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Role of Ancestors in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

Anju Chhetri

Associate Professor

Dept. of English

T.H.B.College

Jamugurihat, Assam.

Memories associated with the bitter experiences of African slavery, especially the women slaves, have seen the pouring out of heart wrenching stories in the form of neo-slave narratives by African American women writers since the past many decades. But the contemporary black women writers tend to return to this dreaded phase of history in their works with the same impact of pain as experienced during slavery. The re-discovery of the untold stories of their slave ancestors was accompanied by a renewed interest in the authors to study the antebellum society where the actual incidents took place. The obsessive creation and re-creation of the experience of slavery in the works of the contemporary writers convey a deep rooted presence of the haunting memory of enslavement in the free American Society.

Race protest being the dominant surge of the black novelists, Gayl Jones contributed immensely to this impulse and she is credited with being the first writers of African American literary circle to focus on the topic of violence of sexism and racism from the perspective of a woman. Jones has very carefully depicted brutality and its effect on the African American women and the identity crisis suffered by them as a result of such dehumanization. She deals with the common experience of her race and she becomes the substitute voice for the members of the victimized group. Jones believes like what Audre Lorde says "I HAVE COME to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect" (Sister Outsider 40). Black women in America have always been undergoing oppression by racist slurs and also bear the added burden of sexist violence not only from the whites but also from their own black men who are themselves passing through the trauma of past violence. Audre Lorde says "We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred (Sister Outsider 151).

Gayl Jones is among one of those black women writers who tried to unearth the traumas endured by the survivors of slavery and solve the mystery of the peculiar master-slave relationship. In this way the descendants of those who chose to survive have created women of resistance in their writings. They boldly present the subaltern point of view and disclose the hidden and untold parts of slave stories which were thought to be shameful and left unsaid. But these stories of the ancestors were still haunting the African Americans like nightmares and the new generation of women writers gave the buried ancestors a voice to retell their part of the story as black voice. Audre Lorde remarks "And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives" (Sister Outsider 43).

Ursa, in Gayl Jones's first novel *Corregidora* (1975), is the protagonist, who represents the modern and free black American woman. But the appalling memories of her ancestors under slavery have a negative effect in her present life as an African American. The role of Ursa's matrilineage is vibrant centering round the theme of contradictory emotions of love and hate for the Portuguese sea man turned plantation owner Corregidora, who enslaved them. However, they may try, history connects them to their past to bear witness to the sufferings of slavery.

Corregidora is a bizarre, romantic story of four generations of black women, exposing their intimate family history of sexual exploitation by the slave holder who made money by engaging his slave women in prostitution. Jones presents a gripping portrait of the sexual and psychological abuse this family was subjected to. It is noteworthy that history has very little or no evidence to disclose about those black slave women like Ursa's family who were mistresses and breeders to their white masters. And literally no record of their motives, emotions or memories is given any substantial value by the historians. In the absence of any such record on papers, the women used oral transmission of their story to their children who unfortunately had to bear the legacy of trauma throughout their lives. Ursa is the voice through which the author retells the untold story of slavery and Jones's use of first person narrative is reminiscent of slave accounts of antebellum narratives.

Gayl Jones has brutally but honestly presented in *Corregidora* the most painful revelation, of what has occurred, and is occurring in the souls of black men and women. The poison of racism and sexism has permeated the most intimate spheres of twentieth century African American families resulting in brutalization of women and degradation of men. The psychological injury and its impact on the abused women's life fascinate Jones and through the trials of Ursa, the trauma is reenacted. Ursa is the strong and articulate African American blues singer, and is the descendant of women raped and enslaved by the old Corregidora in Brazil. Her ancestors consisting of her great grandmother, grandmother and, mother carried down the tradition of handing over of the memory of violence, incest, and humiliation of the barbaric slave master to the next generation as living testimonies. Jones explores the impact of memorizing and preserving such brutalities as evidence of victimization and its negative consequences on the later generation. Ursa, the fourth woman in line, while trying to carry forward the legacy of her ancestors suffers the life she has not lived but she is trapped in the memory of perpetual victimization of her foremothers. The image of old Corregidora is forcefully imprinted in the minds of the women so that he is not forgotten, and the hatred they bore for him was kept alive throughout the four generations. As Ursa says:

I've got a photograph of him. One Great Gram smuggled out, I guess, so we'd know who to hate. Tall, white hair, white beard, white mustache, a old man with a cane and one of his feet turned outward, not inward, but outward. Neck bent forward like he was raging at something that wasn't there. Mad Portuguese. I take it out every now and then so I won't forget what he looked like (*Corregidora* 10).

Ursa's great grandmother, addressed as Great Gram, was the first victim of sexual exploitation in slavery. She was taken "out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his [*Corregidora*] whorehouse while she was a child. She was to go out or he would bring the men in and the money they gave her she was to turn over to him" (*Corregidora* 10). Great Gram would repeat the story over and over again making it a point that Ursa should never forget the rapist,

Corregidora, who fathered his own daughter later, making the mother and daughter pay heavily in this incestual game. Corregidora was the father of Ursa's grandmother and her mother too, and when slavery was abolished in Brazil, the slave-holders burnt all papers making it as if there was no slavery. But Great Gram would not let this happen and found a way out to recount all the emotional injuries crippling her family of breeders. Great Gram believed that by counting the matrilineal Corregidora line, she would preserve the evidence of the atrocities committed by the old man as a "slave breeder and whoremonger" (Corregidora 8-9). It became necessary for Great Gram to pass on the legacy of the trauma of physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuses inflicted on them in the absence of any authentic document. Five year old little Ursa was forced to remember by Great Gram that she "got to leave evidence too" (Corregidora 14). Four generations of Corregidora women refused to let his memory die with time and converted the female body into a form of documentation.

Erasure of the dreadful crimes inflicted on the black women was a sin and Great Gram was determined not to let the culprits escape from the unwritten slave history. The burning of the papers is an event highlighted and emphasized in the novel and the Corregidora women carried forward the mode of counter-attacking the violence inflicted on them. Racial –sexual violation and the destruction of evidence shaped the retaliatory desires of the Corregidora women and finally becomes an obsession with them. Audre Lorde incorporates that "Every BLACK WOMAN in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed angers" (Sister Outside 145).

Great Gram's illusion to preserve evidence spells trauma for the victims of slavery and on its way destroys the path of reconciliation for her later generations. Ursa and her Mama, find it difficult to safeguard the love coming their way and are compelled to live an incomplete life. Their traumatized behaviors anger the men in their lives and leave them lonely with their encrypted feelings of being victimized like their foremothers. Ursa's father Martin is disgusted by his wife's attachment to her maternal history and feels cheated by her. The realization that he is being used to help her make generations of more Corregidora women makes him hate her.

Mutt, Ursa's first husband, is similarly deprived of the bliss of a peaceful and loving conjugal life. He is also critical of Ursa's ancestors as an obstruction; he finds it difficult to win his wife Ursa's love completely as at the back of her mind she was always a Corregidora woman. Ursa is the victim of consequences and laments her intense link with her ancestors more than her love for Mutt. Her second marriage with Tadpole too fails due to her obsession with her past ancestral link with slavery.

After the failure of her two marriages, Ursa realizes that female and male relationship in her family is conditioned by the inscribed memory of her foremothers represented by old Corregidora only. Her father Martin suffered the effects of loving a woman whose life was never her own but was born to carry forward the legacy and memories of other people's lives. Mutt too had to bear the same consequences like Martin by loving Ursa who was preoccupied with the Corregidora women's legacy. The men who married Ursa and Mama tried to fight against their predetermined roles, and labeled themselves as violent husbands and rapists. Martin beat Mama believing that a Corregidora woman can have a relationship with a man only in the form of a

prostitute and a client and throws her out of his house. Mutt too turns into a violent husband and throws his wife Ursa down the stairs killing her fetus and leaving her permanently sterile.

But after her hysterectomy, Great Gram's command to Ursa to make generations to keep alive the pain of dehumanization comes to an end. Ursa has to find an alternative way to define her and now it becomes necessary, apart from her being a Corregidora. Unlike her foremothers of three generations, who fulfilled their vows by making generations, Ursa finds a new path to divert her desires to fulfill the mandate through her blues singing. She uses her soulful singing to give voice to the innumerable experiences of humiliation and abuses of the enslaved spirits connecting her to her foremothers and the likes of them. She is released of the huge burden of ancestral violence inherited from old man Corregidora by performing the blues and thus moves beyond the cycle of abuse to a new woman with a voice by reclaiming her body and sensuality with dignity in post civil rights era.

Corregidora studies the predicaments of the twentieth century African Americans who triumph in releasing and connecting themselves at the same time from the grip of their ancestral history with conflicting emotions of love and hate, thereby suggesting the inevitable relationships they share in the process of healing and reconciliation.

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