Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the intertwining of individual and cultural memory in American fiction, with special reference to Ernest Gaines’ The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. This paper shows how individual memory is interwoven with communal memory. The writer in a way uses the protagonist’s personal experiences to demonstrate the experiences of the whole community. The suffering of a particular black is the suffering of the whole black community during and after slavery.

1. Introduction

Memory is an apparent revival of past experience. Every received stimulus leaves behind an imprint capable of being received later, thus contributing to the various manifestations of consciousness and behavior. Memory is both individual and social. Personal memory activates historical or cultural memory. Memory depends on one hand of the group in which one lives and, on the other, to the status one holds in that group. To remember, one therefore needs to situate oneself within a current of collective thought. In the process of our day to day life, everything cannot be remembered. But something ought to be remembered in a selective method. Memory depends on valuation and valuation depends on our historical memory. Memory in a way is bringing back of cultural history. As pointed out by Lindbladh individual and collective memory is enigmatic, fragmented, intimately connected to our senses and feelings and thereby in need of an alternative epistemology, challenging traditional definitions of knowledge and truth. In the introduction to the anthology The Poetics of Memory, Thomas Wagenbaur defines memory on the one hand as storage and on the other as a story. In the agreement with current trends in memory research, he underlines the importance of the narrative and poetic dimensions of memory, in contrast to the memory’s function as storage of information from the past.

The major achievement of memory is not to remember what has actually happened, but a constant distinction between recollecting and forgetting. In some sort of internal monologue the brain
constantly test viable network patterns, it tests the functionality of its versions of reality construction, i.e. its narratives. (Cited by Lindbladh, pg. 6)

In fact memory is never a process of direct recall; it is always consolidated by imagination and other distractions. As Ricoeur points out “memory cannot be represented directly in a pure, unmediated way but also has to be the result of a process of remembering, in which distractions, associative and wishful thinking cannot be separated from the actual memory of the past” (cited by Lindbladh, pg. 6). Pure memory is not possible; there is always the act of mediated recall and the subsequent reconstruction of recalled events. Further, the process of recall is never direct or absolutely focused, not allowing for contributions from unrelated or peripheral areas. There is always a process of free association at work even as the mind tries to address particular incidents or issues. It follows that there is always an element of consolidation brought on by fiction or the discourse in which one situates one’s memories.

Eakin corroborates Ricoeur by highlighting the element of fictionality in any act of recall. He claims that the truth represented by memory and autobiographical text is the result of an intimate combination of fiction and fact. While these critics do not dismiss the claims of truth in memory, they would like to affirm that the truth is fortified or consolidated by fiction or reconstruction (cited by Lindbladh, pg. 6).

Communal memory is accumulation of individuals’ memories. By remembering the past in a way the community is challenged and questioned. What we remember defines how we belong to the past. Narratives help us to make sense who we are at communal level and the possibility to have the real experience of loss, anxiety and trauma. Remembrance is always distorted by political aims. We find ourselves called to respond to our past in order to give it a new, unique future. Remembering and forgetting are responses to the past, they attest to our narrative and ethical identities. Memory occurs in the space between individuals and the past to which they belong, such that to remember means to respond to a claim or call that issues from others who have passed.

Analyses of remembering often begin with the claim that memories first and foremost belong to individuals. Memory is regarded as a capacity of recalling to mind specific events that an individual witnessed or in which he or she was personally involved. There is a form of reconciliation that occurs in the process of writing history. Memory concerns our being faithful to the past; history attempts to discover the truth of what actually happened. A narrative is always bound to the social, historical and cultural context in which it is created. A writer belongs to a social group, shares a collective memory with it, and deals with certain event of past that has impact on the present. Literature provides more than a means of reflecting on memory; it is also the site of the rebirth and construction of individual and collective memories, which is reconstructing or rewriting history from a different perspective. Creative writing is a powerful tool of rescuing memories, bringing them back to life, thus reconciling the past with the present.

Literature plays an important role in the dynamic processes that are basic to the creation and the handling of a collective memory. Literary scholars will often deal with novels in which the characters, the narrator, even the writer himself recount their personal experiences, but in which these personal narratives transcend the individuals and concern a much larger group of people, sometimes mankind in its totality. Literature is thus often a skilful blend of individual and collective memories. Memory took to be the major theme in African American fictions. Major African American narrative artists have focused their literary efforts on the black past. Gaines, Toni Morrison, Faulkner and many more, have chosen to reconstruct the past rather than tell stories of the present.
The narrative of black past is the trauma stories where they tell of both tremendous loss and survival; they describe the psychological and social effects of suffering. African American narrative is precisely the recreation of history as a tale of endless black suffering.

In African American literature past traumatic experiences are based on actual events based on actual time and setting. Slave narratives and their different forms functioned as a healing power in the state of enslavement. Slave narratives presented two major trends in Afro-American literature: autobiographical and confessional writing and a strong tendency to express social protest and self-consciousness through literature. There are certain characteristics of southern literature. The southern writers deals with the aspects of Southern History, significance of family, a sense of community and one’s role within it, a sense of justice, religion and the burdens/rewards religion often bring, issues of racial tension, a sense of social class and place.

Gaines in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman covers slavery through the memory of a hundred year black woman slave. The novel tells the life of a whole community under Louisiana plantation through an individual oral narrative. The narrative starts with Jane’s journey from the day of emancipation to the Civil Rights period. The story narrates how slavery makes black masculinity impossible, the condition of slaves in the aftermath of emancipation. The slaves were so accustomed to slavery that they even fear freedom. Every event is shown to be the consequence of slavery.

2. Memory and Retelling (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman)

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is an autobiography from an oral perspective of a black woman, who undergoes hundred years of slavery. Ernest Gaines’ novel The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman is framed as an edited, tape-recorded life story which tells of a hundred years of life that included a childhood in slavery and old age in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. This story covers the black experience from the Civil War to the civil rights movement, eloquently told from the memories of a fictional 110-year-old black woman who was born into slavery in the 1850s and lives to become a part of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. This novel is communal in the sense that the "editor" tells us in his "Introduction," that it is built on a series of interviews with Miss Jane Pittman, a one hundred-ten-year-old former slave, and many of her friends:

"Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's". (Gaines, introduction)

The narrative retells the history of rural Louisiana through the eyes of an individual. The individual here tells the experience of the whole community of African American during slavery in the South. The events that she experience were experienced by the whole community, and in her story lays details from the stories of many others. By writing Jane’s autobiography, he grants her the power of self-definition in written speech, something to which the illiterate Miss Jane has rarely had access. Miss Jane Pittman’s started her narrative of memory of slavery from 1860s to 1960, from her picking cotton on a Louisiana plantation to dismantling the segregation in South.

The novel is divided into four sections with an introduction. The brief introduction states that a black history professor in Louisiana introduces Miss Jane and tells the circumstances under which her story was recorded. Miss Jane, a fictional character, then takes over as narrator and seems to take on a presence and life of her own. The four books then trace Miss Jane’s experiences in The War Years, Reconstruction, The Plantation, and The Quarters. The novel through the memory of
Jane 100 years of slavery traces the history of America, examining the nation’s struggles with race, African Americans’ unique battle with self-identity after the Civil War.

The story begins with Jane being a slave girl named Ticey; her master beats her till she bleeds for changing her name to Miss Jane Brown. Soon after their master announced their freedom, she decides to leaves the plantation with a group of blacks on their way to Ohio. The whole group was killed by former confederate soldiers left out was only Jane and a young boy Ned, whom Jane adopted. Jane then settles in Louisiana and serves as an influence for several black men who work hard to achieve dignity and economic and political equality: first Ned, who changes his name to Ned Douglass after his hero Frederick and becomes a campaigner for the most basic civil rights for blacks, but who is eventually lynched by whites; Joe Pittman, Jane’s common-law husband and breaker of wild horses, who is killed by a black stallion; and Jimmy Aaron, a young civil rights worker born on a plantation in Louisiana, who becomes one of the movement’s martyrs.

Jane’s memory brings forth the condition of slaves after emancipation, their search for freedom. When their emancipation was passed, they had no idea where to go. The idea of naming themselves first Jane herself then the other slaves shows their first aspect of slaves having the freedom to do something of and for their own. But Jane’s punishment for changing her name shows that during slavery, only the masters had the right to name their slaves.

Through the story of her life, she speaks of tolerance and human understanding, commitment and sacrifice, human dignity and its price during slavery and after slavery. The first book The War generally starts with the days after slavery. The killing of Big Laura and other, the patroller’s violence witnesses the violence experienced by blacks after slavery. Jane and Ned's reaction to the deaths illustrates the way in which they along with the whole community have become accustomed to violence.

While Miss Jane Pittman as a whole uses the frame of the extended personal experience narrative of autobiography, many narratives are about others, about historical events or of the communal references. Throughout the novel, there are stories of the folk history, freeing of slaves, the major floods, the death of Huey Long, etc. Miss Jane tells of life in slavery, love and marriage to a strong man and the effects of his death, and the hardship of finding a place for herself in the world. Jane and Ned’s Jane encounter with a Yankee from the Freedom Bureau starts Gaines's commentary upon the role of the Northern Federal Government after the war.

“Well, ‘cording to the Fedjal Gov’ment, they sending Yankees down here to help y’all out. See that y’all have something to eat, clothes, school. Everything Brown promised you, you go’n have right here in Luzana.” (Gaines, pg.35)

He tells Jane that Louisiana soon will feel as free as Ohio; he treats her in a very different way than most white men that she has met. He pays to get them across the river and finds them a safe room. The children's home that Jane and Ned reach represents safety, but for Jane it also represents another form of enslavement.

Jane and Ned’s journey towards Ohio were with many adventures. They meet a black hunter, who is heading towards South, to find his sold father. This can be referred to how slaves move after slavery in search of identity. Jane disbelieve towards any stranger she meets on the way is due to the impact of slavery. Jane referred that everything continued to be the same as before.
The second book deals with the changes in Southern politics after the war. The northern government with its Freedom Bureau has thus far been involved in rebuilding the south. Mr. Bone's plantation illustrates the freedom and respect the blacks receive after slavery. Not too long after the war, however, the northern government abandons the south, and when the southerners return, they bring back their racist social order. Jane herself keenly feels the abandonment by the north. While she once met the New Yorker from the Bureau who promised her that Louisiana would soon be as free as the north, she now knows that his statement is false. Furthermore, Gaines emphasizes the irony of the northern role by explaining that while the northern government abandons the reconstruction efforts, northern businessmen and banks make thing worse by lending money to southerners, like Colonel Dye, so that they can buy back their plantations. The north then has left the south with its old ways while simultaneously helping to promote them. Jane knows that "slavery has returned" once the white secret societies start threatening and beating blacks for the smallest oversight or success.

Jane decides to stay back. She cannot imagine that life in the North would be less miserable than the South. Black masculinity was dominated in the South. Murder of Ned and Joe, signifies the condition of black leaders working for independence.

Jane’s narrative of Molly most clearly shows how slavery is deeply rooted in one’s mind-set that she cannot cope with freedom. Molly wants everything to remain as it was during slavery. When she has to leave the Big House, she dies soon after:

“She had been with the Clyde family ever since she was a young lady. She had been the cook, she had been the nurse. But now she was in her sixties, and they thought they are getting old and needed help. She was scared if she got help the next thing the other person would be taking over. She had had it pretty easy all her life, and she wasn’t go’n let nobody else to take it from her.” (Gaines, pg.90)

Jane and Ned’s new community near Bayonne similarly has feared so much that they are enslaved. Although they believe in Ned’s cause, they will not help him because of their fear:

“Not that they didn’t believe in what he was talking about, but they had already seen too much killing. And they knewed what he was preaching was go’n get him killed, and them too if they followed”. (Gaines, pg.106)

The tragic end of the character Cluveau portrays the conditions of the whites who consider the blacks cowards and created violence against them. In contrast, we see the Black leader Ned, who fights for his country, educates his peoples and face death boldly.

Jane’s narrative portrays the humiliation of Blacks in the Samson plantation. Black Harriet loses her senses by the beating of the white. In the fight with Tom Joe, the women who fought against him were fired. In this episode of Black Harriet and the competition and conflict among women workers in the fields, Miss Jane acknowledges her own part in a situation that ends in tragedy. She says:

“I got to say it now, we was all for it. That’s how it was in the field. You want that race. That made the day does. Work, work, you had to do something to make the day go. We all wanted it. We all knewed Katie couldn’t beat Harriet, but we thought the race would be fun”. (Gaines, pg.137)

Later in the book, Miss Jane talks about the "high water" of 1927.

“I remembered the high water of ’12 well enough, but the high water of ’27 I won’t ever forget. Because in ’26 it rained and rained and rained. And that same winter we had a big freeze. Early next spring we got more rain, and the water couldn’t sleep in the ground because the ground was already full from the year before, and the water had to go to the rivers.” (Gaines, pg.156)
She says that they respected the rivers and found strength in them and explains that she has also experienced that with certain things:

_There's an old oak tree up the quarters where Aunt Lou Bolin and them used to stay. That tree has been here, I'm sure, since this place been here, and it has seen much much, and it knows much much. And I'm not ashamed to say I have talked to it, and I'm not crazy either. It's not necessary craziness when you talk to trees and rivers. But a different thing when you talk to ditches and bayous. A ditch ain't anything, and a bayou ain't too much either. But rivers and trees-less, of course, it's a chinaball tree. Anybody caught talking to a chinaball tree or a thorn tree got to be crazy. But when you talk to an oak tree that's been here all these years, and knows more than you'll ever know, it's not craziness; it's just the nobility you respect._

Ned's counsel at the river is a key to understanding the ways of three heroic black men that stand out in Miss Jane Pittman. The first is Ned Douglass himself.

"People are always looking for somebody to come lead them.... Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One". (Gaines, pg.211)

Jane's remarks open "The Quarters," but apply to Ned some thirty-five years earlier. An unlikely One he sensed his duty as a black man at a young age. As we read through each incident, he is fully conscious, performing what seem to be fated obligations. In retrospect, he may be seen as a basic element in Gaines's vision of Afro-American history. Jane pleads with him to stay home. But he senses that a slave can have no true homeland and moves actively, toward an unknown future.

Working first with Whites, resettling former slaves, and later with his own Southern black people, he is pursued constantly, and realizes that he cannot live very long.

Albert Cluveau had killed so many people he couldn't talk about nothing else but that". Cluveau is an unsettling creation. When he tells Jane he must kill Ned if he is ordered, he cannot understand her anger or shock. As his name suggests, he is literally an instrument, and in him we see a prevalent emphasis on "Them".

Cluveau, like many other Whites in this book, is a cleaver, mechanical. It is their function to blight and cut the natural, seen here in the growth of black manhood. In Jane's mind, Indians and Blacks have natural totems, sacred phenomena with which they can commune. For the earliest Americans, it was the river; for the Blacks following them, the oak tree. But for the white man-first seen as the French-it is his fate to be the levee, various human versions of the concrete spillways that possess the rivers and cut man off from the natural sources of life. Later in the novel, Jimmy Aaron is another strong young black leader. It is his function to lead toward an unknown future, and his leadership is not what the conservative church elders wish from "The One." He is political, organizes a demonstration in Bayonne and is shot to death for his efforts.

The following is her comment about the collapse of Reconstruction and the cruelty with which lawless bands of whites treated those blacks who sought to make a living by farming their own small plot of land. Such groups, says Jane, rode all over the state beating and would kill any black man who tried to stand up and would kill any white man who tried to help him. Just after the war many colored people tried to go out and start their own little farm. The secret groups would come out there and beat them just because their crops were cleaner than the white man's crop.

"What you growing there, Hawk?" they would ask him. "Corn, Master," Hawk would say. "That look like grass out there to me, Hawk," they would say. "But 'fore day in the morning I surely get it out-if the Lord spare." "No, you better start right now, Hawk," they would say. Then they would make you get down on your hands and knees and eat grass till you got sick. If they didn't get enough fun out of watching you throw-up, they would tie you to a fence post or to a tree and beat...
you. "Tomorrow night we come back again, Hawk," they would say. "And you better not have no grass out there, you hear?" Or, "Tomorrow night we come back and you better have some grass in that field, hear, Charlie?" (Gaines, 70)

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman revises the entire historiography of slavery. The book tries to offer a trajectory of slavery from Jane’s memory of last days of Civil War, in a two ways of disruptive account. That is within slave owner history of South and within abolitionist history of South.

The slave owner of the history of the South apart from questioning the legitimacy of abolition suggested that the South was united against abolition. Secondly, it was also suggested that everybody who participated in the civil war, decidedly against abolition was engaged in heroic art. As oppose to it Jane remembers hungry, underage men fighting against their own will, against abolition.

Even as Jane’s memories of the final days of American civil war recontextualise the hollowness of historical claims to Southern heroism that also a more significant stain in the narrative. This concerns the reluctance of many white young soldiers to continue fighting. There are brief snaps of conversation Jane remembers where young soldiers cursing their commanders and suggesting that left to themselves, they would have allowed to slave to do they please. Miss Jane also remembers the inability of a young soldier to stand up, given his physical condition. What emerges is that among the slave owning members of white community there was no community, past and future of slave and slavery.

In Jane’s memory we find Blacks and Whites emerging as victims. Victim is presented in a series of converging images. Gaines proposes an inclusive history where Blacks and Whites not only live together also recognizes the need to do so. Gaines allows historical memory to be repeatedly disrupted by what can be called situational manics. Historical memory in way overlook specificities and also to look for large categories of inclusiveness. For instance Miss Jane’s memory includes stories of non-descript Black man emerging on figures of Black manhood. The water barrier in a plantation, the boat man as locomotive supervisor, horse rider or a limestone prospector there would be evidence of ordinary black man stealing themselves in order to give meaning to their life.

There is a danger projecting Black man as heroes and in the process undermining the specificity of their action. By referring to do as told or like exploring of possibilities of thinking differently the Black man has given himself a life that is no danger anonymous. He is alive in a specific context of fear. In another words by allowing the Black man to narratives a specific context of fear, failure and transcendent Gaines admits a representative of manhood in his fiction.

The emergence of Black manhood repeats and by repeating highlights a transformation of an individual into a larger type. It would make sense to also recall how regional stories of fights facts and frontiers got translated into a uniform narrative called a myth of American Adam. Ernest Gaines presents the mother as possibility of challenge, freedom, and bravery in a way he presents motherhood.

Gaines’ the last section “Quarters” is the narration of the slave quarter and the lives of Black community. The starting of Civil Rights moment slowly changed the earlier thinking. The life and spirited culture of the quarters is diminishing as the Cajun farmers push the need for black labor away. Most people of adult age have moved to cities for work, and only the very old and very young remain. Jimmy rise as a black leader.
The growth of the Civil Rights movement clearly threatens the social order that guarantees white supremacy. Robert Samson believes that the Civil Rights movement is so threatening that he disallows any of his tenants getting involved in it. To some extent, this rule is both harsh and ridiculous. All of the tenants on Samson are old and have lived there for almost fifty years. Though he is an old man now, he still makes a final attempt to control, even though the turning of the racial tides is well underway in the south and throws away Yoko and her family.

A great number of people supported and got involved in Jimmy’s group instead of Robert Samson’s fear. At the end of the novel, though Jimmy was dead, the change in the mind of people, overcoming their fear, gave him and his community a great success and brings equality among all.

3. Conclusion

Thus we found that in this Autobiography, memory of slavery is presented through the narrative voice of a slave woman, who undergoes hundred years of slavery. The voice of this lady is the voice of the whole community. While referring to the events of her life after the day of emancipation, Jane made references to communal events like Civil Rights movement, flood and other governmental organization engaged for and against the abolition of slavery. The mention of other fictional plantations and her life in those plantations depicts the plantation life during and after slavery. It seems that slavery got installed in the mind set to such an extent that even they feared freedom, how black masculinity were dominated by the whites. Though the blacks were aware of all the impacts, they fear to speak. Gradually, the change in the society seem to emerged with people’s participation with Jimmy’s communal speech and at last joining Jimmy’s movement along with Jane. Memory in this novel is revisiting the past from an individual perspective. We found reconstructed history of African American felt by African American and written by African American. This is finally a community novel. Jane in fact forgot many events of her life. She cannot talk about her house but about her community. That is why she doesn’t have children of her own but children of her community.

4. References