



## Race, Slavery and Sexual abuse in "Gayl Jones novel Corregidora"

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African – American Literature, Racism, Slavery, Sexism, Corregidora

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**ABSTRACT** *Racial protest was the dominant impulse of the Black novelists who wrote during the thirties and the early forties. Gayl Jones has figured among the best of contemporary Afro – American writers. All of her work, it is assumed, deals with the common experience of "her race", and she becomes the spokes woman of "her people", a substitute voice for the members of the oppressed group, who have the same problems as she does. The writings of Gayl Jones has been traditionally received in this way. Like other Afro – American novelists Gayl Jones is customarily referred to as an "African – American novelists".*

*The present study analyses the selected work of Gayl Jones novel "Corregidora". James Baldwin says "Corregidora is the most brutally honest and painful revelation, of what has occurred, and is occurring in the souls of Black men and women". In her fiction Gayl Jones often portrays the slavery for twentieth – century African – American families where racism and sexism permeate the most intimate spheres of life, resulting in brutalization of women and degradation of men. The paper analyses about Race, Slavery and Sexual abuse in Gayl Jones "Corregidora".*

Black women in America being black female and poor have been victimized by racism, slavery and sexism, not only from the white world, but also from their own men. "The abuse of women and its psychological results fascinate Gayl Jones, who uses these recurring themes to magnify the absurdity and the obscurity of racism and sexism in everyday life" Black women writers (1950 - 1980): A critical Evaluation. Gayl Jones novels and short fictions invite the readers to explore the interior of caged personalities, men and women driven to extremes.

Gayl Jones creates worlds radically different from those of normal experience and of story telling convention. Though her narrators are close to the boundaries of slavery the experiences they record clearly that society acts out its own obsession often violently".

In her first novel, *corregidora*, she explores the psychological effects of sexual abuse and racism on a modern black women. Ursa *corregidora*, a blues singer from Kentucky, descends from a live of women who are the progeny, by incest, of a Portuguese slave holder named *corregidora* – the father of both Ursa's mother and grandmother. Gayl Jones purpose of writing *corregidora* is from reactions against the treatment black women had and she knows that life is too complex for blanket judgments and easy solutions. *Corregidora* is about the very sad complexity of one women life.

"*Corregidora*" is named after a Portuguese seaman who, become a Brazilian plantation owner, compels his female slaves to sleep with him and then with others, for money. The history of the "generations" descended from this white ancestor is interspersed in italics as the novels heroine Ursa, a blues singer in a Kentucky café, tells her own history (p.80).

There are many incidents in the novel like Ursa's, comes to a reconciliation with her first husband, Mutt by envisioning an ambivalent sexual relationship between her great – grandmother and the slave master *corregidora*. On the other hand, the layers of oppression that inform Ursa's present, and from which ura must emerge, go back to slavery's controlling images; they have a historical density. Collins, Patricia Hill argues that during slavery, "black women's sexuality could be reduced to gaining control over an objectified vagina that could then be commodify and sold"(2000:133).

In the context of slavery's patriarchal system, child bearing implies a definite marking or stamping for the black women. In migrations of the subject, Black women, writing and identity, Carole Boyce Davies argues that "the mark of motherhood inscribes the domination of men into women's bodies"(1994 : 137).

In her drama, poetry and especially in her 1975 novel *corregidora*, Jones has made an original contribution to contemporary narratives of slavery, by focusing on the inter subjective relations that taking about slave experiences can produce. The author Gayl Jones employs a form, she trace to Zora Neale Hurstons their Eyes were watching God, in which an ancestral narratives of slavery is " framed within a novel that dramatizes a modern version of it, "In which the grandmothers slave narrative" prefaces, fore shadowed, and provides the dramatic and revelatory pattern" for the grand daughters own life,(Rowell.42).

Although writing by women, particularly Afro – American women, has flourished in recent decades, it certainly has not flourished without a great struggle. For women writers, white or black, a predominate white male presence in American letters has left little space for an aesthetic or more specifically, for a black female one. Gayl Jones is particularly note worthy, for her novel *corregidora* dramatically lays bare the sort of obstacles faced by any black women comp led to voice her story particularly, through, when she has been seduced, silenced and subjugated.

In performing the blues, ura challenges the dominant racial formation and its inherent process of subjection inherited from the blues performance, then like the performance of history. Challenges the codes and categories through which one can understand the experience of the past and the politics of the present. The sexual and racial categories inherited from plantation cultural can be contested through the blues because they offer a productive culture formation. Like the family narratives to which the blues are so closely aligned throughout the novel *corregidora*.

Ursa's sterility and focusing her sexuality, that her womb creates a problem because she has been told by her mother and grandmother that without a womb she cannot function as a women. This logic is a heritage of slavery, which reduced

women to begin sex objects of exchange: Jones writes as through exploring the depths of her anger. The impulse that Gayl Jones to write *corregidora* obviously sprang from reactions against the treatment black women have had. *Corregidora*, is simply, about the awful complexity of one women life (p. 27).

*Corregidora* portrays a more diffused kind of gender oppression, one that corresponds to both black and white, middle class communities, and which has to with contemporary, commonly held views on female sexuality, as a symbol of male dominance. Yet this subtle oppression is made particularly intense because of Ursa, *corregidora* race: in *corregidora* merge the remnants of contemporary sexism together with the long history of domination and abuse that slavery exerted on the black female body and sexuality.

Collins attributes the black female's difficulties with agency and self definition to "systems of oppression that hold up distorted mirrors of a 'public image' through which black women learn to view ourselves" (2000 :166 ) Indeed, W.E.B. Du Bois was the first to theorize about the black mans double – consciousness, or his viewing himself through the external look of the white man, who sees him as racial and thus as America is subject to at least a double marginalization.

This novel tells about sexual hatred and also in the form of sexual warfare in many popular, ideological novels by women. The novelist avoids ideology, although her novel deals with racial and feminist issues. It is filled with sexual and spiritual pain hatred, love and desire wear the same face, and humor is blues bitter (p.85 ).

The racial, economic, legal and sexual exploitation by the white male and then its subsequent cover up , have been powerfully dramatized by Gayl Jones in the novel *corregidora*. The result of Gayl Jones efforts is a novel of great beauty and power regarding the creative processes of her story in every sense of the word. Ursa, then knows the extreme cost of a residence exercised through the kind of power a women can possess in a sexual Act. A slave owner may be vulnerable during an act of forced sex, but he is nevertheless empow-

ered by the social arrangements existing outside and supporting the plantation. The state not only permitted white slave master to rape the bodies of their African slaves, but they made black sexuality itself a spectacle in the punishment of slave resistance.

A great Gram noted, "What happened over on that other plantation "served as", a warning, cause they might want your pussy, but if you do anything to get back at them, it 'll be your life they be wonting, and then they make even that some kind of a sex show" (125). Here, sexuality is also a primary site of oppression because masters determined the quality and direction of their slaves desires.

Though, the blues most explicitly contest the racial formation that emerged out of slavery and gets rearticulated by those who continue to commodity black women's sexuality after the final scene in which ursa alludes to the ideal of palmers as a social space where black women and black men had positive, healthy relations, after both Mutt and Ursa re - enact but creatively deviate from an ancestral scene of enslavement, the two lovers "replace the ambiguity of language and the pain of violence with a direct exchange feeling"(116:4).

Finally, man – women relationship based on sexual ownership has not disappeared with the end of slavery: Ursa's abusive husband also calls her his pussy, and ursa remembers him asking me to let him see his pussy. Let me feel my pussy. It turns out then that in her marriage ursa is reduced to her vagina and her womb to the same extant to which her great grams sexuality was turned into product by *corregidora*, who fathered her daughter and her granddaughter.

Thus, throughout the novel, the theme of Ursa struggles Race, Slavery, and Sexual abuse are interrelated to overcome the emotional shock of her personal past. At the shocking and unforgettable close of the novel, the past and present coincide almost absolutely. The words that ursa uses to describe her mother could also apply to ursa herself: "It was as if their memory' the memory of all the *corregidora* women, was her own private memory, or almost as strong" (129).

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