

Feminity and Non Feminity in Ernest Gaines' *of Love and Dust*

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Abstract:

Nowadays, sexual identity has become a hot issue. In social institutions, there are debates about what should be the right attitudes to have toward queers and homosexuality. In literature, some characters are sometimes pictured as deviant, as persons who are questioning whether if they are men or women. In our article, we are using Ernest Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* as a corpus and the tools of postmodernism and feminism to get insight in how the notions of feminity and non feminity were viewed shortly, after the Emancipation period in the American Society, when African Americans were still living in the plantations.

Keywords: Non feminity, feminity, migration, plantation, community.

Résumé: De nos jours, l'identité sexuelle est devenue un sujet brûlant. Dans les institutions sociales, il y a des débats sur les bonnes attitudes à adopter envers les homosexuels et l'homosexualité. Dans la littérature, certains personnages sont parfois décrits comme déviants, comme des personnes qui se demandent s'ils sont des hommes ou des femmes. Dans notre article, nous utilisons *Of Love and Dust* d'Ernest Gaines comme corpus et les outils du postmodernisme et du féminisme pour analyser la façon dont les notions de féminité et de masculinité étaient considérées dans la société américaine, peu après la période d'émancipation, lorsque les Afro-Américains vivaient toujours dans les plantations.

Mots-clés: Masculinité, féminité, migration, plantation, communauté.

Introduction

In the plantations, *shortly* after the Emancipation period, life was still not easy for African Americans. Slavery was still existing not like before, but in another form. Ernest Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* is an autobiographical novel which refers to this period of time. Katie Fay testifies:

Gaines's desire to tell the stories of males becoming men begins in his childhood on a Louisiana plantation and continues into his young adulthood. As a child in the South being raised by sharecroppers, Gaines experienced first-hand many of the situations his characters undergo. Because his family still lived on the plantation where the older generations were forced into slavery, as a child he was exposed to racism, lack of education, poverty, and the remnants of plantation life. (...) . But more importantly, Gaines was able to share the hardships that he saw young black men endure. Because he was raised in a society of historical racial division, Gaines saw the demoralization of men both in his generation and the older generation before him. (Katie Fay, 2004:4-5)

Katie Fay explains that Ernest Gaines is coming from a family of sharecroppers who has lived in Louisiana in the United States. Consequently, in his young adulthood he has been exposed to many hardships experienced by African Americans in the plantations. These traumatic situations has influenced his writings. He has decided to share the hardships that he saw young black men endure in some of his writings such as *Of Love and Dust*. In Ernest Gaines's *Of Love and Dust* we are introduced into a White American's plantation. His name is Sidney Bonbon. As we go through this corpus, it will be interesting to ponder over these questions: How the system put in placed inside the plantations robbed the African

American men of their non feminity? How were African Women treated? What was their conception of feminity? How have both men and women fought for their non feminity and feminity?

The African American's Men Robbed of Their Non Feminity

The Declaration of Emancipation didn't put an end immediately to slavery in America. During the reconstruction period, the white Americans strive to regain the authority on former slaves by putting in place the sharecropping economic system. Without land to cultivate and looking for jobs, African Americans have fallen prey to this system. In this system, they were given lands, accommodation and seeds, tools, mules and seeds, but most parts of the production was given back to the master. Thomas Ladenburg notices:

With the collapse of Congressional Reconstruction, the former slaves were once again denied the right to vote, equal protection under the law, and land to own and farm. Forced to find employment where they could, the vast majority had no choice but to work on their former owner's plantation at his terms. (...)A sharecropper did not own his own farm; nor did he own house, mule, or tools. Instead, he rented these from his landlord. The landlord allowed 'croppers' to farm his land, usually about 10 acres, in exchange for 1/3 of the crop. For use of a mule, the seeds, and the tools, the cropper frequently paid another third. Since he owned the land, the landlord could order the planting of a money crop, usually cotton or tobacco, and could prevent "croppers" from planting vegetables, which they might eat or sell. Croppers seldom made improvements on the farms, which they did not own, and landlords frequently let the farms, which they didn't live on, fall into disrepair. With from 1/3 to 2/3rds of the crop going to the landlord, there was little incentive to work as hard as the business of farming required. (Thomas Ladenburg, 2007:31)

According to Thomas Ladenburg the former slaves were not given lands to farm for free. Sharecropper was in fact another disguised name for slave because as sharecroppers, African Americans again were denied the right to vote, equal protection under the law, and land to own and farm. 1/3 to 2/3rds of the crop were going to the landlord and all what the African Americans earned were spent in the renting of a house, mule, or tools. The sharecropping system then kept them in poverty. Jim, the narrator of Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust* describes the size of the land that African Americans rent: "The plantation (or what was left of the plantation, now) had all its crop far back in the field. The front land was for the sharecropper. The Cajuns had the front-east and best land, and the colored people (those who were still hanging on) had the middle and worst land" (*Of Love and Dust*, 26). In the amplification "The plantation (or what was left of the plantation, now) had all its crop far back in the field." the narrator makes the satire of the White American's cupidity and cruelty. He stresses the fact that despite the fact that the African Americans were expected to give back as rent fees the most part of the plantation yield, the White American master made sure that African Americans ended up with nothing by renting them the parts of the plantations which were not much productive like their own. Complaining about the little earning that the African Americans were left with, Jim says: "They don't pay 'bad people' anything. I said: "They feed you, they cloth you. If you find anything else, you can change it at the store out there. That adds to you time" (*Of Love and Dust*, p.31). In this irony, the narrator makes fun of the wickedness of the White American master. He denounces and deconstructs the deceitful ideologies sustaining the sharecropping system. These ideologies have been framed to make the African Americans believed that the system has been made for their welfare, to feed them, cloth them, care for them after slavery for only philanthropic reasons. The ideology "They feed you, they cloth you" is contrasted with the antithesis: "If you find anything else, you can change it at the store out there. That adds to you time" to highlight the fact that African Americans were not fed and clothed without charges. They have to pay back all these services at the store owned by the same White American master with the money got from selling the small part of production that remained to them. Jim also stresses: "That adds to you time" How was the time spent in laboring in the plantations was converted into money used to buy goods at the store? Thomas Ladenburg answers:

A lien is a loan with goods or produce as the security. Cash was scarce after the Civil War, and few banks were open (those that were seldom did business with poor farmers), so most croppers and tenants obtained

credit from the local merchant or storekeeper. The merchant advanced supplies such as food, clothes, or tools, (never cash) in return for a mortgage or lien on the farmer's crop. In the most typical cases, the farmer pledged his unplanted crop at the county store each spring. The merchant kept the books and charged a rate of interest per year (usually about 37%). The African-American farmer seldom asked to see his account, even if he could understand the credit system or add the numbers. Challenging either the skills or the integrity of the white man was not tolerated in the South. Sharecroppers and crop-lien farmers usually had to confine their business to the local store until their loans were paid. They were allowed to plant only those crops that did not compete with the provisions they were supplied. Since farmers always sold their crops in the fall when prices were low, bought at the high price of the local merchant, paid a 37% rate of interest, and never got to inspect the books, they usually ended the year owing money. To use the local language, they failed to 'pay out' and began the next planting even deeper in debt. (Thomas Ladenburg, 2007:32)

Thomas Ladenburg's explanations sheds light on Jim's: "That adds to you time". Jim was pointing here to the fact that the unfair sharecropping economy arranges everything to maintain African American in poverty by adding to the time of debt payment. The longer was the time taken to reimburse a debt, better it was for the White American mater and merchant because he was the only one keeping the books of account and he could easily charge a 37% rate of interest on the debt every year.

Emancipation did mean freedom, for African-Americans because most of them continued to work in the white man's land or to work in his house. In *Of Love and Dust*, all the plantations owners are White Americans. There are: Jacques Germain, Frank Morris, Herbert Marshall. All African American men in the corpus are poor, unable to own a property or a plantation. They have been robbed of their non feminity and of their freedom. They have lost their humanity just like Bishop, Herbert Marshall's houseboy: « He [Bishop] couldn't run because he didn't know where to go. There wasn't any place for him to go. The house and this yard was the only place he had » (*Of Love and Dust*, p.267). In the foreshadowing, Bishop looks like entrapped by a system that doesn't want him to have his own life, his own house. All that he has, he possesses is related to the master. He is deprived of everything even abilities that men usually possess such as taking decision freely and assume them freedom. The relationship that exists then between most African Americans men and White Americans masters in *Of Love and Dust* is a relationship of subordination. This relationship even robs African Americans men of their non feminity. For , Lauren J. Roth that is the case of Bishop:

Displaying the feminine role of establishing and keeping boundaries, Bishop is a male character in the novel who finds his strength and identity in the task of homemaking and keeping. Unable to function outside of this role, Bishop attempts to preserve his place on the plantation by directing Marcus to his correct place on the plantation: "'Go back down the quarter, boy,' Bishop said. 'Please go back down the quarter.'" (Lauren J. Roth, 2010:47)

According to Lauren J. Roth, as the result of making the task of homemaking and keeping (task of a feminine nature) for years, he has lost his non feminity. He has come to a point where he can find his strength and identity only in the task of homemaking and keeping. Alienated and unable to function outside of this role he is acting more like the way a submissive woman will do with her husband. In *Of Love and Dust*, apart from few African Americans such as uncle Octave and Mr. Robert's (Aunt Margaret's husband), few men are married to women. They don't have the financial means to feed themselves properly and take the lead in a family. Having a family is not then for them an option. Bishop, Marcus, Jim Kelly (the narrator), John and Freddie are all Africans Americans working in Herbert Marshall's plantation. They are all working under the supervision of Joe Walker, Cooler and Sidney Bonbon. The surname "Bonbon" is an ironical name given to make fun of this character bestiality and ferocity. He is far from being sweet like a bonbon for the narrator says:

Bonbon was a simple man and a brutal. [That] was the way Aunt Ca 'line described him. He was brutal because had been brought up in a brute-taught world and in a brute-taught times. The big house had given him a house and a whip (he did had a whip at first) and they had told him to ride behind the black in the field and get as much work out of themselves he could. He did then, but he did more, he fell in love with one of the black women. (*Of Love and Dust*, p.67)

The expression; "Bonbon was a simple man and a brutal" sounds like a paradox which contrasts the humanity of the man with the brutality of the beast. In the metaphor, "they had told him to ride behind the black in the field" the narrator points at the fact that Bonbon is a product of a violent system, the slavery system. In this metaphor, American Americans are compared to a horse, or a mule rid by Bonbon because this is the way he views them. For Bonbon, African Americans were not human beings and couldn't have any non feminity. They were only good for physical work and exploitation. Bonbon has learned violence from his parents and he also teaches it to Billy and Willy, his children. At five years old, a gives them a BB gun and teach them how to shoot. The narrator observes: "When they [Willy and Billy] made five years old, he gave them a BB gun to play with together. Aunt Ca' lie said the moment they learn to shoot the gun, nobody and nothing was safe on the place". (*Of Love and Dust*, p.67). Five year old is then the age of loss of innocence for Willy and Billy, Bonbon's sons. Early at this age, they are introduced to the evil and violent world by showing them how to shoot.

So, through the sharecropping, the White American racist system has organized the economical system in order to rob African American men of their non feminity and humanity. The social institutions such as the family, the plantation or social community has also serve this purpose through ideologies and education. But how that system consider the African American women?

The African American's Feminity

The white American master has insulted also the African American's feminity. African American women were not treated better than the African American men. They were victims of discrimination first because of their skin color, the black one and secondly for being women and not men. Deprived of their dignity, their female body no longer belonged to them. It belonged rather to the White American master who could at any time and any place have sexual intercourse with them without their consent and in all impunity. We can point at the example of Pauline, the mother of Bonbon's sons:

It has started in the field, where he had all the right to call her over into a patch of corn or cotton, a cane or a ditch-the one he was closest to-and make her lay down and pull up her dress. Then, after he has satisfied his lust, he could go back in the house like nothing had happened. And he would pull down her dress and go back to the work she was doing before he called her to him. The other women wouldn't say anything to her, and she wouldn't say anything, either- like nothing in the world had happened. But something had happened to Bonbon. At first he had laid with all and any of them. (*Of Love and Dust*, p.63-64)

In the ridicule "It has started in the field, where he had all the right to call her over into a patch of corn or cotton, a cane or a ditch-the one he was closest to-and make her lay down and pull up her dress", Bonbon who represents the White American master is compared to an animal who copulates in the bush. The animalistic and violent way of having sex is highlighted here. Bonbon seems to have lost all his humanity and self-control. In the antithesis: "The other women wouldn't say anything to her, and she wouldn't say anything, either- like nothing in the world had happened. But something had happened to Bonbon.", "anything" is contrasted with "something". This antithesis makes the satire of the racist system. It denounces a system that gives to the White American the illusion of being above reproach, true men. White American men are taught that a crime such as rape of African Women is something good because it allows them to express their non feminity and their superiority over African Americans women. But in reality, rape downgrade them and makes them behave just like animals do. The statement : "he had all the right" is sarcastic and makes fun of the wrong psychological representation of African American women which

move White American men to rape them. About the representation that prompts White Americans men to rape African women, MacKinnon states that it has been instilled into White American men that sexual aggression against those with less power should be viewed as an enjoyment, an entitlement of their non feminity that creates and maintains a sexual/gender hierarchy. Therefore, the fight against rape is not only a fight against sexual violation, but also a fight which determine for women who should control and define their sexuality. (Beverly A. McPhail, 2015:5)

Here, Beverly A. McPhail quotes MacKinnon who thinks that rape is an act of aggression against those with less power. Those people are deprived of their humanity and viewed just as sexual objects made for their pleasure, "an entitlement of non feminity that creates and maintains a sexual/gender hierarchy." Beverly A. McPhail insinuates that rape functions as act of terrorism. We can then say that White Americans like Bonbon in *Of Love and Dust* who rapes African Americans use rape just like a terrorist weapon used to intimidate their victims, and keep them in a state of fear. From a psychological viewpoint. Like most White Americans, Bonbon has a complex of superiority which impacts negatively their representation of African Americans women and move them to view those women as mere sexual objects. He has developed such complex due to interactive and negative effects of discrimination, racism power, gender, race, age, and class on his psychology. He has been influenced as a product of the patriarchal system, by racist policies enforced that have deeply affected his way of life and shaped the relationships between White American men and African Women and maintained the later ones in a position of subordination. Racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing and establishes a kind of sexual hierarchy that values certain female bodies over others, with the bodies of women of color devalued. White American men were not the only ones who were influenced by this racist culture. African American women themselves also came to be assimilated to the point of believing that the master had the right to dispose of their body as he wanted, to abuse it in all impunity. Consequently, these American women like Pauline in *Of Love and Dust* found it difficult to fight against and resist Bonbon or denounce him when he has raped her. Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson denounce the existence of such a code of silence:

The institutional pattern of rape was well established before the newly enslaved Africans reached the Americas. During the transatlantic voyage, crew members routinely raped and impregnated Black women. In preparation for sale, enslaved women were stripped naked and placed on auction blocks. (...) According to historians, at least 58% of enslaved women between the ages of 15 and 30 had been sexually assaulted by White men. After slavery ended, the Klu Klux Klan and other White vigilante groups whipped African Americans, destroyed their property, and gang raped Black women (Sommerville, 2004). Embedded in this court decision, and embraced by the larger culture for more than 500 years, was the belief that Black women's innate hypersexuality made them "unrapeable" and undeserving of protection or sympathy (Tillet & Quinn, 2007). Throughout history, African American women have used a variety of resistance strategies to combat sexual victimization. Some women physically fought back or ran away. Other women developed a culture of silence that discouraged the disclosure of rape. This code of secrecy often extended to the larger Black community (Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson, 2013, p. 1-2)

For Carolyn M. West and Kalimah Johnson the existence of code of silence can be traced back to the transatlantic voyage that brought many African Americans from Africa to America on ships. Even after the end of slavery, the established culture of rape continues to thrive and even biased the court decisions about White Americans rapists. They were found non-guilty in several judicial cases. Few African dare to resist and adopt resistance strategies to combat sexual victimization. Helpless, some had to run away for their life. Most of the African Americans, like Julie Rand, Pauline, Aunt Emma and almost all the women *Of Love and Dust* have chosen to keep the code of secrecy which prevents the disclosure of rape no matter the difference of age among them. Even if Pauline who has been raped several time by Sidney Bonbon refused to denounce because she felt intimidated, Julie Rand and Aunt Emma, Aunt Margaret, Aunt Polly, who were older should have known better.

The most authoritative figure in the novel is the elderly Miss Julie Rand. The narrator let her introduce herself to the reader, speaking at the first person of singular: "I had been the Herbert Cook forty years. Cooked for three generation of them. Sidney Bonbon got something on him and put Pauline there in my place" (*Of Love and Dust*, p.14). In the ellipse "Cooked for three generation of them", the sentence is disrupted because the subject is removed from its place. This can be a clue that point at the fact that like many African American women, Miss Julie Rand was not well educated. She was denied as a subject the right to be educated. The fact the subject is also removed can suggest the fact what matters to Herbert, the American White master was not if she was a human being or not. What matters to him was if she has cooked and if she has cooked a delicious food on time, just like a slave or a cooking machine. This predicament has lasted for many years because the omniscient narrator mentions that Miss Julie Rand has served the White American Herbert and his sons and grandsons over three generations indicates that she is a very old woman. If she has been able to live so long and work so long for Herbert, until Pauline's arrival, it is because she is not too much talkative and has learned also the code of silence. Miss Julie Rand uses the authority that she enjoys in the African American community because of her gray hairs to promote the code of silence among the African American community. She cautions them to avoid causing trouble by doing anything that can offend the White American master such as exposing his wrongdoing. Lauren J. Roth, observes:

The most authoritative figure in the novel is the elderly Miss Julie Rand. Though Miss Julie cooked in Herbert Marshall's plantation kitchen for most of her life, she judges and commands what is best for her community with authority. (...) The spiritual nature of the duty is intensified by the pictures on Miss Julie's walls, as Jim notices, "no matter what wall you faced, you saw pictures of Jesus Christ" (Lauren J. Roth, 2010:p.38)

For Lauren J. Roth, Miss Julie Rand is listened in the African American community, not only because of her age, but she plays the role of the spiritual leader. The reference to Jesus Christ who is the messiah and the Christians' guide reinforces this idea. Giving a physical description of her house the narrator adds: "Miss Julie waved the fan before her face a couple of times. It was one of those old past fans that undertaken donate to churches every four or five years. It had a picture of Jesus on one side, on the other side was writing, probably the address of the undertaken parlor" (*Of Love and Dust*, p.111). This excerpt establishes an analogy between Miss Julie Rand's leadership and her bedroom. The picture of Jesus even on the fan reflects the source of her faith and optimism. Jesus Christ seems to be omnipresent in Miss Julie Rand's life. Just like Jesus Christ, Miss Julie Rand has a strong influence on both African men and African women. As a strong, independent and, in many cases, domineering figure of the African American community, Miss Julie Rand assumes her feminity in her community by instilling hope and a strong faith in in others. Nevertheless, unlike Aunt Margaret, Miss Julie Rand is a moderate feminist.

Though the omniscient narrator is also a feminist, he does not agree with Miss Julie Rand and the other African American women who have learned the code of silence. He does think that refusing to expose the wrongdoing of the master, his shameless habit to rape African Women is a greater humiliation than the rape itself. He even voices his disapproval: "The other women wouldn't say anything to her [Pauline], and she wouldn't say anything, either- like nothing in the world had happened. But something had happened to Bonbon. At first he had laid with all and any of them. (*Of Love and Dust*, p.63-64). Through the paradox "she wouldn't say anything, either- like nothing in the world had happened." makes the satire of the African American women who refuse to denounce their rapist, as if nothing has happened to them. He takes side and views keeping code of silence as nonsense and a coward attitude. By the amplification, "Something had happened" he stresses over the fact that a rape is not something trivial for a woman and insinuates that the rape should not either mean nothing to the world. Through the irony: "like nothing in the world had happened.", the narrator denounces the paternalist ideology promoted by the society, according to which women are nothing more than sexual objects. The promotion of this ideology inside the American society has not only favored the enforcement of the code of silence, but also impunity. (Lillie Anne Brown, 2008:45-50)

The patriarchal ideology has made both White American and African American men to believe that the only place of the female African Americans characters is in the kitchen. In the novel of *Love and Dust*, no man work in the kitchen apart from Bishop. While men are fieldworkers, married women work as cooks. Even if some African American women like Pauline or Miss Julie before her retirement, work as cook for the White American, they also do the cooking for their husbands as housewives when they come back home. No man even dare to assist them in the kitchen. The narrator explains: "Everybody else had come out the field, and you could see the smoke flying out the kitchen chimney where the women were cooking supper, and you could see the men sitting or lying down on the gallery waiting for the food to get done so they could eat". (*Of Love and Dust*, p.42). The narrator here contrasts the attitude of the African American men and the one of African American women. On one side, in this compare and contrast, the group of African American men influenced by the patriarchal ideology are pictured as masters or kings lying down and sitting down in the gallery. They are opposed the other group of African American women who are hard working hard, more than men, cooking for them despite tiredness. Apparently, the former view cooking as a feminine task. But the narrators thinks differently. Taking their defense of African American women, the observes from his point of view: "Everybody else had come out the field". He appeals to African American men's compassion and empathy and prompt them to take in consideration the fact that their spouse can feel the same tiredness that they feel after working outside the whole day. Why the narrator his so sensitive to the African American women predicament.

In fact, through the omniscient narrator, it is Ernest Gaines who is fact speaking as a feminist. It does so because as a child he have seen his aunt who cared for him facing the same predicament. He felt for his aunt. Though crippled, she strived o cook for him as a child and his brother and do all the housework. He recalls in an interview:

My aunt, who could not walk, raised us. She cooked for us. We had to bring everything to her. We had a little wood-burning stove for food, for meat or vegetables or whatever it was that she was cooking that day, and we had to sit it right before her. She sat on a little bench by the stove, and another little bench in front of her, she used as a table. She'd cut up the vegetables and the meat, and then she could put it over in the pot on the stove. She washed our clothes; we had to bring everything to her. (Lillie Anne Brown, 2008:34-37)

We can then understand from Ernest Gaines' references to his childhood that the African women that he describes in his fiction *Of Love and Dust* are constructs to the real-life African American women who were living in Point Coupee where he has grown with his aunt. In the patriarchal society that Ernest Gaines describes in his fiction, African American male characters are robbed of their non feminity. But at the same time, both African and White American male characters rob the female characters of their feminity. How the male characters in *Of Love and Dust* will regain their non feminity and the female characters regain their feminity?

The Fight Of The Characters To Regain A Better Status

Towards the end of the fiction, one can notice a change in the spirit of mind, attitudes and behavior of the African male characters. The outstanding example is the one of Marcus, a former African American convict who has been brought to work in the plantation. Jim, the omniscient narrator and Marcus' best friend introduces him to us: "Marcus was pretty handsome fellow and he knew it. He was about six feet tall, slim, but well-built; he had a medium brown skin and a pile of curly black hair. He had bright brown eyes, a kind of straight nose, thin lips, and a well-shaped mustache. Marcus had a lot of Indian blood and he probably had a lot of white blood in him." (*Of Love and Dust*, p.57). This indirect presentation made by Jim seems incongruous. In fact Marcus is pictured in this excerpt as someone without a precise racial background. He has "a pile of curly black hair" and at the same time "a lot of Indian blood and he probably had a lot of white blood in him." This paradox is used by the narrator to draw the reader's attention to the fact that Marcus is not only an African American but that he belongs also to multiracial nation made of people coming from

different countries and continents. The narrator insinuates that there should be nothing like African American minorities in America because all humans belong to a single race: the human race.

Though Marcus and Jim are good friends, they didn't share from the start the same viewpoint about non feminity. If Jim's viewpoint is moderate, Marcus' own is radical. Firstly, Marcus is not ready to assist Jim in making any house chores and even distrusts Jim. Highlighting the contrast existing between Jim and Marcus, Suzanne W. Jones notices:

The bitter, rebellious and hardened nature of Marcus can be seen in the boy's initial distrust and disrespect of Jim, as the boy denies his food. The boy shows his distrust of his own community, even, as he states "I don't need nobody to feed me" (24). However, through time and the consistency of Jim's effort, Marcus begins to trust his caretaker. Jim describes the important scene of the first time Marcus eats at his table: "I went in and washed my face and hands and warmed up some beans and rice I had in the icebox . . . and I sat in the back door eating. After a while, Marcus came back there. I nodded toward the plate. He washed his hands and sat down at the table" (29). Marcus continues to display his bitter distrust and childish disrespect as he asserts: "Just 'cause I'm eating your food don't say I trust you" (30). (Suzanne W. Jones, 1997 "New Narratives of Southern Manhood: Race, Non feminity, and Closure in Ernest Gaines's", *Critical Survey*, Volume 9, Number 2, USA, p.40)

For Suzanne W. Jones, Marcus was having such strong feelings about non feminity that he found disgusting at the beginning that a man like Jim could cook for him. He was so angry about that he refused once to eat his food Jim. Marcus thinks that instead of being satisfied with a cooker or caretaker role, he must think about ways of fighting in order to regain his manhood stolen by the White Americans. He finds Jim too dull and not trustworthy. Unlike Jim, Marcus expresses strong feelings about the racist system put in place in plantations by White Americans. He is not afraid to voice his anger. For instance, expressing his exasperation about the way African Americans are exploited in the field, he says: "Look at the blisters inn my hands. I been working like a mule all day" (*Of Love and Dust*, p.44). In this metaphor, Marcus is comparing the way African Americans are exploited in plantations by the White American owners to the way mules are used to make work too hard for humans in order to denounce the inhuman humiliating, degrading and alienating conditions in which the African Americans work in the plantations. He is revolted against this. Marcus is also fed up with the lack of respect and the White Americans' racist and discriminatory attitude for he vents: "You could buy soft drinks in the store or if you were a white man you could drink a beer in there. But if you were colored you had to go to the little side-room-"the nigger room" (*Of Love and Dust*, p.42-43). In the apostrophe "You could buy soft drinks in the store or if you were a white man you could drink a beer in there." The tone used here by Marcus to address the white American master is accusatory and express a feeling of revolt face to racial injustice. He is complaining about the fact that African American men are treated without dignity, respect and consideration and are denied the right to choose what to drink and where to drink . They are not free to enjoy their non feminity by making their own decision. All what they are allowed to drink by White Americans is soft drink and they cannot sit in the same room like White Americans to drink. Marcus takes the role of the community leader by leading the rebellion against injustices. For him a true African American male should stand for his rights. Marcus then moves from words to actions. Which actions does he takes?

Reckoning that Sidney Bonbon is not a higher rank of male and him and inferior one, Marcus thinks that if Sidney Bonbon can lie down with African Women anyhow, he equally has the right to lie down with Sidney Bonbon's wife. He decides to cross the social boundary by having a loving affair Sidney Bonbon's wife. The narrator makes various references about this secret interracial loving affair that Marcus entertains with Louise Bonbon, Sidney Bonbon's wife:

I didn't know then that Marcus had seen Louise those two nights, because I hadn't talked to Sun Brown yet. But I know he had been not carry her from the tractor and he was just waiting for the chance to get near that house. (...) I was thinking about Marcus and Louise. And I thought to myself, it was the Old Man. He created them (...) No, it wasn't the Old Man. Just it wasn't the Old Man who had stuck Marcus on me. No,

it wasn't the Old Man. The Old Man didn't have a thing in the world to do with it. (*Of Love and Dust*, p.132; 146-148).

In this soliloquy, Jim makes his own introspection and tells us what he thinks about the loving affair between Louise Bonbon and Marcus. On one hand he says: "And I thought to myself, it was the Old Man. He created them" because sometimes he thinks that it is not bad for an American man to love a White American woman because they are both creatures of God. The Old Man is a metaphor that highlights God's oldness and wisdom. Nevertheless, in the other hand he says "No, it wasn't the Old Man. Just it wasn't the Old Man who. No, it wasn't the Old Man. The Old Man didn't have a thing in the world to do with it." When he gives to the matter a second thought, Jim is confused. The oxymoron reflects the confusion and the internal conflict induced by the racial ideologies promoted by the White Americans. Like Jim, these ideologies have modified the conception that African American men have of the interracial relationship and has created in their subconscious an internal conflict. Consequently, they are indecisive and fear to engage in a love affair with a White American woman. Though Jim does not think about displaying openly his non feminity by choosing freely the person he wants to love, he is impress by Marcus' courageous Pondering over Jim's ambivalence, Lauren J. Roth notices:

In *Of Love and Dust*, Gaines's complex characters struggle with the changing social structures of a segregated South. Playing on the difference between African Americans from country and blacks from the city, Gaines shows a conflict within the community. Marcus, the convict from the city, cannot accept the set way of life in the plantation community, and fights for his individual freedom at the expense of others.(...) . The male characters, often through conquest and crossing of boundaries, neglect the home and destroy it through selfish motives. Gaines shows the complex nature of this struggle through assigning two gender roles to Jim's character. Accepting the burden of being Marcus's caretaker from the strong women in the novel, Jim attempts to protect the community. However, he also comes to admire Marcus's courage and lack of fear, a component that is lacking in his own manhood. (Lauren J. Roth, 2010:38, 46)

For, Lauren J. Roth, Jim adopts an ambivalent attitude because though he admires Marcus's courage and lack of fear, he is not able to cross the social boundaries set up by White American's males who represent the white dominant political and racist system, in order to fight for his non feminity. He doesn't have the guts to act the same way like Marcus because courage and lack of fear is missing in his manhood. Till the end *Of Love and Dust* , Jim struggles to assume two gender roles. He tries at the same time to carry the burden of being Marcus's caretaker from the strong women in the novel and to protect the African community from the White Americans' punishments as the results of rebellious acts. In this regards, no difference can be seen between Jim's role in the fiction and the female character's role. As Marcus' caretaker, he goes to field, watch over him like a mother will do for his son and cook for him. He tells us: "After cooking up some grits and eggs and making a big pot of coffee, I sat in the back door and ate breakfast. (...) I put up my guitar from against the wall and went out on the gallery (...) I sat on the steps and started playing my guitar. But I thought about her [his former love] and went back (...) tried to forget her and went back on the hard. After a while, Jobbo came up there with his harp. (*Of Love and Dust*, p.22; 47-50). This excerpt describes different tasks performed by Jim as a caretaker. In this imagery or sensory description, various senses are used to highlight Jim's full involvement in his role as caretaker. "cooking up" makes reference to smell and taste, "started playing guitar" refers to hearing and touch. This imagery highlights the fact that Jim is enjoying his feminine role as Jim's caretaker. He not only feeds Jim all the time, but also play music for him, to make him feel happy and comfort him. He is so delighted with it that he does not even feel like marrying a woman for he confesses in the internal conflict: "But I thought about her [his former love] and went back (...) tried to forget her and went back on the hard."

To some extent, Marcus' leadership has made Jim change his mentality about his non feminity. In fact, formerly, Jim thinks that African Americans should keep faith in God and believe that he will surely stop all the injustices they face and avenge them in due time, without taking any other actions. Contrasting his former viewpoint and to his present one, he notices: "I used to say the whole prayer and I thought the Old

man was going to do it all for me. But I know I have to do it for myself". (*Of Love and Dust*, p.19). The interior monologue "But I know I have to do it for myself" point at a change of the viewpoint and perspective, a rupture Nevertheless, Jim is not ready to go further as Marcus in the fight for African American men's dignity and non feminity. Jim still has the feeling that Marcus way of fighting and disrespect disrupt the peaceful life in the plantation. All the other African American men living in the plantation feel also the same way. For instance, Jobbo who is also a friend of Marcus and Jim finds difficult to understand the purpose of Marcus' fight. Marcus says to him: It was pitch- black out there. The moon has risen but it was still behind the trees (...) "Man this place is black", Marcus said: "Good Lord". (*Of Love and Dust*, p. 47-48). In this statement the color black is the symbol of the darkness, the lack of vision, the obscurantism that has befallen upon the African community living in the plantation and prevent them to see clearly the path to take in order to be free from oppression. Marcus as a hero seems to be the only one to see the light shining and showing the way for freedom. Moved by a clear vision of the future of the African community, Marcus takes a courageous stand and do not shrink back and strives to rally the reluctant men to his fight. Suzanne W. Jones notices:

There is a difference and conflict between Marcus and the other African Americans on the plantation: being from the city, Marcus does not consider himself the "old-fashioned" black. After a few days on the plantation, Marcus joins Jim and Jobbo out on the porch in the evening as they play music. Listening to the two men sing, Marcus comments on the plantation's culture, "Man this place is black . . . Good Lord" (48). Jobbo, not understanding that this is an insult from Marcus, comments about the time of day: "'Yeah, it's pretty black, alright' Jobbo said, looking around like he hadn't seen it dark like this before" (48). While Jobbo is ignorant of anything being wrong with his lifestyle, Marcus looks down on the plantation life, thinking that it is a shameful way of life. Marcus sees the people on the plantation as trapped as slaves, and he insists repeatedly throughout the novel that he cannot stay. Because he sees the community on the plantation quarters as a failure for the African-American community to progress, and a place of entrapment rather than a peaceful home, Marcus attempts to escape using whatever means he can to get away, even through violence or at other people's expense. (Suzanne W. Jones, 1997:41)

For Suzanne W. Jones, there is basically a contrast between Marcus and the rest of the African American men because they don't have the same viewpoint about what should be the status of African Americans living in the plantation. While the rest of the African community is pessimistic and see only darkness, Marcus dream freedom of the African American community, better life conditions for African Americans. For Marcus, the plantation life, is shameful because it destroys the African American 'men non feminity and the African American's women feminity. In the metaphor "a place of entrapment rather than a peaceful home", Marcus compares life in the plantation to a prison, a trap that keep in bondage the African American both psychologically and physically. Marcus prompts the African Americans to escape such predicament by all means including even violence. Jim, Jobbo and the rest of the African American men, think differently. They think that they must peacefully stay inside the plantation and promote the African American community's dignity and value through music and culture in order to move the White master to change his attitude.

This idea is also present in the reference to dust used in the title of the novel *Of Love and Dust*, and which comes often as a leitmotif in the fiction, just like is the excerpt: "I went on down the quarter. It must have been a good hundred. That dust was white as snow, hot as fire. You had nothing but hot dust to walk in from the time you left the highway until you get home" (*Of Love and Dust*, p.182). This dust is not a literal one because Jim says that it is "white as snow, hot as fire". The dust can refer here to obscurantism and the white Americans ideology that is omnipresent in the plantation both when it is snowy or sunny. The African American community is so entrapped in this dust that they are unable to move forward on the road of freedom. Marcus is eager to move from that dust and Aunt Margaret and Miss Julie Rand do not succeed in

making Marcus change his mind. Moving from that dust means first for Marcus trying to break the social barriers, the status quo established by the White American master and later escape from the plantation.

Nevertheless, one can wonder since the female characters, like Aunt Margaret pictured in *Of Love and Dust* do not engage in movement of protestation for the change of their condition, can really be called feminist? .To be objective in dealing with this issue, one should remember that there are different trends of feminism. All feminists do not belong to the radical trend. Feminists can be classified in various trends depending on the strategy that they choose. No wonder Danica Minic, thinks that feminism can also be seen in “a crude preservation of positions, [which] often begins with the following well known questions: “What should you do? What are the possible strategies for change? Where do they lead? What are the possible consequences?” (Donica Minic, 2007:282) For instance, Alice Walker has decided to choose womanism as a feminist strategy as a African American feminist woman. She defines a womanist as “family-centered, in concert with the men , in the liberation struggle; strong, genuine in sisterhood; whole, authentic, respected, recognized, men-compatible, flexible, role-player, adaptable, respectful of elders, spiritual, ambitious, mother nurturing” (Dosinda Garcia, 2011:122). The womanist is not a radical feminist. Likewise, by remaining strong psychologically despite oppression, whole, authentic, respected, recognized, men-compatible, flexible, role-player, all the female characters in *Of Love and Dust* can be considered as feminist. They all bring their contribution to some extent to the e fight for the improvement the whole African community. They have not chosen to fight separately from men for Jim observes:” Where the women were cooking supper, and you could see the men sitting or lying down on the gallery waiting for the food”. (*Of Love and Dust*, p.42). In this description of women and men living together in the plantation, we can notice that women are nearby men, supporting them, feeding them. There are contrasting images. While men are described as weak, passive, “sitting”, “lying down”, “waiting for the food”, women are in an active role for the narrator says that they “were cooking”. The female characters seems even more active than the male characters at the exception of Marcus.

Several times, Aunt Margaret who is Bonbon and Louise Sydney’s servant see Marcus breaking the social barriers between White American women and African American men by coming to Sydney Bonbon’s house to have sex with his wife. She cautions him. But Marcus never cares. About Aunt Margaret’s attitude, Suzanne W. Jones observes:

Aunt Margaret is not trapped; she has peace and stability in her home, and sincerely cares for her community, even the white overseer’s daughter, Tite. Trying to protect the community she and her ancestors have built, Aunt Margaret attempts to stand in the way of Marcus’s violent attempts to incite progression and change in the quarters through destruction of the home. Aunt Margaret becomes more than a metaphorical barrier between Marcus and the white overseer’s wife, Louise. (...)Aunt Margaret also sees that Marcus is being manipulated, as he has lost his original plan to escape by himself, and is now attempting to bring a white woman with him. Aunt Margaret does not verbalize agreement with the social oppression of interracial relationships; however, she knows the reality of the social constructs in the South, and speaks the truth about the destruction of both home and community that their affair will cause. Aunt Margaret’s speech, silence, or actions are founded on the Womanist values of protecting oneself, and protecting or sustaining the community as a whole. Aunt Margaret does not want to oppress Marcus; rather, she wants to protect him, the rest of the community, and herself. (Suzanne W. Jones, 1997:42-47)

According to Suzane W. Jones Aunt Margaret plays a feminist role. She is not totally indifferent to the outcome of the African American community in *Of Love and Dust*. Since she cares about her community welfare and become more than a metaphorical barrier between Marcus and the white overseer’s wife, Louise. She is a moderate feminist who is in favor of the improvement of the African American community’s condition. Nevertheless, she does not think that the best way to fight social oppression of interracial relationships is to use violence to destroy everything. Aunt Margaret, Miss Julie Rand play the same role in community as Marcus’ advisers, coaches and monitors. For instance, when Aunt Margaret notices that Marcus is being manipulated, as he has lost his original plan to escape by himself, and is now attempting to bring a white woman with him, Aunt Margaret cautions him and help him come back to his senses. Without being in the spot of the light, Aunt Margaret who knows quite well the reality of the social

constructs in the South, strives in this way to protect herself, guides Marcus and sustains the African community as a whole. She shows her concern by discussing with Marcus, because she wants him to choose the best and efficient possible strategies in order to free the African community from oppression. Suzanne W. Jones acknowledges:

Trying to prevent chaos in the community, both Jim and Aunt Margaret work together to keep Marcus from crossing social boundaries, which would have violent results. While he is working in Bonbon's yard, Marcus tries to get into the kitchen: "Ya'll got anything cold in there – lemonade or anything?" (153). Aunt Margaret stands in his way, does not invite him in, and "just looked at him" (153). She becomes a physical boundary between the convict and the house. However, when Aunt Margaret goes back to work, Louise helps Marcus hop the fence and sneak inside the house through the bedroom window. Marcus crosses all spatial, personal, and racial boundaries to gain access to the white overseer's wife's room. (...) She looked at Marcus. 'Black trash,' she said quietly" (139). Though Marcus is seemingly fighting oppression for his race, Aunt Margaret considers him "black trash" for the methods Marcus uses to gain that freedom; crossing unlawful personal and social boundaries – methods that afflict others in the quest for his own freedom. (Suzanne W. Jones, 1997:42-47)

Even if Aunt Margaret is not bold as Marcus, she is not naïve, servile and passive. She does not agree with Marcus because according to Suzanne W. Jones, Marcus uses unlawful and counterproductive methods such as sneaking inside Sydney's bedroom window in order to have sex with Sydney's wife. Aunt Margaret's takes a feminist stand not only by advising men but also by the authority she displays in her command over Bonbon's family. Though Louise is a fully-grown woman, Aunt Margaret is her caretaker and mother; she also raises Louise's daughter, Tite. Louise cannot survive without Aunt Margaret. She says: "Louise didn't look like a woman, she looked like a child playing with a doll" (*Of Love and Dust*, p. 241). In this simile, Louise Bonbon is compared to a "child playing with a doll" to highlight her immaturity and the need that Aunt Margaret feels as her spiritual mother to protect her and her daughter Tite. Aunt Margaret thinks that Louise views her daughter Tite as a doll because instead of protecting her from calamities and dangers, she seems to play with her life, her education because she is emotionally immature.

Can men like Marcus be called also feminists? Klocle Nomas answers:

Perhaps a more important question than whether or not men can "do" feminist theory is whether men can engage feminism and can they be feminists? Can Men be Feminists? It is crucial for men to be a part of feminist agency. If feminism is to attain its goal of liberating women, men must be a part of the struggle. Indeed, men probably bear more of the responsibility for ending oppression of women since patriarchal men have been the main perpetrators of that very oppression. But can men do this by becoming feminists? Although I believe that men can be pro-feminist and anti-sexist, I do not believe we can be feminists in the strictest sense of the word in today's society. Men, in this patriarchal system, cannot remove themselves from their power and privilege in relation to women. To be a feminist one must be a member of the targeted group (i.e a woman) not only as a matter of classification but as having one's directly-lived experience inform one's theory and praxis. A clear analogy can be made between male profeminism and anti-racism. Men cannot really be feminists anymore than whites can be black nationalists. However, men can be pro-feminist and whites can be pro-black nationalists. At the same time it is not enough to simply be a member of the disenfranchised minority to be either a feminist or a black nationalist. Feminism, like black nationalism requires political. (Brian Klocke NOMAS, 2013, "Roles of Men with Feminism and Feminist Theory." *National Organization for Men Against Sexism*. P.1)

For Klocle Nomas, Marcus can be viewed as a pro-feminist because men not be seen as feminists in the strictest sense of the word because to be a feminist in the strictest sense, he must be a member of the targeted group (i.e a woman). Men cannot really be feminists anymore than whites can be black nationalists. Since a clear analogy can be made between male profeminism and anti-racism, Marcus is a pro-feminist

because he feels sympathy for the African American women like Pauline who has been raped several times by Sydney Bonbon. As an African American, he shares with African American women the life experiences of belonging to an oppressed group and have most likely shared personal stories that reveal their wounds from patriarchy. Marcus even feels for Louis Bonbon, a White American woman and plan to escape the plantation with her.

As a matter of fact, we can retain that though African American men have been mortified by life in the plantation after the Emancipation, they have adopted two reactions. The majority of them like the old men in *Of Love and Dust* have definitely accepted the loss of their non feminity and have not done much to regain it because they are entrapped by the obscurantism and White American ideology. Others, just like Marcus have chosen as strategy of fight radicalism. On the other side, African American women's courage, endurance, motherhood must be praised. Miss Julie Rand, Aunt Margaret are the pride for the African American community living in the plantation "Since Womanism is focused on sustaining the home and protecting the community, the private, domestic sphere is central to African-American women's power and authority." (Lauren J. Roth, 2010:70) . Definitely, the resounding message that Ernest Gaines conveys through *Of Love and Dust* is: You can be a true man or a true woman, a feminist or not, depending on your determination to fight for the recognition of your gender. Consequently, no one is deemed to be discriminated on the basis of his gender.

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