

### CHAPTER III

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE ANCESTORS' NARRATIVES ON A BLACK DAUGHTER'S TRAUMA AND HEALING PROCESS IN *CORREGIDORA*

*Corregidora* is a story of a contemporary blues singer who was traumatized by her maternal ancestors' narratives. The legacy of slavery from nineteenth-century Brazil passed through the narratives cause Ursa's psychological problems, limit her sexual feelings and create difficulties in developing relationships with others. After spending her whole life searching for reconciliation, Ursa liberates herself from the trauma and pain caused by the narratives through using her ancestors' life stories to re-evaluate her painful past and turning those narratives into a mechanism for healing her pain. The novel is directly related to the importance of maternal narratives on the daughter's lives both as a form of trauma and for healing. Because of the fact that Ursa's trauma is not based on her personal experiences, Asharf H. A. Rushdy's notions of "intersubjective communion" and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's "phantom" are used to enhance understanding familial narratives and their effects on the descendants. Rushdy extensively discusses the crucial role of the maternal narratives in his work, "Relate Sexual to Historical: Race, Resistance and Desire in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*" through the use of "intersubjective communion." He defines "intersubjective communion" as "the creating of a sensibility that the hearer is an equal sharer in the story to the degree of being as involved in its events as the teller, of believing oneself to have lived out what another experiences" (273). Consequently, the hearer may share the narrator's pain although she does not share the same traumatic situations with her maternal ancestors. The hearer's pain thus

depends on the hearer's perception and understanding as well as the narratives' intensity. These factors can cause the hearer to identify with the narrators and become traumatized by those narratives.

Gender is another factor which influences "intersubjective communion." Ursa shares her foremothers' pain because she is faced with the possibility of being abused as her foremothers were. Ursa is a black woman whose physical beauty makes her more vulnerable to sexual advances, sometimes resulting in sexual abuse. She has no history of having any healthy male-female relationships, has become prejudiced against men and regards them as abusers. Listening to her maternal ancestors' narratives of abusive experiences, Ursa easily shares their pain of being abused by their male counterparts.

Instead of protecting the children from the possibility of being traumatized by maternal ancestors' narratives where the descendants can grow up in a secure environment, the maternal figures raised their descendants with traumatic narratives. However, slave women who experience traumatic situations may find the historical narratives of their maternal ancestors therapeutic. Judith Lewis Herman, a psychiatrist whose clinical work and research focuses on victims of domestic and political traumas, asserts the importance of narratives that, "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites [...] for the healing of individual victims" (qtd. in Horvitz 239). In other words, past narratives can help the narrators heal their traumas. They help the narrators encounter those unspeakable emotions and traumas and become an outlet for the narrators to express that repressed pain. Moreover, the narratives were the ancestors' tools to resist Corregidora and the official history which does not include the female slaves' stories. Ursa's maternal ancestors pass on their terrible experiences of being sexually abused by their male counterparts to the next

generation by means of oral narratives in order to complete official history which deletes female slaves' sufferings. In order to preserve those painful memories Ursa's foremothers "challenge (to) patriarchal systems of meaning" and "delete(ions) (of) master narratives concerning the nature of slavery," as Stephanie Li indicates in "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayle Jones's *Corregidora*" (132). Ursa's ancestors made an attempt to assert their voice and their rights. Moreover, those ancestor's narratives have to be passed on to their descendants because it is a necessary process in their identity formation. Donia Elizabeth Allen examines the importance of the family history the foremother passed to Ursa in her work, "The Role of the Blues in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*", "the information they (maternal ancestors) share with Ursa is crucial to her understanding of who she is and where she comes from" (269). As a result, it becomes imperative for the maternal ancestors to narrate their stories to Ursa, although the descendants are at risk of being traumatized. The foremothers are caught up in the dilemma of whether or not to reveal their painful experiences to Ursa. Ursa is also caught in the dilemma of whether or not to listen to her family history. Yet, in order to know her roots, Ursa takes this risk and, unfortunately, is traumatized. The sexual relationships she forms with her male counterparts are difficult and problematic. Listening to the abusive sexual relationships of her maternal figures without experiencing the healthy sexual relationship, she lacks a good relationship model. She does not know how to express her love and desire, nor know how to develop a healthy sexual relationship with her partners. To avoid the "intersubjective communion" caused by the maternal ancestors' narratives, her foremothers should have provided space for Ursa's interpretations, doubts and variations when forming male-female relationships. Ursa may be able to

form her own healthy identity and sexual relationship with others if she is given the space to do so.

Ursa's psychological condition and her problematic relationships are also affected by the incomplete nature of her maternal ancestors' narratives. These narratives do not provide good relationship models. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, well-known psychoanalytic theorists on family secrets, suggest the danger of having a fragmented history in "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology" is that the hearer can be traumatized by these gaps in history. Trauma is defined as a "phantom," the "result of the unconscious suspicion that something had been left unsaid during the life of the deceased relatives in the family line" (qtd. in Rushdy 279). The descendant may be haunted by the gap caused by an ancestors' secret which may cause psychological symptoms. Abraham posits that they may "act out or express in phobias of all kinds [...], obsession, restricted phantasmagorias or ones that take over the entire field of the subject's mental activities" (292). The protagonist of *Corregidora*, Ursa, also suffers from these psychological symptoms since her maternal ancestors shroud parts of their lives in secret. Ursa's maternal ancestors express only their pain and anger through their narratives. We can see that the narratives of the Corregidora women are mostly about the unbearable experiences of being sexually abused by their male counterparts without any mention of passion or sexual desire. Great Gram refuses to tell her descendants what happened in her sexual relationship with Corregidora before she ran away from the plantation and left her own daughter with him. Mama also refuses to tell Ursa about her sexual relationship with Martin. Having grown up with her ancestors' pain and anger toward their male counterparts and the history that excludes passion and sexual desire in the maternal ancestors' sexual relationship, Ursa

associates her male counterparts with abusers and has difficulties in forming relationships with them.

*Corregidora* was written within the context of Brazilian slavery. In Brazil, in particular, slave women were subject to the “sexualized commodification of their bodies” (Rushdy 281) and were often forced to sell their bodies and become prostitutes. Although Ursa Corregidora was born more than half a century after slavery was abolished in Brazil, she is greatly affected by the legacy of slavery passed down by her maternal ancestors living during those times. Their traumatic experiences with Corregidora included sexual abuse and incest. They attempted to resist Corregidora by leaving the evidence of their oppressed lives, but the evidence did not become part of their formal history. Corregidora burned all the written documents detailing and validating the abusive experiences of these female slaves. As a result, Ursa’s maternal ancestors used their oral narratives to give voice to their traumatic existence and resist Corregidora. Ursa’s maternal ancestors urged their descendants to strongly and obsessively remember the traumatic slave time and intensively transmitted the painful memory from one generation to the next. They repeatedly told her their traumatic stories forcing her to grow up with her maternal ancestors’ narratives:

[...] The two women in that house. The three of them at first and then when I was older, just the two of them, one sitting in a rocker, the other in a straight-back chair, telling me things. I’d always listen. [...] They kept to the house, telling me things. My mother would work while my grandmother told me, then she’d come home and tell me. I’d go to school and come back and be told. When I was real little, Great Gram rocking me and talking (100-101).

Ursa was forced to listen to the maternal ancestors’ stories attentively from when she was very young. The ancestors did their best in making sure that Ursa spent most of her time listening to their narratives. When they were free to narrate the past, they

always helped each other narrate their pain, and when someone was unavailable to perform this duty, they made sure that Ursa could spend her time listening to the family history from others. The ancestors' narratives thus permeated Ursa's consciousness and Ursa identifies herself with her ancestors' pain.

Apart from forcing Ursa to listen attentively and intensely to their stories, Great Gram increases the narrative's intensity in order to avoid variations in their family history. She narrates their stories repeatedly to make sure that Ursa can remember all the traumatic experiences of Corregidora women caused by that slave master and to assure that the version is consistent with earlier versions. At this point, the narratives of Great Gram become, what Rushdy calls, the "impersonal history of Corregidora" (275), as there were no more personal tales and feelings. In order to have the same version of history, Ursa is expected to share the same degree of pain experienced by her maternal ancestors.

In order for the narratives to be consistent with the family history, Great Gram repeatedly tells her experiences in coercive language and forces her descendants to pass the traumatic experiences to the next generation without raising any doubts or questions. Ursa recalls the following scenario she experienced from very young age:

Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I'd stared down at her hands. She would fold them and then unfold them. She didn't need her hands around me to keep me I her lap, and sometimes I'd see the sweat in her palms. [...] It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory. As if it were only the words that kept her anger. Once when she was talking, she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. Then she caught herself, and stopped, and held my waist again [...] Sweat inside her hands. Her palms like sunburnt gold (11-12).

The way she folded and unfolded her hands, her sweaty palms and the way she rubbed Ursa's thighs suggests Great Gram's struggle with her oppressed emotions during her narrative. It is as if she is constantly haunted by her traumatic experiences in Corregidora's plantation. Great Gram is committed to pass the traumatic stories onto her descendants, regarding as the most important duty of all Corregidora women because she believed that "words" are the only means available to help her deal with her traumatic past, and resist both the slave owner and the official version of history. Moreover, Great Gram forces her descendants to live with those traumatic narratives and passed them onto the next generation. Ursa is also taught not to doubt the veracity of Great Gram's narratives. This control is suggested by the way Great Gram slaps Ursa when she begins to doubt the truth of the narratives:

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 the 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 leave the 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).

Great Gram forces Ursa to believe the traumatic family history and urges her to hold onto the evidence of their suffering which replaces the written documents burned by Corregidora. Ironically, even though Great Gram gives priority to passing on the evidence of family traumas, she shrouds parts of her life from her descendants. She keeps her sexual resistance a secret and does not leave all the evidence to her descendants. Ursa learns only that "she [Great Gram] did something that made him [Corregidora] want to kill her" (79) but Ursa never knew exactly what Great Gram did to Corregidora. Martin questions the relationship between Great Gram and Corregidora when he asks, "How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was

love" (131). Martin's doubt also raises questions about Great Gram's sexual feelings in her relationship with Corregidora. Later in the story, we find out that there is desire in Great Gram's hatred as Ursa depicts: "Two humps on the same camel?" (102). Great Gram's desire can be suggested by the way she refused to leave Corregidora although she was freed after the emancipation as Great Gram narrates, "Corregidora's whores was freed too, [...] Mama stayed there with him even after it (slavery) ended, until she did something that made him want to kill her, and then she ran off [...]" (79). Corregidora also had desire for Great Gram and Great Gram knew that he had the deepest sexual desire for her: "I know I was the piece he wanted most" (126). Corregidora and Great Gram's relationship was one of both hatred and desire. Great Gram refuses to narrate her sexual affair and desire to her descendants, but only recounts her terrible sexual experiences with Corregidora. As a result, her descendants focus their attention on Great Gram's hatred and overlooked any possible sexual desire.

Great Gram's escape from Corregidora greatly affects her daughter's life. As a Brazilian plantation slave, Gram is forced to enter prostitution as her mother does. Gram has similar experiences to those of her mother who is raped by many men visiting Corregidora's whorehouse. Gram is forced to share Great Gram's pain by listening to her narratives and assuming the duty of passing her mother's traumatic experiences to the next generation. After her mother's secret resistance, Gram is sexually traumatized by men including her own father. The incestuous relationship makes her life even more complicated. Although Gram suffers both from her personal experience and from the narratives passed down by her maternal ancestors, Gram's narratives are not as intense as Great Gram's. Instead of forcing her descendant to leave evidence, Gram suggests the danger of the intense narratives regarding



traumatic experiences. She says, "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 our 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" (72). This excerpt suggests that Corregidora women are too attached to the traumatic family narratives which can cause traumas and psychological problems in their lives. However, Gram does not suggest that Ursa should completely abandon the family narrative. She urges Ursa to "bear witness" but does not focus on intense remembering. Gram uses the narratives for healing rather than resisting Corregidora. Rushdy sees ambivalence on the part of Gram's narratives when he says that Gram's narratives also suggest the slippery and flexible nature of emotions and feelings (267-277). Gram tells Ursa, "it's hard to always remember what you were feeling when you ain't feeling exactly that way no more" (79). This excerpt suggests that Gram's perception is quite different from Great Gram's. Great Gram insists on having intense remembering and narratives which foment the anger and pain caused by the traumatic experiences of slavery to stay alive, whereas Gram believes in the possibility for feelings to change as time passes, as well as the danger of intensive remembering that can cause psychological problems.

Mama is another character responsible for keeping the family narratives alive. As a character who has not undergone the traumatic plantation experience in the same way her maternal ancestors do, she is still affected by the legacy of slavery and is herself an offspring of an incestuous relationship between Corregidora and his daughter. This truth has haunted Mama throughout her life as, she is forced to live with the traumatic family narratives told by her ancestors and is finally consumed by them. Mama's narratives become impersonal as Ursa mentions, "Mama kept talking

until it wasn't her that was talking, but Great Gram. I [Ursa] stared at her because she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking" (124). Mama narrates Great Gram's stories as if she were Great Gram herself. She loses her personal identity and her voice as they merge with those of her ancestors. The narratives cause Mama's psychological problems as is indicated when she encounters difficulty in narrating a coherent version of the family traumas. Her narratives are fragmented, as Ursa comments, "She [Mama] began speaking again, hugging her shawl to her. It sounded almost as if she were speaking in pieces, instead of telling one long thing" (123). Up to this point Mama tries to fulfill the duty of keeping history alive but finally the intensive narratives cause Mama to become the mouthpiece for Great Gram. When she is the mouthpiece, the effects of Mama's narratives are no different from Great Gram's. Another similarity between Mama's and Great Gram's narratives is the effect of their private memory. Mama conceals her private memory from Ursa as Ursa mentions, "she [Mama] wouldn't give those [Mama's private memories] to me, though she passed the other ones [the family narratives] down, the monstrous ones, but she wouldn't give me her terrible ones. Loneliness. [...] Desire, too" (101). Mama decides to tell Ursa her maternal ancestors' stories and keep her private memories to herself. She does not tell Ursa about her relationship with Martin. She does not narrate their courtship, their sexual relationship and the abusive experiences. Mama refuses to tell Ursa about both her private hatred and desires. Li explains Mama's silence that, "Mama's silence was not only a product of her submission to Great Gram and Gram but it was also a deliberate strategy of self-protection" (136). She knows that Great Gram and Gram do not allow private memories and insist on telling only the family history. Since Mama is an obedient daughter, she decides to pass the family stories down to the next generation without including her personal stories. Mama knows that

her private memories of desire for men, instead of her hatred, may increase the maternal ancestors' anger. She also may fear violent responses to her private memory as Great Gram has responded to Ursa when she doubts Great Gram's narratives. All of this negativity and secrecy causes Mama to keep her personal experiences and feelings from Ursa. Growing up with this incomplete family history contributes to Ursa's psychological problem and difficulties in developing relationships with others.

It seems obvious that Mama and Ursa are traumatized by the painful narratives of the slave legacy passed down from their maternal ancestors and are in a danger of what Rushdy defines as "intersubjective communion." They endure psychological problems which can be suggested by their silence. Both characters refuse to speak, always responding to other characters and their male counterparts with silence. Initially Mama responds to Martin with silence because she is still haunted by the traumatic family narratives of Corregidora's sexual assaults on her maternal ancestors. When Mama and Martin see each other for the first time, Martin seems to have a one-way communication. Mama, being strongly negatively prejudiced against men, responds to Martin with silence:

I always like seeing you in here. They ain't nothing else  
Good about this place.

*I said nothing.*

My name's Martin, What's yours?

*I didn't answer.*

You always like to know who you talking to, or looking  
at. I mean, if you like somebody.

*No answer. [...]*

My name's Martin.

*I still wouldn't tell him what my name was.*

I don't mean you no harm.

*I wouldn't say anything.* I just keep looking down at the  
table. I wouldn't even look at him. I felt as if tears were in  
my eyes, but I hoped he didn't see them. It was like *I  
couldn't say nothing*, Ursa, it was just like my mouth was  
there, but *I just couldn't say nothing* (emphasis added, 113-  
114).

Clearly Mama, “expecting him [Martin] to be like the other mens was, and say real evil,” (114) refuses to establish a relationship with Martin and responds to Martin with silence.

Ursa also refuses to speak and always responds to other characters and her male counterparts, both Mutt and Tadpole, with silence. When Cat brings up the subject of prostitution and urges Ursa to discuss it, Ursa refuses by saying, “Now we ain’t talking about that” (30). Similarly when Cat tells Ursa about her relationship with her husband, “feel(ing) foolish in the bed at night with your man” (64), Ursa responds to Cat with silence: “I said nothing. [...] She was looking at me, expecting something she wanted me to tell her that I knew what it was like, but I wouldn’t tell her” (64). At this point, Ursa refuses to discuss male-female relationships with Cat. Cat and her husband’s unhealthy relationship is suggested by the way her husband refuses to act as her sanctuary from racial prejudice of the white master. This master-slave relationship reminds Ursa of the relationships between all Corregidora women and their male counterparts causing her to respond by keeping silent. Ursa consistently maintains a silent mode when she interacts with her husbands. When Tadpole confesses that he loves her, Ursa responds to his declaration of love with stoically: “I said nothing” (55). When they engage in sexual intercourse and Tadpole wants Ursa to say something about her feelings, she refused to say anything, thinking, “What I felt didn’t have words” (75) and when Tadpole does not seem to care about her sexual desires, Ursa keeps her silence: “he turned away from me. I closed my eyes, but didn’t go back to sleep. I wanted him again, but I said nothing” (80). Silence is also part of her conversations with Mutt, when he tells Ursa about his family history and that his great-grandmother was used as a property to pay off his great-grandfather’s debt. Mutt’s ancestors’ experiences probably remind Ursa of her

maternal ancestors' own painful relationships with their male counterparts.

Unfortunately, Ursa is unable to share her feelings with Mutt and refuses to give him a reason why she is unable to develop a healthy sexual relationship with him:

Hell if you can't, you got a cunt, ain't you?  
 I said nothing.  
 What's wrong, baby? What do you call it?  
 I still wouldn't answer (152).

Any time other characters remind Ursa of unhealthy male-female relationships or sexual desires, Ursa is unable to utter a word and responds with silence.

Apart from her silent response to sexual relationships, Ursa's psychological problems are manifested when Ursa loses her ability to engage in language. When she starts to articulate her pain and fear, Ursa always ends up stopping and breaking her sentences. The first break occurs when she begins to think about her important duty as a Corregidora woman, "making generation." Ursa said, "What's bothering me? Great Gram, because I can't make generation. I remember everything you told me, Great Gram, and Gram too and" (41). This excerpt helps to explain how Ursa is haunted by the duty of "making generation." Her sentence is broken and unfinished because she fears that she can not fulfill her duty of "making generation." Another break also occurs when Ursa is gripped with the fear of being unable to have children. Ursa talks to herself saying, "[...] No, what's inside my head because those other women they could do it. Afraid of what I" (89) and she stops when the burden of "making generation" haunts her.

Ursa's psychological symptoms are also manifested when her consciousness is interrupted by her own reveries about the traumatic family history narrated as Stephanie Li indicates, "memories and the voices of others intrude upon Ursa's consciousness such that it is often difficult to distinguish between dream and reality and to identify various speakers" (131). This statement is supported by many scenes

where her maternal ancestors' narratives interrupt her thinking; these are primarily related to the maternal ancestors' experiences of sexual molestation. After Jeffy makes sexual advances to Ursa, she discusses this with Cat and is caught in a reverie about her ancestors' sexual experiences. The blues stanza existing in her reverie suggests how Corregidora has molested Great Gram and Grandma:

While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed  
 While mama be sleeping, the ole man he crawl into bed  
 When mama have wake up, he shaking his nasty ole head  
 Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said  
 Don't come here to my house, don't come here to my house I said  
 Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead  
 Fore you get any this booty, you gon have to lay down dead (67).

This reverie suggests Ursa's feelings about the traumas of being sexually assaulted, her disgust at having unwanted visitors in her bed and her response to the visitor who sexually assaulted her. Her response is similar to how her maternal ancestors responded to Corregidora's unwanted visits. Jeffy's sexual assault on Ursa parallels to what happened between Great Gram, Gram and Corregidora. All Corregidora women are sexually accosted by unwanted visits while they are sleeping. Jeffy's intrusion and unwanted advancement reminds Ursa of how Corregidora used to sneak into her maternal ancestors' beds. These repeated narratives of her maternal ancestors and her foremother's terrible sexual experiences constantly pop into her mind.

Another reverie takes place after Ursa has lost her ability to conceive children. When Ursa thinks about not being able to "make generation" through giving birth to her own children, her thoughts are interrupted by Mama's narratives about being inside her mother's womb:

Good night, Ursa, baby. Good night, Irene. Honey, I remember when you was a warm seed inside me, but I tried not to bruise you. Don't bruise any of your seeds. I won't, Mama I never told you how Great Gram had Gram. She thought she had to go to the toilet, and then something told

her not to go outside to the outhouse like she was going to, and then she squat down on the chamber pot. And then that's how she had your Gram, coming out in the slop jar. That's how we all begin, remember that. That's how we all begin. A mud ditch or a slop jar or hit the floor or the ground. It's all the same. But you got to make generations, you go on making them anyway (41).

Ursa believes that she is worthless as her mother compares the lives of all Corregidora with "a slop jar" and the only way to make her life worthwhile is to "make generation." She becomes obsessed with the duty of "making generation."

After losing her ability to have a child, Ursa decides to separate from her husband, Mutt, and develops a relationship with Tadpole. In this relationship, Ursa is still caught up in her reveries. After Ursa talks with Tadpole about Corregidora, Ursa moves back into Great Gram's narratives describing Corregidora:

A Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner, he took her out of the field when she was still a little child and put her to work in his whorehouse while she was a child. She was to go out or he would bring the man in and the money they gave her she was to turn over to him. There were other women he used like that. She was the pretty little one with the almond eyes and coffee-bean skin, his favorite. "A good little piece. My best. Dorita. Little gold piece (10).

Great Gram's narratives describes how Ursa's ancestors were abused by Corregidora, were treated as sex objects and commodities. They negatively affect Ursa's relationships with men and prevent her from establishing healthy relationships with her partners.

Corregidora's treatment of woman as sex objects or commodities is found in Gram's narratives which pop into Ursa's mind after she has discussed "making generation" with Tadpole. Great Gram narrated, "[Corregidora] make the woman fuck and then take their money" (23). Ursa can not get rid of her maternal ancestors' sexual experiences and still believes that men treat women as a sex object from whom they

can find sexual pleasure or make money. Therefore, every time she experiences sexual abuse or develops a sexual relationship, she is caught in reveries related to her maternal ancestors' sexual traumas, and haunted by her ancestors' narratives. No matter what she was doing or thinking, her maternal ancestors' narratives never left her mind.

Apart from the inability to narrate their abusive experiences, Mama and Ursa cannot develop relationships with their male counterparts. Their sexual relationships are affected by the narratives of the maternal ancestors and the duty to "make generation." This duty to "make generation" is the reason Mama develops a sexual relationship with Martin which is not based on love or sexual desire. The sole reason for Mama to interact with Martin as reflected in her narratives is her desire to "make generation." Mama declares, "I didn't want no man. Cause I knew I wasn't lookin for none. But it was like it knew it wanted you [Ursa]. It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl" (114). When she has sex with Martin, she struggles with the sexual encounter and does not allow herself to feel anything. Mama narrates, "And then all of a sudden it was like I feel the whole man in me, just feel the whole man in there. *I pushed him out*. It was like it was just that feeling of him in there. And nothing else. I hadn't even given myself time to feel anything else before I pushed him out. But he must have ...I... still that memory, feeling of him in me. *I wouldn't let myself feel anything*" (emphasis added, 117-118). The way Mama represses her sexual desire reminds us of how Great Gram and Gram banished their sexual feelings. Great Gram and Gram were forced to work as prostitutes on the plantation and were repeatedly raped by the master and other men. They had to suppress their feelings in order to survive and avoid the pain caused by prostitution. Haunted by those narratives of her foremothers' abusive slave



experiences, Mama also banishes her sexual feelings. Her lack of sexual feelings leads to the unhealthy relationship with her husband. Mama's sexual encounter with Martin does not go well; Mama tries to "push(ed) him out". Throughout Mama's narratives about her sexual relations, Mama does not show any sexual desire or passion. Stephanie Li explains this aversion to sexual intimacy, "to enjoy sex or allow for an emotional connection outside the matrilineal line presents a betrayal of Mama's familial obligation" (136). As a Corregidora woman who is obsessed by the traumatic family history, Mama associates Martin with a dominating abuser and cannot allow herself to indulge in sexual pleasure during their encounters. Instead Martin is treated as a necessary tool only for "making generation." The relationship between Mama and Martin gradually deteriorates and eventually resembles Corregidora's relationship with her maternal ancestors. Mama is physically abused by her husband and says that during beatings: "he started slapping me, just slapping me all over the face" and she was beaten until her face is "black and blue all over" (119). Moreover Martin also casts her out to wander on the street "looking like a whore" (121). The word "whore" reminds us the relationship between Corregidora and Mama's ancestors, where he was the master and forced his female slaves to work as prostitutes or whores. The maternal ancestors' narratives continue to powerfully affect Mama's life as they maim her sexually and destroy any opportunity of establishing a healthy sexual relationship with her husband.

Ursa also encounters difficulties with her sexuality and has problems in the relationships with both her male counterparts, Mutt and Tadpole. Ursa and Mutt's relationship confirms Ursa's rigid code of binary opposition between men and women passed down by her maternal ancestors. Mutt acts like Corregidora when he announces the sale of his wife, Ursa: "I got a piece of ass for sale, anybody want to

bid on it?" (159). Mutt puts Ursa up for sale at a public auction and totally dehumanizes her. Corregidora forced Great Gram to have sex with him and raped his own daughter. When Mutt wants to have sex with Ursa, he does not care about her sexual needs as she admits, "when ever [Mutt] wanted it and I didn't, he'd take me, because he knew that I wouldn't say. No, Mutt, or even if I had, sometimes I wonder about whether he would have taken me anyway" (156). It seems evident that Mutt disregards Ursa's feelings just as Corregidora did of Great Gram's and Gram's. Ursa denies the arousal of any passion which results in sexual encounters with no feelings. She always struggles with sexual encounters and says, "I didn't let him inside me completely" or "I felt uncomfortable [...] to do with opening up" (152). The sexual encounters became problematical and, although Mutt loves Ursa, he cannot develop a healthy relationship with her. He can not understand why Ursa allows herself to be obsessed by her ancestors' narratives and how these narratives lead to her difficulties in having sexual relationship. These struggles are a source of anger for Mutt during their sexual encounters. The relationship between Mutt and Ursa eventually becomes more problematic and peaks during a fight where Ursa falls down a flight of stairs. This accident causes her unborn fetus to die and she is unable to conceive after this time.

Ursa's relationship with her second husband, Tadpole, is not significantly different from her first marriage. Ursa decides to begin her second marriage a few days after breaking up with Mutt. She seems to make her decision without love or taking time to think about it carefully. She cannot feel or even describe sex with him when she says, "he was inside, and I feel nothing. I wanted to feel, but I couldn't" (82). Ursa also struggled a lot when having sex with Tadpole:

We stood up but I couldn't get him inside me. I wanted to say, "I'm not relaxed enough," but I didn't.

He stroked me on the behind, pulling up on me. Then he said, "You have to work too." He pulled up on me more, squatting down. He took me with him to the wall, squatting more. I still couldn't get him in.

"Work, Ursa."

"I am working," I said. It was almost a cry, but a cry I didn't want him to hear. I don't want him to hear. I don't know how long it was between it and when I finally said, "Tadpole, I can't, I can't."

He stood watching me for a moment, and then he said, "Well, I'm not going to stand here all day."

He walked away from me and went in the bathroom (83-84).

Ursa cannot allow herself to feel comfortable with sexual relationship. Tadpole does not seem to have true love for Ursa. He is just fascinated by her beauty and wants to have a passionate sexual relationship with her. As a result, Tadpole responds to Ursa's struggle in their sexual relations in the same way as Mutt does. He expresses his frustration with her struggle and does not understand Ursa's obsessive preoccupation with her family history. They know that their relationship is problematical but they do nothing to improve it. Ursa refuses to tell Tadpole her problems. Every time he asks about her trauma, she responds to him with silence. Tadpole cannot endure this kind of relationship and decides to have a sexual relationship with someone else who can provide him with sexual pleasure.

Ursa tries to cope with her traumas using the maternal narratives to heal her pain. Completing the missing pieces of her ancestors' narratives helps make sense of her own life in the same way that she subsequently uses those narratives to re-evaluate her painful past. After being haunted by an incomplete family history, Ursa begins to realize the danger of the family history passed down by her ancestors through Gram's narratives. Gram reveals to Ursa the difficulty of recalling the past and how feelings change when history is passed from one generation to the next. She admits, "(it's)

hard to always remember what you were feeling when you ain't feeling it exactly that way no more" (79). Gram recognizes the futility of the effort to keep the anger alive in one's consciousness as it ultimately does not benefit the descendants in anyway except to haunt them. For Rushdy, narratives should be used to heal the mind more than used to keep anger alive (277). After thinking about Gram's narratives, Ursa begins to realize the dangers of being too obsessed with the family narratives she inherits from her ancestors. She comes to understand Mama's suffering from the consequences of the family narratives and the demand to "make generation." Ursa also learns the importance of private memories/secrets from Gram's narratives realizing that "dwelling on it [family history] to the exclusion of her own life" and "making herself a monument to the sufferings of the past" (Rushdy 276-277) could cause trauma. As a result, Ursa learns to differentiate the private memory from the family history in order to end the cycle of being traumatized by others' experiences. She decides to see her mother and ask for Mama's private memory. Listening to Mama's stories, Ursa learns about the experiences and emotions of another Corregidora woman. When Mama shares these deep rooted secrets with Ursa, it is Ursa's first time outside the dominating family narratives of Great Gram and Gram. She finds out the truth that actually her father had feelings of love and passion for her mother. Martin had tried to fight against Mama's prejudice against him regarding him as a rapist and tried to help Mama reduce the obsession with her family history. It was her mother who destroyed the relationship. Her mother developed a sexual relationship without love and used Martin only as a tool for "making generation." During their sexual relations, Mama allowed herself no sexual feelings, insisting on being haunted by the angry voices of her foremothers and images of Corregidora as a rapist, Amy Gottfried discusses this in where she mentions, "Angry Art: Speech, and

Song in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*", "(Mama) denied a sense of herself as a private and sexual being" (565). After listening to Mama's stories, Ursa learns how the family narratives influence all *Corregidora* women and their relationships with men. Eventually she has learned the connection between her mother's relationship with Martin and her relationships with her male counterparts, Mutt and Tadpole, Ursa understanding that she has also taken part in perpetuating the family history and in her failed sexual relationships with men.

At the end of the novel, Mutt returns to Ursa asking for a reunion after a long separation. The relationship between Mutt and Ursa becomes much more settled. During this separation Mutt has tried to recall his own family history in order to understand Ursa better. He imitates his Great-grandfather's behavior after he lost his wife during slavery because of his unsettled debt by eating "onion so people wouldn't come around him" then eating "peppermint so they would" (183-184). He realizes that being obsessed with his ancestors' past cannot help him deal with his problems, since as he tells Ursa, "it didn't do nothing but make me sick" (184). However, revisiting the past helps Mutt understand how much the past could traumatize Ursa and no longer demands that Ursa forget the past. Ursa also learns about the dangers of her maternal narratives. During a moment of intense sexual intimacy, there is an incident that helps Ursa complete her family history and realizes her own power to change for the better. She is able to find out "what is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" (184). She makes the assumption that Great Gram had bitten *Corregidora*'s penis while performing fellatio because "it is a moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it

breaks the skin” (184). Ursa realizes that Great Gram was not passive and had the power to abuse Corregidora. This incident helps Ursa realize her own potential to be an abuser when she declares, “I could kill you [Mutt]” (184).

Ursa begins to claim her sexual desire in their sexual relationship. When Mutt asks her whether she is ready for sexual intimacy she replies, “I said I was” (184). No longer a passive woman who always says, “I wanted to get fucked” (89), she now actively claims her desire:

[...] I wanted it too. We didn't speak. We got out of our clothes. I got between his knees.  
 “You never would suck it,” he was saying. “You never would suck it when I wanted you to. Oh, baby, you never would suck it. I didn't think you would do this for me (184).

Ursa no longer accepts the passive role in a sexual relationship and actively initiates sexual encounters, expressing her desire and acting on it. After the sexual encounter, Ursa describes her ability to distinguish her personal stories from the family history and not to allow others' pain to intrude her thoughts.

It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her* to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore (184).

Ursa can now differentiate Great Gram's, Gram's, Mama's and her own stories from each other and points out that Mama's and Ursa's relationships with their husbands were destroyed by their obsessive interact in Corregidora's stories. She accepts the fact that she and Mama had taken part in a broken relationship. They hurt their husbands in spite of the fact that their husbands did not abuse them in the same way Corregidora did to Great Gram and Gram. Claiming responsibility for it, Ursa is enabled to move beyond her maternal narratives.

The novel ends with a blues stanza:

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.  
 “Then you don’t want me.”  
 “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,”  
 “Then you don’t want me.”  
 “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,”  
 “Then you don’t want me.”  
 He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a  
 kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” I said.  
 He held me tight (185).

This stanza shows Ursa’s acceptance that what Mutt did to her was not abuse. She hurt herself when she allowed herself to be traumatized by her ancestor’s narratives and also used those narratives to hurt Mutt and destroy their relationship. The blues stanza also suggests how much Ursa opened herself to Mutt when she cried and revealed to Mutt what it is she really wants. Donia Elizabeth Allen suggests in “Creating Generations: The Relationship between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*” that Ursa’s crying is significant (263) because throughout the story, Ursa never cried in the presence of her men. When she had a fight with Mutt or found Tadpole in bed with another woman, she held back her tears, not wanting to show her vulnerability. By the end of the novel, she is able to cry in Mutt’s arms telling him what she wants and expresses a willingness to share her feelings with him. This change suggests the possibility for a better relationship between Ursa and Mutt.

In conclusion, Ursa’s thoughts during her forty-nine years are dominated by her ancestors’ narratives. Constantly haunted by her maternal stories, she becomes debilitated by them enough to become unable to live an ordinary life and is. Whenever she develops a relationship with a man, it always ends in failure. There seems to be no emotional growth or reconciliation of all conflicts. To cope with these problems, Ursa returns to her ancestors. With the narratives and stories of her ancestors, Ursa learns how her foremothers became successfully reconciled with the family history, as well as how the ancestral history she shares damages her

relationship with her husbands. Additionally, learning Great Gram's secret empowers her. At this point, she realizes her own power in the sexual relationship and is able to claim her own desire. At the end of the novel, Jones suggests the possibility of Ursa to heal her pain and develop a healthy sexual relationship without harming her husband after a long separation.