An Analytical Overview Of Racism In “A Lesson Before Dying”

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It is known to everyone that racism is the perception that one race is superior to another. Racism results in discrimination, stereotyping, and judgmental and biased attitudes toward specific groups of people and targets their ethnicity, race, language, colour, etcetera. Racism is a singular word with multifaceted implications that could affect different people differently. Some people are affected by the events and prejudice they encounter, and some highlight the element of humanity and prefer to focus on people instead of historical incidents.

Gaines’s Personal History and Racial Perspective

Ernest J. Gaines makes his people the centre of his work. Gaines “began his life among cotton pickers in the old slaves’ quarters at river lake plantations” (Wilson & Ryan, 129). Gaines was inspired by his life, times, and events and determined to depict the impact of racism on individuals through a more thoughtful perspective. “*A Lesson Before Dying*” is the most eminent instance of his work, which was first published in 1993 and is based on the story of Willie Francis. The story is narrated as fiction but is a true story and portrays Jefferson (Francis) as a young black man who lived in Louisiana and was sentenced to death twice by an electric chair.

Slavery, Unequal Labor, and a Biased Legal System

Gaines’s unique ability to elaborate on the experience of an individual character adds practicality to his thesis. He has lived a slaved life in Louisiana and, therefore, is well aware of the harm it could do to a man. Leon Litwack writes the reflection of a Mississippi slave that says, “I used to think if I could be free, I should be happiest of anybody in the world.” (Wilson & Ryan, p. 20) From the very start of the novel “A Lesson Before Dying”, Gaines demonstrates a society in 1940s Louisiana which is rife with racism. Bayonne is a community in Louisiana which deals with plantations based on descendants of slavery and used generations of enslaved people to work on the plantations. Regardless of the hard labour of ancestors and the young generation, slaves never got a fair amount of payment and were paid less than other white workers. Gaines explains the flaws of the legal system as well, which promotes racism and never takes a slave’s trial seriously.

A closely related analysis is available in Does Grant Have The Most Pressure In The Book A Lesson Before Dying.

Jefferson's Dehumanization During the Trial

Throughout the trial, Gaines clarifies black slaves' status in white society as that of an animal. The defence attorney attempts to evoke some mercy in the jury by comparing Jefferson to a hog. The attorney says, "Let us for a moment say he was not. What justice would there be to take this life? Why I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." (Gaines, p. 10) At this point, Gaines highlights the helplessness of slaves, who do not even have the right to overturn the sentence through appeal, and therefore, his grandmother, Miss Emma, requested that a schoolteacher named Grant help Jefferson die as a human rather than as a hog. She says, "They called my boy a hog, Mr Henri. I didn't raise no hog, and I don't want no hog to go set in that chair. I want a man to go set in that chair, Mr Henri." (Gaines, p. 17) The instance asserts that racism can hurt the self-esteem of an individual, and everyone deserves respect and fair treatment regardless of any matter. Jefferson's suffering has hurtful effects on other Black people as well, including Grant, Miss Emma, and other black dispositions, because they all are human and want to live and die like humans in a dignified and respected manner.

Internalized Racism and the Mulatto Divide

Moreover, Gaines makes a point that racism can damage the self-perspective of victims of racism. As time passes, the victims become like a pickled vegetable, which is dipped long in vinegar and adopts its sourness. For this purpose, Gaines incorporates the character of Vivian, who has a lighter tone of black skin because of the luxury of having a mixed breed. However, this slight difference makes her proud of herself. Grant reflects that "mulatto (people of mixed racial properties) were enemies if anything at all. There was not even respect." (Gaines, p. 52) The hate of mulattoes for black people is as substantial as white people's abhorrence. Nevertheless, mulattoes are also a target of racial discrimination in the setting and era, and they are barred from entering white taverns and eating places. Mulattoes are not entitled to high-paying job opportunities, but regardless of all these facts, they tried to adopt a demeanor similar to whites. Mulattoes work in bricklaying or carpentry areas and sometimes do some jobs related to house painting to "keep from working in the field side by side with the niggers." (Gaines, p. 160) In this way, mulattoes make themselves unlike blacks and more like whites, but only in their perception. This phenomenon underlines the shade of differences, which can mean that "the simple dualism of black versus white is not the only issue that divides people." (Galens & Moss, 130)

Education as Resistance to Racial Degradation

Gaines illustrates the horror of the death sentence by electric chair in his other works as well. In "*A Gathering Of Old Men*", a "character recounts the terrible story of how his son was killed in the electric chair." (Galens & Moss, 131) It was a concrete punishment which was used by whites to terrify blacks in those times. However, through the protagonist of Jefferson, Gaines affirms the power of a single man to change the implications of racial society. On the plea of Miss Emma, Grant contemplates arranging education for Jefferson so he could die like a man instead of a hog or any other animal. Miss Emma stresses, "I want the teacher to visit my boy. I want the teacher to make him know he's not a hog; he's a man. I want him to know that 'fore he goes to that chair, Mr Henri." (Gaines, p.17)

Education was the only power that could elevate Jefferson's confidence level, which, in turn, could help him face the situation directly. The higher authorities have surmised that the terror of being electrocuted will eventually evoke Jefferson to take his own life. On the other hand, education provides Jefferson with utter courage and pride on the appointed day of his execution. His poised persona annoys Pichot to an extent; Jefferson is "the bravest man in that room." (Gaines, p. 203) Finally, it proved that the dignity and composure of a single man can inspire victims of racism in a genealogical society. Gaines affirms that racism can be addressed in the long term as well by utilizing the same strategy. Through hard work, education, and establishing relationships, Jefferson becomes mature and represents his people in a magnificent and esteemed way.

Dignity as an Antidote to Racism

By analyzing the content mentioned above, it becomes evident that racism has several aspects which could hurt, damage, and destroy people. Some people get pickled in the essence of racial discrimination and go with the path of boasting and false pride. Nevertheless, the only antidote to mitigate the harmful effects of racism is to acquire education and develop a mutual understanding, which gradually pulls Jefferson up from the pit of shame and inferiority and makes him a man, not a hog.

Work Cited

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