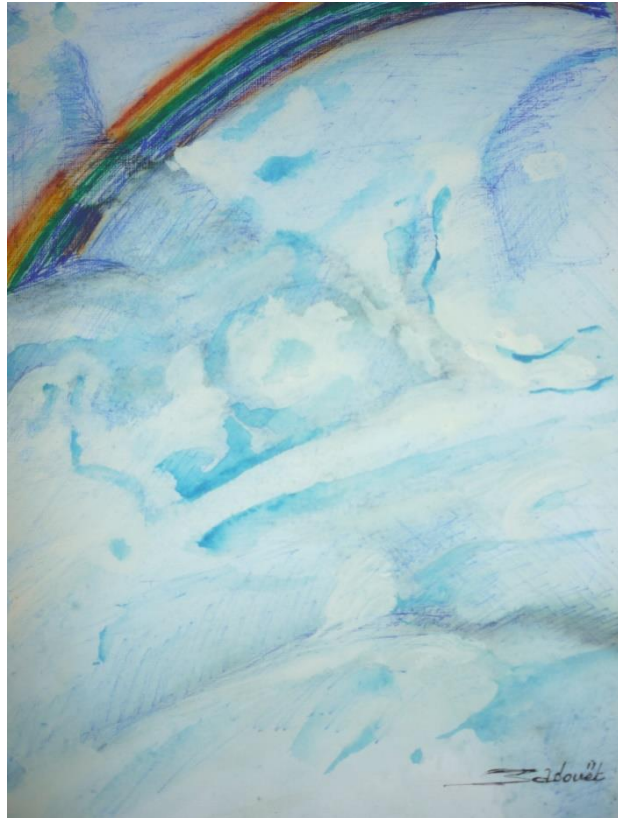


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SOMMAIRE

- 1- Dr. DIALLO Adama, CNRST/INSS, « **Problématique de l'interaction des langues nationales et du français au Burkina-Faso** »
- 2- Dr. ETTIEN Yapo, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny , **Ernest J. Gaines's Miss Jane Pittman: A Symbol of the Black Female Abolitionist Struggle**
- 3- Dr. JOHNSON Kouassi Zamina, « **How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents de Julia Alvarez: Évocation de l'Histoire et des Identités Culturelles à Travers la Littérature** »
- 4- Dr. KONKOBO-KABORE Madeleine, CNRST/INSS, « **Homosexualité et répression : Faut-t-il invoquer les droits de l'homme ?** »
- 5- Dr. KOUASSI Kouamé Brice, Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, « **Liberté en question et question de la liberté dans *Germinal* de Emile Zola** »
- 6- Dr. ASSI Véronique Diané, Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, « **Loin de mon père de Véronique Tadjo, une auto-fiction ?** »
- 7- COULIBALY Adjata, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, « **La spatialité dans le cercle des tropiques d'Alioune Fantouré : lecture d'un réel géoimaginaire** »
- 8- Dr. AGOUBLI Paul-Hervé KWADJANÉ, Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, « **Les écritures de soi, entre valeur et antivaleur : Michel Houellebecq entre deux impératifs** »
- 9- Dr. KAMATE Banhouman, Université Félix-Houphouët-Boigny, « **Les crises sociopolitiques ivoiriennes dans les spectacles théâtraux de Sidiki Bakaba (1972-2010)** »

- 10- Dr. DIASSE Alain, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, « **Place et rôle des journalistes ivoiriens dans leurs rapports aux politiques** »
- 11- Dr. BOGUI Jean-Jacques Maomra, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny
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- 12- Dr. NAKOULMA Arouna Goama, CNRST/INSS, « **Droits des paysans modèles en zones urbaines et périurbaines: Cas des villes de Ouagadougou et Ouahigouya au Burkina Faso** »
- 13- Dr. QUENUM Anicette, Université d'Abomey-Calavi, « **Les traces d'une inspiration biblique dans l'œuvre d'Olympe Bhely-Quenum** »
- 14- Dr. TOTI AHIDJÉ Zahui Gondey, Université Alassane Ouattara « **L'image sociopolitique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest à travers l'œuvre d'Ibrahim Ly: *Toiles d'araignées* et *Les Noctuelles vivent de larmes***»
- 15- Dr. N'GBESSO Hélène, Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, « **Charles Nokan et l'Afrique noire moderne** »
- 16- KOUAME Konan Richard, Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, « **Les particularités énonciatives dans la production littéraire des auteurs ivoiriens: cas des ivoirismes interjectifs chez Zadi Zaourou et Diégou Bailly** »

- 17- KOUADIO Thomas, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, « ***l'écriture de la bible et le fusil de Maurice Bandaman ou les représentations d'une esthétique de rupture*** »
- 18-TOKPA Dominique, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, « **Aspects fantastiques du descriptif dans *Les Soleils des indépendances* d'Ahmadou Kourouma** »
- 19-Dr. BODO Bidy Cyprien, Université Félix Houphouët Boigny, « **La Lecture et l'écriture en-jeu dans *Les soleils des indépendances* d'Ahmadou Kourouma** »
- 20- KOFFI Konan Thomas, Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, « **la création en « nouchi » et les langues ivoiriennes** »
- 21- Dr. DION Yodé Simplicie, Université Felix Houphouët Boigny, « **«L'homme » de l'énigme du sphinx** »
- 22-Dr. OUATTARA Vincent, Université de Koudougou, « **Littéracie en quête de l'homme** »
- 23-COULIBALY Kounady, University Felix Houphouët Boigny, « **Festival as a Means of Social Integration and Alienation: A Study in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, and AyiKwei Armah's *Fragments*** »

24-MINDIE Manhan Pascal, Université de Bouaké, « **Le spectacle grotesque de la guerre dans Voyage au bout de la nuit et Normance de L-F. Céline : une écriture carnavalesque**»

ERNEST J. GAINES'S MISS JANE PITTMAN: A SYMBOL OF THE BLACK FEMALE ABOLITIONIST STRUGGLE

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Introduction

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971) is Ernest J. Gaines's contribution to the depiction of the black's plight in the American society through the rewriting of the slave history. It turns around the life story of Miss Jane Pittman, an African American protagonist, whose life covers the Civil War period (1861-1865) and the 1960s marked by the Civil Rights Movement. Set in the South of the USA where slavery was centered, precisely in Louisiana, Miss Jane Pittman's story appears to be the embodiment of black female experiences in America. Generally speaking, many Americans, both Blacks and Whites, were involved in the struggle for equality, and some individuals, female slaves especially, became famous through their active and remarkable individual struggle. Likewise, Miss Jane Pittman is regarded to have actively struggled for her freedom. As such, her struggle stands out as a symbol of individual black female abolitionist struggle.

In this trend, Miss Jane Pittman resembles those African American women who lived from the slavery period to the 1960s because of the similarity of their respective experiences. This paper aims to show that Miss Jane Pittman is an archetype of the slave woman's experience in the deep South of the USA. In this way, we will explore three specific traits of her character: first, the autobiography being an auto-referential text, we would like to understand how she examines her own being by establishing her identity through her private narrative. Secondly, we read Gaines's book as the point of view of those millions voiceless slave women. But before dealing with these two parts, as the

depository of black history, Miss Jane Pittman is presented as a witness of black women's struggle for equality.

I - Miss Jane Pittman's narrative or a testimony of black female experience

One of the particularities of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is that it has an introduction that informs the reader about Gaines's technique of writing. Though a fiction, it is the result of Gaines's investigation. That is to say, unlike in the classic autobiographies whose authors coincide with their narrators, as Philippe Lejeune (1975, 20) postulates in his definition of the autobiography as a genre, in Gaines's text, the author clearly differs from the narrator: they do not coincide. Thus, although it seems to be unnecessary, we might guess that its author is Ernest J. Gaines while its narrator is Miss Jane Pittman.

To keep the authenticity of Miss Jane Pittman's life story, Gaines gives her the voice to narrate her own story after an interview. "Using only Miss Jane's voice throughout the narrative [...] no one could contradict her, because, after all, this was her story." (vii). In this context, the personal pronouns "I" and "we" are profusely used in the narrative. These are some instances: "I'm not too sure", "I won't ever forget"; "We knowed the soldiers was coming that way-we had heard the gun fire the day before" (3). "We had to leave the place where we was slaves" (69); "I hadn't seen Ned in twenty years"; (99); "I stuck the money in my pocketbook" (246).

Gerard Genette (1980) coins the first-person narrative as homodiegetic. "I" is used when the narrator is the protagonist of the story he or she tells. In its turn, "we" is used in the same way in the case of two or more characters. Manfred Jahn (2005) explains that the usage of the first-person narrative shows that the narrator is a witness to the narrated story. And Philippe Lejeune has almost the same view point when he states:

The biography and the autobiography are referential texts which pretend to bring information on a 'reality' external to the text, and which are accordingly submitted to a test of verification. Their aim is not a simple likelihood, but the resemblance to the truth. (1975, 36. The translation is mine).

From this quotation, one can assert that Miss Jane Pittman is a trusty narrator. As the protagonist of the story she recounts, she is also an autodiegetic narrator. Therefore, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* has a witnessing function. It establishes a truth concerning the black female's experience through the experience of the heroine.

The other narrative technique that corroborates this idea is the use of the direct speech by the narrator. The direct speech is one of the three degrees of speech insertion inside the narrative discourse which are: the direct speech, the indirect speech and the free indirect speech. The direct speech is typologically marked with the quotation marks in writing. It is the exact representation of what a character says. In the direct speech, the speech reported does not undergo any change. That is the reason why Tzvetan Todorov (1968, 52) states that the mode of a discourse is in the degree of accuracy with which this discourse evokes its referent: the maximum degree in the case of direct speech, the minimum in the account of non-verbal facts, and intermediate degrees in the other cases. Undoubtedly, the direct speech is “the (raw) manner of expression which one expects from real speech – there is certainly no implication of an imitation of actual words or sentences” (Fludernik, 1993, 29).

Though the indirect discourse is found in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines privileges the direct discourse over it. Miss Jane Pittman is a good storyteller because there is no mimesis in her narrative. She is the original speaker who narrates her own story in a live way. Like other black narrators, despite all prejudice and propaganda, she is a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of the black folk (Andrews, 1986). The story she recounts is as well as history.

Miss Jane Pittman relays the African American experience as she experienced it through the recounting of the key events in her life by commenting them and describing their relevancies. She narrates the story in a coherent and chronological order and in a progressive way. All the respective chapters of each of the four books are connected by their respective relevancies from “The War years” to “The Quarters” which, in turn, are tightly related. When we make a chronological list of them all, we notice that their arrangement follows the chronological sequences of some key events in American history: “The War Years”, “Reconstruction”, “The Plantation” and “The Quarters”.

This can also be seen in the language she uses to narrate faithfully her thoughts and feelings. She uses literary devices associated with the oral tradition. With a figurative

language, she uses the story she tells as a means of conveying knowledge and her feelings. For example, we have at first the metaphor of her travel (136) from the South to the North which can be seen as a travel from slavery to freedom, from spiritual trauma to a spiritual healing, and from despair to faith. Moreover, the travel from the South to the North can be compared to the Jews Exodus in the Bible. Secondly, there is the metaphor of death represented by “blood” in the second chapter of the first book. Indeed, here “blood” represents the dramatic killing of numerous slaves by slave masters.

The repetitions in Jane’s narrative are also relevant to the oral tradition. Such expressions as “jumping, jumping, jumping”(22–23) and “screaming, begging; screaming, begging” (23); “Pick it up, Pick it up” (31) and the transcription of the slow-wit speeches, “I, I, I can be, be, be Brown if I want to be, be, be Brown”; “Ti,Ti,Ticey”; “Go, go, go right on and di’, di’, die” (18), reveal Miss Jane Pittman’s capacity to keep all these events into memory.

The skill to keep all the events which marked out Jane’s history from slavery to the Civil Rights period is a performative quality. It allows her to explain her experiences to the younger generations of her community, a community to which Enerst J. Gaines belongs. Walter J. Ong interestingly summarizes this transmission of experience through orality, revealing the importance and the function of the oral tradition:

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious and society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. (2002, 41)

In addition, like many African Americans of the 1960s, Jane’s speeches are characterized by a very low level of language which confirms the general precarious situation of African Americans who have always constituted a disproportionate percentage of the poorer class since their arrival in America. This also has something to do with the fact that during slavery Blacks were not allowed to learn and to write. As such, many of them came out of slavery completely illiterate as it is reflected in their

language. Gaines faithfully transcribes her speech by keeping its colloquial characteristics. For example, “Cat-o’ –nine-tails, Master”; “One of y’all sitting there ...” (7) ; “We ain’t going back there, Master” (32) “He know me” ; “We going to Ohio” (38), "cookin" (189), "Scuse me" (180) etc., are evidences that Gaines exactly reproduces what she has told. Here, the written story keeps the oral characteristics.

Undoubtedly, Miss Jane Pittman’s story is not only a testimony of her experience, but also a testimony of the black female’s experience in general. The first-person narrative which grants an authenticity to her story is unfolded with the direct or indirect discourse insertion, the literary devices and the oral tradition. To paraphrase Minor and Pitts (2010), we can state that for Miss Jane Pittman, orality is an effective medium for both her own demand for liberation and to relate a history that places her at the center of representation and experience she conveys. As an autobiography, her story is presented like a meditation on her own being.

II - Self-examination and self-identity construction

One of the stakes of the autobiographical work is the construction of self-image (Lejeune, 1975, 165). In other words, the autobiographical narrative entails the construction of self-identity. Generally speaking, the term “self” refers to the thoughts and feelings that a person has about himself or herself. And to focus on the autobiography, we can assert that self is the thoughts and feelings that “I” have about “me”. It is a reflection on “my-self”. In this case, I’m the subject that reflects on the object that I am at the same time. “It requires that there is an ‘I’ that can consider an object that is ‘me’ (Leary, Tangney, 2012, 71). The ‘I’ raises the questions of identity that Mark R. Leary, and June Price Tangney (2012, 69) as the following:

Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past-what used to be true of one, the present-what is true of one now, or the future-the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become.

Besides, self-examination which is both self-reflection and self-critique, cannot be possible without the conscience of having thoughts about one’s own self. Of course, this

recalls the Cartesian syllogism “Cogito ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am,” (Descartes, 1973, 123). In other words, “I think, therefore I exist”. The Cartesian syllogism can be linked to Franz Karl Stanzel’s theory of narrative which sets up the analysis of the experiencing self (the self as protagonist) (Fludernik, 2009, 152) in an autobiographical narrative.

On the ground of what has been said, it can be said that one of the important aspects of the first-person narrative is that the focus can be on the narrating self or the experiencing self. In this case, the story is told in a perspective of retrospection. Therefore, as a homodiegetic narrator in Gaines’s text, Miss Jane Pittman is capable to tell her own story as an experiencing self, that is to say, she examines her being. In this trend, we might guess about the construction of her individual identity.

To construct her identity, Jane exteriorizes her interior and individual thoughts and beliefs that constitute “her”, or her-self, or her being. She relates her life marked by her psychological and physical pains. Indeed, in the opening section of the novel, the reader is informed that Miss Jane Pittman was a ten or eleven year-old female slave, called Ticey during the war years. She ignores the part of her childhood between one and ten years. It is evident that her genealogical precedent is explained by her orphanage. She did not know her parents and she had no family life. But Jane purposely let aside this part of her life in her story and she recounts the important events that occurred during the war years. For instance, she underscores her slave status in the first section of her story. She even reveals that she was a slave and she had a slave name, Ticey. She was deprived of one of the elemental marks of identity, the family name, and was reduced to an animal. Culturally and psychologically, slavery affected her like an unscarred sore.

Self and identity generate action. Yet, self-examination also produces action. As a result, in Jane’s case, the construction of her individual identity consists in searching for freedom. She thus had to struggle to acquire her freedom because as Orlando Patterson writes (1991, 2), freedom must be worshiped and everyone must declare to die for it. Accordingly, Miss Jane Pittman commits herself to acquire her freedom. Doing it, she appears to be a heroine.

“The hero is the one that has positive qualities that [...] other characters interpret as such based on a particular axiological system.” (Piégay-Gros, 2006) Undoubtedly, Miss Jane Pittman develops some positive qualities such as courage, beauty, honesty, etc. and she bears the characteristics of the hero as defined by Myriam Watthee-Delmotte and

Paul-Augustin Deproost (2004). By her acts (serving water to the troops / changing her name), her commitments (challenging her masters), by her exploits (surviving “the massacre”), she has been revealed to the world. She appears to be unique and above the ordinary character. Like the female heroes of antiquity who showed different temperaments, sometimes rebellious and violent, sometimes tender and submissive (Wathee-Delmotte, Deproost, 2004), Miss Jane Pittman also has the quality of a mother and a wife though biological barbarism and brutality she experienced made her barren. She was respectively Ned, Tee Bob Samson and Jimmy Aaron’s foster mother. After her union with Joe Pittman, she became his daughters’ foster mother.

Besides, the search for freedom is also revealed by the dream of reaching the North, especially Ohio. Here, John Truby’s theory about the structural analysis of the hero can be applied to Miss Jane Pittman’s story (Truby, 2007). In fact, John Truby identifies seven main steps (Weakness/Need, Desire, Opponent, Plan, Battle, Self-revelation and New Equilibrium) in the analysis of the evolution of the hero.

When applied it to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the first step concerns Miss Jane’s self-introduction to the reader within her environment, the South of the United States of America, with freedom as her principle “desire” that is made up with her will to reach the North. The stake of her travel to the North turns around four specific goals: her will to join Corporal Brown who is her protector though he remains a virtual one, her will to get rid of the stigma of slavery, her will to forget the memory of servitude, and her search for new opportunities that could supply a financial power offered by the socioeconomic conditions of the North.

During the Civil War years, the North was the land of promise. It was considered as a free soil where relative justice and security existed. On a religious approach, slaves’ movement from the South to the North could be paralleled with the biblical Exodus from Egypt to the promised land as described in the book of Deuteronomy (8: 7-9): “A good land, a land of torrent valleys of water, springs and watery deeps issuing forth in the valley plain and in the mountainous region, a land of wheat and barley and vines and figs and pomegranates, a land of oil olive and honey.”

Metaphorically, the land promised by God to the Israelites could be compared with the North of the USA during the Civil War because the two lands had a common point: they shared the quality of being lands of freedom. Also, during the Civil War Blacks’

situation in the North was better than in the South. As a matter of fact, many slaves tried to move to the North and some of them such as the famous Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ross Tubman succeeded in their trip to the North.

As we see, Miss Jane Pittman had a very great challenge to achieve. However, she was unconscious of the greatness of this challenge. She was not aware of the various obstacles which could hinder her trip to Ohio. Among these obstacles, there was the long distance. In fact, Miss Jane Pittman had to cross a wide land. Referring to the American geographical map, we realize that she had to go through the State of Louisiana, then the States of Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky before reaching Ohio. The next obstacle was the white community of the South in general, but particularly the confederate soldiers who were Negroes' potential enemies. "The massacre" is an atrocity experienced by Miss Jane Pittman and Ned. As it occurred just after they left their masters' plantations, it could hinder them from traveling but they continued the journey.

In her attempt to reach the North, Miss Jane Pittman used some natural elements such as the bush and the North Star which appeared to be her helpers. The bush was used as a shelter. It helped her overcome "the massacre". As for the North Star, it was used as a guide because it "[pointed] the way at night" (13).

Thanks to these elements, a physical and psychological battle was engaged between Miss Jane Pittman and the obstacles to her exodus to the North. Her psychological toughness helped her try to carry the physical battle which consisted in walking a long distance to reach the North. But, she finally realized that she would better stay in the South which was a kind of prison from which she could not escape. She stayed on Mr. Bone's plantation.

With the failure of the Freedmen's Bureau during the Reconstruction, the tactics of the struggle for freedom changed though its nature remained the same because slavery changed form to become segregation: "it was slavery again, all right." (70) In parallel, Miss Jane devoted the twilight of her life to the Civil Rights Movement. She found a new equilibrium in her community.

At that time, she found the necessity to join the church because she "had nothing else in the world but the Lord" (134). Her religious conversion is to be related to the father complex coined by Sigmund Freud (1961) in his theory about the psychological origin of religion. In his theory, Freud argues that "the dogmas are not the residue of

experience or the final result of reflection; they are illusions of fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind: the secret of their strength is the strength of these wishes” (1961, 75).

For Freud, God is a transfigured father, a powerful one, created by human facing the need for protection aroused by the infantile helplessness. In this perspective Miss Jane Pittman’s conversion resulted from her need for a divine protection. Her religiosity could be explained by her desire to resist or overcome distress in the American society.

Besides, at the end of the story, “some of the people backed away from” (245) her and despite her old age, she participated in the Civil Rights Movement protest of her area. Her courage enhanced those people’s motivation. In turn, her motivation and commitment for equality culminated and reached a higher level. Miss Jane herself rose to a high social status.

To sum up, a hero is he who puts a social value forward his life and takes the risk of losing his life to defend it. The hero is the embodiment of the social values that are recognized as such by the whole community in which he lives. Indeed, Miss Jane Pittman is an exemplary figure. She testifies to the major role black women played in the struggle for equality in America. Through her character Ernest J. Gaines set up black women’s heroism and leadership. Therefore, the novel appears to be black women’s point of view.

III – The slave women’s point of view

One of the motifs of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is that it is a slave narrative. So to speak, the novel is another narrative of the black history in general, but the narrative of slave women’s history in particular. Miss Jane Pittman’s history is the history of all the slave women. Her identity is a collective identity of the slave women. Thus, through her experience, Gaines gives another version of the slave woman’s history. Doing it, he portrays the slave woman’s life from a slave woman’s point of view. Miss Jane Pittman is thus a spokeswoman of those thousands slave women ignored by pro-slavery historians and writers: she is the voice of those voiceless African American women of her generation in the South of America.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman it is an abolitionist medium which depicts the horror, cruelty and trauma slavery caused to slaves. As slavery is defined as “a system of brutality and coercion in which beatings and the break up of families through the sale of individuals were commonplace” (Cincotta, 1994, 152), it caused both psychological and physical trauma. As such, the novel opens with “The War Years” which underscores Miss Jane Pittman’s enslavement. She is introduced as a slave girl. Like *A Mercy*, another slave girl, (Morrison, 2008), she had a slave name, Ticey, and she was used as a servant. This depiction highlights female slave’s childhood usually marked by their separation from their parents.

In fact, slaves usually bore psychological and cultural wounds. Beatings and other physical maltreatments caused barrenness sometimes. Miss Jane Pittman’s incapacity to give birth prompts us to talk about slaves’ motherhood. Most of the time, those slave women, who were lucky to give birth following sexual abuses, did not have the right to educate their children who were sold by the slave masters. The attempt to protect their children against all forms of trauma made them flee like Elisa did in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) or they begged other slave masters to take them as a present like in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008), or they committed infanticide like Margaret Garner did in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) etc..

To the extent of slave women’s socialization, Miss Jane Pittman’s barrenness and her jeopardized motherhood are evidences of their difficult socialization she does not have a real family structure. Although she got married with Joe Pittman, she did not succeed in giving birth and Joe Pittman had to prove his manhood by breaking horses.

In addition, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* exemplifies the regular emotional affliction of African American women who were always bereaved by the murder of a relative or a husband or an offspring during the Civil Rights Movement. Like Martin Luther King Jr., and some other black leaders such as Malcolm X, the assassinations of Ned and Jimmy Aaron affected Miss Jane Pittman who was their foster mother.

The emphasis on the cruelty of the white supremacist in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is an attempt “to arouse the sympathy of readers in order to promote humanitarianism” (Campbell, 2014). On the one hand, the objective is to reach a particular audience which should include both black and white racists.

To black people, since Miss Jane Pittman's story is a testimony of African American women's struggle for equality, it should prompt their curiosity about the originality and the truthfulness of their own history. As to the dominant white community, it should be an appeal to deconstruct both the negative and dishonorable images of Blacks and the racist ideology that prevailed in the white community.

On the other hand, the novel shows the hardship of black women's resistance to all sorts of brutality, abuse, cruelty and trauma they experienced from the slavery era to the 1960s although it puts their heroism and leadership in a prominent position. Of course, this is the manifestation of African American women's commitment to struggle for justice.

Finally, Ernest J. Gaines uses *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* to make African American women's voices be heard. Unmistakably, the novel is a space where the power of the African American woman's extraordinary voice highlights her life experience with the testimonial presentation of Miss Jane Pittman's life story.

Conclusion

The study of the character of Miss Jane Pittman as a symbol of the black female abolitionist struggle posits her as a witness of the black female's experience, generally marked by the physical and psychological trauma slavery inflicted to them. Her story is regarded as a testimony. And its authenticity is granted by the first-person narrative, the direct or indirect discourse insertion, the literary devices and the oral tradition.

Besides, through her autobiography, Miss Jane Pittman constructs her own identity by examining her being. By her commitment to the struggle for equality, she reveals as the embodiment of the social values of her community. Indeed, she is a heroine who simply testifies to African American women's major role in the struggle for equality in America. Accordingly, through *The Autobiography of Miss Jane*, Gaines makes African American women's voices audible in the sense that as an exemplary figure, Miss Jane Pittman echoes the black female's suffering.

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