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GAYL JONES PERSPECTIVE: PERIPHERAL EXISTENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

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Abstract

It is a well-known fact that Gayl Jones is not as glamorous as a writer as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor are. But, it is also true that Gayl Jones is a very formidable African-American author. Her works present brilliant experimentation with psychology of language while analyzing the socio-economic issues of race, class, and gender. Hers is a potent and audible voice which heard far and wide with utmost care and patient attention. Her personality bears the stamp of experience and observation. Her life has been controversial, phenomenal, and consummate in many respects. Her vitality as a social activist, her association with the extreme ideology of her husband and patience in dealing with the hiccups of life has made her a versatile character. Her ordinariness raises her above the extra-ordinary heights.

Keywords: vehemently, pathetic, feminist, peripheral, inequality, hardship, enslavement.

INTRODUCTION

Jones was born on November 23, 1949 in Speigle Heights, a neighborhood of Lexington, Kentucky. Gayl's mother, Lucille, had creative faculty in her innerness, which was evident from her hobby to entertain the neighborhood children by narrating stories replete with moral lessons. She used to narrate the stories of social discrimination against the African-American citizenry. Gayl Jones reminisces, "I began to write when I was seven, because I saw my mother writing, and because she would read stories to my brother and me, stories that she had written"(N.P). In her school days, Gayl Jones became an obvious scribbler heading towards

meaningful content and precision in days to come, and a student of dialect.

From the very first novel *Corregidora*, Jones makes it clear that black speech is an aesthetic device she would prefer to use in her creative writings. The rhythms and structure of the black speech are the most potent ingredients of her plot. She reveals the inner personality of her characters and the emotional conflicts involved in the plot with the help of these ingredients. In her substantially long critical work, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African-American Literature*, Jones makes it vehemently evident that the growth of the black writers as dominant literary voice depends upon

their willingness to come out of the shadow of the formidable white models and make use of the treasure-trove of oral and musical traditions of the black populace. Jones maintains lyrical flow in her own writings. That is the reason why she calls her poem *Deep Song* (1979) a "blues poem" and her first novel *Corregidora* a "blues novel".

Suffering of black women is caused by the anomalous patterns of hierarchy, bias on the line of race, color, gender, and inhuman sexual orientations. In fact, the germ of inequality is planted in the very pattern of the social fabric. There are arguments that support the theory that inequality is the result of biological or cultural genesis. However, biological factors, such as, race and gender, become important only because they accompany social ranks and rewards. So, it is the society that has its bearings on the individuals and the groups as far as social inequality is concerned.

African-American women continued to suffer long, and trauma through which black women passed continued for generations. The scars of suffering are still found in the collective memories of contemporary black society. In an interview with Wyatt (1992), the rape survivors narrated their horrendous experience. In their first hand narration, "rape was described as something that could happen to you because you were black and female" (p.88). Thus, it can very well be inferred that

- (i) The history of United States reveals that young black women were the victims of economic and labor systems which were biased against or unfair to them. These systems institutionalized sexual crime against black women.
- (ii) As far as sexual victimization of black women was concerned, law machinery remained toothless.
- (iii) Black women were stigmatized as promiscuous by Jezebel-type social institutions, and, therefore, rape of the black women could be justified.
- (iv) Failed law-enforcing institutions always put black women in hazardous situation where the victims were forced to live with stigma and loss of face in the society. Therefore,

black women evolved a culture of shrouding themselves in silence and secrecy.

- (v) Victimized institutions forced some vocal black women to propagate the philosophy of resilience and activism against sexual violence. It created a protective cloak even around black men who were often tortured for their perceived illegality.

Some Facts about the Incidents of Rape and the Rape Survivors:

The surveys carried out by various agencies reveal that the rates of rape of black and white women were almost similar. Again, the black and white rape survivors passed through similar traumatic experience at the same rate, and both of them experienced similar psychological problems as the rape-victims (Neville & Heppner, 1999 pp. 41-62; Wyatt, 1992, pp. 77-91). But these similarities in the experiences of Black and white victims end here. There are certain racial issues involved in the victimization of African-American and white women.

Some surveys about sexual violence need to be analyzed in order to ascertain the real problem African-American women really face. The National Violence against Women Survey reveals that 18.8% of black women were sexually assaulted (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). The community sample in Los Angeles reveals that a higher percentage of black women, about 25%, were raped (Wyatt, 1992, p.77-91). The surveys conducted in academic standards further say that 16.5% African-American girls were raped in high school (Valois et al, 1999, pp. 328-335); 17% in a government job training program were raped (West & Rose, 2000, pp. 470-494); and 36% were raped in college (Gross et al, 2006, pp. 288-300). The rape rate among black women Navy recruits was 25.1% (Merrill, Newell, Thomsen, Gold, Milner, Koss & Rosswork, 1999, pp. 211-225). Other surveys reveal that HIV positive black women were 27% (Gielen, Fogarty, O'Campo, Anderson, Keller, & Faden, 2000, pp. 480-491), and there were 32.1% black adolescents who were sexually active (Cecil & Matson, 2006, pp. 89-103).

It is true that black women are raped by strangers too. But, very often, the perpetrators of sexual violence on black women are none other than

their own acquaintances, their boy-friends, live-in-partners, and those women know (Pierce-Baker, 1998; Robinson 2002). In addition, black women also suffer from sexual violence at the hand of their husbands. The sample collected in San Francisco, reveals that 18% of African-American women were the victims of sexual violence perpetrated by their husbands (Russell, 1990). And it is a historical fact that black women have never been safe at their workplaces. Today also, they are sexually exploited by their employers. African-American women working as low-salary veterans were sexually assaulted on duty by military supervisors under whom they worked (Campbell & Raja, 2005, pp. 97-106).

Gayl Jones, from her own experience, understands the fact that social support system, that infuses a sense of belonging in the innerness of the victims of sexual and physical violence can serve as a shock-absorber against the traumatic psychosis. The novels and other writings of Gayl Jones have plot that gives importance to family and friends who allow and inspire the tragic characters to explore their feelings of shame, guilt, and ire. Her characters learn to express themselves with resilience, and exhibit their enthusiasm to shed off the psychological weaknesses and emotional vulnerability. It is Jones's prowess as a creative interpreter that inspires her to give a perspective to the social victims, and persuade them to stand erect against all odds, celebrate their resilience, and revere their gender.

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.

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 center, 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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