



## THE CREATIVE WORLD OF GAYL JONES: LOCATING THE WOMEN'S SENSIBILITY THROUGH FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE

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### ABSTRACT



A multi-faceted interpreter of human sensibility with pungent but accurate description of sexual and racial violence, Gayl Jones touched the pinnacle of popularity with her first novel *Corregidora* in 1975. The second novel *Eva's Man* that hit the stands the very next year in 1976 made her a house-hold name. After an interval of about twenty years, she brought out her third novel *The Healing* in 1998. It proved to be a great success, and attracted appreciative criticism. In quick succession, *Mosquito* (1999) appeared. Thereafter came out a series of fiction and non-fiction works which changed the American psyche with their articulation and factual delineation of sexual, domestic, and racial violence the African-American women are subjected to.

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### INTRODUCTION

In a short span, she became one of the most audible and innovative voices of African-American womanhood. Her fiction relates the tale of African-American women's struggle against sexual and domestic violence. In addition, she articulates the suffering of African-American people because of racial discrimination. But the most paramount aspect of her writing is the responses of her female characters that she delineates with utmost articulation and factual coating on the fictional happenings. It is a recognized fact that Gayl Jones is one of the foremost writers of African-American genesis who keeps sexual violence and its repercussions on the psyche of African-American women at the centre of her narrative. Other avenue she treads in is feminism and racial brutality. The most remarkable fact about her writing is the use of first person narrative as a powerful and penetrative

tool. By doing so she has succeeded in institutionalizing her characters. Moreover, she finds it convenient to infuse her own personal and dramatically violent experiences in the plots of her fiction. The reviews of her novels *The Healing* and *Mosquito* can be taken as the testimony of inclusion of the dramatic events of her own life in the plots of the novels. Another aspect that is most glaring is her characterization. Her female characters are strong, articulate, and extrovertly active. Jones herself admits that *Corregidora* and *The Healing* are centred around the brutality the men commit on women and the physical and psychological trauma the victims pass through. Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer, is the chief protagonist of *Corregidora*, Jones's first novel. She belongs to the lineage of the women raped and enslaved in the past. Her family descends from the ancestry enslaved by a Portuguese in Brazil. The tradition of enslavement,

physical and psychological agony caused by perpetually inflicted violence at the hands of the enslaving masters, and social ignominy that enslaved people faced did not die down with passing time, because Corregidora's ancestors wanted it to remain alive as the living and walking-talking document of past persecution. Jones strives to trace out the constraints through her act of exploration the victims faced while trying to escape the violence, incest, and brutality. Through the portrayal of Ursa Corregidora, Jones treads into the realm of perpetuated victimization. And she does not remain an objective narrator of the perceived episodes or the unattached observer of the imaginatively created reality of sexual, domestic and racial violence. Through her first person narrative, Jones enters into the personage of her characters. Therefore, when Ursa Corregidora tries to break the shackles of slavery and attempts to free herself from the bindings of condemned enslavement, it is not Ursa Corregidora but Gayl Jones herself who seemingly endeavours to cut all shackles of socio-economic discrimination. In her efforts when Ursa fails and is forced by circumstances to suffer from the impact of tortuous consequences, it seems to be the suffering of the writer herself. The intensity of feeling, the propensity to remain alive in the brute's cave, and solemn solicitude to carry on the message to the believably enlightened posterity presents an altogether different plateau on which her characters stand.

The next novel, *Eva's Man*, is no different. It too explores a similar theme. Not only this, but novels are also replete with similar themes. In fact, sexual, domestic, and racial violence is the recurring theme in almost all the writings of Gayl Jones. Eva Canada is the chief protagonist of the novel. At times, she goes on talking furiously and incoherently. The entire novel is replete with disorderly and inconsistent murmurings of Eva Canada. The circumstances have pushed her into psychiatric hospital. A charge of poisoning and dismembering of her lover is levelled against her, and it is believed that she has committed the crime due to the ailment of nervous breakdown or psychological disbalance. Gayl Jones deliberates upon the issue of sexual and racial violence through

her interpretation of the conversation that the inmates of the hospital including Eva make among themselves. Jones exhibits her interest in debating the responses made by the inmates to the issue of sexual and racial violence. The conversation is mostly based on the personal experiences of the inmates. Unordered and inconsistent conversations are very ordered and consistent in locating the feminine sensibility that has been outraged and dislocated for ages.

Woman's perspective is the main catch-area of Gayl Jones in his next publication which is a collection of short stories. The collection, *White Rat*, hit the stands in 1977. Another collection of poems came out in 1980s. In all these stories and poems, Jones discusses and delineates diverse points of view pertaining to sexism and racism that a woman visualizes. Everything that Jones portrays is dark and distressing. Free and fare noise that Jones has created presents a reality that is agonising, traumatic, and disgusting at times to a sensible world of humanity. The havoc created by the insensitive perpetrators of sexual and racial crimes against the hapless mass of femininity is disarming, and it outrages the very sensitivity of a thinking mind. Everything is from the perspective of a woman. How a woman looks at the world around and what type of reality she perceives amidst the colourful dream of youth and adolescence carves out a potential negotiator of truth and veracity from within the creator's innerness. Jones has looked at the women's experiences from multiple angles and succeeded in opening up a vista, erecting a canopy, and unfurling an atmosphere of freshness to the feminine experiences that had been suffering in the smothering air of sexual violence and racial discrimination.

Again, her next novel, *Mosquito*, rests on an altogether different plateau. The main protagonist of the novel is a truck driver. The protagonist, Sojourner Johnson, is indulged in illegal human trafficking. He smuggles illegal immigrant to the desired destination. The endurable relationship that he has with the humane philosopher, Ray presents a candid area to Gayl Jones which she explores with brilliant articulation and expert craftsmanship. It is a heartening fact about Jones's personality as a writer

that her work got to get appreciative criticism from the very first day after her first novel hit the stands. She attracted public notice and incredible appreciation with her first novel. John Updike and James Baldwin considered her novels as path-breaking. Toni Morrison, as has been noted earlier, was all praise for her. Researchers and scholars put her fiction in a unique category of creative writing. They considered her novels as the first of their kind because they had explored the theme of violence of sexism and racism from the perspective of a woman's point of view. Her explicit delineation of racial brutality, sexual offence against African-American women, and domestic violence, and the impact of all this cruelty on the physical and psychological personage of the African-American femininity creates an exclusively distinct aura around Jones. She gets the reputation being one of the loudest voices against such violence. She succeeds in carving a niche for herself which no one else could do before her in the past.

Her style to present the psyche of the slave-victim becomes much more authentic when Jones enunciates the eventful description through first person narrative. By doing so, Jones erects a canopy under which, believes the reader, lie truth and reality that pertains to human suffering. Her use of vernacular language and localised speech patterns makes the tale more pathetic, more, authentic, and more characteristic. Of course, there are many who get offended by excessive description of violence and criminal brutality. But, there is no denying the fact that whatever she attempts to say through her fiction is very close to first person experience. There is another objection raised against her. It is said that she does not conform to the objectives of the Black Aesthetic Movement. Moreover, she is criticised for her plots that draw a line between African-American men and women. And by drawing such line separating African-American men and women, she diverts the attention of the readers from the larger issue, racism, which infects the black community more deeply. However, her skill to portray the characters with utmost care and sensibility, and her interest in the contemporary events earn her universal admiration. In this regard, the comment of Jill Nelson that "Jones's ability to create bizarre yet

believable characters is magical, requiring a subtle act of faith between writer and reader" is quite pertinent.

It is a well-known fact that the American penal system is biased against the women prisoners. Female culprits are made to suffer the psycho-sexual agony during their incarceration more often than their male counterparts. And condition beyond the jail yard is no different. There also the women are subjected to inhuman treatment. Many writers with intellect to locate the female agony create narrative of factuality, and Gayl Jones falls within the bracket of such narrators. Whenever Gayl Jones finds the traces of women's agony and its impact on her psyche, she grabs the factual truth and weaves her narrative. It is because Jones gets impressed by the event, gets sensitised by the victim's experience, and gets herself in the loop of those who are subjected to such pain with similar enormity. Jerry W. Ward Jr. (1984) writes:

The abuse of women and its psychological results fascinate Gayl Jones, who uses these recurring themes to magnify the absurdity and the obscenity of racism and sexism in everyday life. Her novels and short fictions invite readers to explore the interiors of the caged personalities, men and women driven to extremes. Her intentions seem less analytic than synthetic, the strategies of her fictions themselves being indices of contemporary disorder as norm rather than deviation. Throughout Jones's fictions, prisons and asylums function as settings for problematic narratives and as clues for the interpretation of outsidership. In the very act of concretizing these fictions as aesthetic objects, readers find themselves caught. The pleasure of experiencing such irony, and of gradually coming to know how accurately it confirms our habitation of an invisible penal colony, is justification for attending to Gayl Jones's achievement.

Structures of Jones's *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man* are so unpredictable and taxing that an ordinary reader finds it extremely difficult to relate himself with the intention Jones has presented the entire text with. The short fiction *White Rat* bears the similar stamp.

The entire narrative confounds the reader, and he wanders between the lines to construct the intended meaning. Jones takes the readers into the realms of uprisen plateau where he finds himself alien among the natives. To be at home with the presented environment, the reader needs cultivated intelligence and some extra information available in the related texts. Moreover, the literary competence that an inspired possesses is the other prerequisite. That is the reason why a reader finds himself seduced into the narrative while experiencing the feel of the characters but failing in evaluating the intensity of heat and passion contained therein. Left alone, the reader finds himself asking unusual questions, and trying to trace out the answers within the constructed text. The reader begins to think while remaining in the fictitious state of existence. This thinking in fiction leads the reader to the state of the psychological experience the protagonists of the fiction are narrated to be having. The reader while passing through a strange phase of mental experience finds it difficult to differentiate between the texts created by a male writer and by a female writer, although he senses a difference between the qualitative genuineness of the two texts.

Such difficulty is a natural experience of the readers when they strive to relate themselves to not only the fiction of Gayl Jones, but to the entire modern fiction. However, it makes the readers to feel the heat of the verbosity and its captivating plot which is the trade mark of modern fiction. Modern fiction, in fact, has the power to transform the very personality of the reader into a distant race that his being human makes him believe, provided he allows himself to enter into the personage of the characters the fiction portrays. And Gayl Jones's fiction is in no way different. Every reader finds himself not so immune to the captivating impact of her fictions.

Through the course of reading a fiction, if the reader begins to think, it means he is indulged in digesting the verbal and non-verbal symbols the author has used in his/her fiction. And if the reader claims that he is thinking in fiction, it means he considers fiction as something associated with his own existence. It can be understood through an

example. While carving out the desired faces and expressions from within stone, metal, plastic, clay, wood, or any other material, the sculptor does not think in material, but he thinks in vacuity, in space and in the probability of distributing the faces and expressions lying hanging in the air in front of him. Similarly, the creative artist whether writer or poet does think in words he uses, but in the ideas he intends to present in words. Jerry W. Ward Jr. (1984) writes:

Lexical items are servants to configurations of action, feeling, event, situation, visions. The sculptor's aim is the realization of spatial concepts in the physical world. The writer attempts to make temporal abstractions derived from human behaviors comprehensible in a text. Fictive configurations, like stone, are givens. The determining process of thinking in fiction elaborates what we assume to be true about human beings and their environment on a symbolic level. Thinking in fiction is at the very core of inter-textuality, for the writer is using previous "texts" of human action to fable yet another text. The primal motive of modern fiction is not to conceal this technique; on the contrary, the technique is left so undisguised as to implicate the reader.

As Ward opines, the text of the fiction propels the reader into the creative process, and makes him imitate the thinking of the writer. The thinking of the writer begins to flow as a liquid does. This thinking liquid, in due course of time, gets frozen in the form a verbal structure and becomes visible to the reader. While reading, the reader begins to flow with the thinking fluid recreated by the text. Thus, the writer's thinking becomes the reader's thinking, and the reader becomes an inseparable part of the entire creation and the created text. As the frozen thinking fluid begins to get liquefied, the reader begins to find himself associated with the characters. The reader enters into the personality of the characters through the recreated text. The reader, through his perception, creates an implied narrator, who is an imagined personality and may be someone different from the writer. It seems quite

strange, but the reader allows a voice, physically absent, to speak to him. The pleasure or discomfort that the act of reading provides to the reader makes him think about the insights he receives from the text. Thus, a secondary thinking in fiction is occasioned which is caused by the reader's mind and the cultivated intelligence he gains from the text.

However, during the entire journey undertaken by the reader, intelligences within the narrative act as the chief agents, because the reader thinks perpetually along with the characters that emanate from body of the text. The proposition that the characters think does not require any pre-assumption or pre-conception. It is obvious from the discussion made about the fictions, and in the analytical interpretations made by the scholars about a literary art. In fact, reader is permitted to go into a contract with the literary narrative and the content lying therein. And, in the contract between the reader and the narrative, religious differences lying between the reader and the characters do not have any power of nuisance. Reader may be reading *Odysseus*, *Sula*, *Bigger Thomas*, or *Teacake*, he is possessed with the sense that the characters are emanating from the text, and standing before him in flesh and with intelligence. In other words, the reader pretends to see the characters in flesh and blood emanating from the words he reads. And it is this pretension of the reader that makes the characters potent enough to think rationally according to the situation they are in, and act with all the strength they have in the given situation. The inferences that the reader draws depends upon the process of development the characters go through, and quantified qualitatively by the enunciation made in the narrative and by the conversation the characters get involved in. These traits by which the reader draws his judgments are, in fact, submerged in the sea of thought that he explores. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* can be taken as examples. In both the novels, mental operations are the essential preparedness to comprehend the narrative. The reader will have to understand through his intellectual deliberation as to why the Bunden family and Bloom, Stephen, and Molly meditate and execute their thoughts as they

do. The reader has to rely on the thinking ability of the characters, and he has to walk the thought of the characters. He has to align himself with the thought and execution of the characters of the novel, for a certain duration he will have to come out of his own persona, and will have to enter into the person of the characters the writer has portrayed for reader's perusal and comprehension (Hans Robert Jauss, 1974, p. 287). The reader will have to pass through the state of great puzzle as he would find himself torn between his own reality and the reality of the characters he tries to comprehend.

Frank Kermode (1972) opines that modern readers have ceased to assume "that a novel must be concerned with the authentic representation of character and milieu, and with social and ethical systems that transcend it ..." It is probably well known to the modern writers that there is no collective tradition to accept accurate definition of authenticity or apt representation. It is an accepted proposition that all systems are random, and authenticity is subjective consideration of the individual's mind. In a fiction also, the reader relates the authenticity with the incorporating efficiency of the mind, which works as the forming agent. As refined and consciously much reader, we relate more with consciousness than we do with the characters. Modern readers are self-conscious, and they pretend that the ideas framed in the narrative of the fiction are important only as long as they are useful in unlocking the openings of the prison cell that has kept the reality incarcerated. The narrative of Gayl Jones's fiction provides relevant opportunity to such belief, because she constitutes a text that speaks not an ounce more than the factual existence.

Jones's novels *Corregidora*, *Eva's Man*, and the collection of short stories *White Rat* seem, as Clarence Major (1976) opines, "to resolve the artificial representation problem of the realistic tradition and to re-establish a nonlinear view of the world or at least a view that is not confined to the dogma of a particular identity and its ideology," In addition, they appear to be promoting empathy for the characters who seem to satisfy their ego in a very strange way. The experience of the reader while thinking with the Black women suffering from

the psychological and physical trauma caused by racism and sexism, and also thinking about their dwindling fortunes is very unusual. He finds the thinking on both fronts quite tortuous, as if he receives battering on both counts. However, the reader finds himself only in a waste land produced as the outcome of others' actions. It is a fact that thinking gives shape to personal and public identity. And in this thinking, men and women are equal participants. In the on-going chapter, the scholar would like to concentrate on the novels and short stories, which are considered to be off-beat writings of Gayl Jones. And the first and the foremost is the collection *White Rat*. It is a collection of some very phenomenal short stories. Two of the stories deserve special mention. These stories present a situation that propels the reader into state of thinking with the characters.

In the story, "White Rat", Rat is the self-proclaimed "white-looking nigger". He is confined to Kentucky hill country, and his thinking can not transcend the Black faith, and he trusts the veracity of the popular stories related to the country-folks. His thoughts fail to cross the limits of the racial confinement. Even the dreams and imaginations revolve around the deep-rooted Black traditions. Rat is tied with the traditional belief pertaining to the celibacy of the cathedral priests. He believes that God retributes the priests who break the rules framed by the ecclesiastical authorities for the priests to follow. The punishment meted out to the priests becomes more severe if the sin pertains to celibacy. Moreover, God's curse on the sinning priest depends upon the color of his skin, believes Rat. As he believes, if the priest is Black, God curses him to be the father of a club-footed child. And if the priest is white, his child would be cursed to be Black. Rat is overwhelmed by the history-coated fiction of the African-Caucasian mulatto. He looks at his wife as "the yellow woman with chicken-scratch hair and his son as the club-footed little white rabbit." Because of his ill-imagined belief, the domestic peace is ruined. The reader is also overwhelmed by the first person narrative of Rat, and he begins to think about "white nigger" talking about other "niggers". While doing so, the reader falls in the trap of complexity that the prison-house

of language has created. Jerry W. Ward Jr. (1984, p. 250) writes, "Just as Rat's acceptance of fictions confines him to a narrow social role, a failure to recognize the consequences of his language would make us as ignorant as he is. "White Rat" is a clever game of semantics, a net to catch the reader not attuned to how the codes of fiction operate in literature and in life."

In her story "The Return: A Fantasy", Gayl Jones attempts to warn the reader that there is strong possibility for him/her to be trapped by the concluding outcome of the fiction even if he/she continues to remain ultra careful about the canons of literary analysis. The fictitious tales of Kafka are very much digestible, and they can be digested with alarming results. Stephen gives an account of the strange personality of Joseph Corey, Dora's husband, and tries to observe the effect of his saying on his sister, Dora.

He's made himself both the doctor and the patient, the curer and the ill. He has made himself the priest figure, working his own magic (*White Rat*, p. 132).

Before his marriage with Dora, Joseph remarks about the frailty of man's nature. It is not clear whether he refers to Gregor or Kafka or both, but his comment reveals the truth of human behaviour in general. And the reader begins to think with the character aligning himself with the narrative:

"The man became a bug", he said. "Men can become bugs. There's no *as if*. You don't conduct your life as if you were Christ. You become Christ" (*White Rat*, p. 105).

The entire story that revolves around the conduct, inter-personal relation, and individual sensibility of the trio Dora, Stephen, and Joseph, endeavours to present a narrative of Joseph's systematic slide into the Kafkaesque realms of irreality. In his descent, Joseph ultimately becomes a character of Kafka's imaginative world. The structures of the canvas of the short fictions which cover the pages of the collection through the tales- "White Rat", "The Return: A Fantasy", "The Women", "Jevata", "The Coke Factory", and "The Roundhouse", and their language remain partly explored. They come with elaborate exhibitional

potential in Jones's novels *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*.

A blues singer, in *Corregidora*, narrates the events that occurred in her twenty-two years life between twenty-five and forty-seven years of age. Ursa Corregidora, the narrator, relates her tale beginning with the break-up of her first marriage, and concludes with the event relating a sexual act which brought the two, Ursa and her first husband to the brink of reconciliation and reunion. Though it looks strange, yet there is nothing unusual in the narrative particularly when the beginning and the end of the description coincide with the sexual activity of the the female protagonist. In addition, the novel incorporates within its framework the sexual incompetence, hollowness of existence, indulgence in lesbian encounters, and other sex-related conducts. The protagonist has altogether different notion of sex. She takes her involvement in the sexual acts as duty rather than an option. Her obsession with sex and her relation with others find its genesis in her belief that procreation is an essential part of her existence.

In the background of Ursa's thinking faculties, the sayings of her great-grandmother find their echo. And Ursa does not possess the ability to turn a deaf ear to the prominently audible echo. Her narrative continues to have the bearing of her great-grandmother's words which always guide her life from the depth of her subconscious innerness:

...The important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And That's what makes the evidence. And That's what makes the verdict (p. 22).

Ursa's great-grandmother had internalized the fact that it was in the destiny of the slave-woman to accept her duty to procreate. She believed that the only duty of a woman having root in the slave family is to leave children as evidence against their probable and vaguely defined fathers, the masters of the slaves, who are always white people descended from the European blood. Ursa is born with this notion about the duty of a slave woman. She shackled with the faith in surrendering to the primitive belief. And the very belief that Black woman exists merely to be treated with ravaging

cruelty that leaves permanent scar on her physical and psychological personage draws a boundary within which the Black woman could grow and settle. Ursa never conceives to transcend the set limits for her existence. She never imagines to go beyond the drawn boundaries. She never thinks of revolting against the pre-determined fate, and can not dream of an alternative way of living in the slave vicinity. She has accepted the rules and regulations framed by those who live beyond her own person and try to control her physical behaviour. She is the owner of an arrested personality that leads an enslaved life, and it is so because the person within the frame of flesh and blood does not possess the zeal to revolt and seek an alternative for more meaningful existence. The values she received during her process of growing up have instructed her to accept the life of received sexuality without any resistance. Naturally, the meek surrender casts devastating impact on her psyche, but she has learnt to live with sustained submissiveness.

Whereas Ursa thinks as if her soul is permeated with enslaved consciousness, protagonist's thinking in *Eva's Man* relates the tale of paralysed consciousness. The protagonist in *Eva's Man* is intellectually so paralysed that he/she fails to take any decision even if it is not so complicated a situation. Eva, when brought in the psychiatric prison, is in her early forties. She is still in a sound mental condition, and tries to recall the events that led her to a crime unexpected and, to some extent, unprecedented. Eva lacks the proactive courage to meet the situation with due rationale. She is driven by the unguided predilection of accepting fantasy for reality. The events that have driven her course of action throughout are nothing but unguided missiles. The sexual encounters she experienced during her proactive days have cast dehumanizing effect on her person, although she remains aloof to the degrading impact that makes her hollow from within. It is true that all the sexual encounters are haphazard but inter-linked. However, the system under which the experiences drive her ahead does not fill her heart with energizing juice of life, nor does it rejuvenate her thinking faculties so as to fill them with creative attitude. Instead, all the experiences she earns put pressure on her, and she

suffers from volatility of temporary insanity. It is beyond comprehension of a simple mind as to what drove her to kill Davis Carter when she had spent five days in giving company to him in his hotel sharing the room and the emotion as well. Reader suspects the veracity of Eva's version, and she knows it well that narrative is always under suspicion. She knows it that any explanation in self-defence earns veracity if it is punctuated by truth and truth alone. This is the reason why she says:

Sometimes they think I'm lying to them, though. I tell them it ain't me lying. It's memory lying. I don't believe that, because the past is still as hard on me as the present, but I tell them that anyway (p. 5).

Readers and the psychiatrists believe that Eva does speak truth and that she hides some truths. But Eva knows it that man can articulate his words to deceive others, and he can choose what words he should use to defend his action. But the subconscious mind does not allow anyone to manoeuvre the thoughts hidden in the memory. They keep pricking the innerness of the individuals. Language is only the means to externalize the articulated and manipulated ideas. Reality remains away from the realms of language. Words present merely the thoughts that are allowed to be visual after due articulation. Woman is the most lovable life on earth, because Eva understands the meaning of visually externalized thinking more competently. The society that keeps Eva chained with traditional values and ways of interactive humanity does not make her adept in understanding the linguistic codes, but she has intellect enough to conceptualise the sensual recordings.

Ursa, the blues singer, does not have much liberty to opt for a career of her own choice, but with her sheer will and a little amount of freedom that is granted to her even in that taxing situation, she chooses a career of her liking. The socio-economic condition she lives in is certainly not conducive to the exercise of such option. The neighbourhood looks at such exercise of free will as collaborative connivance the chooser and the masters of slaves are supposed to have volunteered in. In the most agonizing situation and when she finds herself deeply perturbed, her consciousness

gets awakened by the relationship that exists between the slave and the master. For instance, her subconscious becomes greatly proactive when she is hospitalised during her operation. At the time of her discussion with her husband and others about her hyphenated ancestry, she again becomes conscious of her true legacy. When she believes that sexual procreation is nothing but a physical activity and when she lives alone as a spinster without the company of a male partner, she realises that she is tied with her mixed ancestry. Her mind is deep-rooted in her past. The preconceptions that have filled the entire space of her thinking faculty punctuate her every experience, and color it with the enslaved past. To her subconscious mind, man is nothing but a mere stud or hunk. To her pre-owned conceptuality, a husband is merely a stud who enjoys the right to have physical intercourse with the woman he owns. Call her wife or by any other, more refined name, but she is merely an object to receive the sperm. To Ursa, woman is a merely a harlot, who produces evidence of her indulgence in physical intercourse with a hunk. If woman is a wife, she is owned for sexual procreation. She can never be owner. She is merely the object of pleasure for others. She is not allowed to use others as the object of her pleasure. Ursa has formulated a perspective, and looks at the entire man-woman relationship from that perspective. From her perspective, the indulgence of men and women in any relationship, defined or undefined, pertains to lust and emotional torture. Even inter-personal love leads to perversion expressed. Ursa believes that human emotions are greatly confined, limited, and run parallel to the insignificantly existing mutuality between the master and the slave. And the self is nothing but the victim of time. It is also enslaved by the mode of expression, the language, which provides physicality to the thoughts that emanate from the human mind.

Eva draws out references from the events that take place in her life to define the relationship that the self develops and maintains with the others. Even in her adolescence, she found the conversation between her mother and Miss Billie about the attractiveness and killing instinct of woman's beauty quite delightful. She is fascinated to learn from their



talk that woman is a honey-bee who can “kill” a man sensuously if he falls within the loop of her aura. She grows up with the ideas about sex learnt from the hawkers and street-dwellers. She is brought by a mother who does not hesitate in having extra-marital relation with a musician. To her misfortune, there were no individuals, no family values, or no cultural heritage to infuse a sense of positive feelings in her creative faculties in her formative days about human sensibility and love for dignified existence. Eva is, therefore, devoid of an exact and complete idea about a wholesome personality. To her, woman is merely a personage to respond to the actions made by the man or the environment. Woman is merely a respondent, and not the action maker. Such thinking is not uncommon, particularly among those who believe in the absurdity of any endeavour to become a sensible human being. Such people surrender their body and emotions to the environment. They believe only in the meaninglessness of human life. Therefore, such people make use of their freedom in following the biological impulses and misconceived notions of togetherness in dangerous way. Since they have fictitious notions of society and individuals, they can easily be convinced that they are merely detritus; they are plump of ice and they are destined to melt into nothingness whether they like it or not. And they internalize the false and ill-taught notion so acutely that they begin to behave as the residual personality. Eva is a person of this kind. She has low perception of her own person. She underestimates herself, and acquiesces to be a much devalued, much disgraced, and much demeaned individual. The vocabulary she uses to delineate her sexual experiences implicitly includes the words that express her notion of womanhood. Her description of sexual encounters is very much expressive of her mind that visualizes woman as a demeaned format of blood and bread. The correlatives man/owl, orgasm/river, power/the Medusa she uses in her description reveal her low perception of entire womanhood.

Ursa and Eva and the characters that have crowded the entire gamut of short fiction of Gayl Jones offer a perspective to the reader and as the reader begins to think in and with the perspectives

offered, he/she finds that the confusion that had mired his/her ways in foggy opaqueness begins to disappear. Deep he/she goes in the plot with the thinking of the fiction, clarity welcomes him/her. Gayl Jones, particularly in her novels, creates a fictive thought that pushes human worth and dignity into a bottomless chasm of darkness. In addition, she weaves a cobweb that smothers the failed human beings to their ruin. Jerry W. Ward (1984) writes:

Focusing on the sexual aspects of self, minimizing other features of being-in-the-world, the narratives of Ursa Corregidora and Eva Medina Canada intensify the reader’s sense of the terror in fictions, and in unqualified acceptance of the fictions in which we costume social norms. Tricky, exotic, grotesquely aesthetic, thoroughly modern, Gayl Jones’s fictions offer momentary escape from truble, the trouble and problem of what is commonplace. On the other hand, the very fictionality of her fiction reimmerses us in man’s struggle with the greatest demon in his mind: language (p.252).

Verbal delineations in a fiction endeavour to dissect the human personality from a certain, well-defined perspective and explain the responses of the personality in a given situation. And the thinking in the fiction is nothing but accepting or rejecting the rationale the word configurations put forth. It is “the shared activity of author, text, and reader”. The reader is offered tangential and fragmental suggestiveness to pick up with the language of the fiction. The instructions that are available to the reader induce him to the represented state. Obviously, the characters of the fiction have better understanding of the fiction’s language than the reader who walks ahead under the restricted guidelines provided by the author. In fact, thinking in the fiction is something like the performer and the performing art, conjugation of artist and the art. It is natural observation that there are qualitative differences between the fictions created by male and female writers, and it is because the fictions are gender-centric and they need gender-reading.

If we go deep into our thinking, we find that the communal traditions and social norms by which we analyse the responses of the characters are settled in the language and in the consciousness of the characters. The narrative strategy that Gayl Jones adopts induces us to accept the thinking of her fiction, and attempts to make us conform to the thinking of the characters. Wolfgang Iser's observations that pertain to the narrative strategies of the author and his relative position are quite apt:

Even the narrator, despite his apparent position of superiority over the characters, deprives us of the guidance we might expect by neutralizing and even contradicting his own evaluations. This denial of orientation can only be offset by attitudes the reader may adopt towards the events in the text, which will spring not so much from the structure of the perspectives but from the disposition of the reader himself. The stimulation of these attitudes, and the incorporation of them into the structure of theme and horizon, is what characterizes the echelon arrangement of perspectives in novelists ranging from Thackeray to Joyce (Iser, 1978, p. 117)

With all said and done, it can be opined that Gayl Jones's fiction is a criticism of social oppression, and a communicative insinuation. Her textuality is nothing but the destroying of ever-existing barriers between the text and the reader, between the active and passive or echoed speech. Sometimes she appears to be standing alone in the African-American literary history with her vulgarised simplicity. Her fiction, undoubtedly, explores the multi-dimensionality of the infinite mind. Her first person narrative takes the reader all along the journey into the realms of human behaviour.

*Song for Anninho*, a long poem of Gayl Jones, is again a narrative of the spiritual journey of Almeyda. It is again a first person narrative, in which we hear the voice of the chief protagonist, Almeyda. The narrative reveals the theme as well as the character. Almeyda's narrative is a tale of courage, non-violent way of emancipation, and persevered resilience against great suffering. She explores the inhuman

condition in which the Slaveholders of Brazil kept their slaves. She tells us about the Palmares settlement of African slaves who liberated themselves from the clutches of the slaves-owners of Brazil in 1690s. She describes the untold bravery of the freed Africans who endeavoured hard to emancipate their brothers whose timidity prevented them from getting free from the state of slavery. The description emphasizes the point of non-violent ways of escaping from oppressive hands. Almeyda was herself liberated from slavery and brought to Palmares by her compatriots. However, her happy moments ends very soon when Jorge Velho, a wealthy Portuguese farmer, attacks the inhabitants of Palmares settlement, and enslaves most of them again. Other inhabitants who ran away from Velho's eyes were forced by circumstances to live in different parts of the hilly forests of Brazil. Anyway, the Palmares settlement was dismantled, and the inhabitants were either enslaved or scattered in the dense forests. Almeyda and her lover Anninho were among the fortunate few who escaped the onslaught of Jorge Velho. But they decide to come back to Palmares and work for the good of the left-out settlers over there. Anninho thinks, by living in the Palmares settlement, he could be of some help to the poor settlers. *Song for Anninho* uses the personal and ethnic history while narrating the conjugal relationship between Almeyda and Anninho and their subsequent separation as the war with the soldiers of Vello's forces is going on. The narrative is quite suggestive of the fact that the destiny of the Palmares is tied with that of Almeyda and Anninho. Even the physical and mental state of Almeyda and Anninho is indicative of the socio-economic state of the community. After escaping from the sudden attack of Vello's regiment, Almeyda and Anninho had been wandering through the forests. Unfortunately, they encounter Portuguese soldiers who charged upon them. In a brutal attack, the soldiers cut off Almeyda's breasts and throw them in the river. When she comes back to her senses, she finds herself in the house of Zibatra, a stranger for her. To her utter sock, she finds Anninho nowhere around her. Zibrata lives in the hills, and she is known as a "wizard woman". The poem deliberates upon Almeyda's recuperation and

her search for Anninho. The enquiry that Almeyda makes with Zibrata and her response to the queries set the tone of the poem

Did you see Anninho  
when you found me?  
"No. Only the globes of your breasts  
floating in the river.  
I wrapped them decently and hid them.  
The mud on the riverbank  
had stopped the bleeding.  
I put you in a blanket and  
brought you here...  
I cannot find him for you.  
It is you who must make the discovery"  
(p.11)

With the application of herbal medicine on Almeyda's wounded breasts, she begins to move slowly back to normalcy. Her memory begins to open up, and she begins to recall the past events that led her to such state of extreme tribulations. The wizard woman plays mother's role for her. Almeyda re-creates the entire events and weaves about the connective thread. She recalls her genesis and the genesis of her community. She conceives a personified figure of someone who she loved. Gradually, the entire frame of Anninho's personage is created by her, and she recalls her love for Anninho. Gayl Jones uses the event of cutting off of Almeyda's breasts in a symbolic perspective. Her cut-off breasts symbolize her love for Anninho and her community. Like her breasts, her relationship with Anninho has also been cut off, and her community is wounded. Separation from Anninho and the community is as painful as the cutting off of her globes. Moreover, the event provides a dramatic situation which creates the possibility of re-union with Anninho, healing of the wounds caused by community's uprooting and re-union with the community. It will ultimately be the possibility of re-birth of the Palmares settlement. Zibrata is not a witch. She is merely a wizard woman. She has the ability to guide Almeyda in her search for Anninho and the community. But, Zibrata asks Almeyda to try on her own to find her relationship and her people. Thus, the poem the narrative Almeyda's seeking for her love. The physical wounds inflicted on Almeyda, undoubtedly, makes her immobilized, but her

spiritual strength takes her to higher level of existence. Her emotional outreach creates a sequence of meditated thoughts. In her imagination, she flies high in the space and time, and composes a poem of multiple dimensions. The perspective is feminist. The emotional journey is intriguing. The spiritual journey that Almeyda undertakes appears to be someone's physical journey to escape from all emotional angst and anxieties. Her imaginative flights take the reader beyond the limits of temporality, transience, and temporariness. Her imaginative fight takes her away from the mortal existence, into the realms of life beyond death. Zibrata does not participate in Almeyda's efforts of seeking. She merely provokes her through varied questions. Whenever Almeyda seems to waver or appears to be hesitant with blurred vision, Zibrata comes forward to provide her a hand of encouragement.

Section three of the poem is substantially metaphysical in tone and texture. It deliberates upon various layers of human experience. It deals with the experiences that a human being gets through his five senses. In addition, it also deliberates on those experiences which a man gets through his imaginative faculties. Thus, the entire section is replete with binary of opposites and oppositions, conformity and contradictions. The poem is, therefore, a strong fabric woven with emotional flights of man and woman, the feelings of love and hate, noise and tranquillity, existential struggle and surrender to the inevitable, mutability and changelessness, speech and silence, frailty and strength, sights and premonitions, ideas and intuitions, and strife between the centre and the circumference. Gayl Jones, of course through Almeyda, oscillates between the past and the present. She visualizes the past and peeps through the future. These binaries of opposites, very often, travel beyond the realm of time. And incidentally, all the binaries occupy centrality with varied amount of prominence.

Centuries ago before Christ, Plato had insinuated that the wholeness of creatures exists always in pairs with each component complement the other. Thus, man and woman, in their individuality, always remain the two halves. To

complete the globe, they have to complement each other. Each of them alone does not complete the circle. Almeyda's narrative is a perfect illustration of Plato's axiom. Almeyda personifies a conventional woman, who longs for the companionship of a man, and feels incomplete without the presence of desired companion. Almeyda's seeking for the companion becomes more intense with every passing moment. Once we peruse some pages of the poem, we realise that Anninho is not only a man, but a source of energy. It is he who provides life juice to the brown roots of Almeyda's existence. Nowhere does Almeyda give any hint that Zibrata has personally met Anninho directly or opaquely. Zibrata, like Joan of Arc, sees visions. She plays a clairvoyant: "I have seen with a third eye,/ and a fourth one, and yet another" (p. 14). Through her extraterrestrial power, Zibrata comes to know that Anninho is someone special, and he is meant only for Almeyda: "...A woman/ such as this one should have/a man as that one" (p.11).

As is evident from Zibrata's observations, Almeyda and Anninho are made for each other. The tenderness of their relationship is punctuated by their devotion to each other. However, the environment is not conducive for the delicate feelings of love. Man is born free, but he is always eager to enslave his cohabitant. Love between Almeyda and Anninho is set against the backdrop of war with Portuguese soldiers. The situation is very tense. And in such horrendous situation, love-making is not possible. Association is, therefore, threatened, and dissociation is imminent. When wings of war are set free, and soldiers are in pursuit of destroying the targets, fond emotions evaporate; the senses get too blunt to feel the passion of togetherness. Almeyda and Anninho are on mandatory run to save their lives. They are looking for their compatriots because crowd provides protective shield against any aggression. They are tirelessly running in search of other Palmares. Anninho knows it well that war does not allow the stakeholders to stop and rest. But Almeyda is a woman, and woman is, by nature, guided more by tender emotions. Even in the tumult of war, she caresses her desire to pause for a while, enjoy the pleasures of love for a moment, and move further

with rejuvenated strength. The opposites are beautifully carved in the memory of Almeyda:

That was the question, Almeyda  
how we could sustain our love  
at a time of cruelty.  
How we could keep loving  
at such a time. How we could  
look at each other with tenderness.  
And keep it, even with everything.  
It's hard to keep tenderness  
when things all around you are hard  
(p.32).

"That wind is cool here, Anninho; can we stand here a moment?"

He slows down, then stops. It is a short moment  
we stand there. He keeps his back to me, then  
we start up again.

"It won't be good to stand longer than this," he says, and then we move on.

I watch his back. If it was a different time, I could relax in my watching. It is a tense watching. We walk through a tunnel of trees  
(p. 65).

It is not that Almeyda does not understand the terrific situation they are in. But her woman heart does not know the constraints of life. She realises that her years are running fast, and she is no longer young. The intensity of her longing is very much piercing as seen in second section:

"I said it's been years since the flesh of man flowed into me.

And since that river of blood  
stopped and the big wound closed"  
(p. 64).

Almeyda has centred her hope of getting love on Anninho, but the atmosphere of war appears to have sealed the fate. She dreams of manly embrace even in such scenario of strife with no possibility of physical consummation.

Aninho recalls an episode when the king of Palmares, Zumbi, tells his people that they should understand that the fates of hunter and the hunted are interlinked:

"But Zumbi said..."

"He said that there is always a last day,

when the blood of the hunted  
serves as a guide for hunters" (p.20)

Zumbi is a realistic interpreter of events. He understands the working pattern of Nature. His observations are true, and Anninho has learnt much from Zumbi's realism. Anninho reads the situation and infers that the time is not ripe for love even if Almeyda is insistent. Almeyda's observations contain the life and death, mortality and immortality in the same bracket. She believes that death is not the end of life, and the fear of death is not the most potent deterrent. Almeyda looks at the death of Zumbi at the hands of Velho's forces with detached attitude. She does think that just by killing a man one can succeed in presenting the evidence of mortality. She believes that death is not powerful enough to breach the continuum of life:

"I am told that after they killed Zumbi  
they cut off his head and put it in  
a public place to prove to the others  
that he was not immortal."

"Eh, they think that is proof?" (p. 56)

Almeyda believes in the continuity of life. She believes that when physical life comes to an end, metaphysical life begins. And, thus, body may melt away in a stipulated period of time, spirit continues to live. A similar faith the Bourne Islanders have in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. After the death of Cuffee Ned, the Bourne Islanders do not sit idly wailing over the mortal remains, but they get up and say that Ned's death will light up their spirit, and the enthusiasm to achieve freedom will give birth to new rebellion in Bourne Island. Similarly, the death of Zumbi will light up the spirit of Palmares, and the energy of inspired enthusiasm, thus generated, would make them free from enslavement. Almeyda's exhortations make one believe that the wounds of the Palmares will heal in a very little period of time as the wounds inflicted on Almeyda's chest healed. Life is a complex phenomenon. It exists in the infinite continuum of time. Naturally, the human experience transcends all joys and miseries, all knowledge and beliefs, and the confines of life and death.

Life never exists in an insulated chamber. It flows through the infinite ocean of time. Life goes through multiple changes during its terrestrial and

celestial journey, but the total ingredients that make it a traceable existence remain same.

The entire poem is replete with Almeyda's insinuations about mutability, transformation, and change. While talking about Anninho with her solicitude to find him, she talks about her grandmother. She says that her grandmother was a woman of some extraordinary intellect. Her grandmother believed that Almeyda has "links with the invisible world" (p. 34). She further added that Almeyda's links with the other world enlighten "beyond time" (p. 27). Therefore, Almeyda is bound to meet Anninho in "another time and place..." (p. 14). Her grandmother firmly believes that Almeyda is blessed with an unusual power to remain composed in the most of the taxing situation and is the inheritor of the extraordinary power to endure any probable change:

... You are the granddaughter  
of an African, and you have  
inherited a way of being.

And her eyes stayed on mine, Anninho,  
until all her words and memory  
and fears and tenderness  
ran through me like blood...

That was the moment when I became  
my granddaughter and she became me (pp.  
32-33).

Almeyda's breasts are cut off, and the globular pieces are thrown away in an inhuman act of terror. By cutting off the breasts, the source of nourishment has been sliced off. Gayl Jones has used the event quite symbolically. The brutal act is performed symbolically with the sole objective of starving the posterity of Palmareans to death. The source of nourishment and strengthening is wiped off. But, Almeyda is characterized to represent the strength of womanhood. She is an empowered and inspired woman. She does not tire out or retires to submissive resignation. She continues to search for the individual who has ability to make her complete woman, or who has strength enough to complement her deficiency. She searches out her love, because she knows that Anninho has the potential to reciprocate her love with a "long kiss that heals, or that persuades healing" (p. 83). She knows that change in situation is imminent because change is

the law of Nature. And in her opinion, "transformation through love and tenderness" is always probable. It is true that the oppressors have presented her as a woman "who mutilated herself so she wouldn't have any man at all" (p. 44). It appears as if Almeyda has forced the brutes to come up upon her to prevent her from giving birth to babies at the time great social upheavals and violent uprising. Such allegations or such presumptions become null and void when the reader finds Almeyda transcending the limits of a woman having no ability to bring up her baby. In the second section, Almeyda feels imagined swelling in her breast:

Anninho, my breasts are swelling.

I feel them swelling.

They are gone but I feel them swelling.

My breasts are heavy, Anninho, and she is curing me.

I am bread soaking in milk.

She says my breasts were globes floating in the river, and that it is only memory and desire that replaces them; makes them feel heavy.

(pp. 67-68).

In spite of having wounded physique, Almeyda does not lose her hope to be able to meet Anninho. And this hope is nothing but the hope of well-being for Palmareans. Almeyda, gradually, recovers from her tragedy. The tragic experience is still there in her heart as an indelible scar, but she is physically fit enough to go for walk outside her closet. Her restlessness is now not related to her physical agony, but it is linked with her desire to find back Anninho. And it is because of the fact that reunion with Anninho is indicative of happiness that is stored in future. The report submitted by Jorge Velho to the king of Portugal in 1695 also mentions the future of Palmareans:

"It is indeed true that the force and stronghold of the Negroes of Palmares in the famous Barriga range is conquered ... and that their king was killed (by a party of men from the regiment of the petitioner, which came upon the said King Zumbi on the twentieth of November, 1695) and the survivors scattered. Yet one should not

therefore think that this war is ended. No doubt it is close to being terminated if we continue to hunt these survivors through the great depths of these forests, and if the regiment of the petitioners is kept along the frontier. If not, another stronghold will suddenly appear either here in Barriga or in any other equally suitable place..."

As the report reveals, even the oppressive forces knew it well, that there were very bright chances of the slaves to come up with rejuvenated energy and start a fresh struggle for freedom. And the slaves of Palmares are accompanied by the optimism of Almeyda and her likes, their efforts would definitely bear fruit, and no force of oppressive enslavers would be potent enough to keep them enslaved for long. Thus, fresh rebellion could not be overruled in days to come. Almeyda's insinuations are, in fact, the premonitions of the positive occurrences that are stored in the womb of future.

Zibrata is the guiding spirit. She is the representative of the celestial forces which shape the destiny of man. Zibrata provides an encouraging optimism. She makes Almeyda realise the genesis of her tortuous past, and, at the same time, shows her the ways to march into the future with hope and enthusiasm.

#### Conclusion

Thus, Gayl Jones continues with her preference for the woman's voice for the first person narrative. In fact, her sole objective in selecting a woman as her speaker and using the first person narrative is to reveal the women's sensibility from the perspective of a woman. In almost every fiction, prose or rhyme, Jones keeps a woman at the centre, and makes her throw her eyes upon the happenings located at the periphery. In Gayl Jones's scheme of things, most of the happenings are catastrophic in which women's personality is mutilated, physically as well as spiritually. But it is also true that Jones's women are diehard individuals. They have strong spirit. The oppressive forces may keep them drowned for a while, but the women do not succumb to adversities. They use their energy which existed in hibernated state till then and re-emerge with renewed zeal. Like Almeyda, Jones's other women protagonists also

relate the history of oppression. But the narrative always possesses within itself the women's sensibility. In *Song of Anninho*, Gayl Jones picks up a historical episode, and through Almeyda's first person narrative presents an intense, exotic, tale that combines the pleasant and painful experiences interminably. Through Almeyda's links with the invisible world, her journey from the tortuous past to the hope for her own self and the community is intensely narrated. But in all this narration, woman's sensibility is at the core. Gayl Jones adopts similar plot and similar tools to bare the oppressive forces that always remain active in the multi-layered, multi-ethnic society.

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