

## Rewriting the Self: Reconstructing Female Subject in Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

N'Guessan Koffi Eugene,

Alassane Ouattara University - Bouaké.

**Abstract:** *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is a historical novel cast in the form of fictional autobiography centered on an emancipatory narrative of the African Americans. It is a folk autobiography, which puts in the fore a female voice that reconfigures the history of the African American struggle for liberation. In other words, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman reshapes and delineates the autobiographical "I" in the process of black subjectivity. This paper investigates Gaines' particular way of predicating female subjectivity that moves away from the stereotypical or traditional representations of black female subjects in their historical struggle for Civil Rights in the United States. More specifically, the focal point of the present paper is the way Gaines represents and reforms the experience of blacks' struggle by conjoining the egalitarian coexistence, or the collective task of male and female subjects, a cross-gendering, which erodes the traditional conceptions that subordinate women's roles in the discourse of African American nationalism.*

**Key Words:** *autobiography, historical revision, subjectivity, cross-gendering, conjunction, African Americans.*

### Introduction

Problematizing history and historical narrative, Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) states that history is not just "what happened," but also and mainly "that which is said to have happened." Therefore, history is ambivalent: it is both a social process and a narrative about that process. He argues that: "Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators... In vernacular use, history means both the facts of the matter and the narrative of those facts, both "what happened" and "that which is said to have happened." (*Silencing the Past*, 2) if we place emphasis on the second meaning, we can suggest that history is the representation of the past, a narrative construction opened to subjectivity.

It is in that vision that I should like to consider Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, a historical narrative in the feminine that reshapes and delineates the autobiographical "I" in the "distorted" discourse of Black Nationalism. As

Lawrence Hogue (1986) put, it is a nationalist historical past, which "gives meaning and history to the Afro-American who needs to make sense out of a historical past – slavery, pain, suffering, injustice – that had been excluded by dominant American historical texts and myths." (64) Similarly, Madhu Dubey (2013) has stated that, "African Americans' history often gets written as the story of great men, erasing or veiling the contributions of women." (335)

Going against the portrayal of African American as passive, a caricature of human being, and especially the black woman as an inactive object, a wench or a bitch, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* shows the courage, strength and dignity of the African Americans. (Hogue, 64) Going from the general standpoint that there were fraudulent representations of African Americans' past, many black writers set out to rewriting the past and correcting history's wrongs. Gaines resorts to the autobiographical genre to reconstruct

the history of African Americans, for autobiography, as bell hooks (1992) argues, is a literary genre which, has always had a privileged place in African American literary history. As a literature of resistance, confessional narratives by black folks were didactic. More than any other genre of writing, the production of honest confessional narratives by black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects are needed as guides, as texts that affirm our fellowship with one another (59)

Grounded in African American folk tradition, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is the narrative of the African American historical past from the perspective of an old woman, and as it is noted in the introduction of the book, "Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's." (viii) Her story is a story within stories, and it is supposed to make up for some deficiency and omission in other official books. Mary, Miss Jane's agent asked the teacher: "What's wrong with them books you already got?" Then the teacher answered: "Miss Jane is not in them." (vi) In an essay, Gaines offers more details concerning his revisionist undertaking and his efforts to achieve it:

She [Miss Jane] knows much – she has lived long. Sometimes she's impatient, but most times she's just the opposite...If you go to the history books, you will find that most of them would not agree with what she has told you. But if you read more closely you will also notice that these great minds don't even agree with one another. Truth to Miss Jane is what she remembers. Truth to me is what people like Miss Jane remember. Of course, I go to the other sources, the newspapers, magazines, the books in libraries – but I also go back and listen to what Miss Jane and folks like her have to say. (*Mozart and Leadbelly*, 2005, 23)

This paper examines the way Gaines rewrites the past in his fictional autobiography, the cross-

gendering dynamics in the struggle for liberation. In other words, it examines the way Gaines revisits the history of African Americans by underwriting gender or conjoining black female force with black males'. Cross-gendering representation is therefore a subtext, a discursive framework that stages black male heroism, a narrative in which Miss Jane is a protagonist, an active agent capable of effecting change. The heroic representation of male characters is conjoined with empowering female figures that resist or defy the politics of an annihilating patriarchy and racial domination as well.

Given this hypothesis, the primary question I address in this paper is: How is female subjectivity predicated in Gaines' fictional autobiography? In other words, how does Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* enact the African American male and female subjects in the struggle for black emancipation and liberation? To answer this question, we shall first be concerned with the female representation: body and identity construction of subjectivity. Secondly, our reflection focuses on the way female agency is enacted in order to constitute an integrated resistance force.

### **1. Female Representation: Embodiment and Identity Construction of Subjectivity**

Female subjectivity in the narrative performance occurs in the form of cross-gendering, and the body is used as a locus of identity to underwrite the discourse of gender and race, as well as the relationship of power. The book inscribes a female self in the narrative by blurring gender barriers: the fusing of maleness and femaleness, empowering female subjects: their physical and moral strength, and decency. Such representations of female characters: Miss Jane, Big Laura, Black Harriet, and Mary Agnes LeFabre, move away from the stereotypical representations of black women.

Female characters in the novel are strong and positive, and Miss Jane, the narrator is no exception. Though Gaines delays her commitment to the struggle for black liberation until the last lines of the novel, this participation constitutes the climax of the connection between male and female subjects. It is a salient point that has started since the beginning of the whole narrative, which places Miss Jane at its center. Miss Jane's voice is the dominant voice in the narrative. As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1996) states, "Narration plays a crucial role in the affinity that emerges between the problematics of reconstructing the past and retrieving memory and the problematics of representation and subjectivity." (4)

The narration by Miss Jane is in the form of storytelling, which places her at the center. She is the one who gives voice to her personal and emotional experience. Of course, this storytelling, as the main mode of narration, of access to the history of African Americans, integrates female and male voices. In the Introduction, Gaines indicates the following:

I should mention here that even though I have used only Miss Jane's voice throughout the narrative, there were times when others carried the story for her. When she was tired, or when she just did not feel like talking any more, or when she had forgotten certain things, someone else would always pick up the narration... (vii)

Thus, Miss Jane's voice is not always autonomous; it is sometimes alternately replaced by the one of Pap or other people, which destabilizes the dominance of female subjectivity and opens the way for solidarity between males and females. This mode of narration assures an expressive realism: the fact for other individuals to balance the story that is told in order to recognize it as true or false. This mode of narration or storytelling enables female subjectivity. All the African American experience in the book functions on that basis.

The matrix of black female subjectivity in Gaines' fictional autobiography is also predicated by disruption of the conventions, the negation of convention so as to overcome social subjugation, the breaking of the expectations imposed on black female identity. As Abhipsa Chakraborty (2015) writes,

Although in the autobiographies the black American female selfhood is shaped by the (recollected) individual experience of the subject, it is also representative of black women' "collective experience" of the historical conditions "or interlocking structures of gender, class and race. (190)

Thus, in contrast to the traditional female image of a submissive woman, Miss Jane, the narrator highlights female experience, presenting us with an archetype of female characters who subvert male control as well as racial domination. The opening book foregrounds the female presence and importance in the African American emancipatory and nationalist discourse through Miss Jane's attitude while she was still a child and a slave.

Indeed, Miss Jane, whose slave name was Ticey, started to stand against slavery and white oppression when she met Corporal Brown, a Union soldier. Corporal Brown called her Jane after his own daughter, and thus instilled in her the idea of freedom. Thereafter, Jane refused to answer her slave name when called by her mistress: "I raised my head high and looked her straight in the face and said: "You called me Ticey. My name ain't no Ticey no more, it's Miss Jane Brown. And Mr. Brown say catch him and tell him if you don't like it." (9) This disobedience is an act of rebellion and she took severe beatings from her mistress, but still, she refused to go back to Ticey as her name: "My mistress got tired beating me and told my master to beat me some. He told her that was enough, I was already bleeding." (9)

A year later, when slaves were proclaimed free, Jane, who was not but nine or ten years old, was among the young and radical group, opposed to the conservative and passive old people. They rejected their ex-master's offer to still welcome them on his plantation with a different status, and rather started their way toward the north for more freedom. While the conservative blacks were taking time to weigh between leaving or staying, Jane was already decided upon leaving. When the black driver asked the ex-master: "Master, if we free to go, where is we to go?" (11) The answer came from Jane, not the master, for before he could open his mouth, Jane said: "Where North at? Point to it. I'll show y'all where to go." (11) This interruption got the driver on his nerve and he called Jane a trouble maker. Jane replied: "If I ain't nothing but trouble, you ain't nothing but Nothing." (11) Next, the driver hit her in the face and she fell. But Jane was not only verbally aggressive, she was physically aggressive as well, and though still a little girl, she did not want to let herself be pushed around: "I jumped up from there and sunk my teeth in that nigger's hand." (11)

On the whole, Miss Jane exhibits determination and strength, and these traits are reinforced by her being barren, a reason of her reluctance to with a man, as she explains:

The other reason I never looked at a man, I was barren. An old woman on the place had told me that. I went to her one day and told her how my body act and didn't act. After we had sat down and talked a while, she said one word: "You barren." I went to a doctor and he told me the same thing: "You barren, all right." (77)

Motherhood specifies one's identity as woman. Motherhood is presented as a serious obstacle to women's liberation. Being barren, unable to give birth, withdraws Miss Jane from her social function as a medium of reproduction, and makes her a woman capable of enacting her independence and agency. Thus, she moves from the status of an object of reproduction to a status

of active subject. The incapacity which is negatively perceived in a society dominated by patriarchal system is here a probable positive aspect for the protagonist. Miss Jane is therefore presented as a counter strategy to unshackle female oppression and man's control over the woman's body. Her status challenges the social restrictions imposed upon women in general, especially their enforced domesticity that sometimes prevents them from holding public roles.

In addition, she is not willing to stick to a man. As she indicates, "When Joe Pittman was killed a part of me went with him to his grave. No man would ever take his place, and that's why I carry his name to this day. I have knowed two or three other men, but none took the place of Joe Pittman. I let them know that from the start." (98) She lives with Joe Pittman without being married to him. When he dies, Miss Jane does not venture into living with a man as a formal wife. She is given the conventional male status and therefore predisposed to play the conventional male role. After Joe Pittman, she evokes an ephemeral relation with Felton Burkes, another man with whom she has spent some time: "Me and Felton lived together about three years, then one day he was gone. Didn't say a word. I didn't know he was gone for good till he didn't come back for a month. But that didn't bother me none; not long after he left, Ned showed up with his family." (98)

Actually, it is this particular status of women, men's wives, which makes them victims of their objectification, commodification and exploitation. In refusing formal marital life, she frees herself from domestic and marital commitments, and thus, displaces males' importance in her life and preserves her independence. At the same time, she predisposes herself for political activism, as we will be dealing with in the second section of our reflection. The construction of female subject is also manifest in the body of some other female

characters in the novel. Miss Jane introduces Big Laura, one of them in the following passage:

Now when we came up to the swamps nobody wanted to take the lead. Nobody wanted to be the one blamed for getting everybody else lost. All us just standing there fumbling round, waiting for somebody to take charge. Then somebody in the back 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. She had two children....But even with them two children she had the biggest bundle out there balanced on her head. (16)

As presented, Big Laura possesses physical traits that can be compared to men's traits. She is likened to men and could perform any physical task men could perform. This physical strength is also backed with her moral force and determination. She volunteered to lead the group of people heading north. In doing so, she displaces men's traditional physical preeminence over women, overthrows men's conventional attributes and domination over women. She is a woman, but she is the one who dominates or supplants the men in this group. Leading over the group, men have to take her orders. And she also threatens and disciplines her companions, males as well as females:

You got just one more time to try your studying round me." Big Laura told him [the slow-wit fellow] "Just one more time, and I'll kill you." She looked at everybody there. "That go for the rest of y'all," she said. "You free, then you go'n act like free men. If you want act like you did on that plantation, turn around now and go on back to that plantation." (19)

Big Laura is endowed with physical strength and when the white patrollers attacked the group, she confronted them, opposing an emboldened

resistance before being defeated. As one of them has confessed, "Goddamn, she was mean. Did you see her? Did you see her? Goddamn, she could fight." (22) Big Laura has even killed two of the patrollers, as Jane reports: "Then I saw another one all busted up. So she had busted two of them in the head before they killed her and her baby." (23)

Big Laura is an aggressive woman, someone who challenges males' authority; she displays the characteristics of courageous and daring person. She represents stamina and courage defying stereotypes. Her physical and moral strength make her a dominant figure. Another female character aligning with Big Laura is Black Harriet. Like the former, she has some protruding physical characteristics and strength to beat any man on the field. She is nicknamed "queen of the field":

Her name was Harriet Black, but she was so black (she was one of them Singalee people) and the people called her Black Harriet. She didn't have all her faculties, but still she was queen of the field. She was tall, straight, tough, and blue-black. Could pick more cotton, chop more cotton than anybody out there, man or women, except for Toby Lewis. She was queen long before I came here and she probably would have been queen long after if Katie Nelson hadn't showed up. (131)

Those female characters, in their embodiment and identity, blur the line between the conventional categories, males and females. Along the axis of gender in the construction of female subjectivity, there is also the axis of race, represented in the novel through Mary Agnes LeFabre: an exemplary woman, a model of behavior transgressing racial conventions.

Mary Agnes LeFabre is a mulatta, and another female outstanding character in Gaines' book. She is a beautiful young black teacher at Samson's Plantation, and she is courted by Robert Samson

(Tee Bob), the son and heir of Samson. Tee Bob is fond in love with Mary Agnes:

He watched her till she had gone in that house, and he didn't look at her the way you think a white man look at a nigger woman, either. He looed at her with love, and I mean the kind that's way deep inside of you. I have seen too many men, of any color, look at women that way. After she had closed the door he looked down at me again. His face scared me. I saw in his face he was ready to go against his family, this whole world, for Mary Agnes. (171)

According to the mores of the plantation, Robert Samson has all the right to lay with her, to use her as a sexual object as he pleases. Whites' ownership of the black body and the legally sanctioned sexual exploitation of black women under slavery are recalled by Jimmy Caya, his friend: "If you want her you go to that house and take her. If you want her at that school, make them children go out in the yard and wait. Take her in that ditch if you can't wait to get her home. But she's there for that and nothing else." (173) Besides, some black women would take this kind of relations as an opportunity that grants them some social privilege. Historically, Mulattas, or mixed-raced women of African descent used to pursue a relationship with a white man, in the hopes of protecting themselves. Yet, all these considerations are out of order for Mary Agnes, who has reported to Miss Jane: "But I got no interest in men, black or white. I'm for these children here. That's why I left home." (169)

Against the tradition and the social advantages, Mary Agnes rejects Tee Bob. Her beauty imposes respect and consideration from Tee Bob, and above all, she holds a decent attitude and handles Tee Bob, using wit, as she told Miss Jane in this conversation:

Jane: "And you think you can handle him?"

Mary: "More than anything else in this world, Robert is decent,"

Jane: "Is this world decent, Mary Agnes?"

Mary: "Robert is more human being than he is white man, Miss Jane,"

Jane: "And how long you think this world go'n let him stay like that?"

Mary: "Robert is good. That's why I don't fear walking with him. The day he get out of the line I'll tell him he's too decent for that."

(169)

When Tee Bob insists on being with her, she said: "We can't have nothing together, Robert." (176)

In a world in which black women are sexual objects, Mary Agnes puts up the rules and this attitude makes her an important character, which validates black women's decency. She is expected to service his sexual needs; yet, she does not allow him to subjugate and appropriate her. She refuses to be vilified, to be his "object," a wench to fulfill her role of sexual object for a white man's gratification. Against the societal convention, she denies him the right of sexual access to her body. In order to avoid trouble and preserve her dignity as a woman, she decided to leave Samson plantation. Later, Tee Bob committed suicide as a result of this unrequited love, and Mary Agnes remains an exemplary woman who demonstrates decency.

Gaines' autobiographical fiction is a novel that integrates a discursive process of construction of female subjectivity: the construction of the autobiographical subjectivity through the dialectic between male and female subjects in the reconstruction of the past. In order to shed light on males and females' conjoining roles, we have focused on female characters in the novel, their representation and subjectivity, their deeds and actions that project them as female figures in opposition to the demeaning stereotypes of the patriarchal and racial domination.

On the whole, together, these women are portrayed as memorable characters and serve memorable roles and can be considered as some heroic representations in the feminine. The representation of the black female body into a black female subject is crucial in the process of making and empowering female subjects. They challenge stereotypical images, and in that position they are capable of awakening and empowering the community for resistance, as in the case of Miss Jane, the maker of messianic male figures and a mediator or bridge leader.

## **2. Shuttling between Male and Female: Enacting Female Agency**

In her article: "African American women in the civil rights movements. Trailblazers or just nominal members?", Esther Swam (2011) postulates that although, women and especially black women made up the larger part of participants in the African-American movement for civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s and can be seen in almost all pictures that were published of the movement's demonstrations and campaigns, the roles they played in the movement have largely been overlooked by historians whose accounts mostly examined the national civil rights organizations and their leaders, all of whom were men. Only since the early 1980s have especially female historians started to look particularly at female participants and leaders of the civil rights movement and their contributions to the movement. (2)

In Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Miss Jane lays claim to subjectivity (subject status) through her tie with the messianic characters and the community: her role of mediator, the psychological and emotional connection between the young heroes and the community, and ultimately as mother of a new order, a new world.

Actually, Miss Jane's emergence into selfhood, her agency or her transformative dimension in the

autobiographical fiction starts with her being the maker of the male messiahs. The black male heroes don't have fathers. They have mothers or are mothered by Jane. And this fact shows the importance of black mothers in black families. As Marlon B. Ross (2006) has noted, "Gaines' masculine nationalist history is clothed in a woman's body, and yet the woman who is made to speak this nationalist narrative is herself but a cover for the male Messiah, the necessarily male race leader, whom she awaits, nurtures, memorializes, mourns." (5-6)

Miss Jane is a childless woman, and this predisposes her to be "the mother" of young male messianic figures. With Ned Douglass for instance, she plays the double role of father and mother. There is no mention of his father in the narrative; and his only parent Big Laura, his mother, has been slaughtered during the travel to the North. Jane was young, but still, she assured the responsibility that was conferred to the African American adult women, namely their role of taking care of the family in the absence of men, their husband. She nurtured and took care of Ned. She even justified her reluctance to be with men on account of Ned, the little boy who has turned to be her symbolic child. "Ned was by himself in this world, except for me, and I didn't want no man and no children spiting him just because he was an orphan." (77)

She has been very essential in Ned's survival. Miss Jane took him under her guidance and protection. Later, when he got involved in activism in the fight for blacks' civil rights, Miss Jane, Miss Jane is the one who mediates Ned Douglass' actions. She understands him and she also understands the people, the black community, of which she says: "But the people wasn't listening. Not that they didn't believe in what he was talking about, but they had already seen too much killing. And they knowed what he was preaching was go'n get him killed, and them too if

they followed. The churches wouldn't help him either." (101)

Later, when some whites decided to stop Ned's activities destined to subvert the structure of racial domination, Miss Jane tried to protect him, and on that account, they threatened and coerced her. "He slapped me down with the back of his hand. Then they turned over everything in the house. Turned over my table, kicked the bench in the fire. The end of it got scorched and when they left I had to douse it out with water." (74) Following this threat, Ned asked her to leave the place in order to stay alive, but she declined Ned's invitation to leave; she preferred to stay and confront whites. This situation enhances Miss Jane's role in the life of the male messiahs.

Moreover, in addition to being framed as the mother of young male militants, Miss Jane assures the intermediate layer of leadership undertaken by the young messiahs. At the very beginning, she was an actor, fighting her way toward the North in order to enjoy more freedom. Later she subsided into passivity; her role being limited to the status of a narrator, accepting her condition in the South. But this passivity will not last long for she will have to play an important role between the male saviors and the community. As Hogue states, "In realizing that passivity contributes to the continuation of the brutal system, Miss Jane comes full circle from being a passive observer to an active, courageous participant who demands change." (75-76) Thus, from a passive object, Jane becomes a participating subject, a community agent, an actor in the liberation struggle, and even a leader. She becomes an agent of the black community's awakening as a result of the solidarity between her and the young male heroes. She provides the bridge necessary to cross boundaries between the community and the messianic figures. Playing that role, she performs what I can term as the female self-actualization.

Miss Jane is the oral mediator of the people's folk history. Yet, she is not just the narrative mediator

of male heroism; she is also a bridge leader, a female icon of Black Nationalism. Marlon Ross (2006) compares her to the "monstrous female icons and Republican Mothers." Her purpose is "to prepare the next generation of young males by teaching them the virtue of the race/nation, a virtue that she is exceptionally fitted to inculcate and embody exactly because she is more a transcending witness to history than a participatory agent shaping its course directly." (6) This role or position of women as stated by Ross concurs with what Belinda Robnett (1996) has stated in the following:

African American women operated as "bridge leaders", who – through frame of bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation – initiated ties between the social movement and the community and between prefigurative strategies aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness and political strategies aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and the societal institutions. (1664)

Miss Jane's roles as a maker of black messianic figures and bridge leader are also highlighted through her relationships with Jimmy Aaron, the One. Jimmy Aaron has a family background which enhances once again Miss Jane and black females' responsibility in general in black families. Like Ned, Jimmy Aaron has a mother, and even mothers, but not a father. Miss Jane is among those women who "give birth" to the leaders needed to rebuild a world in decay:

Shirley Aaron was his mama's name – but I don't need to tell you who his daddy was. That don't matter – and, yes, it do. Because if his daddy had been there the cross wouldn't 'a' been nearly so heavy. Oh, heavy it would 'a' been – it had to be – because we needed him to carry part our cross; but the daddy, if he had been there, would 'a' been able to give him some help.



But he didn't have a daddy to help him. The daddy had done what they told him a hundred years before to do, and he had forgot it just like a hundred years ago they had told him to forget. So it don't matter who his daddy was, because you got some out there right now who will tell you his daddy was somebody else. Oh, sure, they all know who he was, but still they'll argue and say he was somebody else. (199-200)

Jimmy Aaron is "fatherless" because he is the offspring of a union between a white man and a black woman. Though tolerated, this miscegenation is illegitimate. Therefore, the fruit of this illegitimate or forbidden union is rejected by the white man, and the black mother has to fulfill the double role of father and mother. Thus, in her role of mother of messianic figures, Miss Jane's responsibility starts right at Jimmy's birth:

It was in the winter – grinding – and it was me, Jane Pittman, who helped him into this world. When I took him 'round the other side and handed him to Lena she was sitting at the fire crying. That's why I'm sure she asked him if he was the One. No daddy, and soon will be no mama, because mama was go'n leave for the city to work like all the other young people was doing – I'm sure Lena asked him if he was the One. (200)

For some reasons as indicated in the foregoing passage, Miss Jane plays a central role in the upbringing of Jimmy, and in making him the One, that is the savior of the black community. Soon, the little Jimmy realized the role the people have conferred on him: "He wasn't nothing but a child, and he didn't know we had already made him the One, but he was already doing things the One is supposed to do." (204) Miss Jane and the black community have proclaimed Jimmy the One, and consequently, they brought him up according to their expectations.

We watched him every move he made. We made sure he made just the right ones. If he tried to go afoul – and he did at times – we told him what he had heard and what he had seen. No, no, no, we never told it to him like I'm telling it to you now; we just looked at him hard. But it was in that look. Sometimes that look can tell you more than words ever can. (208)

Then, when Jimmy started his militant activities, he was met with the opposition from the conservative people of the black community, especially the elders of the local church. It is Miss Jane, who was close to them, who started mediation in order to convince the community through the religious elders: Just Thomas and Elder Banks. In carrying this mission of talking them into accepting Jimmy's ideas, Miss Jane once quarreled with Just Thomas:

Jane: "Oh just shut up, Just."

Just Thomas: "What?" Just said. "Who said that? That's right, that's you." "That's why they took the mother from you," he said. "If you ain't arguing bout something you don't know nothing about, you at that house listening to them sinful baseball games." (225)

She fathomed and was absolutely sensitive to what Jimmy was doing for the community: "Jimmy came by to tell me he 'preciated what I had said at the church. I told him I could understand what he was trying to do because my boy had tried to do the same thing long long before he was born." (228) And she encouraged him, and advised him to be patient with the people, because, as she told him: "The people here ain't ready for nothing yet, Jimmy....Nothing out there now but white hate and nigger fear. And fear they feel is the only way to keep going." (228) But, as she continued, "One day they must realize fear is worse than any death. When that time come they will be ready to move with you." (228) Miss Jane is perhaps not Jimmy's mentor in his militant

activities, yet, she sustains him and plays an important role: she is a moral support and a counselor to Jimmy. She is instrumental in bringing forth Jimmy as a leader. Her contribution holds from a philosophy that she evokes in the passage below:

People and time bring forth leaders," I said. "Leaders don't bring forth people. The people and the time brought King; King didn't bring the people. What Miss Rosa Parks did, everybody wanted to do. They just needed one person to do it first because they all couldn't do it at the same time; then they needed King to show them what to do next. But King couldn't do a thing before Miss Rosa Parks refused to give that white man her seat. (228)

Rosa Parks is considered as a trailblazer in the civil rights movement; she has initiated the ground that made Martin Luther King into a leader. Following the example of these historical figures, Jimmy and his team have used a girl to execute their devised plan in order to set in motion a movement of protestation against segregation laws in Bayonne. This strategy to break segregation down reveals collaboration, complicity and unity between man and woman. Miss Jane has been identified as indispensable to prepare the way for the leader, as the long head boy, Jimmy's companion said: "We have our Miss Rosa Parks." (228) Now, Jimmy and his team have scheduled a demonstration in Bayonne and participants were needed, especially people from Samson plantation. But Jimmy did not know how to convince them. "But what can I do?" he wondered (228) he turned to Miss Jane's for her collaboration, her role of bridge leader in order to 'tear their veils of fear' and inspire them for the cause and their participation in the demonstration.

On the scheduled day for the demonstration, Miss Jane was the first to be on the place of rally on Samson Plantation. Standing with her was Lena, Jimmy's aunt. She said: "I have to go. I don't

want go; I don't want see them kill him in front of me, but I have to go." (239) Later, many other people came around, all ready to go for the march in Bayonne. It is the proof of Miss Jane's active role and capacity in awakening a new consciousness in the community.

When Robert Samson, the plantation owner ordered the marchers to go back home, because Jimmy has been murdered early in the morning that same day, the news of Jimmy's death affected the people, but it did not deter them from going to Bayonne. His death is a sacrifice that empowers Miss Jane and the community for resistance. Thus, to Samson's request, Alex, Strut's boy replied: "I'm going to Bayonne, me." (245) Miss Jane, though tormented by the news, has not lost her determination. Contradicting Samson, she said: "Just a little piece of him is dead. The rest of him is waiting for us in Bayonne. And I will go with Alex."(245) After having instated or bridged the gap between the young and the old, she executed the symbolic breaking down of the walls of segregation, by initiating the movement of resistance among the community. As she reports, Some of the people backed away from me when I said this, but the braver ones started for the road. They had forgot about bus fare again, and since I didn't have enough money for everybody I sent one of the children in the house to Olivia. He came back with a ten dollar bill and said Olivia said she would be up there later. I stuck the money in my pocketbook. Me and Robert looked at each other there a long time, then I went by him. (245-246)

Thus, the novel produces in Miss Jane an image of the black woman in her role of an agent capable of awakening resistance in the black community against the politics of white domination. In addition to her "giving birth to leaders," she is a mediator, a bridge leader, who passes on the heroic tradition from one generation to another. Definitely, she appears as an icon of Black

Nationalism. In the quote below, Marlon Ross (2006) summarizes her roles:

On the one hand, Gaines' iconography has the benefit of disturbing and subverting the normatively masculine stance of Black Nationalism by figuring a woman whose cross-gendering is less aggressively patriarchal in size and intent, more ambivalently feminine in spirit and form. On the other hand, it has the effect of "softening" and thus blunting the militant agency of a defiant black collective conscience and consciousness. (13)

To conclude, there is a dialectical relationship between male and female characters in Gaines' autobiographical fiction. Actually, it is through voices and positions that Gaines enacts and integrates female and male subjectivity. Through Miss Jane's voice, female characters assert themselves by transgressing or subverting the patriarchal conventions, or playing complementary roles with male characters. Against the politics of male domination, they are either makers of black messianic heroes and also community leaders in the struggle for black liberation.

More importantly, Gaines' book shows the importance of female characters, their subjectivity in a world where the male characters are doomed to failure, or predestined to death and therefore need to be superseded or helped by women. It is what Madam Gauthier, the Hoodoo woman told Miss Jane, who wanted her to stop Joe Pittman from being killed by the ferocious wild horse he was supposed to break. According to the hoodoo woman, there was nothing to be done, because, it was a question of fate or determinism: "That's why you can't stop him," she said. "He probably rides for many reasons. That's man's way. To prove something. Day in, day out he must prove he is a man. Poor fool." (93) For black Americans, in order to be men, they have to confront death. It is a fate, and as such, it is inevitable, as she further explains:

"Mon sha, man is put here to die. From the day he is born him and death take off for that red string. But he never wins, he don't even tie. So the next best thing, do what you can with the little time the Lord spares you. Most men feel they ought to spend them few years proving they men. They choose the foolishes' ways to do it." (95)

Therefore, if Madam Gauthier is right when she asserts that man is foolish, then he needs woman for help. And the book shows examples of female characters perfectly playing important roles in order to help men.

### **Conclusion**

*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* reconstructs the African American historical past on the perspective of Black Nationalist discourse. Through the novel, Gaines engages in historical revisionism in order to convey this historical evidence, an authentic reality of the slave experience, and the African American nationalist movement of the 1960s. Miss Jane's story is, as Trudier Harris (2011) has mentioned, "a metaphor for the spirit of survival that defined so many black people after slavery." (464) Based on a female perspective, it revisits and reforms black women's subjectivity, a status which is sometimes denied to them.

Michel Rolph Trouillot (1995) is right when he says that power operates in the making and recovering of history. According to him, "Any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences." (27) Some African American writers favor the position of male characters at the expense of female ones. Revision is therefore called upon by some black feminists. bell hook, for instance, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990), postulates that "Black liberation struggle must be re-visioned so that it is no longer equated with maleness. We need a revolutionary vision of black liberation, one that

emerges from a feminist standpoint and addresses the collective plight of black people.” (64)

As a matter of fact, in literary imaginations, or in fictive portrayals, women's roles are usually submerged, undermined when it comes to the African American struggle for liberation. Against this unbalanced position, Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* transcends racial matters to integrate gender issue. It is the struggle of a black female character for subjectivity, and actually, Gaines' book places the female character in a prominent role. By gaining control over self-representation through writing back to the dominant cultural forms, the speaking subject manifests her ability to shape her silenced voice that is configured by an alternative mode of representation that refutes the cultural strictures forced on her. It is a competing narrative within which women do not assume a subordinate role in the struggle for black liberation.

Ultimately, Gaines' narrative takes on a discourse that reconciles male and female subjects in the context of the struggle for black liberation. Female characters serve memorable roles and can be considered as some heroic representations in the feminine. Above all, solidarity and unity between males and females have been necessary.

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