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## Trabajo Fin de Grado

The Hardship of Being Black in Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage*: an Intersectional Approach to the Condition of Black Women in America

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## **Abstract**

Tayari Jones, as a black woman living in America, has experienced many situations that encouraged her to write a book to raise awareness of the difficulties that African Americans have to lead a safe life. In her book *An American Marriage* (2018), she centres on the problem of wrongful incarceration. Her main character, Roy, is unfairly imprisoned and this provokes destructive consequences in his life, like the loss of his beloved wife. This book does not only criticize the problem of unfair imprisonment, but it also deals with other conflicts like racism and classism, which seem to affect every single African American citizen. Finally, this book also shows the problems that black women have to face for being women and black at the same time. I will explain this situation from the approach of Intersectional Feminism. Apart from that, I will prove in this essay that the book aims at immersing the reader in an African American world in order to make them feel the problems that blacks have from a close perspective.

## **Resumen**

Tayari Jones, como mujer de color habitante en América, ha vivido varias situaciones que la animaron a escribir un libro para generar conciencia sobre las dificultades que tienen los afroamericanos para llevar una vida segura. En su libro *An American Marriage* (2018) se centra en el conflicto del encarcelamiento equivocado. Su protagonista, Roy, es injustamente condenado, lo cual provoca consecuencias destructivas en su vida, como la pérdida de su amada esposa. Este libro no solo critica el problema de la encarcelación injusta, sino que también trata otros conflictos como el racismo y el clasismo que parecen afectar a todos los ciudadanos afroamericanos. Por último, este libro expone los problemas a los que deben enfrentarse las mujeres negras por ser mujeres y negras al mismo tiempo. Explicaré esta situación desde el enfoque del Feminismo Interseccional. Aparte de eso, en este ensayo demostraré que el propósito de este libro es sumergir al lector en un mundo de Afroamericanos para hacerle sentir de cerca los problemas que éstos tienen.

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## **Introduction: Tayari Jones and *An American Marriage* (2018)**

*An American Marriage* was published in 2018 and it denounces a problem that started from the moment white Americans took black people to America as slaves in 1619. Although slavery ended in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, racism and social exclusion towards African Americans lasts to this day. It is true that substantial progress has been achieved since then, but African Americans are still segregated, punished, and accused of crimes they never committed.

The word racism is defined by the Cambridge dictionary as “the belief that people’s qualities are influenced by their race and that the members of other races are not as good as the members of your own, or the resulting unfair treatment of members of other races”. This is the case in America, which judges African Americans by the colour of the skin. In 1968, a report concluded that the US was strongly afflicted by segregation:

Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.... Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it. (Kerner Commission pp 1-2)

This racism goes beyond segregation. It has had many consequences along history, starting with slavery. After being free from slavery and having the right to vote, new ways of racism hit black people, and this changing nature of racism towards them lasts to these days. For this reason, there is a disproportionate number of black people in American prisons. In 2010, a census was carried out for the “Prison Policy Initiative” that proved

that the highest number of prisoners in America were black with 2,306 people per 100,000 (Sawyer). Racism hit black men and women differently because men still had a privileged position over women. In 1870, black men were granted the right to vote, but black women had to wait until 1965, forty-five years after white women were granted this right to. This was a consequence of the racism within the women's suffrage movement, who struggled only for white women, and a consequence of sexism because black men did not believe it was necessary to fight for women's rights.

As a consequence, in 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the concept of Intersectionality to explain the situation of black women. To do this, she used the metaphor of an intersection, and she placed women of color in the middle of that intersection. She named the roads of that intersection 'Racism' and 'Sexism', and the Law is "like that ambulance that shows up and is ready to treat Emma only if it can be shown that she was harmed on the race road or on the gender road, but not where those roads intersected" (Crenshaw 10:25–10:43). Nowadays, this term is a whole theoretical framework that explores the different factors that can affect marginalized women, apart from the mere fact of being women. Some of these factors are race, sex, heterosexism, or economy, and they can make a woman be more oppressed or more privileged, depending on the situation. In Jones' *An American Marriage*, both protagonists suffer racism. But Celestial is stuck in that imaginary intersection between racism and sexism.

The problematic source of racism that is most criticized by the black movements is the one coming from the police, who frequently shoot at black innocent people for unnecessary reasons. A movement called Black Lives Matter has developed in response that tries to stop this violence, and it has emerged stronger than ever this last month after George Floyd's assassination by a white policeman the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2020. This movement

has caused many protests around the world lately, and it seems that they are raising awareness of all the injustices committed against the black population.

But, despite all this activism, African Americans have suffered racism directly or indirectly. The author of *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones, experienced the feeling of having people she knows being judged or even killed. She relates in a short essay she entitled “This Is A Love Story” a traumatic event in her youth in which a serial killer killed thirty black children. She highlights that most of them were boys because she believes men are more likely to suffer this violence than women, and the fact that two of these children she knew personally marked her. She also recalls the detention of Henry Louis Gates, a Harvard University professor “because he was thought to be burglarizing his own home” (Jones, “This is a Love Story”). In this same essay, she mentions shootings by the police at people she knew, and this always made her feel threatened. She says what all blacks think, and it is that they are not secure, and their lives can change at any moment.

Tayari Jones was born in 1970 in Atlanta, where she spent her childhood. She was born in a middle-class family, being child of a second marriage. Her parents were PhDs who met in graduate school and they were involved in civil rights. In 1983, she and her family went to Nigeria thanks to a Fulbright Scholarship that was granted to her father, a professor at Clark Atlanta University. In 1991, she finished her bachelor’s degree in English at the Spelman College in Atlanta. Later, in 1994, she received her Master’s Degree in English from the University of Iowa. In 2000, she completed a Master of Arts in Fiction from Arizona State University. After finishing these studies, she received various fellowships from different artistic institutions like the National Endowment for the Arts, United States Artists, and others (Vasconcelos)

Tayari Jones has written four novels. The first one was published in 2002, and it is entitled *Leaving Atlanta*, then she wrote *The Untelling* (2005). These two novels were not successful, and when Jones felt that she was not going to succeed, she decided to write *The Silver Sparrow* (2011) for herself, and she made another copy for her sister. As it is explained in the Radcliffe Magazine, one day Jones went to a writer's conference and read a fragment of her book, when Judy Blume appeared almost miraculously in her life and helped her to have a conversation with a publisher (Harrison). After that, her book became famous and she became known. The last novel she has published is *An American Marriage* (2018), which is the book that will be analysed in this essay. This book deals with the unjust imprisonment of a black man and the consequent destruction of his marriage.

After working seven years on it, Jones published her novel in 2018 and it was very well-received. Oprah Winfrey said, "It's among Tayari's many gifts that she can touch us soul to soul with her words", which shows how she was moved by this book. For this reason, Oprah contacted Jones and her book was chosen the first Oprah's Book Club Selection in 2018. Barack Obama also expressed his opinion about the book "An American Marriage is a moving portrayal of the effects of a wrongful conviction on a young African American couple". Obama's and Winfrey's opinions appear in the front matter of the book together with many other comments of famous people, newspapers and websites which praise her work. This book was a New York Times Bestseller.

*An American Marriage* (2018) tells the story of a black couple that has recently married, and they are happy together, as well as leading a normal life. Roy works as a sales rep for a book company, while Celestial is an artist who makes baby dolls. But, one day, Roy is accused of raping a woman who seems to have confused him with another man. Consequently, he is imprisoned, and Celestial feels so lonely that she starts spending



a lot of time with her best friend Andre and they finally fall in love and get engaged. From that moment everything starts changing completely and we see how Roy loses everything he has just because of a mistake, and because the judges do not bother to investigate the incident.

In the epigraph of the novel, there is a quotation by Claudia Rankine which says “What happens to you doesn’t belong to you, only half concerns you. It’s not yours. Not yours only”. Borrowing these words, Jones is summarizing the ideology of the book, a book in which characters are condemned to suffer by external circumstances. The use of this quotation anticipates what will happen, and it explains that what happens to Roy is not his fault.

The book is divided into three chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter is entitled “Bridge Music”, which indicates calm, and it truly is the chapter in which Roy and Celestial suffer the least in the book: even if bad things happen, they are together and support each other. But everything starts to change in the second chapter, which is named “Prepare a table for me”, and it makes reference specially to Andre’s arrival at Celestial’s life—that’s why this chapter starts with Andre speaking— but it also makes reference to Roy’s coming out of prison. Finally, the third chapter is entitled “Generosity” , and it seems that this title makes reference to the attitude of Andre when he is being hit by Roy, because despite the fact that he almost cannot speak, he does not let Celestial call the police. He shows generosity when he does not want Roy to go back to prison.

This book deals with very important points. Its main theme is the progressive separation of a couple as a consequence of unfair imprisonment. But, in this story, the personal is political, so Roy’s and Celestial’s problem is not something that they can solve, but something that belongs to society, their personal experience affects a high number of people. So, the novel implicitly deals with many important issues like racism,

segregation, unfair imprisonment, or the situation of African American women, and it puts into question the freedom of African Americans. In this essay, I will show the book's intentions to portray how difficult life is for African Americans due to the new ways to enslave them and steal their freedom from them. Also, I will prove that the book wants to transmit the message that a black woman's suffering is double because of being black and being a woman and I will explain it from an Intersectional approach. First, I will focus on the form of the book: genre and narrative voices. And then I will analyse the book's message about race, class, and gender.

## **1 Chapter One: A Neo-Slave Narrative in Three Voices**

### **1.1.Genre**

*An American Marriage* is a novel that is closely related to the genre of the neo-slave narratives because it shares many characteristics with them. The term neo-slave narrative was first coined by Ishmael Reed when he was writing his novel *Flight to Canada* (1976), and it refers to the fictional accounts of contemporary African American characters who have to face problems that remind the reader of their historical past as slaves and make them—and us as readers—doubt if slavery really ended or it just changed its form. As Ashraf H.A. Rushdy said in his book *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, “the Neo-slave narratives emphasize the historical legacy of slavery ... in the sense of unveiling past and ongoing strategies of racial stratification” (231). In other words, in neo-slave narratives we see that slavery is not something that ended suddenly, but it is ongoing because there is still a division between blacks and whites in which black people are subordinated to whites. And this is exactly what happens in *An American Marriage*. Although at the beginning we have a happily married couple, later we start knowing about their past and how their families suffered racism in different ways.

These accounts are novels in most of the cases, and they can be set in the slavery era or in the New World, focusing on the new ways of enslavement. Some very well-known neo-slave narratives are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Similar to the original slave narratives, they are narrated by a first-person narrator. The difference between them is that this first-person narrator is a real former slave in slavery narratives who tells the way he escaped from slavery, while in neo-slave narratives it is a fictional character. Jones's book shares all these characteristics with neo-slave narratives, it is a first person narration, narrated by different people but always showing the African American perspective of the story, and it shows a new way of enslavement by which a black man is deprived of his right of freedom: unfair incarceration.

At the beginning of Tayari Jones's novel, we can read a conversation between Roy and Celestial talking about slavery as something that belonged to the past and which they would not mention to their children: "I'm not going to remember my kids that somebody died in order for me to do everyday things" (Jones, *An American Marriage* 8). At this point they refuse to acknowledge the past of African Americans, and the novel seems to be just the story of a black couple who lead a white-American life without the problems of the past. But, as the novel advances, we start seeing signs of segregation and problems that the characters would not have if they were not black. This somehow makes them realize that neither them nor their children will have a normal life, and that they are condemned to suffer slavery in different ways, directly or indirectly. In this story, Jones emphasizes the suffering of the directly 'enslaved' man (Roy), but also the indirectly affected people. For this reason, she used three narrators for her novel.

## **1.2. Narrative Voices**

In this story, the three chapters that compose the book are divided into sub-chapters entitled with the name of the character that narrates at that moment. This is the first evidence of the importance of narrators in the book. There are three narrators, and the three of them are extra-homodiegetic narrators, that is, first person narrators narrating in retrospective. Celestial, Roy and Andre are the narrators and also the main characters of the story.

The first to narrate is Roy, he introduces the story and explains his relationship with Celestial. But, the main reason for him being the first to narrate is that his voice is needed to tell the reader the incident with the woman who accuses him of raping her. As a narrator at the beginning of the story, Roy makes several anticipations of his imprisonment and his consequent destruction of life: “A meteor crashed our life on Labor Day Weekend” (Jones 12), at this point we know that something destructive is going to happen to them, and it is something that goes beyond their strength and which they cannot control, just like a meteor.

A couple of pages later he remembers when Celestial suggested that they go back home and after telling us that he did not agree he comments “Looking back on it, it’s like watching a horror flick and wondering why the characters are so determined to ignore the danger signs” (14), he is always reminding the reader that something is going to destroy their happiness. But he does not say what it is, not even at the last moment before we know what happened, in which he says “And this was the last happy evening I would experience for a very long time” (27). After presenting his last reflection —“And this was the last happy evening I would experience for a very long time” (27)— the book jumps to Celestial’s narration, and it is she who narrates the moment in which Roy is arrested, probably because the book wants to put us in her shoes and show us that she is suffering too. It seems that the most important point of view is Celestial’s.

Jones decided to add Andre's perspective too. His point of view is important because we need to know his perspective of the story. As he is a narrator, he is granted the possibility to make clear that he loved Celestial before, and this is the main function of Andre's voice. The third chapter is narrated by him, and in it he tries to make clear all the time that "I planted my flag way back in high school" (98). He feels guilty because he knows he is betraying his friend Roy, but he tries to comfort himself by repeating that "Celestial isn't something you can steal like a wallet" (102).

The order of the voices is also very important. The first four chapters follow this order: Roy – Celestial – Andre – Celestial – Roy. In them, Celestial's voice is alternated with Andre's and Roy's, and this shows the love circle that is formed between them and portrays her confusion in relation to her feelings towards these two men. She loves both Roy and Andre, and she does not know whether she should leave Roy and be with Andre or be a good wife and stay with Roy. Then, their voices alternate depending on what is said in each chapter. For example, when Roy and Celestial remember the first time they met they narrate one after the other, or when Andre and Roy are fighting for Celestial it is their voices that predominate. So, the book creates meaning by ordering the voices of the narrators in a significant way. An interesting aspect is that all the narrators are black and, consequently, all the story is narrated from the perspective of African Americans. This shows the importance of race, which I will analyse in the following chapter.

## **2. Chapter Two: Race**

Race is a key element in this book because all the plot revolves around the consequences of being black in America. Also, we see the distinction between white, black and light-skinned people, which is very marked. There are many allusions to races in this novel, and to the differences between them.

This book merges us in a world of African Americans, all the main characters are black, and they interact with other black characters because the writer wanted to focus on African Americans and wanted the reader to see everything through their point of view. This implicitly portrays the marginality of black people in the US, it seems that they can create close bonds only with people who have their same skin colour because white people do not trust them or prejudge them, so they do not get close to them. However, black characters in this story also try to exclude white people. As we see at the beginning of the book, the mothers of Roy's friends all tell them "If she can't use your comb, don't bring her home"(7). This means that black mothers want their children to have love relationships only with African American girls.

There is an imaginary line separating blacks and whites in America, and when they cross this line, they end up being hurt as a result of racism. This is exemplified when Roy meets a white woman at the hotel and ends up being incarcerated as a consequence of maintaining a conversation with her and going to her room to do her a favour. Also, it seems that there is segregation even among blacks because they differentiate between dark-skinned and light-skinned people, giving preference to darker skinned characters. Roy is dark-skinned, and we are told at the beginning of the book that he used to have a relationship with a light-skinned girl who ended up leaving him for another boy whom Roy describes as "A paperwork sort of person"(Jones, *An American Marriage* 6). When Roy tells his parents about her, his mother Olive replies: "he is always letting these light-skinned girls hurt his feelings" (7). So, the more similar their skin is, the more comfortable they feel. We can interpret this as an unconscious behaviour that African Americans have acquired throughout history because they have got used to the rejection of whites, or it can also be read as internalized racism, that is, racism within the black community. However, this is not the only interpretation, Olive's reply is based on the assumption that

white people own more power. So, each time Roy ends a relationship with a white girl, his mother takes for granted that the girl is the one to blame for it.

However, the distinction between whites and blacks is much more marked. This is made explicit in the book when Celestial tells the story of her mother when she was a child and was once called “A baby maid” (Jones, *An American Marriage* 62) by a white girl from an inferior social class. This scene happened to her around the 1960s. So, they had to suffer segregation at that moment, and, even if there was an evolution in the tolerance of this society, the separation between blacks and whites was unconsciously assumed and inherited by the children of both. This inheritance is portrayed at the moment when Celestial tells Roy that she saw a black boy who resembled him and she says “A voice in my head that was not my own said, *A baby prisoner*” (63).

In general, there is the assumption that only whites are rich, and blacks can only reach economic welfare if they work doubly hard. This is made explicit when Roy says “Now Celestial promises that she will never say that they [their children] have to be twice as good to get half as much” (8), they are aware of their condition as blacks and the consequences of belonging to this marginalized group. This racism subordinates blacks to whites and makes them always be a step behind. This is clear when Celestial is describing the former social class of her parents and she says they were “what the rest of America thinks of as middle-middle class and what black America calls upper-middle class” (29). We see that the social class is relative because when a race generally belongs to a low class, if there is someone from the middle class, they consider that he or she is rich.

But when we see that there is such a big contrast between blacks and whites, we may wonder why the title *An American Marriage* does not mention anything about the protagonists being black. An explanation to this is that the title wants to put emphasis on

the fact that the story takes place in America and it is a typically American story. In a society that is multi-cultural like the United States, there are many definitions for American, all the people born and raised in America are American despite having different backgrounds. The title is composed by two main words: 'American' and 'Marriage'. The word 'American' criticizes that although both members of the couple were born in America and lead an American life, they are still judged for the colour of their skin. For its part, the word 'Marriage' indicates that this will be a romantic novel, almost like a fairy tale, with a perfect world. But, as we reach the rising action in the book, we realize that the title is ironic because the novel is not romantic, and the story is far from being a fairy tale. It is rather a story of suffering, based on real events and telling the story of destroyed love in a racist society.

Roy is accused of raping a white woman, and the judges believe the woman despite the fact that she says that it was dark when everything happened. Actually, the book says, "It was dark, but she believed she recognized Roy, the man she met at the ice machine" (Jones 34). It seems that she just needed to accuse someone, and the most likely to do it was in her opinion the black man, Roy. She believes the stereotypes which taught her that black men are rapists. These prejudices are the reason why an innocent man is imprisoned. The judges are also moved by their own beliefs in stereotypes, and they perpetuate this belief. So, there is racism coming not only from the woman, but also from the judges who believe an accusation that is not based on empirical evidence.

This racism is what leads to the wrongful incarceration of such a high number of black people, especially men. There is a reference to this theme in the novel when Roy says, "But that was when we thought that incarceration had something to do with being guilty or at least being stupid" (127). He is almost explicitly criticizing that even if you do things right, you can someday be imprisoned because a black person is not supposed



to win a case against a white person. And, for this reason, when his lawyer manages to set him free, they announce it in the following way: “‘Uncle Banks worked a miracle’... ‘Roy’s getting out’” (104). Even if it took five years to prove his innocence, they are still surprised that it was ever proved, and also because the state’s usual reaction is to accuse—and not exonerate—black people.

So, race is very relevant to the plot of this book. As a consequence of this big distinction between races, there is social and economic segregation, and this is another subject that *An American Marriage* deals with. In the following section, I will focus on the importance of class in this story.

### **3. Chapter Three: Class**

Although both families have to suffer segregation, we have a contrast between Roy’s family and Celestial’s family. Celestial’s family has a lot of money, and when her father made a deal with Minute Maid they became millionaire. Since then, as Roy says, “they have been splashing around naked in a bathtub full of money” (13). Even if Roy is exaggerating, it is true that they have a great sum of money. After earning this money, Franklin immediately went to buy the house of his dreams, whose owners did not want to sell until “Davenport showed up three generations later with a briefcase full of cash money handcuffed to his arm” (113). Also, each time Roy sees that Celestial or his family do expensive things he compares them to whites, like when he says “It was like white people do” (12), referring to when her parents gave her a house as a wedding gift. For Roy, the Davenports have a ‘white life’, it is something that does not usually happen to blacks, and that is why Celestial says “Daddy is headstrong and persistent; these qualities are the key to his unlikely success” (113). They are all aware that it is not easy for them to become successful, and this is why they work harder.

In contrast, Roy's family had enough money to cover their necessities, and he was raised to be conformist: "We had what we needed and nothing more. 'And nothing less', my mama would have said" (5), and this is the case of many black citizens in America; they have to work hard to lead a normal life. Actually, some statistics produced in 2018 based on data collected by the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (Kaiser Family Foundation), proved that a 22% of the African American population was poor, making this minority have the second highest rate of poverty, preceded by American Indians (24%), and whites had the smallest percentage (9%).

In some other cases, due to mass incarceration of blacks, many find their goals obstructed, and Roy is a representation of this part of the African American population. We see it when he tells Mr. Davenport "You are rags to riches, and I was rags on my way to riches" (Jones, *An American Marriage* 69). These words show Roy's willingness to accomplish the American dream, and the frustration of this pursuit. He speaks in the past because he knows that even if he leaves prison, he will not have the same opportunities because he will always be an ex-prisoner. So, he is condemned to belong to a low social class twice: because of being black and because of being a former prisoner.

Comparing this frustration of the American dream with the title of the book we notice that there is irony in the latter. The book is entitled *An American Marriage*, and this gives us the idea that the American dream is already accomplished for them, but in Roy's letter to Mr. Davenport we realize that Roy never achieved his goals, and he seems to have lost hope to ever accomplish them. These families lead very different lives. So, when Celestial and Roy marry, the result is that they have a middle-class life. He has a decent job which pays more than his bills and she makes dolls which can cost up to five thousand dollars, so money is not their main problem. It is significant that the author chose to make her protagonist couple accommodated economically and with both having

gone to university. This choice makes Jones' criticism stronger because it shows that although they do not live in ghettos—which are supposed to create violent people—and despite having a degree, he still suffers this suspicion from the authorities. But as they determine that he is a criminal and imprison him they ruin his life and even if he gets out, he knows that his future will not be as it was: "I remembered when my whole life was ahead of me and this was a good thing" (240). So, the book criticizes the fact that even if you belong to the high class, if you are black you are vulnerable. This message is sent explicitly in a conversation between Roy and Andre:

"It could happen to you too, Dre. It takes nothing for some he-say she-say to go left. You think the police are going to care that you got your own house or that you got that Mercedes SUV? What happened to me could happen to anybody.

'You think I don't know that?' I said. 'I been black all my life'". (274)

We see that the book progressively makes this message more explicit. First, it transmits it by facts, and we understand the injustice by the mere fact of seeing what happens to Roy. But then, as the story advances, there are more and more reflections about the vulnerability of black people to being imprisoned. As these reflections start involving all African Americans, Roy's case becomes the exemplification of how your class does not save you from wrongful imprisonment if you are black. Also, being black means having different views of gender to white Americans, and being a black woman is also a subject that needs to be analysed. In the following chapter I will explain the roles of gender and the meaning of being a black woman in America.

#### **4. Chapter Four: Gender Roles**

Race and gender are closely connected because it is the characters' race that leads them to have different preferences and expectations from men and from women. With regards

to men, they are expected to be like Roy: “tallish, dark and handsome but unpolished enough that it made him appear wholesome” (100). This is a description made by Andre, and he mentions that Roy is dark, showing how darkness is valued in this culture. The way he says it proves that the darker a man is, the more masculine he is considered. Roy seems to be the ideal African American man, the one who gets all the girls, while Andre says about himself that he “wasn’t militant enough to be an Afrikan with a *k*” (100). He is aware of his not being the typical black man, and he even says it: “In a world that prized tall, dark, and handsome, I was little, light and cute” (97).

Again, there is this contrast between darkness and lightness, and his being light does not help him with seducing black girls. He seems to be contrary to a normal African American boy, especially because “cute” is not exactly what a man should be in a race that values tall and strong boys. Celestial’s father is also portrayed as being masculine, particularly because he himself considers that he is so. Celestial remembers him “wearing a lab coat ornamented with a mishmash of vintage slogan buttons. ... ‘I AM A MAN!’ Daddy let his afro thrive, uncontrolled” (114). As he considered he was A MAN, he wore afro hair, revealing again their ideology. In general, men in this book have the idea that blackness equals masculinity.

To analyse the image of women, I will focus on Celestial because her character is the most complex in the story. She is portrayed as different and unique, and this originality in her personality is admired by Andre, while Roy just accepts it. She is described by Andre as “the kind of woman who will never belong to anyone” (96) and “Celestial isn’t something you can steal like a wallet”(102). She is an independent woman who does not live for men, but she looks for her own happiness, and this is the reason why she chooses to leave Roy and be with Andre.

However, this was not always the case. She used to be with a married man who left her when she got pregnant, and after spending some time with her aunt Sylvia she became stronger. Since then, Celestial seems to be defying all the expectations from women, even at a moment in her wedding when she “got a stare-down with the minister who asked [her] to say the word *obey*” (52). She does not feel she belongs to men and, consequently, she does not accept to obey any of them, and she did not say that word until the minister gave up. But, as she decides what is told about her, she decided that “for Daddy’s sake we kept the line ‘who gives this woman’ so he could say ‘I do’ in his surprisingly deep voice” (120). This shows that she does not feel offended by the expressions themselves, but by the meaning they contain, and even if she does not let men control her, she loves them and makes sacrifices for them.

In this book, there are several references to the expectations from each character because of their gender. For example, when everyone tells Celestial, even her parents, that she should not renew her life with another man because she should wait for her husband, or when she decides to put an end to her marriage with Roy and he answers:

There are women around here who have been coming to see their men for *decades*, riding buses that leave Baton Rouge at 5 a.m. Walter has women he never even met in person and they come to see him, and when they get here, they do more than talk. Some women bunk in their cars in the parking lot so they can be in the visiting room as soon as it opens. Before she died, my mother was here every week. What is it that makes you think that you’re so much better than them?

(Jones, *An American Marriage* 83)

A woman is expected to devote her life to just one man and tolerate everything, and when Celestial refuses to accomplish these expectations she is seen as a bad person, and Roy believes she is not “a proper wife” (268). Celestial suffers doubly because she is black

and her husband is imprisoned and because she is a woman and following her feelings involves being seen as a traitor by many people, including herself.

She is supposed to fulfil the role of the woman who stays at home waiting for her husband to come back. But Celestial defies this imposition, she does not stay at the Victorian 'woman's place', which involves staying at home confined and being a proper wife. For this reason, she follows her feelings and puts an end to her marriage, but Roy—and part of the community— sees her as a traitor for taking this decision because there is more empathy with Roy than with her. Celestial always wants to make him see that she is suffering too, that she felt alone since the very first moment he entered prison, and, despite that, she waited, although she was unhappy.

Only Roy's feelings seem to be important, she is not expected to search for her own happiness, just to create his happiness. For this reason, at some point Roy says, "I'm innocent" (84), and she answers, "I'm innocent too" (84). With this, she means that she did not provoke that situation, but at the same time, we know that she tries to justify her actions. She does not only try to convince Roy, but also herself. She has internalized the community's expectations about women, and she believes that a woman's place is near her husband. Furthermore, when she says, "I'm innocent too", a broader message is sent, and it is that a case of injustice affects many people, not only the imprisoned one. This involves the idea that the personal is political because even if it happens to Roy and Celestial, it affects many people, even the whole society, and they cannot solve it on their own. A political action would be needed to solve this problem because it is a problem created by a racist society, and the separation of this couple is only a consequence of this broader problem.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) is a book that the author used to portray a complex and disturbing issue: the wrongful incarceration of African American men and the consequences this has in people's lives. These consequences seem to be out of their control, it is something that they cannot avoid. The message sent by this story is that the personal is political, and what happens to them is a consequence of the society in which they live, so the only solution would be to change the ideology of an entire nation.

The main theme of the book is this, but at the same time it deals with other points that are part of African American's reality in the United States, and these points are racism, classism, and sexism. Jones writes about these themes in a period in which supposedly there is no longer racism. Barack Obama's presidency, which started in 2009 and ended in 2017, made some people imagine a post-racial America but it is evident that this did not happen. After Obama, Donald Trump was chosen as a president, and he has a very conservative ideology. So far from being a post-racial country, there is still segregation and racism. Jones aims to show how this racism destroys lives of innocent people. For this reason, she chooses as protagonists a middle-class couple. Roy has a nice job and Celestial is an artist. They lead a normal life; both have studied at university and they are not problematic. But they have a different colour of skin, and this seems to be a very important factor to determine whether someone should go to prison.

Another important aspect in this book is the difficult situation of Celestial because she suffers the consequences of racism, but she also has to tolerate sexism. She loses her husband because of this racism, and her life is complicated when everyone, including herself, shows disapproval of her going with another man and not behaving as the proper wife. This is explained by Crenshaw's term "Intersectionality", which talks about how society ignores the fact that black women suffer not only racism, but also sexism.

So, this book is Tayari Jones's way to criticize the injustices towards African Americans and it is her tool to try to change the world. She wrote because she was sick of seeing cases of wrongful incarceration, and, at the same time, she explored other aspects that are involved in this injustice against black people. She focuses on their race, but also on their class and their gender, and she uses Celestial's character to portray some problems faced by black women. Overall, it is a book that tries to explore these problems and aims to showing that slavery did not end, that it only changed its form.



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