

POSTMODERN QUEST FOR FREEDOM

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Abstract

The postmodern literary works are characterized by the erasure of the personal pronoun "I" as initiated by Paul-Michel Foucault. This is doubtlessly the reason why the postmodern hero is ill-treated or defeated in his own story, and critics refer to him as an anti-hero. Postmodernist approach in this paper highlights the destruction of the historical stereotypes and emphasizes the reconstruction of African American's true identity. Contextually speaking, we can, in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, refer to Big Laura who undertakes invaluable achievements.

Keywords: Postmodernism, identity crisis, community, individual, quest for freedom.

Résumé

Les œuvres littéraires postmodernes sont marquées par l'effacement du pronom personnel sujet « je » comme initié par Paul-Michel Foucault. C'est sans doute la raison pour laquelle le héros postmoderne est maltraité ou défait dans sa propre histoire. Ainsi donc les critiques le conçoivent comme un anti-héros. L'approche postmoderne dans cet article met en exergue la déconstruction des stéréotypes historiques avec un accent sur la reconstruction de la vraie identité Africaine Américaine. Contextuellement parlant, nous pouvons, dans *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, nous référer à Big Laura qui réalise d'inestimables exploits.

Mots-Clés : Postmodernisme, crise identitaire, communauté, individu, quête de liberté.

Introduction

Ernest J. Gaines's novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) is a story that depicts the struggle of African Americans

according to the vision of the narrator, a black woman named Jane Pittman. She tells the story following the major events of her own life from the time she was a young slave girl in the southern side of the United States of America at the end of the Civil War (1861-1865).

This study stands for the postmodern quest for freedom. It makes allusion to African Americans' struggle as a community in a multiracial society like the United States in which, through identity crisis, they aim at introducing communal values over individualistic orientations and interests. The search for freedom can also be thought of as the rupture or break from the classical writing styles. The postmodern quest for freedom as claimed in this study can be understood as the questioning of modernist philosophical, political, cultural and literary tendencies. It is simultaneously a creation of a new writing style suitable and consistent with the postmodern sociological, philosophical and literary requirements.

The present topic can be viewed and analyzed as the history of marginalized people, especially African Americans who struggle to improve their images. In other words, the postmodern identity crisis can be marked by fragmentation: many identities meet into one individual. However, in this paper, priority has been given to the cultural and literary aspects of postmodernism. The study mostly aims at showing the struggle to redeem the image or history of African Americans. Indeed, that issue is manifest in Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as well as many other African American novels. Therefore, the central problem of the topic is that black Americans got distorted historical accounts from Euro Americans.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal that Gaines has made effort to rewrite Blacks' history so as to offer a reliable or plausible version of it. Thus, we argue that as an African American, in this case, Gaines is well-placed to better account for black people's experiences.

Another problem is that culture is trampled underfoot. Black Americans have also been brainwashed by their white counterparts. The novel stages people who are characterized by a crisis of identity. Therefore, Ernest Gaines tries to redeem and valorize his people's culture. The paper also contends that *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* has

been conceived according to postmodern art aesthetics. In this way, this study shows postmodern historical background and its interests in the minorities' quest for freedom. In other words, it intends to unravel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as a postmodern literary work. Moreover, the notion of postmodernism may be supported by sociocriticism and semiotics. Such analysis will be organized around three distinctive aspects: the first part examines the issue of postmodern identity crisis as developed in the novel. The second section analyzes the contrast between community and the failure of individual values. As for the third step, it focuses on the emergence and struggle of postmodern female characters and their social repositioning.

1. The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman: A postmodern identity crisis novel

In the present study, it is necessary to make a connexion between postmodernism and African-American literature. In fact, the former is said to be the first-born Euro-American movement. Thus, analyzing African-American literature through a postmodern standpoint is a way of placing literature under a national or native-born theory. In this respect, in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (1996), Lawrence Cahoon distinguishes three major categories of postmodernism and their specific claims:

- Historical postmodernism argues that the social, political, cultural organization of modernity has changed fundamentally, so that we are now facing a novel world... Methodological postmodernism rejects the possibility of establishing the foundations, hence the ultimate reliability, of knowledge understood as valid in a realist sense that is knowledge claimed to represent the true, independent real nature of its object... Positive postmodernism is a positive reinterpretation of any phenomenon on the basis of the foregoing methodological critique. It may reconceive the self or God or nature, or knowledge, or society, or art, or anything given the critique of unity, origin, presence, etc. (17-18).

These three branches in the above citation are helpful for the context of this paper. Indeed, Ernest Gaines not only questions Western cultural hegemony, but also tries to rehabilitate his people's culture on the basis of postmodernist methodological tools.

To better understand identity crisis in a postmodern novel, we propose to give a chronological account of the evolution of identity. Indeed, in traditional times, identity was given through community life. Such kind of identity was stable and rooted in social structures such as family, ritual, religion, etc. The modern identity, on the other hand, is marked by the rise of "individualism", a concept invented by European protestant bourgeoisie. According to modernists, the individual should be white, male, property owner. Moreover, unlike the traditional subject, the modern individual acts independently from community. In the same way, modern formation of identity adopts Enlightenment ideals such as rationality, justice, freedom, progress, etc. (Dunn, 1998, 61). As we can see, the modern identity is exclusionist in so far as it attempts to eliminate or repress differences in order to create a unique or universal being.

Consequently, identity crisis of the postmodern era can be viewed as a disruption of sameness. It is often reflected in confusion, fragmentation, skepticism about the progress of the world. Likewise, we witness the valorization of differences through the emergence of historically silenced groups (African Americans, gays, lesbians, prostitutes, etc.).

Identity crisis is defined in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as a feeling of uncertainty about who one really is and what one's purpose is (Abrams, 2005, 49). As such, Miss Jane's attitude toward hoo-doo is significant. She does not know the goal she pursues by going to see hoo-doo. She admits: "But, I didn't go to no hoo-doo because I don't believe in no hoo-doo. I went to just one hoo-doo in my life-that was for Joe Pittman and that horse-but even then I didn't believe in her the way you suppose to..." (121). Identity crisis is also manifest in this excerpt since we see an abandonment of the so-called universal Christianity for African hoo-doo.

Besides, the crisis of identity often leads individuals to disown their own race. As such, Gaines's novel provides an interesting scene. After

the Emancipation Proclamation, some African Americans lost confidence in themselves. Others also thought they needed their masters to succeed any enterprise. It still remains that the ex-slaves considered themselves as hopeless or good for nothing. This is evidenced in the following quotation: “Master, if we free to go, where is we to go?” (11).

The manifestation of identity crisis can also be seen in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in its part entitled “The Quarters”. Indeed, when Jimmy came back in the South, he joined the church and subsequently urged the black community to lead a demonstration against the court house of Bayonne. However, the old black people in the religious community refused to share his opinion. Miss Jane commented:

It's not that they don't love you, Jimmy; it's not that they don't want believe in you; but they don't know what you talking about. You talk of freedom, Jimmy. Freedom here is able to make a little living and have the white folks say you good... You see, Jimmy, they been told from the cradle they wasn't that they wasn't much better than the mule. You keep telling them this over and over, for hundreds and hundreds of years, they start thinking that way (236).

Furthermore, the postmodern identity crisis is marked by fragmentation. That is to say many identities meet into one individual. We can also argue that the postmodern identity is unstable or dynamic. This situation is better illustrated by means of naming throughout the novel:

He had changed his name –Ned Douglass. Before, he was Ned Brown –after me. We didn't know his daddy's name, so he was Ned Brown. Then he changed it to Douglass, after Mr Frederick Douglass. He was Ned Douglass awhile, then he was Ned Stephen Douglass. Ned Stephen Douglass awhile, then he was Edward Stephen Douglass. All the rest of the young men round him was taking on names like that. Some Douglass,

some Brown-after John Brown, not Jane Brown; some Turners, after Nat Turners; summers; some Sherman (73).

This passage better exemplifies the unstable or dynamic character of postmodern identity. Indeed, African Americans, especially young people identify with celebrities. They deny their original identities to show a change of status, from slaves to free people. Therefore, the continual or permanent change of names testifies to discontinuity inherent to their crisis of identity. One of the examples of this is shown through the character of Pecolla in a scene depicted by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world. To pecolla they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane (Morrison, 1970, 43).

The extract shows how Pecolla, the protagonist of the novel does not know what her real identity is. She rejects her black race on behalf of white cultural identity. In fact, Pecolla was despised by her own family. And this is characteristic of the shift or a break between the traditional and postmodern conception of the family. The former is marked by strong links whereas the latter is characterized by a split or weak relationship among the family members.

In the same perspective, the family crisis is clearly depicted in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* through the ill-treatment or injustice Timmy is victim of from his own family because he is half-caste. In fact, Timmy and Tee Bob were half-brothers from Robert Samson. The former was black whereas the latter white. However, Tommy was often whipped violently by his uncle for nothing and the father thought it was normal. Beyond the family crisis, there is the atmosphere of individual versus community in people's social relationships.

2. Community and the failure of individual values

Literature is a social, cultural and intellectual product which consists in raising the major preoccupations of a community in order to bring about change. In other words, literature is a means of people's representation. Accordingly, the modernist writers' characters are models of the modern world. These figures are generally marked by rationality, braveness, kindness, etc. On the other side, individuals in postmodern productions are replete with flaws reflecting, in this context, the crisis of the human being. Postmodern works therefore prioritize community or communal values over individualistic orientations and interests.

In this process, postmodernist literary works are characterized by the erasure of the first personal pronoun "I" as initiated by Paul-Michel Foucault. Instead, they are narrated with the third personal pronoun "He" or "She" or other. This testifies to the dethronement of the modernist powerful rational being for the sake of a weak and irrational individual. Doubtlessly, this is the reason why the postmodern hero is ill-treated or defeated in his own story and also why critics refer to him as an anti-hero.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman contains convincing clues of the protagonists' weakness. Gaines's work brings to the fore five protagonists who are all defeated by their opponents. Big Laura, for instance, covers a great distance leading black people to the North. Unfortunately, the Secesh army kills her on the way.

The same situation goes for Ned, the abolitionist, who is killed by Albert Chuveau. Joe Pittman, the embodiment of Booker. T. Washington's ideology in the novel is thrown dead by the horse. Jimmy Aaron does not make an exception. Indeed, he is killed the very day of the march he plans against the segregated court house of Bayonne. And Robert Samson, the plantation owner announces this said piece of news: "Jimmy is dead" "Didn't you hear me say Jimmy was killed at eight o'clock" (245). Finally, Miss Jane, the main protagonist, becomes barren because of corporal punishment endured during slavery.

In terms of analysis, Miss Jane's becoming barren following her corporal punishment may be symbolically interpreted as her physical

and moral death since she can no longer procreate and consequently cannot renew life. This fact can, socially speaking, bring about the misappropriation of her “self” or her own identity as a female and human being. She cannot fulfill her role as a female being to procreate other generations for the future of her family. Through being ill-treated, she is turned into a “masculinized” person while being a female character.

Besides, the importance of community and failure of the individual’s memory is shown in the introductory chapter of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*:

But during the third week, everything slowed up to an almost complete halt. Miss Jane began to forget everything. I don’t know whether she was doing this purposely or not, but suddenly she could not remember anything anymore. The only thing that saved was that there were other people at the house every day that I interviewed her, and they were glad to help in every way they could. Miss Jane was constantly turning to one of them for the answer (Introduction, vi).

The extract expressively calls attention to the deficiency or powerlessness of modernist individual and simultaneously brings out the values of the group. In other words, Miss Jane Pittman alone could not save Blacks’ history. Only the whole community succeeds in keeping it. This is a way of praising community at the expense of individual.

Likewise, community’s conspiracy against the individual is another privileged theme of postmodern work. Gaines’s work shows this issue. Thus, the tragic love affair between Tee Bob and Mary Agnes can be viewed as a kind of white community’s conspiracy against Tee Bob. Indeed, Tee Bob is a young white who falls in love with Mary Agnes, a Creole girl. This love affair becomes impossible since Mary Agnes has a black drop in her blood though she is beautiful and has white complexion. Tee Bob persists but meets with long standing social interdictions which eventually get the better of him. The community seems to be stronger than the individual.

In addition, the relationships between Jimmy Aaron and the other black people prove that a child is not an individualistic but a communal wealth. As a matter of fact, while Jimmy's parents are away, the whole black community provides him with his daily needs. They also raise him together by instilling in him moral and communal values. This particular deed shows that by rejecting modernist ideals, postmodern work, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, objectively, reflects traditional or communal values.

Authors, especially African Americans, Native Americans and those of other ethnic minorities emphasize storytelling as one of their cultural heritages. In the same process, other postmodernist writers highlight ways of living which are more collective or communal than individual fights and visions. The deliberate break of individualistic rules is common in postmodernist literary works. Besides, the search for freedom which is characteristic of postmodern artistic creations can be perceived through the correction of individualistic progress in historical accounts. In this example, struggle becomes inevitable when the formerly marginalized people try to free themselves from alienation, domination and established discriminating-norms.

In the individual versus community's relationships, the postmodernist literary productions deal with the issue of fragmentation. As such, the development of mass media in the post-world war II age creates a situation in which cultures influence the individual. As such, the cultural originality as defended by modernism is no longer possible. In fact, influenced by diverse cultures, the postmodern individual becomes fragmented. That is why some of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*'s female characters try to emerge in terms of the struggle that promotes women's repositioning in the context of gender stratification.

3. The emergence and struggle of postmodern women and their repositioning

Generally speaking, postmodern period is said to be one of a great importance and opportunities for women. The emergence and struggle of feminists bring the male counterparts to change their views about the status and role of women in society.

It is on this ground that Gaines puts into question the truthfulness of colonial history as written by Whites about black people. Likewise, of paramount importance is the postmodern notion of women's struggle to be equal to men and their social and political repositioning in American society.

The postmodern approach does not set great store by the past. According to postmodernists, the fixity of history does not take into account changes that appear as time goes on. Neither do postmodernists envision future, only the present counts. Consequently, they reject the past and future in favor of the present. As such, Jean François Lyotard advocates the changing or contingency of history. To him, it is impossible to faithfully represent a non-western event through western general vision. The understanding of an event is dependent on its own structures (1996, 186-187). Therefore, postmodernist approach explains events according to the language and setting (time, space) in which they occur.

For us, postmodernist approach highlights the destruction of the historical stereotypes and emphasizes the reconstruction of African Americans' true identity. Contextually speaking, we can, in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, refer to Big Laura who undertakes invaluable achievements. Indeed, focusing on the whole American historical evolution; after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), men were afraid of leading their fellow black people to the North. We can say that they did not want to be blamed for any possible problem or difficulty that could appear on the way. Therefore, we think that black males refused to be treated like Moses during the crossing of desert in the Bible²⁰. However, the role played by Big Laura in the novel is revealing: "Then somebody in the black said, "Move out the way." I looked and that was Big Laura. She was big just like her name say, and she was tough as any man I ever seen. She could plow, chop wood, cut and load much cane as any man on the place" (16).

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Exodus, chapter 15, verses 22 to 25: "So Moses brought Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water..... And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them", p. 237.

The passage above explains how women are often more courageous than men. This is a great change of the post-world war II epoch. From now on, women occupy great positions in companies and at any stage of social life. It is doubtlessly the reason why postmodernism makes women's voice audible. The postmodern movement questions the capitalist ideology which considers women as second-class citizens.

The postmodern literary work also gives an outstanding role to women in the narration. It is the end of the only-male dominated stories. This case is more developed in Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in which women now realize the three fourths or the whole narration of stories at the expense of their male counterparts. That narrative mechanism intends to rebirth women's voice which was so long silenced by men. In this way, Miss Jane assumes the biggest part of the narration. This is a way of repositioning women on equal footing with men. People can now read stories from women's point of view. In doing so, it is hoped that the reader would get a reliable version of stories about and by women, especially African American women.

Like other illustrations by the same author, the significant role played by women in the post-world war II era is also manifest in Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*. In actual facts, female characters help male protagonists achieve their final goals. For example, Vivian, Aunt Lou, and Tante Emma encourage Grant Wiggins not to be hopeless and helpless about the situation of the South. Thanks to those women, Grant eventually helps Jefferson die like a full human being. Women can therefore be regarded as heroines like their male counterparts (Jefferson and Grant). Thus, the situation shows that the postmodern woman is quite different from the modernist one. The postmodern woman can compete with men and even beat them in some domains. It is a change in woman's role and status.

In addition, postmodernist publications often talk about the emergence of women. For instance, they present women as the equals of men in terms of social positions. This particular aspect is explained by the exclusion of women from modernist history. Thus, postmodernism, not only gives women the opportunity to get their revenge on modernism

by destabilizing the male-dominated history, but also allows them to enjoy social happiness and fame.

What is more striking in this is that the postmodernist literary production deals with tabooed themes. As such, these themes are regarded as immoral, irrational and consequently forbidden by modernism. They are among others, the question of violence, sexuality, the depiction of prostitutes, drug addiction, and the emergence of ethnic minorities, lesbianism, gays' movement, etc.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the status of the protagonist, Jane Pittman as a woman, disrupts the usual and social organization as for the linear development. It puts an end to the idea of "sameness" for the sake of divergence. This is doubtlessly the reason why the crisis of identity which is generally characterized by pluralism, instability or discontinuity is common in postmodern works like *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

Conclusion

By the end of the study that focuses on reading Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as the postmodern quest for freedom, we can consider the term postmodernism as a post Second World War literary and art movement after modernism which points out the crisis of identity. The notion of community versus individual, and the emergence and repositioning of female protagonists in contrast with male characters is also analyzed.

Modernist literature generally describes the industrial world or philosophy. It often emphasizes the individual's detachment from the traditional community. On the other hand, the postmodernist writings stress human beings' standards of living in post-industrial era. These literary works generally depict environmental crises. Modernist scientific inventions create a huge damage to nature. Postmodern authors then, highlight the environmental disaster and its drawbacks on humans' health. In so doing, postmodernism intends to point out that modernist progress and optimism about the world is a myth.

In the same view and on the basis of postmodern literature, Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* can be read as a postmodern work. It contains many postmodern literary techniques namely metafictional and intertextual networks. Also, it highlights the crisis of identity, female characters' emergence, and African American cultural rehabilitation. Moreover, it reflects the postmodern literature search for self-identity. In this context, the author shows the postmodern literature dissociation from modernist writing techniques.

In light of the foregoing, the current study promises to show the early philosophical, political, cultural, and technological influences on the later emergence of postmodernism. Besides, the study has the intention to disclose themes and narrative techniques related to postmodern literature. So, on the basis of those general postmodern themes and narrative strategies, the paper seeks to look into *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

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