

## FRACTURED VOWS: TRAUMA AND AUTONOMY IN THE UNRAVELING OF MARRIAGE IN TAYARI JONES' AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper unravels complex reasons behind the dissolution of marriage between a Black American couple Roy and Celestial in Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage*. The focus is on how trauma and autonomy challenge the traditional marriage ideas and expectations. Roy's unjust imprisonment serves as a traumatic rupture that redefines the couple's emotional attachment and questions their commitment in marriage. The commitment is challenged by the trauma of separation. The joy and bliss that the marriage holds lasts for a short span of time, the memory haunts Roy in prison and he clings to the loyalty, rather Celestial driven by her own emotional swings chooses her autonomy that is her career and her own emotional needs. She distances herself and seeks her personal choices and expects Roy to accept the changes. This paper highlights the marital vows, unraveling the complexities of love and identity in hold of systemic injustice to Roy and personal transformation of Celestial.

**Keywords:** Trauma, stress, expectations, challenges, victims

Trauma in *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones is a core substance that shapes the characters' identities, relationships, and decisions throughout the novel. The story follows Roy Hamilton and Celestial Davenport, a young, newly married African American couple living in Atlanta. Their lives are turned upside down when Roy is wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. A woman accuses him of rape, and despite little evidence, he is sentenced to twelve years in prison. During Roy's imprisonment, Celestial, an artist who makes custom dolls; struggles with the emotional distance and slowly grows closer to her childhood friend, Andre, who is also Roy's best friend. After five years, Roy's conviction is suddenly overturned, and he is released early. Roy returns expecting to pick up where they left off, but everything has changed. Celestial has moved on from the commitment that she vows in marriage with Roy.

Several researchers have done a varied study on *An American Marriage* and most of the studies are based on the trauma faced by Roy and Celestial. Hussain et al focuses the factors which lead to marriage failure between Roy and Celestial. Mahameed in his article "Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage*(2018): A Marxist Reading presents the principles of Marxism" as reflected in an active form in the novel and how it relates to the realistic experience of the African American society. Seghrouchni's "The hardship of Being Black in Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage: An Intersectional Approach to the Condition of Black Women in America*" highlights the approach of intersectional feminism in African American society. Ansa's "Injustice and Intimacy in Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage*" encounters the impact of love, sweetness, support and comfort in Roy's family.

Roy's wrongful imprisonment is a result of systemic trauma. The systemic trauma refers to the collective and societal impact of structures like racism and injustice on individuals as well as on communities. In the novel it refers to the trauma of black people in America that is connected with Roy and Celestial. The injustice to Roy and the trauma he experiences is the effect of societal structures that based on inequality. According to Aruna, "Roy's false imprisonment is an influential example of how African American men are often treated wrongly by the legal system" (35). Roy not as an individual but as a black community, they are targeted in history as a collective group of marginalized, who undergoes the trauma by various forms of injustice and false accusations and imprisonment. As Big Roy states to Andre, "I have one thing to say to you, as a black man: Roy is a hostage of the state. He is a victim of America" (121). Trauma plays a significant role in shaping their identity, love and emotional responses.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD) is a state of mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a tragic event in life. The individuals who suffer from stress disorders struggle to cope up with the present life; they get trapped in the past events emotionally. They find it difficult to come back to the normal life.

Roy's new exciting phase of married life and his dreams for the future is shattered in a moment of lightening. As Celestial, Roy's wife utters "We were only married a year and a half before lightning struck" (82). The wrongful conviction and time in prison are dehumanizing and deeply scarring. The experience alters Roy's view of the world, his identity, and his relationships. He suffers in the loss of autonomy and dignity, which leads to a deep psychological wound. Roy shows the symptoms of PTSD after his imprisonment.

Avoidance is a key symptom of PTSD; which means trying to block out thoughts, feelings, conversations, places, or people that remind someone of the trauma. Caruth believes that stress is the "symptom of normal neurosis, . . . painful manifestations can be understood as, ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidances of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of mind to avoid an unpleasurable event" (59). Roy feels disconnected with the society. As time passes, Roy begins to feel abandoned by the world. Even though Celestial still writes, the tone of her letters changes, and Roy senses the emotional distance growing. The emotional isolation deepens his trauma leading to avoid conversation about certain topics. He even censors his own letters to Celestial, choosing to avoid difficult conversations that might make him feel more exposed or powerless. "Georgia, I know I can't make you talk about what you don't want to talk about, but you should know what it was that was blocking my throat so I couldn't hardly talk"(49). Roy also

express in one of his letters, "But it's heavy, Georgia. You don't know what it is like in here. And trust me, you don't want to know" (68). Here, Roy is consciously avoiding emotions to keep from unravelling. Kiruthikaa too says that "Roy experiences intense emotional distress, grappling with feelings of anger, frustration and hopelessness" (73).

Avoiding the reality is also another symptom of PTSD. As Celestial grows more distant in her letters because of she is in reality as she deals with the real world, but on the other hand, Roy clings to the idea of her rather than confronting the possibility that their marriage is slipping away. He avoids facing the truth, because the idea of losing her is unbearable.

Celestial's avoidance symptoms are subtle yet deeply reveal her internal struggles. Her actions and emotional responses reflect common psychological reactions to trauma, especially avoidance as a coping mechanism. Celestial emotionally distances herself from Roy soon after his imprisonment. Though she writes to him initially, her letters become more distant over time. This detachment can be seen as an avoidance strategy, she separates herself emotionally to protect against the pain of his absence and the weight of the injustice. "You're a part of my family, Roy, and you will always be. But I can't be your wife"(82).

Eventually, Celestial stops visiting Roy and ends the letters altogether. Instead of confronting the reality of their broken relationship, she quietly fades out, avoiding hard conversations or emotional reckonings until Roy is released. Her avoidance reflects a prioritization of self over the nuances of marriage. Even before Roy's imprisonment, Celestial is portrayed as someone who is unsure about marriage. As her boyfriend Andre states, "I'm not sure if she even realized it herself, but she's the kind of woman who will never belong to anyone. This is the truth that you have to lean close to see"(96). After his imprisonment, she leans into her career and her relationship with Andre, someone who represents safety and familiarity rather than directly addressing the unresolved issues with Roy. She avoids commitment and conflict with Roy, Even after Roy's return from prison; she struggles to reveal her own dilemmas and trauma of separation and the psychological wound behind her withdrawal from marriage commitment. She avoids meeting Roy and expects him to accept the change by a word with Andre. She avoids confronting the reality to convince Roy rather, she sends Andre to face the Conflict with Roy.

Celestial channels her emotions into her doll-making, using her art as an outlet. While this is a healthy coping mechanism in some ways, it also functions as a distraction, a way to avoid processing her guilt, confusion, and conflicting emotions. On the other hand, Roy cannot move on from past. His trauma makes him to suffer and hold on the past about his joyful memories with celestial. Celestial's move on from harsh psychological trauma of separation, though it is a positive attitude it is also a kind of avoidance from the reality. Psychologically she is running from the conflicts that systemic injustice has brought in their life.

Celestial deeply loves Roy, though her parents disagreed to her marriage, she is so strong with Roy and convince them to accept the marriage. She deeply cares for Roy too; there are so many instances that show as a testament to their determination. They have so many dreams to cope up with their future, especially Celestial as an artist is interested in Doll-making. She has great plans along with Roy's career. But their dreams are shattered down when Roy is wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. A woman accuses him of rape, and despite lack of evidence, he is sentenced to twelve years in prison. Celestial opines, "Twelve years is what

they gave him. We would be forty – three years old when he was realised. I could not even imagine myself at such an age. Roy understood that twelve years was an eternity because he sobbed right there at the defendants’ table” (39). During Roy’s imprisonment, Celestial slowly down in her spirit, she suffered the separation from her emotional support.

Not only Roy, suffered due to the physical and mental trauma in prison, but also Celestial suffers the trauma of Psyche because of her separation with Roy. They are in married life only for one and half years. She cannot accept the present condition as a wife of a prisoner. Celestial confront of trauma of separation, struggle in her inner mind unconsciously avoids the closeness especially visiting Roy in prison. She feels dejected in the society and embarrassed by the sight of people who came as visitors to the same prison. She keeps distance by herself as it is evident in the letters. Her identity got altered by the dilemma caused by the trauma in her mind.

Celestial concentrates on doll-making, that too, successful doll-making business, to avoid the psychological trauma, she encounters in absence of Roy. Her career is not just a side story, it is central to her character. She pours her energy into her art, which becomes both a form of expression and autonomy. She is economically independent, which allows her to make choices based on desire rather than necessity. Perhaps the most controversial, but also the most autonomous act is her decision not to reunite with Roy after his release. Even with immense pressure from Roy, his parents, and society, she does not let guilt decide her future. This is a radical act of autonomy in a cultural context that often expects Black women to sacrifice themselves emotionally for others.

Celestial’s autonomy is evident in her decision to emotionally and physically distance herself from her husband, Roy, after his imprisonment. While her actions seem to be as betrayal, they are, in fact, an evident of her right to self-determination. She refuses to sacrifice her own identity to remain in a marriage that no longer fits her emerging sense of self. As she tells Roy, “A marriage is more than your heart. It’s your life. And we are not sharing ours” (82). From this statement she asserts that emotional bonding and ties in marriage is a threat to her growth and of Roy’s growth. Celestial needs to prove her identity and affirm self-image above the social norms that anticipates her to be in marriage vows.

Celestial economic independence allows her to make choices based on personal fulfilment rather than dependency or guilt. According to literary critic Acker, “Celestial’s art is both her livelihood and her liberation. It’s how she claims her identity in a world that often erases women’s creative labor” (35). Society often stereotype women to stand by their men in times of crisis, especially within the context of mass incarceration in the black community. However, Jones challenges this narrative by allowing Celestial to choose herself.

Roy returns and expects to resume their marriage, Celestial’s conflict marks a pivotal moment of autonomy. She does not want to be in bottom of societal guilt or fabricated expectations of loyalty but instead insists on honouring her own identity. Her independence is complex and, at times, irritating to Roy. Yet, this portrayal of autonomy is what makes her character so revolutionary. Celestial’s character, reflects the real-life struggles of many women who seek to balance personal freedom with emotional weight.

Celestial in *An American Marriage* is a character who boldly affirms her self-identity in a world that often demands her loyalty to marriage vows. Tayari Jones crafts a narrative where female

autonomy is not objected but respected even when it's uncomfortable. This evolution creates a conflict between personal freedom and marital duty, ultimately leading to the collapse of their marital relationship.

The concept of marriage itself becomes challenging with Celestial's evolving sense of self. Roy clings to traditional ideas of marital loyalty and sacrifice, believing that his return from prison will naturally resume their relationship. However, Celestial challenges these notions. When Roy returns and expects to resume his place as husband, she affirms, "For the last two years, he was only an idea to me, this husband of mine who didn't count. He had been away from me longer than we had been together" (283). This statement is not just a rejection of Roy; it is a rejection of the institution that demands a woman's submission to loyalty regardless of her personal transformation. Her autonomy is contrary with the patriarchal expectations of loyalty till the end and social norms of duty within marriage.

Andre, Celestial's childhood friend and eventual partner, also plays a role in demonstrating the tension between autonomy and loyalty. She is not choosing Andre as a substitute for Roy but as a symbol of her right to choose as an economically independent woman. As Acker writes, "Celestial's real love interest is herself-her art, her voice, her truth" (35). The dissolution of Celestial and Roy's marriage is not due to infidelity or lack of love, but to a deeper philosophical conflict about what institution of marriage means. Roy believes in loyalty to the vow; Celestial believes in personal evolution. The tragedy of *An American Marriage* is not just in Roy's wrongful imprisonment but in how that experience exposes a marriage that could not adopt to Celestial's growth. Through Celestial, Jones invites readers to reconsider what it means to love, to leave, and to live on one's own terms.

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