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Blacks And Blues: The Imaginative Territory Of Gayl Jones

Mr. M. Muthumanikandan
Assistant Professor (SG), Department of Humanities and Sciences – English, Rajalakshmi Engineering College, Thandalam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

INTRODUCTION

Gayl Jones has intense fascination for the blues. She wrote her two novels *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976) as blues narratives. These two novels won her instant fame and she is now highly regarded as the innovative voice of Afro-American women. After a twenty year break, Jones published two additional novels, *The Healing* (1998) and *Mosquito* (1999). Jones is also known for her short-stories and poetry.

In her first person narratives, Jones describes the sexual and racial violence imposed on Black women, highlighting these women's various responses to their suffering. She is celebrated as one of the earlier writers to focus extensively on sexual violence and its relationship to Black women. Jones' clear focus on feminism over racism and the brutal nature of her subject matter have sparked negative responses in some evaluations, but she has earned the praise of fellow writers such as Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and John Updike.

Jones was born in Lexington, Kentucky, on November 23, 1949. Next to the blues her fascination is for the Kentucky region:

I like the idea of Kentucky in my work, though I don't always place my stories there. But it's like a 'magic word.' Often in works that take place somewhere else I'll make references to Kentucky, or have some of the characters be from there. ("About My Work" 234)

Jones credits her mother's aspirations to be a writer with her own career choice:

I began to seriously 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. ("About My Work" 234)

As a shy student in high school, she earned the praise and sympathy of her teachers, one of whom helped Jones get a scholarship to Connecticut College. After graduating in 1971, she earned an M.A. in 1973 and a D.A. in 1975 from Brown University. While there, Jones published her first novel, *Corregidora*, with the support of Toni Morrison, who was at that time an editor at Random House Publishers. The novel earned Jones great popularity. In the next year she published *Eva's Man*, which confirmed her popularity as an innovative and active new literary voice.

A very shy person, Jones was uncomfortable with the publicity and fame that accompanied her status as a rising literary star. She accepted a teaching position in the English Department at the University of Michigan, where she led a quiet life encouraging student writers in creative writing. She was also doing research in the use of oral tradition and folklore by Afro-American writers and the ways in which it modified fictional form. While in Ann Arbor, Jones began an association with Bob Higgins. He was arrested in 1983 for exhibiting threatening behavior and brandishing a gun at gay rights rally there. The couple left the country before the trial, and Higgins was convicted in absentia. Five years later, the couple who had married, returned quietly to Lexington to care for Jones' aged mother.

The publicity from the publication of Jones' third novel, *The Healing*, served as the revival of a showdown between Lexington Police and the couple in 1998. As a result of a book review, the police determined the true identity of Higgins, who had once again been making threats against members of the community. Surrounded by police barricaded in their home, Gayl and her husband threatened suicide after filling the house with gas. The police waited for three hours and rushed through the front door. Her husband committed suicide cutting his throat with a butcher knife. Jones was institutionalized on suicide watch. Subsequent review of her novels, *The Healing* and *Mosquito*, were read against the dramatic events of her own life, despite her lifetime efforts to isolate her life from her writing.

It is possible that this misfortune could have been avoided had Jones' reclusiveness been respected, had her work been allowed to be judged on its own merits. The blame must fall on the culture of celebrity, and the concurrent disrespect for the rights of privacy. Jill Nelson remarks:

The death of Bob Jones and collapse of the supremely talented Gayl Jones should make us all examine under a harsh light the contemporary assumption that the public has a right to know everything about everyone's personal life.

Jones' novels centre upon strong and violent Black females. She writes in the first person, often in a non-linear order as all contemporary creative teaching writers do. Her first two novels are based on the blues form with an emphasis on the wrongs men commit against women and the ways in which women suffer.

Corregidora is the story of Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer and with an ancestry of women raped and enslaved by a Portuguese slave owner in Brazil. Her ancestors carried down the tradition that their lives must be living testimonials to the violence, incest, and brutality they suffered. In the novel, Jones explores the limitations that this type of victimization creates as well as the frustrating consequences Ursa suffers because of trying to break free of the habitualized victimization.

A critic, John Alfred Avant, is appreciative of the blues orientation in the novel:

Corregidora has a blues ache in its prose. Albert Murray's Train *Whistle Guitar* provided literary equivalents to blues phrasing but had no real blues feeling. *Corregidora* has the feeling and the ultimate release of a Billie Holiday recording.

Raymond Sokolov has reserved praise for Jones' first novel. His contention is that Ursa's character is not fully developed. He writes in a review for the *New York Times Book Review*:

Her [Jones'] first novel may have problems: It is too short to give us a full enough sense of the maturing character of Corregidora but too long not to begin raising our expectations and desire for more than we get. But these are healthy defects, grains of sand, we hope, in the oyster.

In her next novel, *Eva's Man*, Jones continues to explore the themes of *Corregidora* in a wider and different perspective. The novel consists of the impulsive and inconsistent ramblings of the protagonist Eva Canada, who has been institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital for the poisoning and violent behavior towards her lover. June Jordan remarks of *Eva's Man*: "This is the blues that lost control. This is the rhythmic, monotone lamentation of one woman. . . . Unerringly, her [Jones'] writing creates the tension of a problem unresolved"

John Updike has a similar view and points out the lack of resolution in the novel:

Real fish swim in her [Jones'] murky waters, though she does not always land them. Her heroines are unable to respond . . . Eva is surrounded not so much by other characters as by amateur psychotherapists, all nagging at her silence. Miss Jones apparently wishes to show us a female heart frozen into rage by deprivation . . . that the characters are dehumanized as much by her artistic vision as by their circumstances.

Again, in her collection of short stories, *White Rat* (1977), and her volumes of poetry published through the first half of the 1980s, Jones continues to discuss and describe the many aspects of sexism and racism from a woman's perspective, coloring everything with a dark and disturbing tone. Gay Wilentz writes of *White Rat*:

As witnessed in her two novels this collection addresses abnormal psychology, sexual disruptions, the historical trauma of slavery, and the social basis of silence and madness. These stories tell the lives of people in a 'limited zone' –– those who have chosen not to speak, and those whom society has silenced.

However, Jones stated with the release of her third novel, *The Healing,* which she intended to depart from her earlier form. The title itself is suggestive of such a departure. Jones' tone in *The Healing* is happier and more hopeful, the book ends on a positive note, and the characters make choices to pursue avenues to get out of their victimization. Critics are aware of this change in Jones. Judith Grossman observes:

The guiding structure of *The Healing*, as I read it, is that of a classical high romance, in which lovers are separated until a series of ordeals and initiations has prepared them for the transcendent humanity that's celebrated in their reunion.

In her novel, *Mosquito*, Jones creates a strong, loveable character in truck driver and illegal immigrant smuggler Sojourner Johnson, allowing her to explore a stable and healthy relationship with the kind-hearted and gentle philosopher Ray.

From the publication of *Corregidora*, Jones has received varied critical and public opinion. Writers such as Baldwin have praised her first two novels. Toni Morrison has championed her. Scholars have credited Jones with being one of the first writers to focus on the violence of sexism and racism from a feminist outlook. Her attention to brutality and its effect on the psychology and personality of Black women has earned her the reputation of a unique literary voice. Clarence Major observes that Jones' work attempts to "resolve the

artificial representation problem of the realistic tradition and to reestablish 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".

However, some critics have charged Jones that her writings remain outside the Black Aesthetics and, that by focusing on the divisions between Black men and women she has diverted attention from the more important issue of racism. Particularly Madhu Dubey has examined *Eva's Man* in this perspective and has argued that Jones' focus on gender issues over racial inequality has led to unfavorable reviews of the novel. Loyle Hairston has castigated *Eva's Man* for being "a study in male hostility" (133). Keith Mano, writing in *Esquire*, has argued that *Eva's Man* lacks any artistic merit and if it had been written by a white or black male novelist, "it would still be in manuscript" (66). He has further commented that *Eva's Man* was published only because Toni Morrison as the editor at Random House, agreed to publish it. June Jordan's observation is that *Eva's Man* does not serve a clear moral or political function:

I fear for the meaning of this novel. What does it mean when a young Black woman sits down to compose a universe of Black people limited to animal dynamics? And what will such testimony, such perverse ambivalence contribute to the understanding of young girls in need of rescue and protection?

Jones herself is keenly aware of the difficulty of such a text being positively received in the African-American community. Generally, the text goes against the grain politically and is disturbing in the violence of both its language and sexuality. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Jones states that "some critics would probably want a greater directness of political statement. I don't like direct political statements". She is aware that "conflict between aesthetic, political, and social responsibilities . . . involves 'dilemmas' in Afro-American literary tradition" , she, however, adds, "I don't dwell on it when I'm telling a story".

The analysis of race and gender is, of course, not prejudicial in Jones. The analysis depends on the way these categories are constructed. These differing constructions can be traced in the fluctuating meanings that have been assigned historically to the word "ideology" itself. At one level, ideology is understood as equivalent to politics, and in this limited sense, it concerns itself with the social, the political and the economic. At another level, ideology is understood as questions about language and representation. Writers like Toni Morrison have repeatedly stated that what marks black literature distinctive is the language of the text. The intention, which is that of Jones, to examine a text at the level of language and representation may not be depoliticizing the text.

Biman Basu describes the above ideology while discussing the political motivation behind critical reaction to Jones' work, and argues that *Eva's Man* differs from other African-American writers. He concludes:

Eva's Man is not a pleasant novel but an extremely disturbing one. . . . Given the preponderance of dominant structures the text speculates on how the oppressed subject might negotiate these structures of violence . . . so that, if the violence is disturbing, it serves to underline the violence of the discursive formations which circulate around and circumscribe the subject. . . . Attention to the language of the text, analysis of language and representation, far from being apolitical, unmasks the politics of language and the ideology of representation which are some of the most powerful instruments for the construction of the subject.

Critics have responded to *The Healing* positively, praising her optimistic ending, her focus on timely events, and her superb character development. As Jill Nelson writes, "Jones's ability to create bizarre yet believable characters is magical, requiring a subtle act of faith between writer and reader".

Critics have praised Jones' use of speech patterns and blues language. The blues tradition has offered African-American women writers a voice from which they can describe their experiences in ways that signify both on European American literary traditions and the writings of African-American males. It is through the blues that the African-American woman writer, like the blues performer, can empower herself as well as her audience. Blues performances serve as codifiers, absorbing and transforming discontinuous experience through the formal expression of song. Moreover, blues performances resist final or stable meaning –– the blues singer's rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibilities.

From obscure and largely unknown African-American origins, blues has become the most extensively used folk music in America. The most important extra-musical meaning of blues refers to a state of mind, a condition of melancholy or depression. *The Guinness Encyclopaedia of Popular Music* defines the blues:

It starts with the sound, the totality of the performance. A sound so unlike anything else that it fascinates from the hearing, stirs recognition and sympathy the listener didn't know he possessed. The words don't register at first, not at least on a conscious level, but the emotion does.

Brownie McGhee puts it succinctly, "Blues is not a dream. Blues is truth." John Lee Hooker, celebrated as the Grand Old Man of The Blues, says: "It has more feeling than other music. When I sing these songs I feel them down deep and reach you down deep." Johnny Shines quips, "The blues are not wrote; the blues are lived." The blues is both music and the feeling that inspires it.

It is generally understood that the blues performer sings or plays to rid him of "the blues." This is so important to blues musicians that many maintain one cannot play the music unless one has "a blues feeling" or "feels blue." Indeed, the blues is considered a perpetual presence in the lives of Afro-Americans and is frequently personified in their music as "Mister Blues."

In its early years, the blues was wholly Afro-American. It developed from the collective work songs of the plantation culture that can be traced to African sources. It followed a responsorial "leader-and-chorus" form. These responsorial work songs died out when the plantations were broken up.

After the Reconstruction era, black workers were either engaged in seasonal collective labour in the south or tended small-holdings leased to them by the system known as share-cropping. Work songs therefore, now increasingly took the form of solo calls or "hollers," comparatively free in form but close to blues in feeling. The vocal style of the blues is derived from the holler.

In the 1890s the post-Reconstruction bitterness of southern whites towards blacks hardened into segregation laws; this in a sense forced the black communities to recognize their own identity, and a flowering of black sacred and secular music followed. Ballads, imitating the traditional British form, celebrating the brave exploits of black heroes, were composed and sung. The blues emerged from the combination of freely expressive hollers with the music of these ballads.

At first the blues was probably only a new song form in the repertory of the black songster. Many songsters and early blues singers in the south worked in street entertainments promoted by vendors. Their travels helped to spread the blues, as did those of wandering singers who sang and played for a living. They followed the example of the street missionaries who at that time were popularizing gospel songs.

The ballad singers had concentrated on the exploits of legendary black heroes, but blues singers sang of themselves and those who shared their experiences. Many stanzas rapidly became traditional and certain images or lines entered the stock-in-trade of every blues singer. But the inventive singer expressed his anxieties, frustrations, hopes or resignation through his songs. Some blues described disasters or personal incidents; themes of crime, prostitution, gambling, alcohol and imprisonment are prominent in the early blues and have remained ever since. Some blues are tender but few reveal a response to nature; far more express a desire to move or escape by train or road to an imagined better land. Many are aggressively sexual, and there is much that is consciously and subconsciously symbolic of frustration and oppression.

Evidently, the blues was born out of oppression. The oppressed resorted to a coded behavior that bound them together and bitterly celebrated their position at the bottom of a social order that barely recognized their existence. The blues is the only form of passive resistance available to black people. The blues could provide temporal relief from the harsh realities of black life that not even emancipation could provide. Gayl Jones escaped to "The Imaginative Blues Territory", to hide her feelings and oppression.