

UNJUST LAWS AND CORRUPTION IN THE NOVELS OF ERNEST J. GAINES

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Abstract

Most of Ernest J. Gaines' novels explore the unjust laws and corruption of white people in which African Americans are exploited. The laws of white people are still brutal towards blacks which take their lives from them and remind that they are still slaves. The laws are entertained according to the culprit; the laws for white culprits are different and for blacks, although innocent, are brutal and different. Although the law was forced on black people as always something good comes out for the blacks. African Americans face segregation every day at bus stations, schools, drinking fountains, and restaurants reserved for white people only, where black people are banned. They are forced to eat and drink separately from whites in nigger rooms, side rooms or in the basements by the law. However, there are some more important references of illegal activities and corruption of whites against the black people in Ernest J. Gaines' literary corpus.

Key words: emancipation, segregation, plantation, African Americans, inhumane.

Gaines focuses on the Great Migration of African American which is between 1916 and 1970. African Americans leave their homes in the South and headed to settle to the North is called the Great Migration. They leave their small lands, houses, and low-paying jobs in the South and found new jobs in the North. African Americans left the south to escape segregation, racism and Jim Crow's law which is significantly less intense in the North. After the emancipation from slavery, rural African Americans still suffer on plantations, low wages and inhumane treatment by masters. Some blacks purchase small lands, some become sharecroppers but most of them remain farm labours. The new generation is attracted towards the North because of the lack of economic and social growing chances, an increase in racism, segregation, poverty etc. in the South. In Gaines' novel *Catherine Carmier*, Jackson Bradley and Lillian, Catherine's sister, are the victims of this Northward migration. On the contrary North demands more labour, workers, and many jobs in industry, mills, and railways due to World War I and II. Similarly, on the positive way, Gaines presents the reverse in migration of African American to New South due to movements like the Civil Rights, Black Power Movement and familial bond as well as kinship ties pulls the new generation to South.

Moreover, in *Of Love and Dust*, Ernest Gaines has brought out the corrupt behaviour of white people. Marshall Hebert, a white plantation owner, has released Marcus, a

protagonist, from the jail on bond who is forced to work on the plantation without wages for five or more years. Gaines has discussed not only the race and class discrimination of African American but also the worst wage gap between white and black men. He presents the wage problem of African Americans through Marcus who does not get paid for his work as many of Gaines' characters get low wages than the white workers. The bond workers who are actually free men but are forced to sign a bond or contract by white men and they are allowed to work only on one plantation, even though, they are getting low wages or no wages, which is according to, "apprenticeship" laws within the black codes. Bonbon, a white plantation overseer is a follower of this law, who forces Marcus to work hard on the plantation. Marcus always wants to run away from the plantation. If a bond worker runs away without the owner's permission it is considered as an offence and breaking of the law. The same problem is discussed by The Economist Newspaper, from the United States, under the title 'The Wage Gap between White and Black Men is Growing Wider.' It is said that the gap was about to end in 1970 but it was there and nowadays it is widening as it was in the 1950s. So, it clearly shows that Gaines has discussed the practical and true African American problems in his novels. Marshall is a very shrewd white man as he brings Marcus on the plantation with a different purpose to manipulate Marcus as his pawn in the beastly game. Marshall wants to get rid of Sidney Bonbon, a white overseer on Marshall's plantation, but with his white head's plan, because he knows:

Bonbon already had something on Marshall, and long as he held this proof, Marshall couldn't do a thing but go along with him no matter what he did. This went on for stealing, too. Marshall knew Bonbon was stealing from his. He had seen a lantern in the crib at nights; he had heard the children laughing in there while they shelled corn that Bonbon was going to sell in Bayonne the next day. Marshall has missed hogs, he had missed cows—he had even missed bales of cotton from the barn. But since he couldn't do a thing about it, he pretended that it wasn't happening. (67)

On the other hand black people, although oppressed and dehumanized, they are not corrupt and do not fool their own people. Gaines has rightly pointed out that it is the white men like Sidney Bonbon cheat their own kind; Marshall Hebert who knows everything but pretends unawareness for his personal benefits. This kind of temperament is possessed by white people whereas African American people help each other in any severe situations. Even Bonbon breaks the law of miscegenation by keeping interracial relationship with Pauline, a black plantation woman. Interracial relationship is banned in the United States as exogamy. But when Marcus, a black man is in relationship with Louise, a white woman, he is killed; which shows the fraudulent behaviour of white people. Gaines has focused on the dual treatment of such kind of relationship by the white society.

In a similar way, Ernest Gaines, in the novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, shows how some groups of whites like, Ku Klux Klans, the White Brotherhood, the Camellias O' Luzana, etc. kill blacks brutally. He writes:

(These secret white groups) rode all over the State beating and killing. Would kill any black man who tried to stand up and would kill any white man who tried to help him. Just after the war, many colored people tried to go out and start their own farms. The secret groups would come out there and beat them just because their crops was cleaner than the white man's crop... They was just after destroying any colored who tried to make it on his own. (68)

White people are afraid that black people will snatch their jobs as they do better work than whites. The American white people do not want black people to overpower in the United States, therefore, every time blacks are suppressed with the brutal laws to overrule by cruelty and violence. Even white people bribed the Yankee soldiers against the law for not helping African Americans. Although black people are emancipated through the proclamation but de facto there is no freedom for them. African American people are illegally executed and murdered brutally by whites. The lynching of African American people is not new to the United States, which is extrajudicial execution without proper judicial process. This violence is to maintain social dominance by the whites over the black people to discourage them from getting an education, working together or participating in any civic activities. Families are separated forcefully by the illegal practices of whites, this is one kind of corruption against the black people.

Albert Cluveau is a white killer who killed "more than a dozen people," (101) kills Ned Douglass, Jane's adopted son, for stopping him from building a school and educating African American people. The sheriff comes for the investigation and questions two black boys who eyewitness the murder of Ned. The sheriff is a corrupt white man, pretends unbelief in the nigger boys asking them cross questions. He asks:

If they was sure it was Mr. Cluveau. They said, yes they was sure. He asked them if it was a cane field or a corn field. They had already told him it was a cane field, so they said cane again. He told them with cane so high that time of year (July) how could see a man?... he said just like they was changing their story from cane field to headland, may be they would change that story from headland to corn field... or to pecan tree. (118)

This is the disappointing condition of contemporary American law and its procedure. The sheriff himself declines the eyewitnesses by making them fools just because they and the one who is killed are niggers. Apart from this kind of duality of law towards black people, they never stop from their goal of starting the school, a step towards Afrocentrism. Another incident about the law and corruption is the suicide of Tee Bob, a white man and a victim of white law, who falls in love with a black teacher, Mary Agnes. Just because of the miscegenation law, Mary Agnes denies eloping with Tee Bob, "because she knowed better"

(188) the consequences of this interracial relationship. Jimmy Caya, a white man and friend of Tee Bob tell him about these white society rules:

I didn't tell him no more than what my daddy told me... What my daddy's daddy told him. What Mr. Paul told Mr. Robert. What Mr. Paul's daddy told him. What your daddy told you. No more than the rule we been livin by ever since we been here. (190)

Hence, it is clear that the rules and laws of white society separated the lovers just because of their race and colour. However, a fake news is published in the newspapers to hide the reality of Tee Bob's suicide and to save the honour of hard-headed white society. This is the fraud and deception of white society to save their self-esteem. Ernest Gaines has rightly described the incidents of suicides as the victims of white brutal laws. Jimmy Aaron plans to overthrow the black codes and all the brutal laws by drinking the water from the white people's water fountain in Bayonne and marching in front of the courthouse on Monday. However, he is shot down by the whites but the African Americans march on with Miss Jane Pittman's leadership suggests that Ernest Gaines is showing the rebellion of African American people against brutal and corrupt law system of white society which favours only white people. Thus, Gaines' literary corpus is revolt against the unjust and corrupt white hegemony. He has explored the invisible and suppressed African Americans' culture and history through his enlightened vision.

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