



## Conflict in Ernest J. Gaines's *In My Father's House*

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Unlike *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, which presents some black leaders, Ned Douglass and Jimmy the One, solely concerned with the fight for equality, *In My Father's House* brings in more of the personal problems that Philip Martin, the central protagonist, a civil rights leader like Ned and Jimmy, has to deal with. A conflict between public responsibilities and private needs is the central thematic concern of the novel. The novel shows Martin from a situation of crisis in his organization and within himself through a process of compromise, and ends with a dramatic synthesis of his formerly divided self. To this personal and central conflict are subordinated other antagonisms in the novel. Another conflict that the novel develops involves the opposition between individual and community, which, like the one between father and son, is related to Martin's personal conflict. This article explores all these conflicts to show that they are an aspect of change taking place and that they stem of the interaction between past and present and of the difficult passage from the former to the latter.

The world, and by extension society, is ripe with conflicts and these conflicts vary in forms, levels of intensity and violence. One may think of the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the subsequent attacks on Iraq led by the US and its allies that resulted in Saddam Hussein's demise, the civil war in Syria, the relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors or the post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. Conflict does also exist within a society or group as in *In My Father's House*. In that case the antagonism may take the form a competition, an opposition or a legal conflict. There can also be dissension in intimate relations. Johan Galtung analyzes the source of conflict as follows:

Life is the pursuit of goals, social life is the exchange of value -and that which pursues values, and exchanges values, is referred to as an actor. In the pursuit he acts, and in the exchange he interacts; actors move along their life-lines....

Occasionally the life-lines intersect: the actors come together in space and time, become relevant to each other and may engage in



value-exchange or interaction; positive, neutral, negative.  
And this is, of course, where conflict enters...

John Galtung here points out the fact that conflict derives from the interaction between people and this interaction breeds conflict.

The first scholar to actually theorize about conflict was not Johan Galtung but Karl Marx who understood human society in terms of opposition between the wealthy, those who own the means of production and the working class, those do not own the factories, machines, and tools used to produce wealth, with the latter ultimately overthrowing the former through a revolution. Not all scholars agree with Marx. Max Weber's view was close to Marx's but he did not consider the economy as the only cause of conflict. Weber considered that the state and economy together set up conditions for conflict and social inequality also derived from status and power and not merely from the division of society into two main classes, which fight for unequally distributed and scarce resources. However, Marx and Weber can be said to view conflict as negative as they understood it to be the source of social change but also disintegration.

Some other social theorists built on Marx's and Weber's ideas, expressing varying degrees of disagreement. Ralf Dahrendorf, for example, saw power, not class, as the central characteristic of human society. He understood that people had different interests and aspirations and that this had to be accepted and regulated. He wrote: "Democracy, in other words, is not about the emergence of some unified view from "the people," but it's about organizing conflict and living with conflict." Georg Simmel appears as another remarkable theorist. Writing before Dahrendorf, he was the first to recognize that conflict is an inherent part of society and not just between social classes. No individual or group can achieve unity through linear harmony. On the contrary, conflict and contradiction are always at play, otherwise, a purely harmonious individual or group would be without any change or development. For Simmel, and perhaps to the amazement of the layman, conflict has also a positive character. He acknowledges this dualism when he writes:

Conflict is admitted to cause or modify interest groups,  
unifications, organizations. On the other hand, it may sound



paradoxical in the common view if one asks whether irrespective of any phenomena that result from conflict or that accompany it, it itself is a form of sociation. And in fact, *dissociating* factors--hate, envy, need, desire--are the *causes* of conflict; it breaks out because of them. Conflict is thus designed to resolve divergent dualisms; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity...

Despite the apparent contradiction between conflict and unity, conflict can contribute to the balance or restoration of human society as we know it since it is a form of sociation.

This functionalist view of conflict, that it has a function, is, of course, problematic when one considers the white ruling class and racial and ethnic minorities in the US. How can racism and discrimination suffered by blacks at the hand of whites, for example, contribute positively to society? One can argue that they have indeed contributed positively, but only to the whites. Slavery indeed has served them well. But the consequences of race-based policies aimed at depriving blacks of their rights, which have pitted blacks against whites and led to other violent conflicts like riots and marches, and caused high poverty levels and crime rates, the lack of employment and education opportunities among blacks point to the clearly negative and long term results of slavery and racism in American society.

Some of the conflicts mentioned above are not new in Gaines' works. When Eddie in "A Long Day in November" drives around in his car instead of taking care of his family, he is at odds with his community's values; similarly, Jackson in *Catherine Carmier* angers his people when he refuses to stay and pursues Catherine, the Creole girl; Marcus in *Of Love and Dust* equally arouses the community's enmity when he first tries to seduce Pauline and then tries to run away with Louise Bonbon. The people in *Miss Jane Pittman* are opposed to their civil rights leaders until Miss Jane, acting as a catalyst, prompts young and old to stand together for their rights. The novelty in *In My Father's House* is the opposition between father and son. Gaines himself puts this as taking "it a little bit farther in this particular book" [*In My Father's House*]. He explained in another interview, "in my books, there always seem to be fathers and sons searching for each other. That's a theme I've worked with since I started writing. Even when the father was not in the story, I have dealt with his absence and his effects on his children." One remembers the hunter looking for his father in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, or James, Procter, and Copper in some of the *Bloodline* stories, "The Sky Is Gray," "Three Men,"



and "Bloodline," respectively. The conflict between father and son is the origin of the novel's title. It is borrowed from The Gospel of Saint John, Chapter 14: "In my father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus uttered these words at the Last Supper and he meant there is enough room for all in heaven, His Father's house. Gaines reverses this meaning by having Martin deny his son.

In *In My Father's House* as in Gaines' other works, the end of slavery has not brought the freedom it promised. Blacks have known a moral and economic hardship, which, in many ways, was only a little better than actual slavery. But some of the changes have been beneficial. Reverend Martin has used the status of his profession to significantly affect the quality of life for blacks in his parish by leading them to successful nonviolent civil rights protests. Martin appears as a respected member of his community and a central force in improving the quality of life for blacks in St Adrienne. At first, textual evidence seems to support this view. Virginia Colar, a hotel owner, says: "he's our civil rights leader round here... Everybody round here proud of him. Done such a good job here, people thinking 'bout sending him on to Washington." Another character, Elijah Green calls Reverend Martin "our Martin Luther King" (FH, p. 16), establishing the connection between the two civil rights fighters, a connection that Reverend Martin's name already implies. In addition to the support of people like Collar and Green, Martin also enjoys the sympathy of some whites who contribute to the activities of the movement. The presence of these white supporters points to Gaines' vision of a biracial cooperation, which he will fully develop in the next novel, *A Gathering of Old Men*.

Another opinion of Philip Martin, held by some cynical teachers, younger members of the community, contradicts Virginia Colar's and Elijah Green's. The civil rights movement faces challenges like Chenal, a Cajun and a department store owner, who hires blacks but does not pay them, and it has become stagnant. The teachers feel that "nigger's already got just about everything he is getting out of this little town (FH, p. 20). So a latent conflict already exists at the opening of the novel between the intellectuals, weary of Martin's moderation and the older and church-oriented members of the community like Collar and Green who still believe in Martin. The moment the novel depicts is a transitional one. Facing a crisis of authority in the movement, Martin is at a crossroads. Will he lead his followers to another non-violent protest or will he



adopt a more forceful course of action and take things in his hands to ensure that he has continued leadership as in the past? He has the opportunity to decide at the march and boycott he and his committee have planned against Chenal. The situation echoes Georg Simmel's view that factors like hate, envy, need, desire are the *causes* of conflict. Here clearly, that factor is need, the needs of black people to be treated on an equal footing and the need of the whites to keep their privileges.

The situation becomes further complicated for Martin when a personal crisis adds to the crisis of authority. Martin the individual has needs that contradict his public responsibilities. His son, from whom he has been separated for long years, Etienne, now calling himself Robert X, appears in St. Adrienne and is arrested. To a large extent, Martin's situation as a politician also applies to that of the black writer in particular and to writers in general. Much has been debated about the dichotomy between the black writer's responsibility to his craft and his responsibility to his Blackness; or put another way, is the black creative artist a writer first, who happens to be black, or a black first, who happens to be a writer? Looking at Gaines' fiction and at the skillful combination of social commentary and aesthetic in it, I find this debate to be analogous to the question of "the chicken or the egg." Even though Aesthetics and subject matter are not one, they are inextricably related. Gaines himself thinks he has avoided social commentary in his works. Talking with Gregory Fitz Gerald and Peter Marchant, he said: "To me, literature expresses man's feelings and relationships much better than politics ever can... Besides the conflicts between the white and black, we also carry on a full life: we love women and have children, men gamble, shoot at people, have fights, everything." It is with this "full life" that Gaines is concerned. However, his portrayals of a brutal white overseer and a black man in *Of Love and Dust*, of Miss Jane's defiance of her landlord in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, of Philip Martin as a civil rights leader in *In My Father's House* are political subjects. Gaines is writing about blacks and whites who are people first, who happen to be black and white. One feels sorry for them, and at times, one laughs at them. Like Gaines, black writers can blend the subject of being black in America and English literary techniques, and put in question the conflict between politics and art and the debate about it.

Denying conflicts and complications has its cost and consequences for black writers who



did not or do not see the intricacies between subject matter and Aesthetics, and for Gaines' character, Martin, who fails to see the relationship between his duty as a civil rights leader and his duty as a father. His internal conflict results from his simplifying idea that he has to choose between these two duties, when winning his son's liberation may better be seen as part of his duty as head of the St. Adrienne civil rights movement. In his initial perception of his situation, the two aspects of his life, the public and the private, as separate domains. For example, after seeing Robert X in his home and reflecting about him, he decides to think of something else, which turns out to be the incoming protest march. But the text makes clear that the two subjects are irremediably linked. First, Martin goes from one to the other in his mind without being able to decide which should be his priority. Secondly, he makes a deal with Sheriff Nolan in which he uses his position as the head of the movement to win Robert X's liberation. The omniscient third person narrator expresses Martin's failure to realize that his duties as a father and a civil rights leader become one in this instance: "Martin felt tired and confused" (FH, p. 51).

Gaines' use of free indirect discourse in the same section of the novel also serves to comment on Martin's character, his inner pondering, hesitations, and his two-subject thoughts. In another instance, free indirect discourse comments ironically on Martin's belief and reality. During a visit to his godmother on Reno plantation, he judges the living conditions there as backward. But in actuality, the people there show an emotional support and a communal solidarity that make their lives and--and his for a time--a little less strenuous. Unlike in *Of Love and Dust* where there is fusion, the first person narrator identifying with, "becoming" the person he imitates, the effect in *In My Father's House* is a distancing of the narrator from the subject. In the following example,

Philip looked across the room at her [Alma, his wife] a while, then he started thinking about the boy [Robert X] again. He was trying to figure out how he had found out where he was. Had someone from St. Adrienne or from Reno Plantation gone up North recently? Had Johanna written home and asked about him? How else would the boy have known where to find him? (FH, p. 63),

the distance between narrator and character is immediately apparent. Martin's thoughts are introduced by the phrase "he started thinking" which establishes a medium between these



thoughts and the reader. The process is the same as if he were talking, except that he would not refer to himself as "him" in the two last sentences of the quotation. The use of "the boy" to refer to Robert X is also Martin's way of talking about his son. This style gives a sense of the continuous presence of the narrator who refers to Martin as "him." There is a bivocality which expresses first Martin's split in his drive toward both his son and the march, and secondly his inability to concentrate on a single one of these two subjects. Keith Byerman captures this tension when he writes that Martin "tries to maintain his position in the present, represented by another son figure, Jonathan, the assistant minister. While Robert wants to destroy him by forcing him into the past, Jonathan seeks to supplant him by pushing the movement into the future." Byerman also expresses the fact that in his will to acknowledge his son and at the same time see himself as the leader of the movement, Martin further locks himself in his internal conflict which is also one between past and present.

Martin's view of the past is a negative one. He explains why he had to let his first family go:

Yes, I had a mouth, but I didn't have a voice. I had legs, but I couldn't move. I had arms, but I couldn't lift them up to you. It took a man to do these things, and I wasn't a man. I was just some other brutish animal who could cheat, steal, rob, kill--but not stand. Not be responsible... They had branded that in us from the time of slavery. That's what kept me on that bed... I wanted to get up more than anything in the world. But I had to break the rules, rules we had lived by for so long, and I wasn't strong enough to break them then (*FH*, p. 102).

In sharp contrast of this view of the past is the present in which Martin has achieved the status of a man. Says he: "I can stand today. I have a voice today." Indeed, he started the movement in St. Adrienne. Clearly, he sees his failure in the light of black history, but his justification stands as a rationalization for actions which may be understandable in human terms, but does not alleviate his fault.

Beside the negative view of the past, one other cause of Martin's problem is that he is trying to make up for that past. But as his wife Alma tells him, "the past is the past... You can't make up for the past" (*FH*, p. 136). Gaines thinks "the past ain't dead; it ain't even past," but he





agrees that you cannot make up for the past. This is an idea that he also expresses in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, when he has Miss Jane say of Mary Agnes, the Creole girl, who wants to make up for "what her own people had done her own people". In the interview with Rowell, Gaines stresses what the right attitude should be, and implicitly what Martin's should be:

There is a difference between living in the past and trying to escape it. If you do nothing but worship the past you are quite dead, I believe. But if you start running and trying to get away from the past, you will, I think, eventually run yourself out of whatever it does to you. It will run you mad, or kill you in some way or the other. So you really don't get away. It's there, and you live it.

In making Martin fail, Gaines calls attention to the inadequacy of his choice of action, suggesting that his efforts to break with the impotence of the past fails because it is negative. Martin's pre-civil rights life and his opinion about this period also play an important role in his internal conflict and downfall. However, Robert X's presence stands as the immediate cause.

Etienne's calling himself Robert X like a Black Muslim is significant. In the Black Muslim's system of naming,

the symbol X has a double meaning: implying 'ex,' it signifies that the Muslim is no longer what he was; and as 'X,' it signifies the unknown quality and quantity. It at once repudiates the white man's name and announces the rebirth of the Black Man, endowed with a set of qualities the white man does not know.

The Black Muslims renaming themselves X has the same signification as the ex-slaves' changing their former names in *Miss Jane Pittman*. The "X" as a last name is very appropriate in Robert's case. First, he "is no longer what he was," and secondly, he uses it to repudiate the father who denied him.

Robert's story is later revealed. He is one of three children Martin had by Johanna Rey, whom he did not marry and who left with them for California. There, Etienne's sister had been raped, and as the oldest son, he was supposed to avenge the family's honor. But Etienne forfeited this right, and the younger brother, Antoine, killed the rapist, and after a prison term moved away with his sister. From the moment Antoine confronted the rapist, Etienne's life became a tragedy.





He began locking himself in his room, literally becoming a prisoner. These private and solitary moments in his room are at the same time a conclusion of one phase of his life and the beginning of a new one, as Robert X. In forfeiting the right to take the family quarrel in his hands, Etienne lost his manhood, and, as his new name with the unknown quantity suggests, his identity. This loss of identity is further emphasized by the fact that the narrator and the people in St. Adrienne do not refer to him by his name, but by "Virginia's new tenant," or by "the boy" like Martin. Robert blames his emasculation on his father's abandonment of the family. He is in St. Adrienne not to claim his bloodline but to get revenge and presumably to redeem himself.

Robert's disposition and Martin's abandonment of him epitomizes the gap between father and son, which in Gaines' opinion, has always existed since they were separated on the auction block. Gaines states:

I feel that because of that separation they still have not, philosophically speaking, reached each other again. I don't know that the Christian religion will bring fathers and sons together again. I don't know that the father will ever be in a position--a political position or any position of authority--from which he can reach out and bring his son back to him again.

Martin has the position Gaines mentions, but that does not bring Robert back to him.

Martin's chance encounter with Billy, a young Viet Nam veteran, reveals first the extent of the split between Martin's generation and the next, and secondly the connection between his life and the problems of the larger community. Billy, too, is at odds with his own father even though he lives with him and cannot recall the cause. For him, neither the church nor the civil rights movement, the two institutions in which Martin has grown to be a leader, can close the gap. The alternative Billy has found is violence against the white power structure.

In one respect, Billy is like Robert X. Both characters are not only at odds with white society and its values, but also with themselves, their own communities, families, and values. What they express is a deep despair that denies the existence of a better future. Robert's endless wandering in the streets of St. Adrienne is the metaphor for an individual without a sense of self and a life without aim. Not surprisingly, he ends up committing suicide. For Billy, too, the image of the end is present. "I'm twenty four now," he says, "when I'm forty four I'll be dead or free" (*FH*, p. 166). But what Billy dreams of most is the end of the world as he knows it. The image of



apocalypse that figures prominently in his language reflects his lack of a sense of self.

Since Gaines' fiction is about generations and it posits the continuity of history as seen in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* where young and old come together for the common fight, *In My Father's House* disrupts this pattern. It rather suggests a disjuncture between the old and the new as the father figure, Martin, is unable to connect in any way with the son, or son figures. Robert and Billy symbolize a youthful generation more interested in vengeance rather than the fruit of the fight waged together with the supposed wisdom of elders as socially conscious as themselves. In another respect, Billy is also close to other Gaines rebels. Whether it is Copper Laurent who proclaims himself the general of an army of poor and dispossessed men in of the *Bloodline* stories, or Marcus Payne in *Of Love and Dust* going against established Southern rules, the rebels always emerge as articulate people in spite of their flaws. Billy, for example, is angry because the blacks in Baton Rouge are doing nothing against the oppressors.

The people in St. Adrienne had organized. But Martin's personal conflict and the deal it leads him to make with Sheriff Nolan jeopardize the movement's goals and Martin's own status as the community leader. It precipitates a conflict between him and his St. Adrienne civil rights committee headed by Jonathan. Martin's cancellation of the march is a betrayal, and it is rightly seen as such by his followers. His efforts to justify himself to them serve only to undermine the very actions he asserts justify the sell-out. He has established a new sense of individual and collective self among the blacks, which Mills describes:

we put this little town on the map, 'cause we held together. Newspapers, television, done visited us from all over the state, cause we was like a tight fist--holding together. All over the country people been watching--'cause we been holding together. Till Today" (*FH*, p. 126).

As Mills implies, Martin's betrayal has destroyed that feeling of solidarity and his being voted out as president of the movement is justified.

Mill's intervention and Martin's demotion also show the importance of the community and the extent of the conflict between Martin and that community. As Jonathan tells Martin, without the people behind him, he would not have been able to achieve anything. The community made Martin strong. His mistake, then, lies in his isolating himself by not telling



them Robert is his son and by his facing Sheriff Nolan alone. Martin's leaving his wife and his followers out the problem he faces deprives him of the advice and comfort that could have sustained him. The sell-out also poses the problem of conflict between civil rights for, and the needs of, the group on the one hand and the leaders' personal concerns on the other hand.

Another concern that the novel touches upon involves problems within relationships between black women and men. None of the relationships portrayed is successful. The novel shows black men are culpable for this failure. Shepherd takes his relationship with Beverly Ricord very lightly; Martin abandoned Johanna who loved him so much that she had been unable to enter a lasting relationship with another man. The black man's faulty stand is further emphasized in the depiction of Martin's behavior toward his wife. Martin does not trust Alma enough to involve her in his activities and problems. She tells him "[I] cook your food. Follow you to that church. That's all you married me for. You never come to me for any kind of problem" (*FH*, pp. 134-35). The issue here is that Martin thinks he should lead the movement, and his wife, the family. But the two spheres, like his role as politician and father, are interrelated. Had Martin gone to his wife for advice, he might have avoided compromising the movement's goals. The challenge to male roles is to avoid following either Shepherd, who is not clear about his romantic motivations in regard to the woman, or, Martin, who hurts his wife without seeming to know it. Moreover, the women are the ones who keep the men going. It is significant that in the last pages, Beverly and Alma are the ones who speak most to convince Martin that he is still fit to lead his community. The end of the novel also shows that the men seem to have realized the importance of the women in their lives. Chipppo suggests that Shepherd will marry Beverly, and Martin, for the first time, confesses his powerlessness to Alma. Shepherd's and Martin's realization reminds us of Jackson of *Catherine Carmier* who sees Catherine as the person who will give meaning and guidance to his life.

As Georg Simmel asserts, change, growth, or maturity are achieved through conflicts and crisis. For Martin, his opposition to his son, his own internal conflict, and the quarrel with the committee constitute the conflicts and crisis. Appropriately, the novel ends on an optimistic note. That end suggests that Martin has changed. He has reconciled himself to his past and he is thus better equipped to act in his triple role of husband, father, and civil rights leader, in a word, he



has achieved unity. He has learned that both past and present are part of his life, and that the fights he wages as either a civil right leader or a father are closely connected. He has also learned the importance of family, friends, and community. But by the same token, he has entered another transitional period. Will he try to recapture the leadership of the movement? Will the committee in St. Adrienne realize the change in him and put him back in his position of leader?

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