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BLACK FEMINISM

Gayl Jones's Corregidora (1975): A Neo-Slave Blues Song



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ABSTRACT

The feminist theorists and critics agree with Simon de Beauvoir's opinion that "One is not born but becomes a woman." Virginia Woolf that observed woman is both inside and outside the patriarchal

library. Imaginatively she is of highest importance practically she is insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover, she is all but absent from history".

Research Paper

Angela Davis writes that the reality of black women in this country is shaped by the 'synergetic' relationship of race, sex, and class. During slavery they were workers first, women second and always black. From Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1853) the first novel by a black woman to the first black woman Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's *Beloved* black women characters ask either, in sotto voice or in strident voice "Ain't I a Woman" like Sojourner Truth, the black feminist activist. Sometimes they speak in metaphors: "de nigger woman is mule uh de world." (Zora Neale Hurston, 16). Claudia Tate comments that the dominant theme in Black Women's Fiction is the quest theme: a character's personal search for meaningful identity, and for self-sustaining dignity. Gayl Jones's fiction is conspicuously absent from Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists*, Susan Willis's *Specifying* and Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers's *Conjuring* as her novels do not conform the ideological aims of black feminist critical tradition against negative stereotype. Gayl Jones's first novel *Corregidora* (1975) like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* belongs to the neoslave narrative tradition. Toni Morrison (1975: 81) described *Corregidora* as a "story that thought the unthinkable", a radical break in fictional representations of black women: No novel about any Black Woman could ever be the same after this, [*Corregidora*] had changed the terms, the definitions of the whole enterprise. *Ursa Corregidora* is not possible, Neither is Gayl Jones. But they exist. *Corregidora* opens with an act of violence. When Mutt insists his wife *Corregiam Ursa* a blues singer to stop singing, an argument ensues. In a jealous rage he pushes his newly pregnant wife down, steps of the night club and the fall results. *Ursa* being hospitalized, loses her child and womb and operated hysterectomy. Now she can never fulfill the pledge made by the women in her family to make generations." The novel details *Ursa's* attempt to free herself from guilt imposed by her physical limitation and from resentment against her now-estranged husband.

Claudia Tate observes two dramas in *Corregidora*, "internal drama" dealing with the *Corregidora* legend and the "external drama" dealing with her husband Mutt. *Ursa* is singing blues in the night club or in a seedy restaurant. She is urban, worldly, northern and lives in black community in Kentucky. The novel takes place in 1940 but the tragedy began during slavery and lasted through three generations. *Corregidora*, a Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner, turned rapist, turned breeder of mulatto women, enslaved and exploited

Corregidora women in Brazil. Corregidora was a slavemonger who slept with his slaves, sired children by them and then slept with his children. He was a breeder who sent his women out to sleep with other men so that he would have mulatto children for market. According to the legend preserved by the family Corregidora fathered both Ursa's great-grandmother and her grandmother. Keeping alive this humiliating experience of incest and possession becomes the life purpose of these women and their descendants. Each generation produces the next primarily to protect against the destruction of the truth by those in power. Mutt, however, is not the only culprit, Ursa learns that she comes from generations of abused women and women abusers. Great-Gram was the slave and concubine of Corregidora, their child becomes his mistress and bore another woman, Ursa's mother. When "papers" were burned to deny slavery ever existed, that these women may not have ever existed, their sole defense is to make generations to preserve the family. Corregidora in Portuguese means "judicial magistrate." "By changing the gender designation, writes Melvil Dixon, Jones makes Ursa Corregidora, a female judge charged by the women in her family to "correct. the historical invisibility they have suffered, to give evidence to their abuse, and to make generations" as a defense against further annihilation. Ursa's name also comes from the man responsible for much of their pain, Portuguese coffee planter and whoremonger Corregidora in Brazil. Ursa must bring justice to bear upon his past exploitation of Blacks as a slave and women as whores and his present haunting contamination of her life." Grier, Cobbs, Bellingsley and others argue that the contemporary black matriarchy is the legacy of slavery. In Corregidora the matriarchy constituted by Ursa's great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother also has its origins in slavery. The matriarchs in Corregidora, too embody the force of past oppression, as their ideology remains locked within the framework of slavery. Most important is Tadpole McCormick, a male character, who points out that the Corregidora women's: procreation. That could also be slavebreeders way of thinking"(22). The story, coming out in monologues, Cludia Tate observes, "seep [s] from Ursa's consciousness in moments of psychological stress." Gloria Wade-Gayles comments that the story is a tale of perversity, a commentary on the sickness of the slave culture. From the age of eight Ursa hears the story of the Corregidora women, from Great Gram first and then from her mother, until it becomes an abiding part of her consciousness. Their past becomes her part and in a terrifying way, controls her present. For her Corregidora, as Tate comments is the symbolic progenitor of all evil. much like the serpent in the mythical Garden of Eden." The Corregidora women's experience of slavery is literally erased when the slaveowner burns all the written records. The women resist their

exclusion from official history by means of oral narrative. "We were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget" (9). Madhu Dubey points that as "making generations" the womb becomes the site of these women's political resistance (74). Corregidora is the symbol of evil to black women. He is an absolute unmitigated villain. The black women are bodies to be used and abused. Because of this history of oppression, Ursa is taught that she has a special mission in life. She must make generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious And that's what makes the verdict. (24) ...And that's what ma "Because when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the papers so it would be like they never had it." (9) In the absence of a written record, the Corregidora women believe that they must speak through their bodies in the form of producing children to whom they can pass on the story of Corregidora. Ursa has been fed the story of Corregidora from birth almost as a substitute for any other kind of nourishment: "I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk" (77). She sees the history of Corregidora's women as "days that were pages of hysteria" (59), and asks what's a life always spoken and only "spoken" (103). Ursa's mother's perpetuate control over their bodies in their resistance that "making generations" is the only mode of expression available to them, in their belief that they can speak with their bodies. They allow Corregidora to retain control over them. Ursa remembers her Great Gram's stories - always the same story with minor variations-repeated over and over and ponders: "It was as if the words were helping her that kept her anger." (11) As if it were only the words. The difference between the White women and the Black woman comes into focus in Brazilian slavery as Great Gram tells Ursa about Corregidora's wife's failure to produce her own "generations": "Naw, she couldn't do a damn thing. Naw, she didn't give him nothing but a little sick rabbit that didn't live but to be a day old - Naw, she couldn't do a damn thing" (23).

As Great Gram says, Corregidora had "lands, and slaves and things but he didn't hardly use nothing but the womens. Naw he wasn't the first that did it. There was plenty that did it" (23) In comparison of Brazilian slavery with the American one Carl Degler mentions that in Brazil slaves were used as prostitutes than as breeders. He points that many a slave owner made his living by selling the bodies of his female slaves. Angela Davis thinks that the rape of black women by white men during slavery can't be seen simply a cultural construction of white women protected from the male lust, "rather can be understood as a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression whose covert goal was to extinguish slave

women's will to resist and in the process demoralize their men". Mutt resents Corregidora's hold over Ursa, not because it keeps her locked in an oppressive past with no hope for liberation, but it is against his own possession of her. He complains, "Ain't ever took my name. You Corregidora's, ain't you ? You ain't my woman" (61). Mutt's almost pathological jealousy makes him think of Ursa as a sexual object. Mutt doesn't approve of her singing but in his perception of her performance as an open sexual invitation to the men in the audience that prompts to violence. Mutt is angry because he thinks Ursa to be his property and should be off limits to all men. He is listening to her songs, his perception of her as a kind of jezebel figure makes him assurance that she is inviting men into her body. Frustrated by Ursa's refusal to give up her work, Mulk vows to go to the club and auction her off: ""That's what I'm gon to do he said 'one de y' all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale (159). Mutt decides not to do this, not for Ursa but for his great grandfather and ex-slave who brought for his wife's freedom, only to have her "repossessed". Ursa mimics the language of Corregidora and Mutt and places her in this position: "May be it is just that a man can't stand to have a woman as hard as he is. If he couldn't support her money, he'd be wanting in spirit. And if I'd thrown Mutt Thomas down these stairs instead, and done away with the source of his sex, or inspiration, or whatever the hell it is for man, what would he feel now? (40-41)Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs ? What he would ask, what would I ask now - But it is your fault all my seeds are wounded for ever No seeds. Is that what snaps away my music, a harp string broken, gitar string, string of my banjo belly strain in my voice" (45-46). The Corregidora women tell Ursa that her center is her womb. This limbo even becomes more profound when she is no longer able to make "generations," Ursa's mother tells her experience to Ursa.: "Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn't want no man. Cause I wasn't looking for none. But it was like it knew it wanted you. It was like my whole body kenw it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and you'd be a girl." (114). Ursa's mother's use of 'it for her body suggests the economics of slavery. Hortense Spillers suggests that economic system defines the black slave as "chattel" on the same level as "livestock" or even household possessions. (Robinson: 1991: 159). Sally Robinson (1991: 159) comments: Slavery that produces the slave as object for the master's consumption. This is the experience of slavery described by Jones in Corregidora and the impasse in which the Corregidor women find themselves their inability to "transcend" slavish consciousness - might be explained by the fact that they have had to produce themselves as objects for consumption.

The problem for Ursa, as a blues singer is that she is barren because Mutt's mistreatment. She experiences guilt at being unable to pass on the as family, story to a daughter, Keith Byerman comments: Mutt seem to have succeeded where the slave owners failed: they could only destroy the record while Mutt can destroy the truth itself by effacing the future. (177) The tale attacks male domination which assaults female identity and integrity. As she can no longer make "generations" Ursa determines to rewrite the story of Corregidora's "coffee bean woman," Great Gram of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes" (54) "I'll make a fetus out Her fantasy of rubbing the grounds of coffee inside her eyes suggests her desire to see the world and history a new to subvert the hold Corregidora has over the construction of that history:

*"I wanted a song that would touch my life and theirs.
A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song.
A new world song.
A song branded with the new world" (59)*

Gayl Jones's poem Deep Song nas a direct connection with Corregidora:

*The blues calling my name
She is singing a deep song
She is singing a deep song
I am human.*

Her mother opposes her career as a blue singer from the beginning. The blues makes personnel statement of trouble. The performer is not only victim. In women's blues, especially the "classic" from by Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and others the lyrics are rich mixture of joy and sorrow. Ursa's insight comes with her awareness that her injury has the effect of deepening and improving her musical performance: cat Lawson points: "Your voice sounds a little strained that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. May be even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been thought move now" (44)

To Keith Byreman this beauty is depended by suffering. But more important her singing has acquired a power that it previously lacked:

"You got like callused hands. Strong hand but gentle underneath, strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain it hurt you and make you still want to listen."(96)

As Claudia Tate observes that it is her way of turning pain into pleasure and freeing herself psychologically from the tyranny of historical oppression. (Wade-Gayles: 1984: 173)

Mutt ironically freed Ursa from the pattern of mutual abuse implicit in the pledge itself, Ursa haunted by the relationship between Grand Gram and Corregidora learns that she was about to continue the oppressive matrilineage that held men and women captive in the need for generations in the manner preordained by her foremothers. Use thinks:

I realised for the first time I had what those women had. I'd always thought I was different. Their daughter but somehow different. May be less Corregidora, I don't know. But when I saw the picture, I knew I had it. Why my mother and my mother's mother before her had. The mulatto woman Great Gram was the coffee bean woman, but the rest of us But I am different now, I was thinking I had everything they had, except generations. I can't make generations. And even if I still had my womb even if the first baby had come - What would I have done then? Would I have kept it up ? Would I have been like her or them ? (60) "My great grandmother told my grand mama the part she lived through and what my grandmama didn't live through, and my grandmama told my mama hat they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we suppose to pass it down live that from generation to generation so we would never forget even though they'd buried everything happen" (9) like it didn't never Mutt was drawn to Ursa by the bewitching power of songs. Ursa also remembers: When I first saw Mutt I was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in to tunnel but it didn't seem like there was no end to the tunnel and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist? Then I sang about this bird woman, whose eyes were deep well. How she would take a man on a long journey, but never return him (147) Ursa divorces Mutt and as Tate comments she "seems to be left alone like all the Corregidora women before her. (Wade-Gayles: 1984: 173) For a short period she marries Tadpole whom she loves and who has helped her after the operation. At last she returns to Mutt after 22 years who has never given up seducing pleas for forgiveness, of messages of love and need. The emotional and physical bond between them is obviously strong. In the union with Mutt, Ursa thinks it should be like Great Gram Corregidora. The novel ends in the rhythm structure and tone of a blues stanza:

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he sa

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he sa

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he sa

"Then you don't want me."

"I don't want a kind of man that will hurt me neither."

The narrative is shaped by the three part incremental repetition of story line from Great-Gram, Gram to Mama, to Ursa. Faith Pulling writes that Corregidora ends on happy note (Dubey: 194 :34)

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