

Marxist Reading of Ernest J Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* and *A Gathering of Old Men*

- C. Jayapal & K. Ravichandran

Abstract: Ernest J Gaines was born on river lake plantation near Oscar, Louisiana, in Point Coupee Parish on January 15, 1933. He started to work as a potato picker at the age of nine, earning fifty cents a day. Poverty became centrifugal in all his works as he grew up with problem of food, education, and attained it through hard work. Gaines' work clearly tells the social, political, and economical position of African American people in South Louisiana. The ideology of Marxism is taken as a tool to interpret his novels to explore the pathos of the poor, labourer, voiceless and slave. This paper aims at analysing of Gaines's the subjugation of poor blacks by the racist white society. *Of Love and Dust* and *A Gathering of Old Men*, show how the central theme of his fiction revolves around the rich and poor, owner and labour conflicts. Each work depicts the common strivings of the disenfranchised, the control of subservient labour by the majority class, and the subsequent revisiting of folk culture that helps to foster the leadership of subordinated and generate a change. As Gaines writes openly and passionately about the proletariat, the most critical aspect of each work in this study is the impact of Marxist reading upon black labour – especially Cajuns and poor blacks. It has the human action and its effect on society is constructed by imperialistic behaviour. Additional to this scrutiny there are various levels of class struggles and emphasis on a changing social system. Gaines's, ultimate message of human equality to achieve true manhood finds similarity with Marxist ideology.

Keywords: Culture, Labour, Owner, Human Equality, Colonizers, Have's vs. Have not's, Economic.

Whatever the motives- whether they have been power, prestige, or security- men have accumulated wealth through conquest, looting, human exploitation and even trade; using, money or lending- most frequently for consumption purposes- has also played its part in this process of the maintenance of an unequal distribution of the income a people has produced. (9)

In that way Marxist criticism is based on social and philosophical theory, introduced by Friedrich Engles and Karl Marx. It is theoretical ideas which interpret their world of political, social and economic structure. In other words, this principle helps to view the social culture and life structure between rich and poor using materialistic lens. Because they control human life such as government, education, religion, culture including literature. The ideology of Marxism came into existence only during the early 20th century. In the initial stage, it criticized the government. The criticism on government gets reflected in the works of middle 20th century writers of the world. The Marxist reading is used to understand the motivating ideology behind human action and its effects on society. Thus America grew under the leadership of its first generation

of industrial capitalism. It generally brought large benefits to the country and to almost every sector of the population. At the same time, it demolished social structure and inequality emerged not only between whites and blacks but also between white rich and white poor. In African American literature, Gaines's fiction is generally interpreted with Marxism, because his works are based on land, politics, and society. By employing Marxist criticism on Gaines's works one can understand the way in which the American people were living in America during 1920's, and 1930's. This is the best way to analyse human life and cultural identity of African American people. Gaines was born on river lake plantation near Oscar, Louisiana, in point Coupee Parish on January 15, 1933. He grew up with problem of food, education, and attained it through hard work. It has helped to explicate his experience throughout his works. Gaines discovered a lengthy and rich African American literary tradition in the late sixties. He has won the admiration for numerous writers, including Alice Walker, James Alan McPherson, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. As important as reading is to read Gaines's writing style in his seven novels which explore the Negro slaves of the south without social security against unemployment, social structure, rich poor variation, black and white conflict, and irresponsibility of government in South America. Gaines has dealt with the cultural conflicts between the native American and African American people in his novels. Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* and *A Gathering of Old Men* are the best works to interpret under Marxist reading. Because *Of Love and Dust* focuses on the implication is the low paid labour of many for the comfort of the dissolute Marshall Hebert.

Slaves, the slow of indentured servants tapered off not because of a decline in demand for agriculture workers but because a new source of supply appeared the American Negro slaves. Negro slaves offered many advantages over white servants they were property and they could not escape easily; their women could also be workers in the fields. (15)

In *Of Love and Dust*, the character Herbert is the representative of ruling class in South America. Hebert's attitudes towards apartheid are in humane and he wants to control over other people, manipulating the legal system for his own sake. He lacks of conscience, sense of responsibility, and unchallenged authority. There is no economical and educational opportunity for the, Louisiana people, who as a result they became chance to increase the illiteracy, labourer and slaves. The novel's conflicting forces seem embodied in Marcus and Bonbon, two men facing the values of their own race and class. However the novel reveals how the shameless racial conflict becomes a mere shield for Marshall Hebert. Bonbon is not a slave in Hebert's social class. He is like a tool as all other workers for Hebert's capitalist who owned and managed their concerns took risks made enormous profit. Hebert's values are shown to be similar to those of Jim and Marcus. In, *Of Love and Dust*, Gaines created a character named Marshall Hebert a white supremacy who has exploited the labour of poor blacks and paid a meager amount:

I remember that old woman telling me to look after him, to talk to

him; I remembered only three days ago she wanted to go to Marshall Hebert again to beg Marshall to keep Bonbon from hurting him or killing him out there in the field. Right now I wanted to hit him so bad my hand started shaking. (120-121)

Generally, Marcus's slaves of the south are the happiest, and in some sense, the people in the world. He enjoyed liberty, because he was exploited neither by care nor labour. Jim and Marcus work on the average in good weather. They did not work for more than nine hours a day. The balance of their time is spent for entertainment like drinks. But for white they sleep and the clever and watchful capitalist is devising means to ensure and cruel them. The free labour must work as Marcus does as slave otherwise they will have nothing to eat. He is more of a slave than the white labour, because he works longer and harder for less benefit than the slave, and has no holiday. The care of life with him begins when its labour ends. Marcus has no liberty, and single right even to love a white woman. The novelist has used Marcus' love as a tool to show the suppression of blacks' emotion; though the protagonist is able to get love from his beloved Louise. He cannot live with her. Thus throughout this novel Gaines explores not only the protagonist's love but also rights of blacks and class conflict. Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*, (1983) takes place in the late 1970's on the land of the Marshall plantation, a remote spot in rural Louisiana the peak of civil rights activities in south. It helps to change social relationship. Every aspect of capitalist enterprise assisted in the successful establishment of colonial Black American people; owner and labour flowed overseas to create settlements and these could be made permanent because of the bountifulness of nature- a way of life those continue in people's memories and in social custom. The novel starts with Boutan's death. He was a Cajun farmer shouted by Mathu, a solitary African American elder. The black story behind this Bouton murder, the entire story of this novel revolves around the murder of Bouton. The murder of white man by a black man immediately makes worse the racial tensions that saturated the easily broken social variety of this isolated southern locality. It has remembered unchanged by the revolution of the civil rights movement.

Something to do with Mathu and something to do with Beau Boutan bead in his yard. That's all I know, all I want to know. Up to y'all now, I had done my part. Y'all can go and do like she say or y'all can go home, lock y'all doors, and crawl under the bed like y'all used to. Me, I'm leaving. (28)

The story takes place in one day, from the killing of Beau Boutan to the final shootout in Mathu yard. This novel exposes some basic structure in sociological formula. 1. Exposition: the murder of beau in colonial system. 2. Complication: the armed old man. 3. Crisis: actual murderer and a shoot ensure. 4. Revolution: the old men feel they have achieved their goal. Either the structure of Mathu's yard is looking well-organized with the obvious domination of whites. This frame work is seemingly an imperialistic as well as capitalistic standpoint. Through the image of 'sugarcane field', 'shoot guns in old men hands' and the damaged road one can easily understand the historical, political and sociological weight of the people who live in and around of that particular place (Mathu's

yard). When the old people speak in favor of Mathu, they do say something about their struggle for survival:

You are talking about thirty-five, forty, fifty years ago, Beulah." Mapes said. "And you got no proof fix was mixed up in that." "Now, ain't that just like white folks?" Beulah said to us, but still looking at Mapes. "Black people get lynched, get drowned, get shot, guts all hanging out- and here he comes up with ain't no proof who did it. So let's don't be putting it all on no thirty-five, forty, fifty years ago like everything is so nicey- nicey now. (108)

Tractors have displaced and entire class of people forcing them away from the plantation to make a new livelihood. Tractors have also changed the social structure for as the Cajuns gain economic power, the Boutan families follow the values of the Marshalls. With its essentially exploitative basics, Gil's claim of relationship to Candy would have particular resonance because they think that social structure is based on skin color. Gil and Candy have nevertheless operated on an assumption of freedom. The blacks are not aware of their slavery and the corruption of the whites, this idea is clearly expressed through the characters – Jack and Beau, they used to drink a lot and think a little about the social structure. Further they do not bother about the conflict between Cajuns and blacks. They consider themselves superior to other blacks. Through these characters the novelist shows that except the character Mathu, no one is ready to rebel against the social structure framed by the whites. Not hold up the fact that the white non-slave holders of the south are in the majority as five to one. They have not grouped in family the laws under which they live in. There is no legislation except for the benefit of slavery, and slave holders as a general rule Jack Marshall's character would merit more attention than Bea's as the last male Marshall descendent, he represents economic and social traditions based on the complete use of human labour through slavery. Jack clearly is obsolete, his language revealing an inability to see blacks as human. An honest image of affected in action is Candy, the young heiress to the Marshall plantation and the old men form in front of Mapes. In order to challenge the sheriff's authority, Candy and the old men launched into direction of non-violence. Wryly, Rufe describes the scene:

[Mapes] had already used his only little knowledge he know how to deal with black folks- knocking them around. When that didn't change a thing, when people started getting in line to be knocked around, he didn't know what else to do. So now, he just stood there, a big fat red hulk, looking down at the ground. (93)

In this way, Marshall Hebert represents the ruling class with emphasis on his value system. He wishes to be a gentleman both in his status and in his value system. Moreover, it reveals the true nature of Hebert's value system. The economic and social structures that maintained racial suppression in Louisiana were randomly constructed. Because, Louisiana often goes beyond cultural divisions. This overlap made racial negotiation more difficult. Because the space between constructed racial categories were maintained by rich whites. They placed Boutan between themselves and their African American laborers, a placement that gives power to Cajuns whites. Thus social and economic control over both

Cajuns and African Americans by these rich whites are clearly exposed. Such social constructions happened throughout the America. In Noel Ignatiev's "Study of Irish Immigrant and Their Identity as white Americans, he argues that:

The abolition of slavery called into question the existence of the white race as a social formation. Because the absolute distinction between the white worker and the black worker were erased. (164)

The white racist society does not want to dispel the slave systems only because they want to control over the black communities who no longer felt a common bond through the racially constructed slave system. The influential white Americans determined to maintain the slave System get continued. By doing so, the rich white class could use such power to construct a larger distance between themselves and their African American labourers. Revolutionary labourers was no accident that the activities of unskilled, migrating casual workers, who fell outside this pattern, should take on a revolutionary cast. There were large numbers of these frequently without homes and families, who followed temporary job in the corn, wheat fields in the south. They began to join with the industrial workers of the world, which taught a revolutionary program our working class abduction of power directly. By addressing the Marxist critic, land owner- labor conflict in *Of Love and Dust*(1967) and *A Gathering Of Old Man* (1983), Ernest Gaines emphasizes the interdependence of white and black people in Louisiana. Simultaneously acknowledged social structure is maintaining the concept of white supremacy. His fictions depict a complex racial hierarchy. As such, Gaines places the Cajun between the land owners, situated socially between rich white and poor working class African Americans. Gaines portrays Cajuns as possible racial intermediaries who can be manipulated by whites to control over blacks. He has come out with a ray of hope for the victim by giving some Solution to get rid of the exploitation at various levels of racial mediation. Simultaneously, Gaines gives readers an opportunity to see from a differing perspective. Gaines' African American protagonists not only realize their own individual worth in the midst of Louisiana's racial conflict, but also various levels of a class struggles and emphasis on a changing social system. This mutual understanding remains central to Gaines's ultimate message of Marxist reading as the key to achieving human equality and true manhood.

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