
TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES AND VOID OF SILENCE IN GAYL JONES' EVA'S MAN**Article Particulars**

Received: 23.02.2018

Accepted: 08.03.2018

Published: 27.03.2018

ROSY TEP*Ph.D Scholar, Department of English, Periyar EVR College (Autonomous)**Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India***Dr. N. GEETHANJALI***Associate Professor, Department of English**Periyar EVR College (Autonomous), Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India*

The growth of Afro-American womenfiction is a reflection of the strength in the relationship between sexism and racism in America. A repetitive struggle in the tradition of writers from the 19th century to the present consists of their challenge to use the choice of one's voice and to express the entirety of the 'self'. In exploring the roots of early Afro - American novels, one can distinguish a powerful influence of the folk tradition, their myths, legend, folklore and oral traditions which have molded their style of fiction writing. The search for identity has developed as a major theme not only in European American but also in Afro - American Literature in the study of the Afro - American women as a kind of feminist discourse, which labels her individual experience as a marginalized person.

Correspondingly, Black Women writings talks about the sexual exploitation, the oppressive and hostile men who force the women indirectly for search of dignity and identity in order to develop a unified self. Gayl Jones, an African – American writer has been regarded as a true artist who plumbed the depth of the brutal realities of sex, race and class in the lives of Black people. She creates world radically different from those of normal experiences and of storytelling convention, which deals with her common experience of her race, and she becomes the spokes-woman of her people, a substitute voice of the oppressed group.

Jones is best known for her novels, in which she creates worlds where madness, violence and sexuality collide, often with destructive results for 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.

Twenty-eight years after its publication, Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976) continues to occupy a rare position in featuring an African – American woman who has sustained

and committed acts of violence. The novel offers the first-person fictional account of Eva Medina Canada, a woman who is incarcerated in a prison for poisoning and castrating Davis Carter, an acquaintance with whom she spent four days in a hotel. In her monotonous and affectless narrative, Eva chronicles her sense of continual exposure to sexual harassment from multiple figures including her cousin, her mother's boyfriend, a plant foreman, and a man whom she stabbed in the hand for grabbing her between the legs. Although she emphasizes Davis' attempts to exert sexual and emotional control over her during their four-day encounter in the hotel, Eva complicates her narrative by foregrounding her feelings of sexual entrapment and sexual desire and by maintaining silence when others harass her or demand that she explain her violent acts.

Eva's Man indicates a method of thought to show the effect of events on individual outcomes. Jones centers African – American women's exploration of the fullest and most complex definition of 'herself' in a society that marginalizes and silences her identity and culture that diminishes her race and gender. She reports how female emotion and absurdity is fabricated and encounters a woman that has to do with the sexist, unfair, and oppressive society and the communities she lives in. The reality of injustice and abuse is so prevalent and intense that it can only result in madness, or female destructiveness and the use of brutal force.

Throughout the novel, notions of suppression are preserved in the power of gender roles assigned to women and men in sexual relationships and familial structure. There are no secure spaces for the women to be free and to not only express their grievances but also to find any sense of comfort in their lives. The spaces they operate through are controlled to continue their own violence and sexual abuse.

The story begins in the cell of forty-three-year-old Eva Medina Canada confined to the psychiatric ward of a prison which complicates her inner life. *Eva's Man* is the story of a woman who has been declared insane after poisoning her lover in their hotel room and then castrating him by biting his phallus off. She taken to the asylum, but refuses all verbal communication; she also refuses to enter the language which will label her as mad. Instead, it is in the story she tells the reader, which provides sights into her childhood, where we perceive male-female relationships based on the objectification of the female by the male. Eva's expression of femininity is inherently a form of resistance.

From the beginning of the novel, Eva's silence is echoed in her interactions with other characters, especially those who have inflicted wounds on her body, which are still healing. Her relationship with the police and other people who have power is characterized by silence. She is silent around, but also silenced by those who have emotionally and physically injured her. Though Eva's silence and unwillingness to explain her is partially a result of trauma, she uses silence to maintain agency in an environment where her power is constantly being taken away from her.

From a reader's perspective, one may feel uncomfortable in learning about Eva's sexual experiences and abuses; one may feel that Eva's privacy is being given many unambiguous details about such a private aspects of her life. The reason for Eva's silence may be subjective, but since she is the person who called the police and then returned to the scene of the crime one can assume she isn't persuasive or using silence to prevent incrimination. She confesses to killing Davis, but is silent, or at least imprecise, about her motive. It is possible Eva felt her silence was lodging from authority.

The novel centers about the life of a black woman and, from Jones point of view, an indictment against men, perhaps black men. All of Eva's men have thrust themselves upon her, both figuratively and literally, and she has been defenseless against their abuses; because they impose their desires on her and partly because she desires them at the same time that she resents and fears them. She longs for a kind of love that they cannot give her, so she feels like "her heart is in her draws." She, like her mother before her, is never asked, "How do you feel?" but is repeatedly asked, "How does it feel?" (Jones, 77) It is being treated as an object, a body, that she resents, and Jones makes this clear by the repetition of images of blood, milk, and semen, Eva's breasts become "rocks that turn to bread and then to milk" filled with "blood". (137)

Eva's dilemma could be expressed by a remembered conversation from her childhood, "Mama, where does the bee sting?" "Your heart," Mama says. "Down in your draws," says Miss Billie. Is your heart in your draws? (Jones, 139) Eva's fluctuation about her role as a person, sex object, and lover is made more difficult by the attitude of men toward her, "All they think about is where they going to get their next piece" (151). Although she thinks often that she must "keep her legs closed," she remembers and quotes her mother, the voice of experience, who told her that "after you've done it the first time, you won't be satisfied till you've done it again." (8)

The character in the novel appears as a lonely, silent woman hardened by abuse and desperate for love, incapable of breaking out of the patterns of her past. When Davis keeps her in the room and will not let her comb her hair, it is not surprising that she thinks of herself as "Medusa. . . . Men look at me and get hardons. I turn their dicks to stone" (Jones 130). Jones portrays her both as a defenseless victim of the animal desires of the men who stalk her and as an animalistic temptress herself. Elements of repetition, and the acts of the body make up this whole. Apparently, food and the act of consumption are evoked throughout, as well as menstruation and sex. Davis says, "When the vinegar touches the egg it smells like...a woman's smell". (18)

Davis continually feeds Eva cabbage, sausage, and beer, focusing on her body as she eats, saying she eats food as if she is, "making love" to it (126). They eat together, perpetrating the natural air of their time together; however, they do not date, go out to dinner, nor do they participate in any traditional roles of couples. They exist together, within their bodies and a room that smells of sex and meals. Yet, this freedom is not

absolute. However much they appear to be free, Eva holds herself back; she cannot defecate when he is in the room, and she attempts to hold in her belches, even though her stomach aches. She could not fully realize herself; she cannot overcome the restrictions that prevent her transformation, the grotesque-ness that already exists from surfacing.

After Eva castrates Davis, she goes and eats cabbage and sausage, showing that even if Davis is dead, if his legacy and authority has ended, hers has not, "he went in like he was tearing something besides her flesh". Sex is put on hold when Davis tells Eva, "don't look at me that way until you're through bleedin'" (Jones 47) "All that blood,' he said, 'I never could help feeling it was something nasty, even with..." (21). Ironically, Davis experiences his own bleeding when Eva castrates him, finding him within his own brief menstruation. By enacting this idea of male menstruation, Eva is allowing the birth of herself, without any restrictions or male domination. Even alone in a room with a lover, Eva cannot truly allow her bizarre body to appear.

Throughout the novel, she reiterates how dangerous and animalistic she is, though there are only a few instances where she injures someone else. Eva says Davis probably thought she had a "habit of sitting there in the dark corner just so men would come over and talk to her" (Jones 9). While at the mental institution, the staff will not let Eva mingle with other inmates; she says, "it ain't nothing I've done since I've been here. It's what I did before I came, the nature of my crime that makes them keep me in here. The way they look at me". (3)

Due to types of separations and silences, Eva is viewed as different and potentially dangerous; therefore, she characterizes herself in a similar manner. Bourdieu in *The Logic of Practice* (1980) states that, the beliefs that dictate behaviour are not states of mind but rather states of body, "instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad." Eva learns early that, "once you open your legs ...it seem like you can't close them" (Jones 15). All the men who cross Eva's path treat her in the likes of with Mr. Logan, the pedophile, and Freddy Smoot, the little boy obsessed with sticking a Popsicle into Eva's vagina and who constantly says "you let me do it once." (Jones 15)

Every time Eva is sexually abused, the incident when "Tyrone, the musician, after placing her hand on his crotch, begins to bring her presents of foods like candy, donuts, cookies, and chips, and he continually reminds her of the encounter" (Jones 31) imprints in her mind, blurring the definition of her own sexuality, until the perception and actions of others defines her, and she becomes a reflection of her treatment in the world. Eva's passiveness and inactiveness is itself a type of control over herself and the men in her life; the men expect a response, either of sexual desire or repulsion, but Eva often gives them neither.

With Alfonso, Eva only gives him part of what he wants, she goes out to clubs with him, but refuses him sexually. With Davis, Eva gives him what he wants sexually, but

refuses to talk about herself when he asks. Davis says to Eva, "you hard to get next to, you know that" and "a mean tight mama," and "the coldest-ass bitch" (Jones 6, 8, 10). Yet he stays, trying to decipher what is not said; her disinterest spurs him forward. The songs playing as they sit in the bar, "The Evil Mama Blues" and "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues," foreshadow and highlight his words (7). Davis names her not Eva but "evil," "Medusa" not Medina, says she looks like a "lion [with] all that hair." (10, 16)

The image of Eva is immediately evoked as well, blurring meaning and genders; Eva begins her story by foregrounding a counter-method of reading. Describing her encounter with Davis's wife, who comes to see her in jail, Eva explains,

[Davis's wife] didn't say anything. She just stood there outside the cell and stared at me, and I stared back. The only thing I kept wondering is how did he treat her. Because it looked like he made her worse than he made me. I mean, if she was as bad-off on the inside as she looked on the outside. She must've stood there for fifteen minutes, and then left. She didn't have anything at all in her eyes--not hate not nothing. Or whatever she did have, I couldn't see it. When she left, I wondered what she saw in mine. (Jones 8)

As Eva tells her tale, she conveys a profound sense of being imprisoned in others' misreading and misconceptions, their refusals to hear and concomitant demands that she speak. "I said nothing" (Jones 67). Nevertheless, Eva concedes that the "past is still as hard on [her] as the present," (16) and her narrative stands as her attempt to tell her story, in her own terms, and on her own time. Although such emphasis on silence and coming to voice may sound like feminist clichés, the incarcerated women's testimony highlights how recent feminist critiques of speak-outs about victimization insufficiently attend to the experiences of socially marginalized women.

In generating these insights, *Eva's Man* itself also draw attention to the role that fictional representation can play in challenging reductive legal frameworks for reading law-breaking women's experiences. However, she speaks to the reader, telling what she believes to be "her story," presenting herself as a woman with many different outlines, a woman occupying many different positions in a cruel world that disgraces Black women regularly.

Jones herself says that "Eva Canada stands for no one but Eva Canada," and if anything, Jones has written, she wishes that she had presented Eva in a less realistic, more fragmented manner. Jones has stated that she is interested in "getting at the truth" of a "*particular* character." However, Eva also fits in a long line of American characters imprisoned by race and sex. Her double bind, made worse by the shackles of her madness and her own lack of identity, results in an extreme case of enslavement.

The complexity of Eva's experience speaks her victimization as she is unable to exist in one moment; her presence is always infused and infected with pasts she has experienced directly as well as indirectly through the remark of other women.

Ultimately, the fear of rape infuses the lives of all of these women because they are barred from expressing a desire that is not structured and corrupted within the wide field of sexuality. As long as cultural construction of women remains unchanged, other women will be made captive to a fear not completely their own, as Eva's fear is not only her own. She is haunted by pain that is both hers and others

References

1. Authurs, Jane. Ed. Jane Authurs and Jean Grimshaw *Revolting Women: The Body in Comic Performance*. Women's Bodies: discipline and transgression..London: Cassell, 1999.
2. Bourdieu, Pierre, Nice, Richard. Trans. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980.
3. Brown, Wendy. *Freedom's Silences*. Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.
4. Jones, Gayl. *Eva's Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.
5. www.enotes.com/topics/evas-man