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FIGURATIONS OF OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION: THE AMBIGUITY OF RELIGION IN ERNEST GAINES' *IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE.*

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ABSTRACT

In most of Ernest Gaines's fiction, black characters are generally engaged in a struggle in order to bring out change in their relationships with whites. This struggle sometimes starts within the black family or community, and gives rise to internal tensions between the older and the younger generation, the individual and the community, men of God and other members of the community. Gaines' *In my Father's House*, blends facts about the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s with fiction, and showcases a dialectical relationship between Christian faith and African American liberation struggle. In this paper, I argue that Christianity emerges as an ineffective or antithetical concept in the African American's search for manhood and equality. Focusing on a double narrative construction (dissociation and re-association), which exposes the rhetoric and imagery of the downfall and spiritual attempts for redemption, this paper unveils the paradox underlying the religious faith in the restoration of black manhood and the struggle for liberation. In that perspective, the theoretical framework that foregrounds this study is a deconstructive analysis of black theological discourse of salvation: an ironic parody.

Keywords: dialectical tension, disassociation, parody, radicalism, re-association, religion, temptation of despair.

Introduction

An exploration of religion in African American literature reveals a phenomenon that grapples with the nexus of race, power and resistance. In other words, there is a dialectical interplay between American political, social environments and black religion. I intend to trace and articulate the rhetoric of liberation through the prism of Christian tradition, familial or communal responsibility, and the politics of pragmatism. Black liberation struggle focuses on racial and economic injustices inflicted on blacks by whites. This includes resistance to structural racism and white supremacy. In this traditional struggle for the dismantling of systems of racial oppressions, the ministers play the role of racial mediators as in most of Gaines' fiction. In this perspective, Evelyne Kelly (2010) argues that: "With the depictions of his preacher characters, Gaines makes the statement that the black preacher continues to persevere as an active agent for change in the community" (48).

Against that standpoint, I intend to articulate, in this paper, the permeability of African American religion: from its acknowledgment to its rejection as a source of deliverance and support in Gaines' *In My Father's House*. This novel by Gaines is an ethical narrative, which incorporates biblical allusion, and its content hinges upon matters that affected the social realities of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It probes the tensions between father and son, older and younger generation, or individual and community with the dialectical mediation of religion in the context of black struggle for liberation.

The title of the novel attests to the centrality of its religious symbolism. The nodal point in the novel is when Reverend Phillip Martin, both a religious and civil rights leader, has to choose between apparently two incompatible logics: radicalism and submission to the white authority that demands the cancelling of any racial manifestation. Confronted with the cynical and manipulative attitude of the white authority, as well as the pressure of the radical young men of his community, Phillip Martin is strongly held back by his reckless past. Can religion serve as a vehicle for centering the black self? Or does it hinder the black quest for subjectivity? Does religion offer a sustenance or opportunity for renewal? Is Christianity a source of support, comfort, and deliverance in the struggle for black liberation? How does Gaines grapple with these compelling questions surrounding black religion and black manhood in the struggle for black liberation?

In his exploration of religion, Gaines exposes in his novel the intricacies of the black male subject reformation by redefining his humanity with the mediation of the Christian church and the liberating potential of religion, or Christian salvation for a re-humanization of blacks. The novel is therefore set around the rhetoric of black liberation which is clasped between oppression, Christian faith, and the politics of pragmatism. Through the prism of Christianity and social action, Gaines actually parodies the importance of religion, the Christian ideal and principle of familial harmony concerning the African American struggle for liberation. Thus, the Christian faith both appears as a remedy for black suffering, and an inadequate, ineffective or elusive force in the realm of blacks' fight for social justice.

In order to discuss and establish this ambiguity, we will look at the dialectical potential of religion that hinges as a site of spiritual liberation and a source of social domination in Gaines' *In My Father's House.* Post-structuralism lends itself to such an approach. In the light of Keith Clark's methodological encodation of the narrative form in Gaines's novels (2002, 77), my investigation orbits around two narrative perspectives. On the one hand, it pinpoints "the narrative of disassociation," and on the other hand, it considers "the narrative of re-association."[1] Thus, following this narrative dynamics, the wrestling between narrative of bondage and narrative of freedom that characterizes Gaines' novel, this paper features two interconnected sections anchored in two poles of narrative process: from deformation or a narrative of disassociation to reformation or a narrative of re-association.

1) The Narrative of Disassociation

The structure and narration of *In My Father's House* emphasize severe fragmentation of the self. The narrative of disassociation is a narrative which consists in the process of the dislocation of the black family, or the negation of the black being. In Gaines' *In My Father's House*, instead of a strong family kinship as suggested in the title of the novel, this narrative is an ironic version of the biblical allusion, and it discloses the black male victimhood. An emasculated, marginalized, and silenced individual, the impotent black preacher Phillip Martin and his paralysis symbolize the expression of his psychological as well as physical downfall. This paralysis is made vivid in the novel and culminates with Phillip Martin's falling, a symptom of his social death, his obliteration. The backdrop of this social death of the black being and its effects on the family as well as the community constitute the focus of this first narrative construction: the narrative of disassociation.

The title of the novel which contrasts with its narrative content has a religious connotation. In other words, the parodic atmosphere is created through the incongruous reference to the Christian parable as it appears in the title "in my father's house" which makes specific reference to the Bible verse: John 14-2, and the

[1] See Keith Clark's discussion of Gaines' artistic development in his book *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines and August Wilson*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2002.

African American family and political crises. The religious metaphor of this title places the narrative in the novel in a parodic context. It postulates a connection, a strong tie or linkage between father and son, and fathers are supposed to take care of their sons and prepare their future. This is a common family responsibility that is incumbent on Phillip Martin, as it is commanded by God in the gospel of John, chapter 14, the central element of Gaines' narrative construction. This gospel is revealed to the reader by the narrator in the following:

> The Bible on his desk was opened to the fourteenth chapter of John. He had chosen today's sermon from that chapter. He began reading, moving his lips as he read: "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. 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. And if I go –" He stopped (54).

In this chapter of the Holy Bible, the message is that Jesus (the son) is the way to (God) the Father. In other words, the idea is that the Father's glory will be shown through the Son, who is another version of the Father. This biblical parable is a religious revelation of understanding and perfect harmony between both entities. Jesus, the son, is the revelation of God, the Father; therefore Jesus, "the way, the truth, and the life" is God. The son is a replication of the father and whatever happens to the father has a direct consequence on the son. Moreover, there exists a next world where God is preparing a home in glory for those who are faithful in their lives despite the afflictions of existence.

In My Father's House does not validate that version. Against this biblical symbology which suggests that "the father's glory will be shown through the son," the narrative in *In My Father's House* exposes disconnection, a cleavage between father and son in the African American historical experience. It is a narrative of disassociation which discloses a family gulf, and this gulf is even extended to the disintegration of the relationship between the individual (the pastor) and the community: a parodic subversion of the biblical parable.

A key characteristic of that parody is irony as it can be sensed in the narrative about the main character's personal experience anchored in social pathology. Delving into the depths of Reverend Phillip Martin's life, the story of the novel navigates between two different and opposing sequences: the past and the present. The past is made of sins, alienation, paralysis, while the present is redemptive, and more affirmative of his personhood. The past of his life is included in what I frame here as the narrative of disassociation. This narrative brings to the fore the syndrome of black emasculation, his oppressive subjection and it comprises his own testimonies as well as the testimonies about his life made by other characters in the novel.

Reverend Phillip, the pastor of a large black church in St. Adrienne, Louisiana, and a leader in the local Civil Rights committee has attained position, prestige, and authority. He has all the external symbols of middle-class success. For the black community of St Adrienne, Reverend Phillip is hailed as a man who has accomplished a great deal of action and feat in the sense of improving the civil rights of blacks. For this reason, he is identified and ranked with the iconic, national figure of black resistance, Martin Luther King, as Elijah, one of the church members proudly reports to Robert X, a newly arrived person in St. Adrienne:

> -Elijah: "Our civil rights leader round here. Our Martin Luther King, you might say."
>
> -Robert: "That's pretty high class."
>
> -Elijah: "We feel he is in that class."
>
> -Robert: "How do you come to that?"
>
> -Elijah: "By his work. His leadership, political and moral. His character" (16).

Virginia also takes delight in presenting the highly admired pastor, insisting on his unflagging popularity: "He's our civil rights leader round here. Everybody round here proud of him. Done with such a good job here, people thinking 'bout sending him on to Washington. Would be the first round here, you know" (10).

Ironically, this popular biographical image or public stature of Phillip Martin's present life runs counter to another view of the pastor according to the testimonies of past life brought to the surface by Robert X. As a different observer, Robert X, a new comer at St Adrienne has been listening to Elijah and Virginia with skepticism.

The reason of his presence at St. Adrienne calls into question the pastor's established reputation. Robert has been sent to St Adrienne by his mother to assassinate his father: "'Get yourself a ticket and go kill him,' she told me. 'Sew back your nuts by killing your father'" (99).

Against his established reputation, Phillip Martin is brought low in the course of the novel when he meets his son, the symbol of his repressed past and self. The presence of Robert X undermines the pastor's reputation which is dramatically strengthened by his fall before the crowd when he recognized Robert at his house. "He had taken only two or three steps when he suddenly staggered and fell heavily to the floor." (40) The fall here is symptomatic of a loss of his physical strength following an emotional shock. As a matter of fact, Robert serves as a mirror reflecting the pastor's reckless past, which unsettles his present exalted outside appearance, his ascribed social image. Thus, against his image of a prosperous, wealthy and populous man, the narrative of the pastor's life incorporates a questioning of his public reputation, and this narrative of disassociation between his public stature and his private and truer self is highlighted through the imagery of falling.

The confrontation with his past sins illustrates the fragmentation of his self through the haunting presence of his social outcast son. Reverend Martin perceives himself as an agent and subject accountable for the consequences of his sins: the victimization of his son that leads to his fall on the ground and his inability to stand up. The passage below is a glimpse of his introspective reflections that subvert his apparent personal, religious, and political achievements:

> When he came up to the back fence he turned and looked at the house again. He was proud of this house. He had worked hard for his family, his church, the people and the movement, and he had been proud of that hard work. He thought he had done a good job, at least both black and white had told him so. But now after seeing the boy in the house, after falling and not getting up, he had begun to question himself; who really was Phillip Martin, and what, if anything, had he really done? (72)

The foregoing passage is the pastor's refection on his achievement. Beyond the mask of a respectable man of God, or in opposition to the superficial judgment of the people, there is that other opinion that springs from the pastor's truer self, his own consciousness that differs completely with his public ascribed status. This other self is his private self-inward perspective that distances and contrasts the public opinion. It is an ironic perspective that tends to nullify or make inauthentic his present reputation.

Indeed, Robert appears as a ghost and a projection of the pastor's irreconcilable past. Through Robert, Phillip Martin's tormented life and past sins resurface. In other words, on a psychoanalytical stance, Robert functions in the novel as the return of the repressed. Robert, the son symbolizes whatever is considered as the past mistakes or wounds of Reverend Phillip, the sins that he has made in his former life and has now got rid of, but remained stored in his unconscious.

Robert X's real name is Etienne Martin, and he is the elder of three children that Phillip had abandoned together with their mother some twenty three years ago. As the narrative goes, "They were total strangers. The boy was his son by blood only… He couldn't even recall his true name" (67). Actually, confronting Robert is self-confrontation: the confrontation with his past sins. These sins, as Robert reminds him involve his abandonment of Johanna and the children. And Robert is in St. Adrienne for revenge against, as he told him, revenge: "For destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family: my mama, my brother, my sister" (99).

Phillip Martin and Johanna, Robert's mother "lived separately. He had no time for marriage, for settling down. There were too many other things to do; there were too many other women in his life" (63). The neglect of Robert's mother is paramount in that relationship. As if he were driven away by some invisible force, he could not have a steady relationship with a woman. Thus, he didn't care about Johanna, or the three children that they begot. He completely denied his social and parental roles of husband and father. They were separated: "That was over twenty years ago. He hadn't sent her one penny or written her one letter in all that time, and neither had he received a letter from her. He had heard that she lived in Texas a few years, then she left for California.

He had not heard a thing about her since" (64). As he later avows, the cause of this family crisis is paralysis, a legacy of slavery:

> "I was paralysed. Paralysed. 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. Not protect you or your mother. They had branded that in us from the time of slavery. That's what kept me on that bed. Not 'cause I didn't want to get up. 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" (102).

The foregoing passage is an autopsy and a testimony of Phillip Martin's dehumanization, the suppression of his manhood. His fall and incapacity to stand up holds from his spiritual annihilation, his lack of the necessary gamut to rise against white domination that has always made him shy away from his responsibility. In spite of his effort, he remains impotent, a helpless victim, who is still manipulated by whites like a puppet: "like some cowardly frightened little nigger, he lay there and let them do all the talking for him. He even let them push pills down in his mouth" (55).

For attendant black people around him, Phillip has been poisoned by whites, comparing his fate with the ones of other historical figures, and for the white men present, the fall which suggests a lack of physical strength is caused by a physical exhaustion due to excessive activity of the pastor. But the pastor knows better, and against these false allegations, as he has revealed, the cause of his downfall is paralysis, the weighty legacy of slavery.

As the pastor collapses, it is the whole ground on which he is supposed to stand that collapses; it is his world that collapses. Robert X stands in the novel as the symbol of Phillip Martin's psychic evisceration, and the psychic evisceration of the black self in general. Heavily burdened by the sins of his father, Robert suffers from psychological castration. He embodies a black body in pain: one whose social and cultural disequilibrium engenders his physical deterioration. The narrative reveals that he is "a crypt," according to the neighbors of his mother (192). He is burdened by permanent guilt due to his emasculation as Chippo, one of the reverend's close friends asserts: "I believe he went in (always in the house) out of guilt. He wasn't the man of the house no more, and he didn't want act like he was" (199).

For whoever reports about him, Robert X looks like a ghost. Fletcher Zeno, the taxi driver who met him around midnight said: "First, I took him for a ghost. Then I thought it might be a dog" (11.) It is this same ghostlike image that is reported by Abe Matthews: **"**He had seen him there on Sunday evening just as it was getting dark, so he was not ready to swear on the Bible that it was the tenant, but if it wasn't, then it was a ghost wearing a long overcoat and a knitted cap pulled all the way down to his ears" (11).

Virginia refers to him as a "poor little sissy," (23) and Robert is a social outcast immune to any kind of physical violence. For instance, he does not mind the weather, be it cold or warm: "It all feels the same to me" (15). He is a restless body and soul: "The people on either side of him could hear him pacing the floor day and night, sometime between twelve and one o'clock, they heard him scream" (22). Robert drinks alcohol in order to "kill the pain" (25) and as he confesses, he is psychologically devastated as well: "My soul don't feel good. Like garbage, broke glass, tin cans. Any trash" (25). He regards life as trash: "nothing but trash now" (27).

Robert is completely devitalized, and is infused with victimology, a social pathology which is the adoption of victimhood as the core of one's identity. What is most revealing about him is that he has become an emblem of "the temptation of despair," to use a phrase by Cornell West. The temptation of despair, West (1996) writes, "is predicated on a world with no room for black space, place, or face. It feeds on a black futurelessness and black hopelessness – a situation in which visions and dreams of possibility have dried up like raisins in the sun" (101).

Definitely, Robert is a figuration of the effects of white oppression on blacks. He is a victim of slavery and racism, as well as internalized racism which has bred immoral behavior in blacks, leading them to

psychological and emotional death. Moreover, the slave mentality has kept blacks in bondage. A prime consequence of this crippling legacy of slavery and the victimization from white oppression is the fragile black family nexus. As Frazier postulates,

> The enslavement of the Negro not only destroyed the traditional African system of kinship and other forms of organized social life but it made insecure and precarious the most elementary form of social life which tended to sprout anew, so to speak, on American soil – the family. There was, of course, no legal marriage and the relation of the husband and father to his wife and children was a temporary relationship dependent upon the will of the white masters and the exigencies of the plantation regime. (Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church*, 13)

Thus, the imagery of falling and the inability to stand up are symptomatic of the still prevailing dominance of the white power to which Phillip, Robert's father is still subdued. The Reverend's abstraction from family responsibility is the result of his pathological patriarchal masculinity. Relegated to a state of symbolic non existence, Reverend Phillip has been enduring a castrating situation: the guilt and the alienation from humanity that results from racist domination. His response to this psychological castration is symptomatic of contemplation of despair, a state of nihilism. As West (1996) argues, the nihilism of the African American "leads to lives of drift, lives in which any pleasure, especially instant gratification, is the primary means of feeling alive" (101). It was in response to that nihilism that Phillip has been using his penis as a way to assert masculine status. His following declaration is a confirmation "'I was an animal before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin. I was an animal'" (211),

He is unable to assume manhood or patriarchal responsibility for families and kin. Actually, the idea of being a man results in the idea of being a father. The image of the father stands as source of stability, discipline and order in the family. In order to reject the denial of his manhood, Phillip Martin ended up multiplying sexual adventures, equating manhood with sexual virility. His hyper-masculine mindset led him to view women as conquests, a reaction to his psychological emasculation. He thus used to devalue women by reducing them to objects of male sexual domination. Johanna, Robert's mother is an effusive victim of sexual objectification. He has treated her as a "common whore," giving her three dollars for her three children (101). Defending himself, Phillip asserts that he was economically obliterated: "That's all I had in the world. I didn't own myself then. Nothing. Nothing else but the rags on my back" (101).

On the whole, this first narrative component: the narrative of disassociation focuses specifically on internalized oppression; that is black oppression within the domestic sphere. It is a narrative about the psychic as well as physical paralysis of Phillip Martin. This paralysis is the result of the historical demonization of black men in general, a process that has veiled the black man's individual humanity. A result of this dehumanization which is central to the narrative construction is the cleavage between father and son, a state of crisis which is reverberating in the African American community's struggle for liberation. In the perspective of an urgent solution, Gaines' narrative construction instantiates another narrative: the narrative of re-association or reconnection which features a dialectical relationship between the older and the younger generations, and in which, religious mediation is parodied.

2) **The Narrative of Reassociation and Religious Ambiguity**

The struggle for black liberation is preempted by the internal crises within the black community following the dehumanizing effect of African American bondage life. In the framework of post-structuralist narrative of liberation in *In My Father's House*, the narrative of re-association or reformation is a narrative of Phillip Martin's journey toward fatherhood and reconnection with his community. This process of re-association goes through a dialectical intensification: the crisis between the pastor and his son and the pastor and the community, which all result in the pastor's disillusionment and loss of faith.

The narrative of reconnection starts with Phillip Martin's spiritual growth or liberation from victim to change agent. Liberation, As Elonda Clay (2010) argues, "represents various forms of opposition to dominance, disempowerment, and violence practiced by marginalized groups that have been invaded, conquered, colonized,

dispersed or displaced, and subordinated" (310). Dealing with the divisions within the black community that weaken the struggle for racial equality in this narrative, Gaines problematizes the role of religion through parody. Through Phillip Martin, the pastor and the main character of the novel, Gaines first enshrines religion before questioning it. What is the role of the church in the struggle to recover from the ills of slavery? How to discard the heritage of slavery in order for father and son to fill in and bridge the gap? Can Christian faith forge connection between father and son? Can religion help reconcile or integrate the black family?

Going from that parodic standpoint, as indicated above, the first form of opposition to dominance in *In My Father's House* is religion. Religion is influential not only at the level of the individual's life, but also in the social and political life of the black community. There are "two Baptist and a Catholic" churches (9) according to Virginia, in the small locale of St. Adrienne, which is suggestive of the importance and influence of religion. At the level of the individual, Phillip Martin's salvation is an illustration. He is an example of the idea that black theology is redemptive. In a hostile American society, Reverend Phillip appropriates Christian experience in order to survive and liberate himself, to affirm his dignity, his personhood. The figuration of religion as a site of liberation takes us back to Phillip Martin's personal transformation from a pathological subject to an ethical subject, his religious redemption. As the narrative reveals, Phillip Martin, a formerly wounded and vulnerable person has gone through a life transition: operating a therapeutic relief, a change in the course of his life with his conversion to religion. God has transformed him, turning him from his animal status to a man, which can be equated to his spiritual and psychic regeneration or deliverance from a life of subjection. In the following narrative sequence, which is a dialogue between Phillip and Beverly, Phillip acknowledges his transformation:

> Phillip: "Did you know me before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin?"
>
> Beverly: "No," she said.
>
> Phillip: "I was an animal before I was Reverend Phillip J. Martin. I was an animal. He changed me to a man. He straightened my back. He raised my head. He gave me feelings, compassion, made me responsible for my fellow man. My back wasn't straightened before he straightened it. My eyes stayed on the ground. I took everything I could from my fellow man, and I didn't give him nothing back" (211).

Thus, according to Phillip Martin's experience, religion constitutes a source of regeneration or re-humanization. It has played a significant role in his life, and for him, it is a source of transformation, an agent of social change. Religion appears here as a symbol of freedom, an emancipator resource that has provided Phillip with stability. This picture of the church is underlined by Evelyne Kelly (2010) who rightly states, "Martin views Christianity as a requirement to achieve and maintain manhood. Without it, he is a mere brute, incapable of controlling the desires of the flesh, which resulted in his inappropriate behavior in the past" (42). Phillip Martin's vertical encounter with God has provided him with salvation: a growth toward mature humanity. His Christian faith has consoled him of his frustrations, of his hardships. Religion has offered him a healing refuge, comfort and stability. To Phillip Martin's eyes, an important benefit of religion in his present life is empowerment: an undeniable dimension of his religious conversion. His Christian faith, as he declares, has given him the necessary force to show love for his son: "I love you now, and I loved you then. I was too weak then to do anything. Today I have strength. 'Cause today I have God" (100). It is this strength or empowerment that takes him to the realization of his past sins, and through Robert, the pastor intends to reconcile with himself.

With his religious faith as source of support, he appears as a redeemed man, and equipped with religious armor, Reverend Phillip has become a model of manhood that serves to guide the members of the community. His involvement in political and civil rights movement in this locale of St Adrienne is a proof of his reformation, and his commitment to a communal redemptive act for his fellow blacks' subjectification. In addition to Phillip Martin's spiritual salvation from sin and guilt, the Civil Right committee of St. Adrienne, a political movement for black liberation is supported and run by the black church. Reverend Phillip and other people from the church find in religion a tonic that gives courage and strength in this struggle for freedom.

The black community's religious experience and engagement in the liberation struggle suggest that they belong to the doctrine of "This-Worldly Theology," which advocates explicitly for blacks to "experience earthly

freedom and happiness," according to a phrase by Janeé Avent and Craig S. Cashwell (2015, 86). In this extent, Phillip Martin and his Christian followers differ from other ministers who adopt the doctrine of "Other-Worldly Theology" in Gaines's other fictional works. This doctrine refers to those churches whose members believe in deferring freedom and reward until after death. In other words, these church members are, according to Janeé Avent and Craig S. Cashwell "more accepting of present pain and suffering since they believe they will experience relief posthumously in Heaven" (2015, 85).

In *In My Father's House*, the church plays a dynamic role in the community's struggle for liberation. As Frazer postulates, Black theology must confront "the issues which are part of the reality of black oppression" (192). In the midst of an oppressive life, religion takes a leading role in creating solution. Together with his fellow churchmen, Phillip Martin confronts the abuses of white power which are part of the reality of blacks' daily experience in St Adrienne. It is no doubt a liberative paradigm, a force that helps in the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism. T. Vaughn Walker (1996) argues that,

> The black church has always provided the moral and ethical leadership for the African-American community. The black church modeled empowerment before the term was used in its present context. It was (and is) the black church that provided hope for the hopeless, faith for the faithless, joy and celebration in the midst of much pain and degradation (52).

Religious faith appears as a healing refuge, one dimension of redemption. The other dimension pertains to its effectiveness in the forming of a community; and it is that dimension that remains the challenging issue in Gaines' narrative. In other words, Gaines's narrative of re-association incorporates another dimension of Christian faith with regard to the struggle for liberation. In this dimension, religious faith appears as a deceptive solution to the conflicts between father and son, or between the pastor and the younger generation, which has resulted in Phillip Martin's estrangement. The Church is an institution involved in a series of dialectical tensions: between father and son, between passive resistance and radicalism.

Though Phillip Martin is considered "saved," the narrative reveals that he is still subjected to white hegemony: "the paralysis," that has kept him on the ground when he saw his son. As he later told his friend, when he found religion he thought the gap was closed: "I thought fifteen years ago when I found religion I had overthrown my paralysis. But it's still there, Chippo. How do you get rid of it? How do you shake it off?" (202)

Phillip Martin's fall serves as an external symbol of his impotence, which shows the limits of his spiritual salvation in solving social matters. Following the meeting with his abandoned son, the return of the repressed, he decides to turn to God for solving a social matter: the fragmentation of his family. But, strangely enough, he is hesitative and unable to pray: "Phillip turned from the window to his desk. He wanted to pray, but how could he pray? If he prayed out loud, Elijah would surely hear him; and he could not get satisfaction praying in silence" (54). The biblical evocations for religious consolation do not resolve the question, and generally, they are ultimately interrupted, which is evocative of the shaking of his religious belief. Thus, the narrative deployment of religion shows pitfalls: hesitations and a slow and progressive crumbling of the pastor's faith.

The crumbling of Reverend Phillip J. Martin's faith ironically contrasts with the name of the church he presides over: "Solid Rock Baptist Church of St. Adrienne." Instead of "a solid rock" indicative of a solid and unflagging faith, the narrative accounts for Phillip Martin's experience in the midst of a crisis of faith, a disillusionment about God as the solution and a viable source of support and deliverance in the struggle for black liberation. This disillusionment is made vivid in the narrative through fragmentary religious expressions and references. Reverend Phillip Martin experiences disillusionment with his faith in God in his search for solution when faced with family and community crisis.

His call on God to solve the problem of family disharmony he is confronted with is not answered. For him, God has failed him, and it is then that he realizes the partial effectiveness of religion. "Making the reverend into a man" was not but a temporary resolution. Indeed, the meeting with his son appears as a pitfall and it reveals the illusion of his absolution, his reconciliation with himself. His request for the healing of the family fracture remains unfulfilled and the reverend remains estranged of his son. "Before kneeling, he opened the

Bible to the book of Psalms and read one verse from the one hundred second chapter. 'Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble; incline thine ear unto me'" (69).

As his expectations are not fulfilled, his religious background is shaken, and doubt and disillusionment take ground in his mind. He starts questioning God out of frustrations, and the religious narrative takes a new turn within the liberation narrative. Phillip Martin's prayers are marked with hesitation and incompleteness, which suggests frustration and stagnation:

> But he didn't begin with the Lord's Prayer as he usually did each day, and neither did he say any of the things that he had said daily since his conversion. Instead he asked the same question over and over: "Why? Why? Why? Is this punishment for my past? Is that why he's here, to remind me? But I asked forgiveness for my past. And you've forgiven me for my past" (69).

He is spiritually confused and his interminable interrogations are indicative of his lamentations out of frustration, and his disillusionment with religion: "'Why, Father? Why? I think I've served you well; I think I've served my people well. Why? Why?'" Despite all these questions which are supplications, there is no answer from God: "The thorn-crowned, twisted, bleeding body of Christ hung on the cross, mute" (69). For the reverend, it is all like God has turned his back on him. When he accounts for his experience to a colleague, Reverend Peters, the latter tells him that God's answers are always delayed:

> Peters: "You asked Him to help you?" he asked Phillip.
>
> Phillip: "Yes," Phillip said, looking directly at Peters.
>
> Peters: "Sometime it takes time, time – years."
>
> Phillip: "Years?" Phillip said. "I don't have years. I don't even have days. We don't even have hours, Peters. We don't have any time at all."
>
> Peters: "He will bring him back to you if you have faith," Peters said.
>
> Phillip: "Will He, Peters?"
>
> Peters nodded his head. "If you have faith" (152-153)

Against Phillip Martin's desire for immediate answer whenever he solicits God, Peters recommends patience, for, as he tells Phillip: "Keep the faith, man. Never doubt," for God "works in mysterious ways" (153). Actually, Christian faith develops a conservative ideology, which can be translated into a passive accommodation.

But as Phillip realizes, religion and its doctrine of passive accommodation cannot bridge the gap between father and son, and this realization draws Phillip to religious skepticism: "There's a gap between us and our sons, Peters, that even He," Phillip said, nodding toward the Bible, "even He can't seem to close" (154). Actually, Reverend Phillip's religious redemption has not made him into a man. The Christian faith or religious conversion has temporarily relieved him but not erased his past sins and restored his individuality, his personhood. He is still burdened by his past, as Alma, his new wife has easily detected in his attitude: "Ever since I met you, Phillip, you been running, running, and running. Away from what, Phillip? Trying to make up for what, Phillip? For what you did to that boy? For what you did to his mom? For other things you did in the past? The past is the past, Phillip. You can't make up for the past" (136).

What he has attained is an elusive realm of manliness. Indeed, Phillip Martin remains impotent and his salvation certainly requires the acceptance and the voicing of the being that has been suppressed by white oppressive power, hence the retrospective narrative with the purpose of reconciling the past and the present. This reconciliation between past and present is symbolized in the narrative through his attempts to reconnect first with Robert, the shattered meaning of being a person, by rescuing him from sufferings, and then, with his reconnection with the young.

He urges his son to accept God in order to be restored, yet he fails in this adventure. For the son, this argument falls within the limits of plausibility. In the conversation below, the son exposes with a tone of irony the ineffectiveness of prayer in the face of social matter:

> Robert: "He answers fathers' prayers. Not sons'."
>
> Phillip: "All men's prayers."
>
> Robert: "Not all men's. Not all men's. I prayed and prayed, and prayed. He never answered mine. I know He never answered mine" (102).

Against Phillip's religious conviction, Robert develops a religious skepticism, and refuses to accept Christianity as a remedy for societal ills. He dismisses the role and the importance of faith. His disbelief in religion is likened to the failure of the father and law in the fights of people's battles. As he asserts: "No father, no more than there's God or law" (104).

The crisis between father and son is in fact a symptom of an African American family gulf, which is replicated in the pastor's relationship with the youth of the community. In the quest for liberation, the young people and the pastor hold competing visions. In other words, how social action for justice and self-determination should be appropriated constitutes the point of division between Reverend Phillip's survival theology based on passive resistance and the radical militancy of the community.

As a matter of fact, Reverend Phillip Martin's liberation rhetoric or political strategy adheres to the conservative policy for black liberation, a non-violence made of circumstantial compromise that contrasts with uncompromising violence as envisaged by the youth. In the collective commitment of black people from St Adrienne for a demonstration against the discriminatory practices of Albert Chenal, the white store owner, Phillip Martin's sermon is guided by his passive Christian subservience grounded on biblical principles:

> "Poor Albert Chenal. Poor, poor Albert Chenal. I don't hate Albert Chenal. I don't want you to hate Albert Chenal. I want you to pray for Albert Chenal. Tomorrow in church, pray for Albert Chenal. Before you go to bed tonight, pray for Albert Chenal. Remember, love thy neighbor as thyself" (36-37).

Not only does Phillip advocate love for the white oppressor, but he also disparages extremism among his fellow blacks, as he goes on in his sermon, evoking religion and its doctrine of passive submission: "Love is the only thing. Understanding the only thing. Persistence, the only thing. Getting up tomorrow, trying again, the only thing. Keep on pushing, the only thing (37).

What the pastor advocates here stands in sharp contrast with the radicalism of the young. Still naively imbued with religious morality and patience, Reverend Phillip grounds his faith in nonviolence as the most powerful form of active resistance to injustice. What he is fundamentally keen on now is how to cultivate true manhood or throw off the shackle of the past, and assert his dignity and fatherhood in a society bent on denying blacks' rights. Reverend Martin's conception of dignity and action differs from the community's. The action that upholds his dignity as human is the liberation of his son who is used as bait by the white authority. He has decided to fulfill his fatherhood responsibilities: a shift from the communal to the individual. So when the young Tony wished him good luck for the battle to come against Chenal, Phillip wanted to say, "To hell with Chenal. My mind is on something more important than all your Chenals" (116).

Instead of sacrificing this individual right for the larger benefit of the community, Reverend Phillip has rather decided to rescue and reconcile with his long abandoned child in order to recover from his psychological wound. Actually, the reverend's affirmation of the primacy of his familial responsibility operates as a betrayal to the cause. To save his son from prison and from death pertains to the strategy of survival and submission, an approach that rails against the radicalism of the community. In other words, this position stands to marked contrast to the plans for social actions as held by the community, especially the black youth.

With his religious background, Phillip is an adept of passive resistance, a celebration of sacrifice and suffering which stand as the values cherished by the Christian doctrine. This attitude reinforces the gap between Billy and Reverend Phillip Martin concerning the agenda of the struggle for liberation. Billy, a young activist, who

has come back from the Vietnam War, is modeled as the opposite of Phillip's conservatism. He rejects black conservative ideology. For him the liberation struggle should be an armed struggle and he is influential among other young people, whom he is organizing in order to undertake a revolution through guerilla war techniques. Facing this lack of shared understanding, Phillip asks Billy: how they can close the gap between father and son?

> "How do we close the gap, Billy?" Phillip asked.
>
> "I don't know," Billy said.
>
> "The church?" (165-166)

When Phillip suggests that the church can play a mediating role between the old and the young, Billy systematically rejects that idea of religious mediation. His outright rejection of religion holds from his idea that there is no adequacy between the church and the civil rights militancy: "Shit," Billy said, without hesitating a moment. "There ain't nothing in them churches, Pops, but more separation. Every little church got they own little crowd, like gangs out on the street. They all got to outdo the other one. Don't look for that crowd to close no gap" (166). In his response, Billy denounces the hypocrisy that reigns into the churches and concludes that the church cannot close the gap between father and son, even though, according to Phillip, "The whole civil rights program started in the church" (166). For Billy, the Christian institution is too complicit with the white power structure, and therefore hinders rather than motivates revolution. For the young people in general, the commitment to dignity and self-determination amounts to the demise of passivity in the black church.

If the gap between father and son has to be closed, "My daddy got to catch up with me," Billy opines. 'I can't go back where he's at" (166). Joining the youth means for the old to drop the fear of getting into trouble. The old have to move away from their being conservative and adopt activism, radicalism which involves more pragmatism and the possibility of self-sacrifice. According to Billy, as he tells the Pastor, the individual has to play the role of the scapegoat in confronting death and sin rather than Jesus absolving the individual's deathly sins. The idea of self-sacrifice here contradicts what the reverend has indulged in so far as a religious subject. There is no other way, and as Billy says, the enemy will not be defeated if violence is not considered as the proper response to their oppression:

> "The honky don't understand but two things, mister – bullets and fire. Go ask the Indians, go ask the Japs. Go ask the Koreans, the Vietnamese. All nonwhite people. Even when they lynch a nigger they have to burn him too. Bullet and fire is all he knows. Well, I intend to get there first" (168).

Thus, to the religious liberation narrative, Billy opposes an atheist liberation narrative. In this narrative, death is interiorized. Billy does not deny violence as a legitimate instrument of freedom. He even argues for the necessity of using violent revolution against white authority, for, violent force is the most appropriate and efficacious means to overcome the oppressor. For the younger generation, the discourse of resistance and regeneration should therefore integrate violence. In this perspective, the denial of the church is the route to freedom. For the pastor, a theology of liberation does not require violence, and what he professes counters the Black Power rhetoric of the young men. Eventually, his dismissal both as the spiritual leader and the leader of the Civil Rights movement equates to his excommunication from the community and the suspension of religious authority in the discourse of emancipation.

After his conversation with Billy, Phillip later exposes to Adeline his total confusion about his religious grounding: "I'm at war with myself, Adeline Toussaint, a former girl friend. I'm at war with my soul. For the past few days I've been questioning myself. I come up with nothing but clouds – about everything" (168). Then he confesses that he has always been lying: "I'm wondering now, after all these years, if I'm not still lying. Lying to myself. God. Lying to my people" (178). Reverend Phillip's spiritual salvation rhetoric and his passive resistance stance are thus dislodged by his realization of God's being mute to his problem. He thought that God would deliver him and his people from bondage, but now, he is disillusioned with religion. Religion has failed him:

> "Even Him," Phillip went on, as if he hadn't heard either Shepherd or Chippo. "How come He let this happen? How come He stood by me all these years, but not today? I've walked through mobs after

> mobs. Traveled every dark muddy road in this state. 'Cause I knowed He was there with me. When He give me all that strength, that courage to do all them other things, and when I asked Him for my boy – " He stopped. His mouth trembled. Tears came into his eyes. "Why didn't He hear me, Chippo? What is it, Chippo? Why won't He let this poor black man reach his son? Was that so hard to do so? Was that asking Him for too much? Well, Chippo?" (209)

Reverend Martin's first conception of God and social change turns out to be a failure. Chippo shrugged his shoulders. "I don't understand His ways, man. They say what He do He do for the best" (209). Toward the end of the book, and following his confrontation with the youth, Phillip Martin drops this doctrine of fatality which is synonymous of his loss of his Christian faith, as implied in this conversation with Shepherd:

> Phillip to Shepherd: "Don't you have faith in anything, boy?"
>
> "Not too much," Shepherd said, looking straight at him. Phillip nodded his head. "That's a good way to be. Boy. The only way to be. That way you never get hurt" (209).

Later, Phillip confesses his disillusionment and his rejection of faith in a discussion with Beverly:

> "I don't have none either," Phillip said.
>
> "I don't believe that," she said to him. "You've been hurt. You've been hurt bad. But a man like you can't lose faith that easily."
>
> "You can lose it that easily," he said. "After you work and work and work, and everything fall apart all at the same time, you can lose it that easily" (210-211).

This confession indicates that the social as well as the religious are worth taking into account. The religious language or doctrine is not enough for black salvation. To recover his human totality or be saved, and reconnect with his son or the black community, Phillip has to acknowledge his being lost, his decentering as he says in these closing words of the book:

> Phillip: "I'm lost, Alma. I'm lost."
>
> Alma: "Shhh," she said. "Shh. Shhh. We just go'n have to start again" (214).

The loss Reverend Phillip voices here signals his defeat and the resolution of the crisis between him and the younger generation, and his willingness to adapt to the new tide: radicalism. In other words, religion appears as an illusory therapy for the African American family or community in crisis. The failure of religion to bridge the gap between father and son, between the older and the younger generations on the issue of social activism for social change lays the groundwork for Reverend Martin's downfall and his isolation. These ending words are suggestive of a fragmentary salvation of Reverend Phillip, and his disillusionment as well as his rejection of his conservative agenda. His reliance on God is problematic in terms of liberation. The realization of his failure is indicative of his possible reshaping of his strategic orientation, as the first stance is doomed to failure.

As a pastor, Phillip Martin occupies a mediating position between the state and the black community. To maintain his leadership role, he must rethink his view, and these ending words suggest the possibility of rebirth, which is crucial for the future of the liberation struggle. In other words, religion, symbolized as a spiritual escape is elusive and ineffective, and cannot be the solution of racial liberation. God, the father is not the solution to black oppression. Reliance on God is problematic, for it discourages agency and responsibility. This awareness makes reverend Phillip Martin a wavering Christian and the whole narrative becomes a religious parody. The narrative of re-association is a parodic narrative that showcases an ambivalent development which culminates in the pastor's loss of faith regarding God's existence and influence in solving black matters. Realizing the precariousness and ineffectiveness of this accommodationist stance, he therefore envisages standing up violently to racial oppression: a new stance that bridges the younger and the older generations.

Conclusion

Black religion and the dialectic of oppression and liberation, or the African American liberation struggle and religion as instantiated in Gaines' novel has been the focus of this study. Gaines's *In My Father's House* is an inquiry into conversation with the 1960s and 1970s Black Power movement. Gaines' slant on religion is approached with regard to the struggle for liberation, particularly the dialectical religious potentiality; that is religion as a site of either liberation or oppression. In other words, my analytical focus has been centered on the question: how does Gaines grapple with questions surrounding black religion and black manhood in the struggle for black liberation? My investigation has shown that even though the Christian faith can be a source of spiritual deliverance, it remains an illusory therapy for the African American community and a deceptive solution in the process of black liberation in Gaines' *In My Father's House*.

Thus, in the novel, the religious narrative within the liberation narrative vacillates between religion as a site of liberation, a symbolic escape from oppressive setting, and religion as an elusive therapy, making the whole story of narrative of a religious parody. The religious mediation between passive resistance and radical egalitarian ideology held by the younger generation

And, instead of his agency for transformation, he relies on God for action: the metaphor of God the father. The title works as an ironic reference to the religious parable "In my father's house". The religious metaphor of the unity between the father and the son is turned into a parody, as it is deployed in the novel. The crisis between father and son is centered on faith in Christian religion and pragmatic social action. Religion has been the remedy to the symptoms of Phillip Martin's sufferings.

From the standpoint of a deconstructive frame, Gaines questions Christian faith or the role of religion in the African American struggle for liberation. Going from the established biblical allusion that contends that the father has to protect the son, Gaines works out a narrative parody that moves beyond religious faith and shows that religion is a deceptive solution, a mere utopia in the black struggle for liberation.

In other words, the narrative of *In my Father's House* features Gaines' paradoxical handling of religion: its potential for black liberation is an ideological mirage. It is first characterized by a process of emancipation from victimization which is deployed in the novel as the struggle for black liberation, and the reconfiguration of black male subjectivity with a particular stress on the ineffective role of religion. *In My Father's House* therefore establishes the dialectical potential of religion: religion as a site of spiritual liberation and a source of social domination, and definitely figures out the inadequacy of Christianity in the face of the profound evils of slavery. This discussion has tried to place religion in a particular context of the blacks' struggle for Civil Rights, and the need for African American to reassert a more powerful masculinity.

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