

19. Making Generations: Corregidora as Revenge Novel

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“We were told to make generations” and that’s just what we have done and what you also must do. These are words uttered by Ursa’s mother and her inability to “make generations” is what forms the crux of this novel. Gayle Jones, in writing about the Portuguese coffee planter, Corregidora, underlines the most important aspect of slavery: the double marginalization of women on the plantations. These women, struggling to remove the shackles of slavery find themselves in postbellum Southern States, as much enslaved by the likes of Mutt Thomas and Tadpole as they were by Corregidora. Gayl Jones's classic novel with the tale of the blues singer Ursa, consumed by her hatred of the nineteenth-century slave master who fathered both her grandmother and mother is a tale of revenge, but revenge of a rather strange kind: they must bring forth babies into this world who will bear witness to the sexual and emotional abuse borne by these women. The last will and testament of UC’s mother is to “make generations” and this statement, read in the backdrop of the plantation owners burning of the slave-owning papers to escape being penalized for encouraging slavery, attempts to trace the permanent scars left on the minds of the slave women. Various critics have given their opinions of Gayle Jones’ first novel and her perspective of slavery and its impact on slave women working on the coffee plantations. James Baldwin wrote: “Corregidora is the most brutally honest and painful revelation of what has occurred, and is occurring, in the souls of Black men and women.”

Key Words: Corregidora: Name of the Brazilian Coffee planter, Antebellum: Post slavery, LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

Introduction

The LGBT professor of literature, Melvin Dixon notes that ‘corregidor’ means ‘judicial magistrate’ in Portuguese: "By changing the gender designation, Jones makes Ursa Corregidora a female judge charged by the women in her family to 'correct' “the historical invisibility they have suffered” (239) Keeping in view this definition I shall attempt to read Corregidora as a Revenge novel in that the whole idea of “making generations” as a way of extracting revenge is one that runs through the different strands of the story.

The Novel

The novel, based on the story of the Portuguese planter of the same name, i.e Corregidora, explores various issues related to slavery on the American continents. Palmares, Brazil is the background for this tale, of which the present is set in Bracktown, Kentucky, with frequent trips down memory lane to Georgetown, Kentucky. The bear – for that is what Ursa’s name means – is brainwashed into extracting revenge for what the Portuguese planter did to her mothers but what is worth noting is the mode she chooses to extract this revenge. Ursa is a blues singer from Kentucky who is brought up to believe that what happened a century ago, to her grandmother and her mother, on a Brazilian plantation, is more important than what happened or may happen to her personally.

Corregidora , the Portuguese planter “..... was a big strapping man then. His hair black and straight and greasy. He was big. He looked like one a them coal Creek Indians but if you said he looked an Indian he’d get mad and beat you.” The nasty and vicious coffee planter had a crop that was very different and similar to his coffee crops and this was the women he bought as slaves for his plantation. Some of them worked in the fields, while others were used to harvest a very different crop. Corregidora, the lusty Portuguese, works his women hard, sending men in to them who are willing to pay for that privilege.

From the earliest time that Ursa Corregidora can recall, she has heard the stories of Corregidora's excesses; stories that her mother also had heard. UC remembers sitting in her Great Gram's lap and listening to the stories of the Portuguese planter who was unable to father children by his own wife and who therefore extracted the ultimate revenge of fathering his own daughter's children. Not content with having used "the coffee bean woman" for his own pleasure he can hardly wait for his daughter to grow up before he lays claim to her as his property and the mother can do naught but watch her own daughter grow big with the child of her own father. These are facts which both women remember and since they cannot undo the past, they attempt to extract revenge by telling Ursa and her mother – before her – to bear witness by "making generations," in order to defeat the slave traders, who in a last attempt had burned the papers that showed men, women and children as their property, to be disposed off as and when they pleased. They weave stories around the character of Corregidora and pass them on to the succeeding generations that posterity may remember Corregidora and his evil deeds. This is the maximum that these sadly used and abused women can do in the attempt to undo the wrong done to them but what they will not accept is that Ursa is not a Corregidora, in the strictest sense of the word. UC says: "They squeezed Corregidora into me" and when she questions the validity of the story, physical punishment is inflicted upon her, with Great Gram saying: "...They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in their minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood." By drumming these ideas into the succeeding generations, the Corregidora women show their condemnation of Corregidora and others like him. However in repeating the stories and charging Ursa and her mother to remember and repeat these stories Great Gram and Gram forget that they are falling into the trap of the slave owners and instead of these characters' lives falling into oblivion they are refreshed. Ursa Corregidora suffers because she is made to believe that these stories are all that matter in life and therefore they must be repeated. This has a negative effect on the psyche of UC and she cannot get rid of this obsessive compulsion which governs her life and her relations with Mutt and later Tadpole McCormick. Unable to have a 'normal' relationship with Mutt Thomas, she is also unable to relax with Tadpole and both relationships quickly fall apart resulting in UC's disintegration. What May Alice and others consider to be normal behavior, UC is brought up to shy away from. Living in a society that accepts unmarried teenage motherhood, UC is obsessed with the idea of making generations and the fall that results in her total sterility has a lasting impact on her relationships. Not only does she divorce Mutt Thomas but cannot sustain her marriage with Tadpole McCormick. Tadpole's scathing rejoinders, when UC reminds him that he knew of her sterility when he married her, only serve to underscore the lasting impact of the instructions of the grandmothers.

Discussion

Corregidora, the novel, shows various and varied forms of revenge: from the Portuguese planter's revenge – for the twelve year old boy running away – to UC extracting revenge for losing her baby is a long span of time, and a lot happens during that time, but throughout it all the one thing that haunts her is the memory of her grandmother and great-grandmother reliving the years spent with Corregidora. When the stories get too much for her, she questions their validity and receives a harsh response. Great Gram slaps her saying:

"When I'm telling you something don't you ever ask if I'm lying. Because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done? so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up. That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them. (14)

The passage quoted shows Great Gram referring to the burning of slave trade documents, which according to Sirène Harb was ordered at the beginning of the 1890s by the minister of finances in Brazil, Rui Barbosa (Coser 129). In an attempt to counter the oppression they lived through Great Gram and Gram unconsciously act as oppressor asking for "unqualified acceptance" of her story. (Dubey 253) The response to her question therefore is not far removed from that of the Portuguese planter who punishes disobedient slave women by sending in men who have the disease so they can pass it on. Ursa's great grandmother, therefore, teaches her as harsh a lesson as the plantation owner

does about the consequences of doubting the veracity of the Corregidora legacy. This is a legacy that's passed on through the blood and the name: all Corregidora women bear his name, even Ursa, whose father's name was Martin carries the Corregidora name so much so that Tadpole is forced to tell her to quit thinking about her grandmothers' lives and to start thinking of how she wanted to spend her own and whether she wanted to make anything of her own life.

Ursa's Great gram has her own sense of vengeance, but one that's definitely born out of the treatment that was meted out to her by her master. Not only was she forced to sleep with him and his wife – who “was a skinny stuck-up little woman he got from over in Lisbon and had her brought over here. He wouldn't sleep with her, so she made me sleep with her,” but after giving birth to his children, also saw her own daughter falling a prey to his twisted and depraved desires. Fathering children of his daughter was but an instance of his sexual depravity and cruelty and the thought that his slave woman - in this instance UC's Great Gram - could talk to a male slave results not only in the boy being hounded, but the very thought heightens his lust and sexual depravity so that all Great Gram's protestations that the boy was too young to have any ideas about her are brushed aside and blood hounds sent after him when he tries to escape and “each time he kept going down in me would be that boy's feet running.”

Corregidora, the coffee planter, knew how to make money from the ground and the women, both of whom he planted to his own best advantage. While the soil was rich and productive the same could be said of his women. The method of selection for his women was the tried and tested method of feeling up their genitals to see if they would make what Morrison has called “good breeders.” Ursa's great grandmother: “the coffee bean woman” he kept for himself, sending only white men to her only after he had broken her in; the others, if they made the smallest mistake, were given the punishment of being sent men who would pay the price of a woman knowing that they were transmitting their diseases to her, for this was his way of avenging himself on them.

All the time that Great Gram and Gram are transmitting what they claim is their hatred of Corregidora, Ursa thinks they are giving vent to their strong feelings for him. In her opinion their protestations of hatred for Corregidora become suspicious and ambiguous given the obsessive manner in which they not only fill her mother's mind with hatred, Ursa herself – born of a free black woman and a free black man – is forced to have her thoughts and behavior tainted by their memories. It does not occur to her that this is an instance of Corregidora's revenge and that abolition of slavery in Brazil does not guarantee a free mind and body to the granddaughter and great granddaughter of a coffee plantation owner. Ursa gives birth, not in reality but in a dream, to a Corregidora look alike – with hair that “was like white wings” - underscoring his influence over her (“You don't even know your own father.....Corregidora's women. Yes you are.”) This is enough to remind us of the deep and lasting impact he has on her. Not having been fathered by him, she still carries not only his name, but is also obsessed by thoughts of Corregidora, drummed into her mind at a tender age. UC says: “I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk.” These thoughts become a part of her unconscious and are reinforced by constant repetition. “It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be substituted for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger.” In this attempt to keep alive the memory of Corregidora's excesses she keeps a photograph of him to be able to define evil better and say: ‘That's what evil look like.’ This act is part of Great Gram's plan to remind succeeding generations of the revenge that had to be extracted. She remembers his appearance and reminds herself again and again of it to ensure that she does not forget.

UC, is influenced by her mothers' stories but chooses her own manner of extracting revenge. Hers is not an isolated act of revenge and she bears witness through her art. She chooses to sing the blues and when she is asked: “What do blues do for you?” she responds by saying: “It helps me to explain what I can't explain.” When her mother asks her where she got these songs, she says: “I got them from you.” This she thinks is the only way she can bear witness to the atrocities committed by the plantation owner. The critic Janice Haris has stated that: “Jones' novel is about a woman artist who sings the blues. It is a saga of pain, loss, and sacrifice; but it improvises and celebrates license to such a rich extent that the pain is yoked to the pleasure.” The pain that the Corregidora women experience and endure is the pain of lovelessness and the pain born out of being used as property and as a means of doing business. Corregidora not only used his slaves himself but also brought men into them and thus he used them as a means of investment. This is one reason why he gets so incensed when he sees

his “gold piece” talking to a black slave boy. For him that is betrayal indeed and as such must be punished in a way that would serve as a lesson for all times to come. On the other hand, in a twisted and rather macabre way, Corregidora is the only lover these women have had or are likely to have. Since no other man has access to them, he is the only man they do experience and it is definitely not one that would inspire the slave women to sing praises of his sexual prowess!

One aspect of revenge that Gayle Jones emphasizes is revenge born of ill-will. When Corregidora has a stroke he calls on “all his niggers and telling them he’d give them such and such a amount of money if they take it off him but they all said they didn’t put it on him.” Thinking that someone has put a hex on him, he calls everyone to free him bribing them with promises of reward but since no one admits to having caste a spell on him, he returns to his normal vile self as soon as he recovers.

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