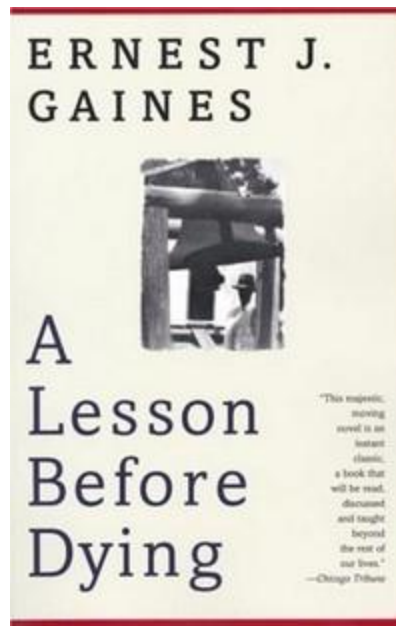


A Lesson Before Dying: A Paradox of Religiosity

Mrs. J. M. Shoba



Abstract

The characters in the novels of Ernest J Gaines portray and uphold the Christian dogma indisputably. The religiosity of the Black community is so obvious in all the works of the author. Gaines explores the imposition of religion on the Black man and the oppression in the name of religion in a very subtle and light manner. The religiosity becomes stifling for few characters in *A Lesson before Dying* whereas the other characters visualize the redemption of soul as a higher calling. Gaines handles the ‘rhetorical manipulation’ without overtones through his characters. Though he is criticized for the ‘soft treatment’ of the “White God” and their religion, Gaines does not waver in his stand. He brings out the paradox of the religiosity the Black people have and also tries to create a “text of religiosity” through his characters. This paper analyses the paradox of the religion that the characters claim to profess in the novel *A Lesson before Dying*.

Keywords: Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson before Dying*, rhetorical manipulation, religiosity, paradox, imposition, oppression, Black religion

Introduction

A Lesson before Dying is an apt novel of Gaines that portrays the Jim Crow generation as a people toiling in their land as well as for their rights. The Black community is portrayed as learned and empowered by the whites, but the real liberation is yet to be found by the Blacks. The Blacks are educated but they are not accorded equality. The present generation had to struggle with the whites, poor life style, agonized past, and disillusioned youth community. They try to find solace in the religion they adopted. The religiosity of the Black community is subtly ridiculed by the author who feels that the education of the mind is more indispensable than the practices of the church.



Ernest J. Gaines

Courtesy: <http://www.hurstonwright.org/ernest-j-gaines-and-junot-diaz-to-receive-2016-legacy-awards/>

According to Gallagher, religiosity is “individual’s conviction, devotion and veneration towards a divinity. However, its most comprehensive use, religiosity, can encapsulate all dimensions of religion, yet the concept can also be used in a narrow sense to denote an extreme view an over-dedication to religious rituals and traditions”. The religiosity of the Black people is evident in their life style. Their mannerisms, church going, etiquettes, etc., reveal their religiosity. But Gaines presents it as a paradox in all his novels. Gaines feels that the African-American society is deep rooted in the voodoo culture unconsciously.

The oppressed Blacks found ‘their calling’ in political movement where they garnered their strength and showcased their oneness. The Christian faith believes in salvation and liberation of mankind. They advocated this preaching to the slaves from Africa. The Blacks were simple people who trusted their white master. The snobbish whites degraded and humiliated the religion of the Blacks even as they evangelized and propagated Christianity. They considered the Black community as a barbaric race.

The Blacks believed in Christianity. They accepted the dogma of this religion practiced most by White people at that time in the United States and started following Christianity. Christianity was seen as a religious symbol for their tired soul as they were promised deliverance and hope. They were ensured of liberation of mind, body and soul. The Africans saw religion as a consolation for their deprived soul. Years of oppression and subjugation of the Blacks and the need for an identity in a new country, made them adapt to a religion that was full of hope.

Even after years of servitude, the Blacks never had their due owed to them. Kelly states that the whites only “disenfranchised” the Blacks, never meting out equality. The stigmatized Blacks found solace and comfort in the religion propagated by the whites and throughout their lives were followers of this faith. The core of the Afro-American was always fond of the elements of his faith, the return to his own legacy. He was attracted to the pecan trees, the cemetery and other things which reminded them of their culture and tradition. The African-American Christianity was a highly religious community.

Paradox in Gaines’ Novel *A Lesson before Dying*

The turbulence of “to be or not to be” is evident in the characters of Gaines in *A Lesson before Dying*. This paradox is permeated throughout the novel. All his characters are presented as either believers or non-believers of the Christian God. Though they are non-believers they are part and parcel of the Christian dogma as is evident in the character, Wiggins. Gaines presents the teacher as a person who is in “existential dilemma” in all domains. He cannot forgo his people or his religion and he stays with his community reluctantly.

Jefferson is presented as an illiterate of mind and soul. Gaines presents the paradoxical nature of Jefferson when he questions the existence of afterlife. He is not very clear if there will be any transformation in himself. The story begins with the preacher advocating the teacher to believe in the “higher calling” but ends up in non-belief of the very dogma that he propagates. The paradoxical nature of the justice rendered is evident in the transformation of the White officers who are in charge of the execution.

Kneeling Down

For Jefferson, kneeling down of the entire Black community in unison is questionable as to what they are seeking from the “Father in Heaven”. The infused Christianity in them refuses to acknowledge the injustice rendered to one among them. They are infused with the religiosity that they forget that “deliverance comes from God”. Wiggins is skeptical of the faith as he wants them to understand and follow a faith and not as a tradition. Wiggins mentions the ladies as boulders, etc., to objectify the emotions and religion of the Black community. They do not venture to question whatever is necessary. This acceptance angers the teacher.

Grant and Ambrose – Gaines’ Presentation

Grant rejects the faith of Ambrose as he feels it is the white man’s faith. But in the end, Grant accepts and proclaims that Ambrose was braver than him. This paradoxical element is abundant throughout the novel. Gaines feels highly perturbed by the untimely and unnecessary death of the Black people and he himself does not find an answer to the brutal inhumanity extended on the Black community. He feels disheartened by the injustice rendered to his community. He vents out his ire in a subtle manner that categorizes Gaines as a “soft writer”. The rhetorical manipulation or “dual meaning” that he employs calls attention to the sufferings of the Black community in rural Louisiana.

Paradox of the Electrocutation Chair

The electrocution chair is presented as a paradox too. The chair is personified and it is taken through the streets as Jesus was taken through the streets and people welcomed him before his imminent death. The electrocution chair is full of noise and gloom and the author presents it as a personified instrument to highlight the gloom of capital punishment. In the words of Grant, the

Blacks have only three choices to be “brought down to the level of beasts” or “to run and run” or “to die violently”. This element of gloom and death is prevalent and is presented candidly by the author. The fate of the Blacks cannot be voiced in a more appalling manner.

The Blacks see the execution of Jefferson as manslaughter whereas the Whites are worried that the execution has to be carried out sans problem. This is the paradox that Gaines candidly expresses in *A Lesson before Dying*. The Whites who have given them their God fails to give them their desired humanity. They treat the Blacks with condemnation and ridicule that they forget the tenets of the Christianity they follow.

Rhetorical Manipulation

The author employs “rhetorical manipulation” to highlight the “veiled” atrocities of the White in the name of religion. The entire novel treats the execution of Jefferson in comparison to the crucifixion of Christ. The date and time set for the execution “Between noon and three” signifies the death of Christ on the cross. The author has employed this manipulation to stress on the intentional chastising of the Black community by the whites for no fault of theirs. He expresses his grief on the redundant execution of the Black laborers who fall prey to the whims and fancies of a white judicial system. The Black’s predisposition towards the whites’ religion is purely, highly religious and they trust both the white rule and the white’s religion. This is apparent in the manner the inspector inspects the school where Grant works. The inspector is keen to find out if all the children knew the flag song and if they can recite the Bible verses instead of giving proper sanctions and materials to Grant Wiggins. He does not acknowledge Wiggins as a learned man.

Wiggins as an Angry Young Man

Wiggins is portrayed as an angry young man who is dumbfounded that there has never been a revival in his society. He is pained when he has to mute himself before the whites. He could not understand where the problem lied. The civil rights movement could not deter the white man in looking at the Black as a member of the down trodden community. The mention of “You won’t forget the doctor, Sheriff?” is intentional by Gaines as he was pained by the death of young man in his county. Gaines mentions this incident in one of his interviews. He mentions it delicately revealing the emotional trauma the man would have faced in facing the chair twice due to its malfunction.

Pichot says “It’s Passable” and this reveals that they really are meaning the electrocution chair and not the welfare of the lady. The reference “Who made them God?” directly questions the authority of the white community. The religiosity of the Blacks is draining them of their voice and they do not wish to question their dogma or belief even during the final days of undergoing extreme humiliation, pain and death. The ‘sin box’ as a way to eternal damnation is highly ironic of the damnation the Black community they have brought on themselves. Ambrose is extremely hypocritical and he admits he is a liar in his moment of failure. He fails as a preacher to his community. Grant is straight forward in his beliefs whereas Ambrose could not convince the masses of the entailed spirituality as he lacks the same.

Religiosity

Religiosity is prevalent throughout the novel. Gaines uses it to showcase the rude brutality of the white community. The central character Wiggins teaches in the Church, he asks the children to narrate the birth of Christ, he listens all day to the songs from the church, the determination day he faces all through his life but he refuses to believe that all these will set them free. He is shown as a disgruntled man and he is so opposed to the ways of the whites and their religion. “There is nothing but ignorance here” says his teacher. Here Grant fails to understand reality and wants to disprove his teacher.

The reality hits him in a rather shocking way when he goes to see Jefferson and he enquires the teacher “Go’n jeck that switch? He is stung by the helplessness he feels in the case of Jefferson. The preacher wants Grant to “... hit the nail on the head, mister...” implying the nails of Christ on the cross. The preacher wanted the redemption of the soul of Jefferson but was not ready to accept reality. This mere puppetry is concealed by Gaines and he brings out the pain and hurt of the Black community on their preachers who were always supporting the white people.

Entire Novel in Grey

Gaines virtually paints the entire novel in grey to emphasize the gloom and imminent death in the novel. The description of the cemetery to the preacher is the greatest paradox. The teacher says he believes on God looking at “the rows of turned-up earth” and reminiscences the untimely

and immature death of his forefathers in the plantations. So when the preacher asks him if he does not believe in the other world, he does not answer but looks at the buds symbolically. The author presents the teacher as a non-believer who he believes in a future life worth living.

The teacher is questioned on his education. He replies that he only knows “to teach reading, writing and arithmetic”. This is not very significant education according to the preacher. He feels that the teacher had had no education if he does not have God in him. This is always debated by Wiggins himself throughout the novel. In many places he finds himself at loggerheads with his conscience if ‘he believes or not’.

Symbols

The sycamore tree outside the prison is symbolic of Jefferson waiting for his ‘Lord’. Jefferson is presented by the author as a non-believer of Christ. But he keeps looking at the sycamore tree outside his prison cell as a ray of hope. Though he had never had God in his life, he tries to believe Him in his last moments. He feels that there will be deliverance for him. Jefferson feels that his non-belief may have triggered his fate.

The termination day observed by the aunt and Miss Emma shows the religiosity of the Black community, but they are only worried about making Jefferson ‘a man’ in the last few days of his life. Jefferson has never found love in his life which is the basic tenet of Christianity. The determination day songs are also named as “termination day” songs intentionally by the author. The real essence of upholding the religious values and principles loses its purpose as the African American Society is more embedded in religiosity. The religiosity is a balm to the afflicted souls who assume that their solace is in the ‘White God’.

Empowering the Lead Character

The rhetorical manipulation Gaines employs empowers the lead character Wiggins who is paradoxical of the faith he knows for generation together. He does not acknowledge his strong conviction even to Vivian. She understands him and tells him that his fear of losing his identity overpowers his belief in the faith. Wiggins does not accept the accusation and simply chooses to ignore her. The nonchalant mood of Wiggins highlights the paradox in religiosity of the members

of the community. They are constantly in doubt as to whether they believe or not believe in their ‘White God’.

This paradox is due to the life long suffering of the Black community. There is no deliverance of the mind, body or soul. As the teacher of Wiggins tells, “He hated himself for the mixture of his blood and the cowardice of his being, and he hated us for daily reminding him of it”. This feeling of helplessness is evident in Wiggins too.

Conclusion

Rhetorical manipulation is a technique that Gaines employs to expose the paradox in religiosity that the Black community reckoned with. The “double consciousness” prevalent in the characters in “A Lesson before Dying” renders them helpless in forging Christianity and at the same time emerging as free individuals. The traditional religion in the Afro-Americans longs for a sense of belonging. The duality of their religion, the fluctuating ideologies and un-reconciled striving make them easy targets for the whites to manipulate and render injustice to the Blacks. The agony the author faces is evident in the religiosity that the author presents as a paradox. The novel “A Lesson before Dying” is an eye opener to the indifference the Afro-Americans face throughout their lives.

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