

**Othermothering or the Power of the Mother Figure in Ernest J. Gaines's  
*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971) and A Lesson Before Dying*  
(1993).**

SORO Dolourou,  
Université Alassane Ouattara,  
sorodolca@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the relevance of “othermothering” in the fiction of Ernest J. Gaines, particularly in his novels *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*. A very common practice in Gaines’s work, this surrogacy involves two categories of maternal figures: other-mothers and community mothers. Through Black feminism and sociocriticism, which provides avenues for illuminating Gaines’s texts based on his biography, culture, traditions, and community practices, the phenomenon is explored, on the one hand, as the author’s tribute to his aunt Augusteen Jefferson, who instilled in him the core of his values and worldview, and on the other hand, as an instrument for safeguarding the community, and above all, as a means of fostering and nurturing masculinity and heroism to impel change.

**Keywords:** change, community mothers, heroism, othermothering, other-mothers, sociocriticism, tribute.

**Résumé:** Cette étude a pour objet d’analyser la pertinence de la maternité de substitution dans la fiction d’Ernest J. Gaines, notamment dans ses romans *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* et *A Lesson Before Dying*. Pratique très courante dans la réflexion de Gaines, cette maternité concerne deux catégories de figures maternelles: les autres-mères et mères communautaires. La maternité de substitution À l’aide du féminisme noir et d’une interprétation sociocritique qui éclaire les textes de Gaines à la lumière de sa biographie, sa culture, ses traditions et des pratiques communautaires, le phénomène se décline d’une part comme un hommage de l’auteur à sa tante Augusteen Jefferson qui lui inculqua l’essentiel de ses valeurs d’hommes et visions du monde, et d’autre part comme un instrument de sauvegarde de la communauté, et surtout comme un moyen de susciter et alimenter la masculinité et l’héroïsme pour impulser le changement.

**Mots clés :** autres mères, changement, héroïsme, hommage, maternité de substitution, mères communautaires, sociocritique.

## Introduction

Many critics catalogue Ernest J. Gaines's fiction as a masculinist fiction basing their assumptions on the centrality of male figures in his writings. Indeed, in several of Gaines's works, notably *Of Love and Dust*<sup>1</sup> (1967), *A Gathering of Old Men*<sup>2</sup>(1983), *In My Father's House*<sup>3</sup>, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*<sup>4</sup>(1971), *A Lesson Before Dying*<sup>5</sup>(1993), and *The Tragedy of Brady Sims*<sup>6</sup>(2017), the narratives often foreground male trajectories. Thus, emblematic protagonists fulfilling key missions are set in motion: Jim Kelly, Marcus Paine (*LD*); Mathu, the old men (*Gathering*); Reverend Philip Martin (*FH*); Ned Douglass, Joe Pittman, Jimmy Aaron (*The Autobiography*); Jefferson, Grant Wiggins (*Lesson*); and Brady Sims (*Tragedy*). The standpoint of these observers is all the more justified as it highlights what these characters embody: virility associated with courage, the quest for dignity, the valorization of an ideal of masculinity, and a patriarchal organization of roles relegating women to rather domestic and secondary positions.

Among the critics who consider Gaines to be a masculinist are Lillie A. Brown, with her thesis entitled *Movements in Dignity: a Critical Examination of Selected Works by Ernest J. Gaines*, Corina A. Grisú, with her article "Tell Nannan I Walked: Reconstructing manhood in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*," Katy Fay with her study *Confronting Manhood: the Struggle of Male Characters in the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines*, and Wolfgang Lepschy, with *Of Fathers and Sons: Generational conflicts and Literary Lineage – the Case of Ernest Hemingway and Ernest Gaines*.

However, a closer reading reveals that Gaines grants a prominent, albeit secondary, place to the maternal figure in his works. Strong, resilient women, morally superior to the men rendered powerless by the Jim Crow system, are the ones who prevent the total collapse of Black communities. Thus, in all of the author's works, masculinity is always supported or brought to the fore by one or more of these maternal figures who provide community-based

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<sup>1</sup> This title will be presented as *LD* in all subsequent mentions.

<sup>2</sup> All subsequent mention of this title will be *Gathering*

<sup>3</sup> All subsequent mention of this title will be *FH*

<sup>4</sup> All subsequent mention of this title will be *Autobiography*.

<sup>5</sup> All subsequent mention of this title will be *Lesson*

<sup>6</sup> All subsequent mention of this title will be *Tragedy*.

maternal oversight. Gaines's obsession with exploring the strong maternal figure at every turn raises the following questions: Why is the author so attached to this motif? What are its causes, and what are the messages conveyed by such a recurrence?

To address these concerns, it is helpful to draw on two theories: sociocriticism and Black feminist criticism. Acknowledged as a literary approach analyzing the "sociality" of the text – that is, how the social is reflected or constructed within the literary work – sociocriticism is highly useful for this study. Claude Duchet, who coined the term sociocriticism, conceives of the discipline as the study of the manifestations of the social in a text and allows us to identify African American pastoral communities in the rural South within their socio-historical contexts. Gaines's literature also abounds with cultural subjects, which, according to Edmond Cros, designate individuals shaped by the cultural, social, and ideological structures of their time. The aunts, who are maternal figures and their adopted sons, are often considered cultural subjects.

As for the Black feminist approach, it highlights these notions of *othermothering* and maternal power which are directly related to the Black feminist thought defended by the Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins.

The study is divided into three sections. The first highlights the types of maternal figures that Gaines's fiction often constructs. The second analyzes the foundations of such Gaines's obsession about mother figures. And the third attempts to demonstrate the important role of the maternal figure in the development of masculinity, heroism, and dignity.

## **1 –Reconfiguring Motherhood in the Fiction of Ernest J. Gaines: Blood Mothers, Other Mothers, and Community Mothers**

Motherhood in the fiction of Ernest J. Gaines resists the orthodox biological definition and instead emerges as a specific ethical and communal institution. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines portrays maternal figures not only as biological caregivers but also as moral instructors, cultural custodians, and agents of resistance within Black Southern communities. Through the interplay of blood mothers, other mothers, and community mothers, Gaines redefines motherhood as a collective and socially embedded practice.

Even though Gaines stories do not explicitly mention blood mothering, by directly bonding a biological mother and her son, this motherhood remains logically undeniable and

implicitly evoked. Blood mothers, or biological mothers, constitute the foundational yet often limited form of motherhood in his fiction. They provide emotional attachment and early care, but their influence is frequently curtailed by systemic forces such as racism, poverty, and legal injustice. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson's biological mother, though deeply concerned for her son, is largely absent from the central moral struggle that defines his transformation. Instead, her maternal role is overshadowed by circumstances beyond her control, particularly the racist judicial system that condemns her son. Similarly, in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Jane's early life is marked by instability and displacement, consequences of slavery that fracture biological family structures. The fragility of blood motherhood in such contexts reflects what Collins describes as the disruption of Black nuclear families under oppressive systems. While Gaines does not dismiss the emotional significance of biological mothers, he emphasizes their structural vulnerability. Their motherhood is rooted in love but constrained in scope, necessitating the intervention of broader maternal networks.

It is within this gap that "other mothers" emerge as central figures. Patricia Hill Collins defines othermothers as women who assume maternal responsibilities for children who are not biologically their own, often providing the moral and social guidance in disrupted family structures (P. H. Collins, 2000: 178). Gaines's fiction offers captivating illustrations of this concept. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother, exemplifies the role of the other mother. Her insistence that Jefferson die like a man rather than like a hog becomes the moral axis of the narrative. As she declares, "I don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet" (*Lesson*, 1993, p. 13), she articulates a vision of dignity that transcends the dehumanizing logic of white supremacy. Miss Emma's motherhood is not defined by biology but by her unwavering commitment to Jefferson's moral redemption. Similarly, Miss Jane Pittman evolves into another mother figure throughout her narrative. Having endured slavery and Reconstruction, she becomes a source of wisdom and guidance for younger generations. Her interactions with characters such as Ned and Jimmy reveal her role as a moral anchor, offering lessons in resilience and resistance. Unlike blood mothers, other mothers in Gaines's works exercise a form of intentional motherhood, one grounded in choice, responsibility, and ethical leadership.

Beyond individual figures, Gaines also constructs motherhood as a collective phenomenon through what may be termed community mothers. These are networks of women

who share responsibility for nurturing, disciplining, and sustaining the community. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the quarters function as spaces of collective caregiving, where women jointly ensure the survival of children and the transmission of cultural values. Jane herself participates in this communal system, both receiving and providing care. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the church community, particularly the elderly women, embodies this collective maternal presence. Their regular visits to Jefferson, their prayers, and their shared concern for his soul demonstrate a communal investment in his humanity. One of the novel's most poignant moments occurs when the women gather food and support for Jefferson, transforming an individual tragedy into a collective act of care. This communal motherhood aligns with Collins's assertion that Black communities often rely on extended networks of care as a survival strategy. These community mothers function as custodians of memory and culture, preserving values such as dignity, solidarity, and resistance in the face of systemic oppression.

The interaction between these three forms of motherhood reveals a hierarchy not of value but of function. Blood mothers provide origin and emotional grounding, other mothers offer moral direction and personal transformation, and community mothers ensure continuity and collective resilience. Gaines's fiction suggests that no single form of motherhood is sufficient on its own; rather, it is their interplay that sustains individual and communal life. This layered maternal structure can also be examined through a sociocritical lens, as articulated by theorists such as Edmond Cros and Pierre Zima, who emphasize the relationship between literary texts and their social contexts. In Gaines's works, maternal figures are not merely characters but embodiments of social practices shaped by historical conditions. The prevalence of othermothering and communal care reflects the adaptive strategies of African American communities in response to the disruptions of slavery and segregation.

Moreover, Gaines's reconfiguration of motherhood challenges dominant Western notions that equate motherhood exclusively with biological reproduction. By foregrounding other mothers and community mothers, he presents motherhood as an ethical practice rooted in care, responsibility, and social commitment. This perspective resonates with Black feminist thought, which views motherhood as a site of both oppression and empowerment. In Gaines's narratives, maternal figures are often the primary agents of moral resistance, shaping the

consciousness of younger generations and fostering a sense of dignity in the face of dehumanization.

Through the figures of blood mothers, other mothers, and community mothers, Ernest J. Gaines constructs a model of motherhood that is at once personal, social, and political. While biological mothers provide the foundation of life, it is the broader network of maternal care – embodied in other and community mothers – that ensures survival, moral growth, and cultural continuity.

## **2 – The Origin of Othermothering and the Strong Mother Figure.**

The theme of othermothering in the fiction of Ernest J. Gaines is deeply rooted in his own upbringing in rural Louisiana, where care, discipline, and moral formation were often provided by women who were not necessarily biological mothers. His personal history does not simply inform this theme – it structures it, giving it emotional authenticity and cultural depth.

Gaines was primarily raised by his great-aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, a woman he often described as the central moral force in his childhood. Illiterate yet profoundly wise, she exercised strict discipline and transmitted values of dignity, endurance, and responsibility. Despite her disability, Gaines's aunt possessed a remarkable moral and even physical strength, which enabled her to manage her household chores while raising Gaines and his siblings. Her responsibilities and actions contrasted sharply with her physical limitations, leading Gaines to describe her as authoritarian and domineering in a conversation with Ingram and Steingberg:

She crawled over the floor as a six-month-old child might do. She had the strongest pair of arms. She could whip hard. I had to go out and break the switch, bring it to her, kneel down, and get my whipping. She cooked for us. In winter, she sat on a little bench beside the wood stove, where they cut the wood. “Bring the wood here, light the fire,” she would say. And she would lean over her little bench and put the wood into the little stove. She could wash. She’d sit on this bench and lean over. We had these old wash boards – you know those old wash boards? – and she’d just wash, wash, with an old bar of soap. There was no washing powder then. And our clothes: she also patched our clothes, sewed our clothes, she baked cakes, and this sort of thing. But that was not even enough for her. She would, in the evening, when work was over, when she’d cook food and all that sort of thing, she’d crawl over the floor, over porch out into the garden to work. It’s that kind of spirit Miss Jane has. It’s aunt Fe’s strength.” (F. Ingram and B. Steingberg, 1995, p. 50)

Although Gaines spent only seven years with her, he regards this period as the richest of his life and career, because it is during that moment he learnt the importance of standing as J. Lowe reports: “he learned the importance of standing, even though she never walked a step in

her life” (J. W. Lowe, 1995, p. xv). Gaines confirms this influence on him in an interview with Patricia Rickels as he told her how she “had the greatest impact on [his] life, not only as a writer but as a man” (P. Rickels, 1995, p. 121).

Gaines’s robust relation with his aunt becomes a model for many of his fictional pairings where authoritarian mother figures would relentlessly endeavor to articulate a boy’s manhood, or where abandoned boys would be reared by othermothers. Either the mother figure is framed in the image of Augusteen Jefferson or the son is modeled according to Gaines’s features. Gaines even goes so far as to say “unless you include her, you can’t write about me at all” (M. Gaudet and C. Wooton, 1990, p. 66), underscoring his aunt’s overriding importance in his life in terms of the values he received from her or her pervading presence in his works. For instance, while many critics see Miss Jane as the spitting image of Augusteen Jefferson, particularly in terms of courage and strength, many other critics also perceive Jimmy Aaron as Gaines’s fictional alter ego as he was also victim of father absence and mother abandonment at an early age and reared by the strong, authoritative and resilient aunt, Aunt Lena Washington.

Actually, Miss Jane is one of Gaines’s most successful and accurate characters, because she is a mixture of history, his aunt’s influence and fiction. All of this contributes to making “Gaines’s depiction of Miss Jane Pittman seem[s] so honest and accurate that some people fail to realize that the work is a novel, that Miss Jane was not a person but a fictional character.” (T.R. Butts, 2001, pp. 35-36). Indeed Gaines relationship with his aunt informs his narratives a good deal. Therefore, the more you know about that experience, the more you can decrypt Gaines’ protagonists and the mother figures who urge these boys to reach manhood. As a result, this lived experience is directly mirrored in characters like Miss Jane and Tante Lou. Gaines explains to various interviewers the origin of his fictional orientations. If to Jeanie Blake, he admits “lov[ing] his aunt more than [he had] loved anyone” (J. Blake, 1995, pp. 137), to Tom Carter, he clarifies why the mother figure trope became inescapable in his fiction:

She had great moral strength. I know the kind of burden she carried trying to raise us and I feel any character I wrote about has to have a burden. The main character has to have a heavy burden, one that can knock the average person down; sometimes it does but he has to get up. This is the philosophy I have, if I have any at all, because of the struggle of my aunt, the struggle of my race, the struggle of people in general. Any person who’s worth a goddamn must really. (T. Carter, 1995, p. 82)

Wolfgang Iser recaps succinctly the reasons why Gaines adopted such fictional postures:

Gaines never tires in emphasizing the love and admiration he feels for the three women who shaped him most during his childhood – his mother Adrienne Gaines, his maternal grandmother Julia McVay, and great-aunt Miss Augusteen Jefferson. Gaines has frequently expressed pride in his family's accomplishments, which he attributes to the lessons in strength, dignity, and discipline the children were taught by the larger family and community." (W. Iser, 2003, p. 45)

Overall, Gaines' fictional mother figures, like his great-aunt, are defined by their ethical authority and their commitment to shaping younger generations.

This practice of other mothering is also inspired to Gaines by the plantation community and collective childrearing custom. Growing up on a former plantation in Louisiana, Gaines experienced a communal model of upbringing in which multiple women contributed to the care of children. In such environments, survival often depended on shared responsibility, especially under the economic and racial constraints of the Jim Crow South. This collective structure becomes central in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, where Miss Jane assumes responsibility for children like Ned and Jimmy, and in *A Lesson Before Dying*, where Miss Emma and Tante Lou jointly take charge of Jefferson's moral rebirth. Gaines is not inventing this system; he is reproducing a social reality he lived.

True, othermothering can be an expression, in a large measure, of Gaines's proximity with his aunt Augusteen Jefferson and his community, but, to some extent, it can also be the impact of culture. As an African American writer, Gaines is also a witness of the African American racial tribulations. So, while creating his fictional world, he cannot reasonably escape the haunting fundamentals of his culture. Gaines can be trapped by what Edmond Cros terms in *La Sociocritique*, the "non-conscious"<sup>7</sup>. A significant concept to Edmond Cros and equally in Socio-criticism, it stresses that the writer may be influenced by social realities or elements of his culture of which he may not be directly aware. By the way, a key principle in Socio-criticism is to assume that "the writer always says more than he understands and more than he realizes."<sup>8</sup> (E. Cros, 2003, p. 35) which Pierre Bourdieu in other words as "the subjects do not always possess all the significance of their conducts as

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<sup>7</sup> Our translation of : « le non-conscient »

<sup>8</sup> Our translation of : « le scripteur dit toujours plus qu'il ne comprend et qu'il ne saisit »

directly emanating from the conscience (...) their conducts always produce more meaning than they know.” (Pierre Bourdieu, quoted by Edmond Cros, 2003, p. 35)<sup>9</sup>

So, Gaines’s sociocultural background might have imposed on his craft the notion of *other mothering* as attested by many observers. The abolition of slavery did not end the subjugation of Black people. Jim Crow laws created an equally destructive climate. In the South, for example, the codes governing race relations aimed to keep Black people in a state of subordination and servitude. These measures were undoubtedly more draconian toward Black men than women, because it was men who demonstrated the potential to resist, revolt, or even reject the system of exploitation.

Speaking to Gaudet and Wooton in an interview, Gaines explains why Black men are more oppressed than Black women, which favors the phenomenon of other mothering:

The women in their work did not come in conflict with the outer world as much as the men did in their work. The men competed with the white man, and there could be conflicts there. The black man competed with the white man as sharecropper and when he went into town, whereas the black woman very seldom competed. She was just a worker there. She was a worker in the big house, and she was a worker in the field. She did not have to – as I have in *A Gathering of Old Men* – compete [by] racing to the derrick to unload the sugarcane, or go into the cotton gin to unload the cotton. In my world, it was not a competitive thing between the black woman and that outer world. She just did what she was supposed to do. (M. Gaudet and C. Wooton, 1990, p. 40)

The analysis above shows how the historical circumstances have incapacitated African American fathers and have contributed to turn the African American society into a women-centered one, a society in which black sons expect more from mother figures than from men. The fathers, as Butts contends, “are unable to fulfill the traditional roles prescribed to men – that of breadwinner and protector.” (T. R. Butts, 2001, p. 59) As long as the father is in trouble, he cannot reasonably offer his protection to another person. This responsibility therefore falls to the women who, a priori, are not perceived as rivals by the white community. Considered harmless and already weak, the women do not seem to need the white man to try to break them. They thus take advantage of this sexist concession to assume the role of fathers.

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<sup>9</sup> Our translation of : « Les sujets ne détiennent pas toute la signification de leurs comportements comme donnée immédiate de conscience (...) leurs comportements enferment toujours plus de sens qu’ils ne savent et ne le veulent. »

In addition to that, historically, women have often been closer to the white world than men are because of such unfortunate events as rapes. In an interview with Fred Beauford, Gaines points to this practice as one reason why mothers and sons are sometimes together in his texts:

Son and mother have always sort of been there. Because let us take for example the white father who rapes the black woman. No matter what happens, the child was the product of the mother. The father never had to look after the child. The mother had to look after the child. That is why the boy and the mother are always together in my books. (F. Beauford, 1995, p. 22)

Clearly, a child born of rape has a priori no father. Therefore, he will never benefit from paternal protection. The only person he can turn to for protection is his mother. While paternity can be questioned, the mother's motherhood is undeniable.

Beyond all this, other mothering is seen by some critics as a cultural heritage from African customs, especially from West Africans' way of life. Sudarkasa states that the Black American inclination to rely on the extended family relations stems from the tradition of living in "a compound" (N. Sudarkasa, 1996, p. 81), a constellation of houses which accommodate many members of the large family.

In his book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, H. Gutman (1976, p. 37) argues that the institution of slavery also contributed to strengthening the sense of belonging to an extended family among Black people. Since families were often separated, it was this extended family that allowed them to cope with the pain of these dramatic situations, by providing necessary support to relatives or ensuring the education of abandoned children.

### **3 –Mother Figures, Manhood and Heroism**

Mother figures in the fiction of Ernest J. Gaines play a decisive mediating role in shaping both manhood and heroism, particularly in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*. Through forms of care, moral instruction, and communal responsibility, these women redefine masculinity and heroism away from dominance and toward dignity, endurance, and ethical accountability.

In both novels, mother figures function as primary agents of moral socialization. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Miss Jane herself embodies a maternal presence, not only biologically but communally. Her guidance of Ned Douglass reflects what Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes as "other mothering," where care extends beyond biological ties. Jane

instills in Ned values of courage, resistance, and racial pride. His eventual activism and martyrdom are rooted in her moral education, suggesting that manhood is not innate but cultivated through maternal influence.

Likewise, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Tante Lou assumes a maternal and disciplinary role over Grant Wiggins. Though Grant initially resists her authority, her insistence on responsibility eventually pushes him toward a deeper understanding of his role in the Black community. She frames manhood not as individual escape but as service and accountability to others.

Mother figures reshape heroism by privileging inner strength over physical or violent displays. In traditional patriarchal frameworks, heroism is often associated with conquest or dominance. Gaines subverts this model. Miss Jane's endurance through slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow elevates survival itself into a heroic act. Her quiet resilience becomes a model that informs Ned's more overt resistance.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, it is through the combined maternal influence of Tante Lou and Miss Emma that Jefferson is transformed. Miss Emma's demand that Jefferson die "like a man" challenges the racist dehumanization he faces. In a context where white society reduces him to an animal, she insists on his humanity. Under her moral pressure and Grant's reluctant guidance, Jefferson redefines heroism as the capacity to face death with dignity. His final act is not rebellion in a physical sense, but a profound assertion of humanity.

Definitely, mother figures act as intermediaries between oppressive social structures and Black male identity. They interpret, soften, and resist the effects of racism while preparing men to handle it. Their mediation ensures that masculinity is not shaped solely by White oppression but by Black communal values.

It is also possible to figure the heroism that mother figures instigate not always as individualistic but very often as communal because they transmit cultural memory, reinforce solidarity, and ensure continuity across generations. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the women's insistence on Jefferson's dignity is not only for him but for the entire Black community. His execution becomes a moment of collective witnessing, where his heroism restores a sense of shared humanity.

A very pertinent example of women's central role in the emergence of heroic men is provided by *A lesson Before Dying*. At the end of the story, Jefferson's manhood is unanimously acknowledged. By proving his humanity and masculinity as he walks to the

electric chair, he impresses both the White and Black communities. In doing so, he fulfills his godmother's wish: walk, not crawl, before White people. Jefferson's transformation remains a landmark event and also represents a significant victory for the Black community over the White community. This victory is largely owing to the women of the community. It is through their teamwork that Grant finally understands the meaning of manhood and heroism, which he then imparts to the boy. Before then, Grant was just an ordinary Black man, whose education meant nothing to white people. In the end, the women's actions have led to the rise of two outstanding characters: one who accepts to die for the rebuilding of black male identity, dignity and self-esteem, and the other whose maturity, self- redefinition and self-awareness might open new avenues for the expression of black youth's responsibility.

One could just as easily say that the women's actions helped transform the cowardice, irresponsibility, and invisibility of two men into strength, autonomy, and self-respect, thus saving them from the fate common to Black men. Women are at the heart of this metamorphosis because, between Grant's initial hesitations and his final impetus, between Jefferson's initial self-effacement and his ultimate heroic courage, lies the pedagogical dynamism of women.

Even in *A Gathering of Old Men*, which is regarded as Gaines's most masculinist novel, the old men's heroic posture is stimulated by a woman's mediation: Candy. Her determination in favor of the old black men provides them with more energy. Actually, Candy is the one who sent words to any old man requiring them to gather at Mathu's place, equipped with a shotgun and a shell when Beau Boutan is found dead in Mathu's yard. Although the men can be credited with the demonstration of manhood, Candy's discreet role is the most important element in their awakening process.

Definitely, mother figures in Gaines's novels mediate manhood and heroism by redefining both concepts through care, moral authority, and communal responsibility. They challenge dominant patriarchal and racist definitions of masculinity, offering instead a model grounded in dignity, resistance, and ethical strength. Through characters like Miss Jane, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma, Gaines demonstrates that true heroism emerges not in isolation, but through relationships shaped by maternal guidance and collective struggle.

#### **4 – Mother figures and Change.**

Mother figures in Gaines's fiction are essentially catalysts of change. They play a fundamental role in shaping individual identity, moral consciousness, and communal transformation. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, motherhood extends beyond biological bonds to involve a larger, collective, and ethical function. These maternal figures act as moral anchors, agents of resistance, and facilitators of change within African American communities marked by historical oppression. Through characters such as Miss Jane, Miss Emma, and Tante Lou, Gaines constructs a vision of motherhood that is both nurturing and politically charged, deeply concerned with the struggle for dignity and self-definition.

First, mother figures in both novels function as moral authorities who guide the behavior and transformation of other characters. In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Jane evolves from a former slave into a symbolic matriarch whose life experience grants her moral legitimacy. She becomes a repository of collective memory and a source of ethical guidance for younger generations, particularly Jimmy. Her voice carries the weight of history, and her actions reflect a consistent commitment to dignity and endurance. Similarly, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Miss Emma and Tante Lou exert moral pressure on Grant Wiggins, compelling him to assume responsibility for Jefferson's spiritual growth. Their insistence that Jefferson must die with dignity forces Grant to confront his own disillusionment and passivity. In this sense, mother figures impose a moral framework that challenges resignation and demands ethical engagement.

Additionally, these maternal figures represent a form of resistance against the dehumanizing structures of racism. Their actions are not merely personal but deeply political. Miss Emma's refusal to accept the racist characterization of Jefferson as a "hog" epitomizes a powerful act of defiance. By insisting on his humanity, she challenges the legal and social structures that deny Black individuals their dignity. Likewise, Miss Jane's life narrative traces a continuum of resistance, from slavery to the Civil Rights era. Her support of Jimmy, a young activist, illustrates how maternal care can nurture political consciousness and collective action. In both novels, motherhood becomes a site of resistance, where care and defiance intersect to oppose systemic injustice.

Most significantly, mother figures also play a crucial role in facilitating the transformation of male characters. In both novels, men undergo significant moral and psychological change under the influence of maternal figures. Jimmy's development into a civil rights leader is closely tied to Miss Jane's guidance and example. In *A Lesson Before*

*Dying*, Grant's evolution from cynicism to moral commitment is largely prompted by Tante Lou's and Miss Emma's expectations. Jefferson, too, undergoes a profound transformation, reclaiming his humanity and sense of self-worth before his execution. These changes highlight the women-powered dynamics in Gaines's work, where women often initiate moral awakening, while men enact the visible outcomes of that transformation.

Because mother figures serve as bridges between past and present, ensuring continuity across generations, they can ultimately be regarded as agents of change. Miss Jane embodies historical memory, linking the experience of slavery to the emerging civil rights movement. Her narrative underscores the importance of remembering the past as a foundation for future change. Similarly, Tante Lou and Miss Emma preserve cultural values in a society that continues to marginalize Black individuals. Through their perseverance, they transmit a sense of identity and resilience to younger generations. Change, in Gaines's vision, is therefore not abrupt but gradual, rooted in the continuity of cultural and moral traditions.

### **Conclusion**

Through the lens of sociocriticism and Black feminist criticism, the study revealed the existence of different types of maternal figures in Gaines's work. These categories are imposed by the harsh racial context that plagues the rural South. Indeed, riddled with poverty, lack of education, and limited opportunities, the rural South offers young people little alternative to deserting their communities, often leaving the fate of their children in the hands of maternal figures known as "othermothers" and "community mothers." Beyond this primary role, these maternal figures function as vectors for the transmission of history, memory, and resistance, on the one hand, and as pillars of community building, on the other.

The study shed light on the reasons for Gaines's attachment to the trope of a strong and resilient maternal figure by juxtaposing his lived experience with his narratives. This recurring theme stems from the strong presence of his aunt Augusteen Jefferson in his early life, the values she instilled in him, and the worldviews she fostered, but more significantly from African cultures of which the author is a descendant.

Gaines' final message remains that of the centrality of women in the construction of a stable society and of their indispensable mediation in the construction of male leadership capable of driving change in a deprived area such as the rural south. Even if they are considered a weak link, they remain the foundation of social transformation and communal preservation.

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