

Voice, Marriage, and Racial Justice: Black Feminist Resistance in Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage*

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Abstract

Tayari Jones's An American Marriage (2018) has been widely acclaimed for its exploration of love, loyalty, and the devastating impact of wrongful incarceration on African American communities. While much scholarship has emphasized Roy's imprisonment as a critique of systemic racism, less attention has been given to Celestial, whose struggles illuminate a different but equally urgent narrative. This study fills that gap by analyzing the novel in terms of Black feminist resistance and with reference to three interrelated themes: Voice, Marriage, and racial justice. The theoretical perspectives of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Roberts, and Kimberle Crenshaw are put into practice by the researcher using a qualitative textual analysis. Celestial letters and artistic activities are viewed as survival and resistance because Lorde insisted on turning silence into words. The critique of family and institutional control offered by Collins and Roberts points to the fact that Celestial opposes patriarchal expectations of Marriage. The intersectionality of Crenshaw uncovers the position of her having to carry the added weight of systematic racism despite her not being incarcerated herself. The results confirm that the story of Celestial is a strong place of resistance, whereby she reinvents loyalty, asserting autonomy and contesting the fact that Black women are shunned and silenced in private and public realms. Re-centering Celestial, the study becomes part of the Black feminist literature criticism since it demonstrates that An American Marriage is not only a novel of racial injustice but also a celebration of the strengths and power of Black women. Finally, the study broadens the discourse on the topic, establishing the work by Jones as an essential input to the twenty-first-century African American feminist literature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tayari Jones, born in Atlanta in 1970, has long been recognized as one of the most critical voices in contemporary African American literature. Her previous publications, such as *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), *The Untelling* (2005), and *Silver Sparrow* (2011), show that she is afflicted with family, identity,

and the hardships of Black life in the American South. However, her fourth novel, *An American Marriage* (2018), was the one that brought international fame to Jones. The novel was not only a New York Times bestseller, but it also received the Women's Prize in fiction in 2019, establishing her as one of the most prominent figures in the African

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American literary world. The critics, such as Anderson (2021), were amazed by the way the novel humanized systemic injustice, and Tayari Jones herself, in the interviews, stressed that she wanted to demonstrate that the personal and the political could not be separated in Black life.

The novel narrates the life of Roy and Celestial, a rising African American couple whose life turns out to be ruined when Roy is falsely accused and jailed for a crime he has never committed. Although at first glance the novel is the story of false imprisonment, a more in-depth analysis shows that the novel is also the story of Celestial trying to find her Voice, the restrictions of Marriage as a patriarchal system, and how the voices of Black women are usually silenced, both in public and at home. As mentioned by Wilkinson (2019) and Jones and Reynolds (2021), the book is frequently interpreted as a story of false imprisonment; however, the most valuable insights can be found in the reflection of the way Celestial herself views the world and the way she negotiates independence.

The significance of the present study lies in the fact that *An American Marriage* can be discussed with a productive focus on the Black feminist resistance. According to authors such as bell hooks (1981), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), and Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), Black feminist theory demands that Black women, as the oppressed group, must be centered in any critical analysis since they are oppressed based on race, gender, and class. By using this lens to analyze the novel by Jones, we can view Celestial as not merely a secondary character in the narrative of Roy, but as the protagonist of the challenge against injustice that is racialized through the use of her Voice, her ambivalence to Marriage, and her confrontation with racial injustice.

The importance of the study lies in the fact that much of the existing literature and popular comment on *An American Marriage* is inclined to concentrate on the fact that Roy has been wrongly imprisoned and the broader criticism of the American justice system. To illustrate, Yip and Xie (2022) note that the novel addresses the issue of mass incarceration as a crisis at the national level. On the same note, Alexander (2018) contextualizes the text in the context of Black male discriminatory policing and sentencing history. Although these views can be considered valid, they

also have the potential to marginalize the role of Celestial as a main character whose experiences also represent systemic injustices. According to black feminist critics, including Coy (2024), the implementation of the approach centered solely on Roy repeats the silencing of the voices of women that black feminism is supposed to oppose. This paper thus turns the focus to Celestial and her resistance mechanisms, and it is essential to note that feminist aspects of the novel are just as demanding as those of incarceration (Farhan, 2025, August).

The research gap emerges from the fact that few studies have systematically analyzed *An American Marriage* through the triadic lens of Voice, Marriage, and racial justice within the framework of Black feminist resistance. Although some scholars, such as Rezk (2024), have discussed the intersectional aspects of the novel, their studies tend to charge Celestial with her subordination to the story of Roy. Similarly, Henderson (2020) also recognizes Marriage as one of the thematic issues but fails to relate it to the Black feminist theories of autonomy in a direct manner. This absence points to a broader problem: although the novel has been widely celebrated, its potential contribution to the discourse of Black feminist resistance remains underexamined.

In light of this gap, the current study aims to accomplish two main goals. The first is to show how the Voice of Celestial is a resistance to not only the silencing of women in patriarchy but also the social exclusion of Black women in the justice system. The second one is the analysis of how Marriage and the racial justice theme merge with the issues of gender and agency to shed light on the systemic constraints of Black women. From these objectives arises the central research question: How does *An American Marriage* dramatize Black feminist resistance through the intertwined themes of Voice, Marriage, and racial justice?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The study provides a theoretical answer to this question, which relies on the Black feminist ideas, namely, the works by Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Dorothy Roberts. Both of them also provide conceptual tools to explain one of the major themes of the novel.

1.1.1 Voice. Audre Lorde's essay *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (1984) provides the foundation for understanding Celestial's Voice as a mode of resistance. This gives the framework of her Voice as the means of protest. Lorde insists that silence is a complicit act of oppression and that Black women ought to turn their experiences into speech as a survival and resistance strategy against domination. In *An American Marriage*, Celestial transforms her letters to Roy, her conversations with her family, and her artistic career. To the society, Celestial speaks, at times when she feels uncomfortable, not only defies the expectations of her husband, but also those of society, and therefore her Voice is a kind of feminist uprising (Allen, 2021).

1.1.2 Marriage. The concepts proposed by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) and Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body* (1997) help put Marriage in the novel into the perspective of Patriarchal authority and Gendered discipline. Collins presents the point that family structures within African American lives tend to recreate broader formations of oppression. In contrast, Roberts presents the fact that institutions govern the freedom of the Black woman. In the novel, Celestial is not ready to subscribe to the notion of being a self-sacrificing wife, but rather she claims that she needs to be independent and be able to express herself through art. Allen (2021) and other scholars argue that Celestial resists the patriarchal script of Marriage, and her defiance of this system represents feminist self-determination rather than betrayal.

1.1.3 Racial Justice. The intersectionality theory devised by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) plays a vital role in the examination of how the wrongful imprisonment of Roy sends ripples through the life of Celestial. Crenshaw shows how black women are oppressed in both ways, which are not the same as black men and white women. Though Roy is the one in jail, Celestial suffers the emotional and social effects of the injustice, such as mistrust, secluded living, and difficulty asserting her own future. The author portrays the intersectional aspects of resistance by foregrounding the way the women in the marginalized groups are overwhelmed by the weight of systemic racism, even without being explicitly targeted, as Rahim and Khan (2024) note.

1.1.4. Application to the Study

With these theories, we can redefine *An American Marriage* not only as a story of injustice against Black men but also as a narrative that assists in the awakening of the resistance of Black women. The ideas of Voice that Lorde introduces clarify how Celestial can make her own claims about herself; the ideas of Collins and Roberts serve to place her experiences of Marriage; and the concept of intersectionality employed by Crenshaw clarifies why it is she who finds herself in the straits of being confined and not the other way round. Together, these frames show that Celestial resistance is multiplexed: personal, relational, and structural.

In summary, Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* offers a unique window into the dynamics of Black feminist resistance, dramatizing how Voice, Marriage, and racial justice intersect in the lived experiences of African American women. This study is essential, as it fills a gap in the research by focusing on the story of Celestial as a place of resistance, rather than placing it at the periphery of the narrative presented by Roy. Through the findings of Lorde, Collins, Roberts, and Crenshaw, this paper will argue that the Celestial serves as a journey illustrating the potential of black feminist thought in literature. With a focus on how her voice subverts silence, how her position on Marriage undermines patriarchy, and how her encounters with unfairness reveal intersectional oppression, this analysis places *An American Marriage* as a critical addition to African American literature and feminist theory.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in this study seeks to situate *An American Marriage* (2018) within broader scholarly conversations on African American literature, Black feminist thought, and intersectionality. It starts by tracing the contemporary critical reception of the novel by Tayari Jones and how both reviewers and scholars have cast it as an exploration of mass incarceration, intimate relationships, and systemic injustice. In addition to the immediate commentary, the review proceeds to discuss how Black feminist theoretical scholars, including bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, and Kimberle Crenshaw, offer paradigms for interpreting the themes of Voice, Marriage, and racial justice in the writing of African American women. The review also takes an interest in the more recent critical work that examines the

points of convergence of gender, race, and law in more modern fiction, and identifies gaps in the scholarly discussion where the narrative Voice of Celestial and her resistance is not properly centralized. Combining these strands, this part will not only help to place the novel in the context of current research but also illustrate the novelty of choosing Black feminist resistance as the key analysis perspective.

2.1 Critical Reception and Scholarship on *An American Marriage*

Since its publication in 2018, *An American Marriage* has attracted substantial scholarly and critical attention, positioning it as one of the most discussed African American novels of the last decade. Those who reviewed the novel early on, like Anderson (2021), focused on the emotive nature of the novel and how it could be used to bring the realities of the political reality of mass incarceration into the personal realm of Marriage. Similarly, Wilkinson (2019) also noted how the novel strikes a balance between the injustice systems prevalent in society and the wars of love and loyalty at the personal level and suggested that Jones locates the systemic oppression directly in the domestic space. Researchers such as Jones and Reynolds (2021) have also taken the debate a step further by looking at how the perspective of Celestial complicates the narratives of victimhood because she is portrayed as an agent who negotiates under strict circumstances.

Other critics have contextualized the novel in the large context of mass incarceration and its impacts on the African American populations. One such example is Yip and Xie (2022), who place *An American Marriage* within the framework of more contemporary literature that condemns what Michelle Alexander (2010) has described as the new Jim Crow, using the effect of wrongful imprisonment that has ruined not only an individual, but also the family and society. However, more critical than these readings is the fact that they tend to make the experience of Roy central to the analysis, pushing the Voice of Celestial to the background. Coy (2024) and Farhan (2024) have highlighted this imbalance, noting that excessively numerous interpretations of the novel recreate the silence of women that Jones desperately attempts to overcome.

Besides, Henderson (2020) has recognized Marriage as one of the primary themes in the novel, implying that Jones employs the institution to explore the evolving gender roles among African American communities. However, Johnson does not fully explore the feminist implications of Celestial's decisions, leaving the question of how her rebellion redefines the role of a wife unanswered. Allen (2021) builds on this point, indicating that Celestial's ambivalence regarding Marriage is symptomatic of a more overarching Black feminism of patriarchal institutions, but Allen makes this point rather broadly.

Collectively, these studies establish *An American Marriage* as a text deeply engaged with the questions of justice, love, and identity in contemporary America. Nevertheless, they also indicate an essential discrepancy: the lack of a concerted emphasis on Black feminist opposition as it is executed in the Voice of Celestial, the way she negotiates the Marriage, and gets caught in the circle of racial injustice. It is in this context that the given study intervenes in the act with the intention of preempting Celestial not as a secondary figure within the tragedy of Roy, but as a prime location of opposition and feminist assertiveness.

2.2 Black Feminist Thought and Theoretical Foundations

Black feminist thought provides the critical foundation for interpreting Celestial's resistance in *An American Marriage*. The essays of bell hooks, especially *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981) provided the rationale of making Black women's experience central to both the feminist and the anti-racist discourses. Hooks believes that slavery and patriarchy have historically placed black women in a disadvantaged position; it creates a special position whereby one can criticize domination. Applying it to Jones's novel, the words of hooks can provide insight into how Celestial resists becoming the silent wife or the supportive image in the background of Roy's struggle. Instead, she forms what hooks terms a radical claim of subjectivity, severing the oppression of race and gender simultaneously.

Voice and self-expression are also discussed as the transformative force, as indicated by Audre Lorde in

the novel, *Sister Outsider* (1984). Silence is complicity, and speaking is a survival and resistance to Lorde. All the letters, conversations, and artistic career of Celestial are also instances of this principle, where personal expression is turned into political opposition. Celestial repeats the statement by Lorde when she states that to be free, it is crucial to convert silence to language.

In her publication, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins broadens this theoretical frame by adding to it the idea of a shared position and demonstrating how intersecting oppressions affect the lives of Black women. Collins reiterates the replication of hierarchies held by institutions like Marriage and family. This point of view sheds light on how Celestial negotiates her Marriage in the novel. Instead of viewing it as an intimate connection, this textual location is where patriarchal requirements and feminist self-determination come into conflict.

The pioneering essay *Mapping the Margins* (1991) by Kimberle Crenshaw presented the term intersectionality, and the central argument of the essay is that the coordinated axes of race, gender, and class form hybridized modes of marginalization. The framework offered by Crenshaw is especially applicable to the discussion of the dynamics of wrongful imprisonment in the novel. Although the most evident injustice is the imprisonment of Roy, it is also in the case of Celestial that the intersectional brunt of the carceral system is felt, emotionally, socially, and economically. Her replies, then, are not detachable from her positionality as a Black woman in negotiations with intersecting systems of oppression (Farhan, 2024).

Collectively, these theorists give us a critique of Celestial as not a passive or secondary character but one who resists. Hooks uncovers the historical antecedents to her marginalization; Lorde sheds some light on the political strength of her Voice; Collins frames her struggle within institutional frameworks such as Marriage; and Crenshaw discusses how implicated in the problem of racial injustice she is, unlike Roy. All these points make the story of *An American Marriage* richer in terms of analysis, as they allow us to observe how the novel employs a complex version of Black feminist resistance.

2.3 Contemporary Scholarship on Racial Justice, Marriage, and Black Feminist Themes

Since 2018, a new scholarship has enriched the insight into how *An American Marriage* addresses the issue of systemic injustice, intimate relationships, and Black feminist standpoints. Among these, the qualitative analysis of stereotypes, social distance, and discrimination in the novel by Ambarwati and Nasution (2021) stands out due to its focus on the lack of upward social mobility of Roy and Celestial as factors that would help them avoid the grasp of racial bias inherent in the criminal justice system. Their research highlights the organizational character of racial prejudice as a power that pervades even thriving black lives.

Likewise, the comparative study by Rezk (2024) is an intersectional feminist approach that opposes *An American Marriage* to the novel *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous. Rezk demonstrates that both novels indicate how socio-political injustices, racial discrimination in the US, and civil war trauma in Syria influence the experience of women as the leading characters of the novels. Celestial and Roy are married in the novel by Jones to offer a prismatic view of the emotional and structural consequences of wrongful imprisonment, whereby one can see the amplified weight Black women carry under the racialized justice systems.

In their article *An American Marriage: Love and Survival in the Shadow of Systemic Racism*, Jacqueline M. Hagan and Stephanie Wieting (2021) discuss the family relationship in the novel as it is affected by mass incarceration. They imply that the break of intimate relationships highlights that racism on a large scale divides Black families, and still, the survival of Celestial reinstates life over desperation. These readings emphasize the role of Marriage in the novel as a place of vulnerability and of strength--a living testimony to relationship resistance.

Other critics resort to broader cultural observations. Hartmann (2020), Farhan (2025, April) situates the novel within the context of evolving marriage concepts, positioning it as a reflection of the new literature of a post-marriage generation, where traditional norms are challenged and the personal understanding of commitment is redefined. In the meantime, Pitofsky and Annie Rocheleau (2020)

address the intersectionality of race, gender, and Marriage in Jones's story, stating that a rejection of the traditional notion of Marriage as Celestial refuses to obey the marital vow reflects the intentional avoidance of subordination to men. This feminist gesture is hidden within the practice of self-definition.

Collectively, these new texts enhance our understanding of *An American Marriage* by shedding light on the novel's approach to the pitfalls of structural oppression and individual liberation. They portray Celestial not merely as a sad character in the shadow of Roy, but as a participant in the silent, resolute opposition. Nonetheless, as these works demonstrate, further research is still required to examine how Voice, Marriage, and racial justice converge into a specific system of Black feminist resistance--which is officially where the given study takes its own niche.

Research Gap

Although the academic interest in *An American Marriage* has increased at a steady pace since its publication, most critical discourses remain focused on how Roy was wrongly imprisoned and how the novel criticizes systemic racism. Research by Yip and Xie (2022) and Alexander (2018) frames the narrative in the context of the discussion on mass incarceration and its lack of intimacy and fractured social relationships, with critics Wilkinson (2019) and Jones and Reynolds (2021) drawing attention to its depiction of social injustice. Intersectional frameworks have been more recently used, as in Rezk (2024) and Ambarwati and Nasution (2021), but even there, they tend to diminish the Voice of Celestial in favor of that of Roy. What is still mostly missing is a prolonged emphasis on Celestial as a site of Black feminist opposition, where her Voice, her negotiating of Marriage, and her complicity with racial injustice merge into a multidimensional agency. This dissonance indicates that, despite the rightful acclaim given to the novel as being a sociopolitical work, its role in the development of Black feminist thought has not been fully exhausted. In response to this gap, this paper will make Celestial the focal point of discussion and re-examine *An American Marriage* as a narrative of resistance that redefines the convergence of gender, race, and justice in African American writing.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative textual analysis design is adopted, one of the most frequent approaches to literature and cultural research, to reveal meanings, structures, and ideologies hidden in the texts. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is especially productive when it is necessary to explain phenomena in a complex society by tales, voices, and symbols. Works of literature (in particular, works that deal with marginalized identities) need to be approached in a manner where interpretation and contextualization take precedence over numerical generalization. That is why a critical analysis of *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones (2018) is best suited to shedding light on how the novel dramatizes the Black feminist resistance in terms of Voice, Marriage, and racial justice.

The source of the primary data in this study is the novel itself, which is discussed as a cultural-political artifact that indicates and criticizes modern experiences of African Americans. Passages in the text, such as the letters Celestial writes to Roy, her thoughts on Marriage, and her coping with racial injustice, are analyzed as a unit. Given (2008) argues that textual analysis enables the researcher to transcend the level of textual description to the level of general theoretical understanding that connects language and narrative to culture and power systems. Academic publications in the domain of Black feminist theory, feminist literary criticism, and African American studies are the secondary data and provide an interpretative paradigm and scholarly discourse. The analytical framework is explicitly grounded in Black feminist thought. Bell Hooks (1981) in *Ain't I a Woman?* Underscores the necessity of centering Black women's lived experiences in both feminist and anti-racist discourses. Using this understanding, it can be interpreted that in the study, Celestial is not only a supporting character in the tragedy of Roy, but a woman who revolts against several silencing approaches. The analysis of the letters and artistic expression of Celestial is informed by the fact that transforming silence into language is an act of survival, as indicated by Audre Lorde in her book, *Sister Outsider* (1984). Patricia Hill Collins (2000) underlines that the experiences of Black women are marked by multiple oppressions in

institutions like family and Marriage, which helps to consider the case of Celestial trying to resist male norms of a wife. Dorothy Roberts (1997) also adds by revealing how institutions punish the independence of Black women. This fact can be directly applied to Celestial, who does not follow the patriarchal regulations of Marriage. Lastly, the theory of intersectionality by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) is the reason why Celestial is involved in the wrongful imprisonment of Roy: she does not end up in prison, but she has to endure the emotional, social, and economic impact of injustice that is based on race.

Theoretically, the research is narrative-interpretive in nature. This involves selecting key scenes, analyzing their language and symbolism, and situating them within the broader cultural context. Riessman (2008) emphasizes that narrative analysis is essential in the articulation of how people and society explain oppression through stories. The novel by Jones is regarded in this work as a fictional narrative and a cultural witness that leaves the trace of resistance of Black women in it. Intertextual associations are also considered: Black female Voice can be stronger when it appears in dialogue with common traditions, as noted by Collins (2000). Thus, the stories of Celestial are read in tandem with the theoretical works of hooks, Lorde, Roberts, and Crenshaw.

There are three reasons why a textual analysis has been selected. To begin with, it does not lose the integrity of the literary text itself, so that the theoretical statements are never lost in the evidence of the narrative. Literary criticism, as Eagleton (2011) says, should not abandon its devotion to close reading; otherwise, it is doomed to abstract generalisation. Second, the approach is consistent with feminist research approaches that focus on the marginalized Voice and deny positivist beliefs of neutrality (Harding, 1991). Third, it addresses the intersectional analysis requirement in literature, highlighted by Nash (2008), who cautions that failure to consider intersectionality is likely to reproduce the same exclusions that feminist scholarship aims to dismantle.

Simultaneously, the methodology is not ignorant of its shortcomings. Due to the choice of one novel per research, the results are not feasible to generalize to the entire body of African American literature. In addition, textual interpretation is bound to be

influenced by the positionality of the researcher, to which Lather (1991) alludes in her appeal to introduce reflexivity in feminist research. In addressing this, the study consults a vast diversity of academic sources to triangulate meanings, and as such, positions its readings in the existing academic discourses.

Finally, the approach is guided by the concept of reflexivity. There is a danger of reinforcing silencing by speaking on behalf of rather than with the marginalized groups, as Lorde (1984) demands. In this way, this paper is not aimed at foisting external meanings onto the novel by Jones, but it is an attempt to shed light on how the Voice of Celestial, her decisions, and her struggles become resistance in the text. Through the combination of theoretical knowledge and textual analysis, this study will demonstrate how the novel *An American Marriage* can be perceived as a contribution to the project of Black feminist thought that is still being carried out in literature.

Overall, this approach integrates both close textual reading and Black feminist theories to address how Celestial opposes silence, reforms marriage, and challenges racial inequity. Overcome by the lessons of hooks, Lorde, Collins, Roberts, and Crenshaw, and the use of a qualitative interpretive methodology, the study will place *An American Marriage* as a strong locus of Black feminist resistance in modern American work.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section examines Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) through the framework of Black feminist resistance, focusing on how the novel portrays Celestial's struggle for agency. Although much of the critical energy has focused on Roy being falsely imprisoned, this study shifts the focus to Celestial, exploring how her Voice, role in the Marriage, and struggle against racial injustice manifest as forms of resistance that have not been fully explored in past discussions.

The conversation takes the form of three parts, namely, the exploration of Voice and self-representation, in which Celestial letters and art help turn silence into speech; the discussion of Marriage and patriarchy, in which her decisions disrupt the

ideas of loyalty and obedience; and the discussion of racial justice and imprisonment, in which her experience shows the intersections and burdens of Black women. Combined, these passages reveal the way in which the novel redefines the agency of Black women by combining the elements of gender, race, and structural power.

4.1. Voice and Self-representation.

The significant aspect of the Black feminist opposition in *An American Marriage* is the experience of Celestial needing to define and maintain her own Voice. Since the first lines, Jones does not want to make Celestial a quiet wife of a man who is wrongfully incarcerated. Rather, she expects her as a woman to resolve the paradoxes between subservience to the husband and devotion to self. The concentration of the story could be likened to the words of Audre Lorde, who wrote that the silence will not save you (Sister Outsider, 1984), and the poet highlighted the political significance of talking to the Black woman. However, in the case of Celestial, speaking is not a self-expression, but the act of coming to life; her words are a rebellion against the silencing of the patriarchy and the silencing of the races.

This resistance is best evidenced by the epistolary nature of the novel, especially when Roy goes to prison. In one of her letters, Celestial writes: "*I am trying to be the kind of woman who can be loyal to you while also being loyal to myself*" (Jones, 2018, p. 152). This is the tension of the very essence of her subjectivity, as in this sentence. She will not let any of her devotion to her husband deny her free Voice through the process of placing her identity as a member of the stereotype of the responsible wife. The letters shared between Celestial and her husband, as stated by Jones and Reynolds (2021), are a rebirth of the place of letters as an instrument of matrimonial duty into the feminist bargaining territory.

The art of Celestial demonstrates how she can make silence into action. Her doll-making is not merely an economic activity that continues to exist, but it is also a means of self-representation. According to Lorde (1984), creativity is one of the main sites where Black women grapple with invisibility, and it is possible to trace such a statement in the work by Celestial. Coy

(2024) emphasizes that the dolls of Celestial are a symbolic language through which she affirms her independence at a moment when the social roles would like to enslave her. In seeking her artwork, Celestial does not allow her identity to be diminished to the role of a prisoner's wife, but instead she demands that she be seen as a creator in her own right with her own Voice. At one point, she asserts, "*I have my own life to live, and I can't put it on hold, not even for you*" (Jones, 2018, p. 198). This assertion brings down the patriarchal conceptions of Marriage, which, according to bell hooks (1989), usually requires sacrificing women in the interest of love. The fact that Celestial did not give up on her goals is what Collins (2000) refers to as the self-definition process- the refusal of Black women to accept roles imposed on them by society and their determination to define themselves in the manner they choose.

Nevertheless, Celestial cannot be said to have a colorless voice. She feels guilty and burdened by social norms, which describes the paradoxes that usually come hand in hand with resistance. However, Lorde (1984) points out that resistance does not mean that someone is not afraid but that they decide to speak even when feeling scared. Celestial reflects this tension: the letters reflect the hesitation, and only the act of writing is resistance. Her damaged, broken Voice turns strong just because it does not allow simplification.

Finally, it is the Voice of Celestial that alters the narrative focus of the novel. Although the wrongful conviction of Roy dramatizes the idea of systemic racism, the expression of the needs by Celestial foreshadows the intersectional weight of Black women, expected to prop, keep silent, and make sacrifices in the name of others. In rejecting these demands, she is an example of Black feminist resistance as formulated by hooks and Lorde. The Voice does not supplement the account of Roy; it is an account in its own right, and one that confronts effacement and demands to be heard.

4.2 Marriage and Patriarchy

In *An American Marriage*, Marriage is not an issue that comes out as a matter of individualized relationships between two individuals, but a matter that is highly controversial due to patriarchal, racial, and cultural requirements. Jones mirrors what Patricia Hill

Collins (2000) calls the way Black women are marginalized, under the constraining images that tend to represent them most often through their relationship with men, by rendering Celestial a component of a set-up, usually dominated by men and enforced by requiring women to sacrifice their lives. To Celestial, going against these expectations is not just about redefining her Marriage with Roy, but also an expression of challenging a wider cultural logic that equates womanhood with obedience and self-effacement.

The narrative illustrates this through Celestial's ambivalence toward the institution of Marriage itself. At one point, reflecting on her strained relationship with Roy, she remarks: "*A marriage is more than your heart, it's your life. And we are two lives. There is no simple arithmetic here*" (Jones, 2018, p. 121). This recognition underscores her refusal to see Marriage as a static or unquestioned ideal. Instead, she frames it as a space of negotiation where her needs and desires must be acknowledged. Collins (2000) argues that such moments of self-definition within family structures are forms of resistance against both racialized patriarchy and normative gender expectations.

Celestial best depicts the refusal to conform as she does not stand by and wait until Roy is released. While she cares deeply for him, she insists on pursuing her own life and future. As she explains to him, "*I couldn't put myself in storage for five years. I couldn't just press pause*" (Jones, 2018, p. 214). The reason why this statement is radical is that it breaks a cultural script according to which women are expected to be fully loyal and endure even to the extent of injustice. In her critique of the institutional control over the bodies of Black women, Dorothy Roberts (1997) highlights the fact that social expectations tend to train women to be silent and sacrificial. That Celestial rejects this script shows how she is opposed to such disciplinary requirements.

The patriarchal nature of Marriage is also brought out in the expectation of Roy. He continues to appeal to Celestial's responsibility as a wife, urging her to be a faithful partner despite her needs. This dynamic reminds us of the discussion of patriarchal love provided by bell hooks (1984) that, in many cases, the system of patriarchal love requires women to self-negate in the name of devotion. When Celestial does

not obey, he interferes with this ideology, indicating that love should not be compared with obedience. She questions not only the authority of Roy but also the cultural standards that justified his demands in making this choice.

Notably, Jones does not make the opposition of Celestial triumphant and straightforward; on the contrary, it is full of conscience, contradiction, and social critique. Her community and family doubt her decisions, which indicates the pressure Black women have to undergo when they want to behave independently. However, as Harris (2021) points out, such complexity is a truth about Black feminist resistance. Such resistance is not undertaken without conflict; rather, it is a process of living through it. The ambivalence that Celestial embodies is an act of rebellion in itself, as it refuses to accept the simplicity of either total allegiance or total non-conformity passively.

In that sense, Marriage in *An American Marriage* is not as stable as a battlefield where the expectations of the patriarchy follow the clash with feminist self-determination. In rejecting the institution by refusing to give her life to the institution wholly, Celestial is exercising what Collins (2000) identifies as the power of self-definition, and she therefore has the right to control the terms of her identity even in the midst of oppressive institutions. The insights of Roberts (1997) further remind us that cultural naturalization of roles is what must be rejected in cases of resistance, and this is precisely what Celestial does. Her union with Roy is not a place of unveiled piety, but the boundaries of those Black feminist resistance are sketched and re-sketched.

4.3 Racial Justice and Prison.

Though *An American Marriage* is generally referred to as a novel of false imprisonment, a Black feminist critique identifies the implications of racial injustice on not only Roy but also on Celestial, who happens to be the collateral damage of institutionalized racism. In this case, the theory of intersectionality that was formulated by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) is constructive as it points to the intersection of race and gender as the sources of further subordination of Black women. Another type of violence of the American justice system, which is dramatized in the imprisonment of Roy (the book) is a racialized one.

However, such a situation of Celestial demonstrates that women, as well, are immersed in the shade of this system and forced to become the victims of endurance and sacrifice.

Jones portrays the wrongful conviction of Roy as a blistering comment on institutional racism. As Roy reflects from prison, "*They didn't even look at me as a man, just a Black body that fit the story*" (Jones, 2018, p. 87). His words resonate with those of Alexander (2010) in *The New Jim Crow*, where incarceration is examined as a contemporary racial caste system. However, although Roy is the one locked up, Celestial carries the burden of his loss, facing the question of the family, community, and society in general. As she confides, "*Everyone expected me to wait, as though my life should be suspended until his return*" (Jones, 2018, p. 159). The intersectional burden here is evident: Roy is victimized by racism, but Celestial is forced to assume the role of silent suffering, a position that Black women are placed in, in particular.

Crenshaw (1991) says that black women are at a very special crossroads of racial and gender oppression, as they tend to be seen as invisible in both racial and gender discourses, which only address either one or the other. This invisibility is revealed in *An American Marriage* through the way attention is given to Roy in a place where public sympathy is given to Roy, even though the plight of Celestial is viewed as secondary or even selfish. According to Harris (2021), Jones fails to adhere to this erasure by granting Celestial narrative authority, allowing her to share her ambivalence and pain. Lorde (1984) referred to it as the reinvention of silence to speech because she insists on not being a supporting character.

The prison mechanism also plays a role as a device that transforms intimate relationships. Roy accuses Celestial of betrayal by proceeding with her life because loyalty should take precedence over her personal autonomy. "*You're my wife. That's supposed to mean something. Even if I'm behind bars*" (Jones, 2018, p. 203). This scene is an illustration of how systemic racism not only incarcerates Black men but also recreates the patriarchal demands on Black women, and thus requires them to give up their futures to be able to show solidarity. According to Roberts (1997), we should remember that such

demands represent larger trends of institutional domination of the lives of Black women. Celestial breaks down both the patriarchal and racist systems by refusing to succumb to these demands.

Other scholars, such as Goyal (2019), have interpreted *An American Marriage* as a novel of incarceration, which is a risky approach to focus on since it may lead to missing the intersectional aspects of the story. Judging the novel through a Black feminist lens, it can be seen that the justice system is not only biased against Black men racially, but it also imposes upon Black women various emotional, social, and cultural pressures that they are expected to adhere to. The issue Celestial refuses to accept is that Roy's imprisonment determines her identity. Her assertion of her independence, therefore, points to the multiplying injustice that arises at the crossroads between race, gender, and law.

Racial justice, as portrayed in *American Marriage*, is not, then, an issue that can be understood through the lens of the miscarriage of justice of Roy himself. It must also consider the fate of Celestial that reverberates outside the prison walls to shape the lives of women and families. By placing Celestial in the center, Jones insists that racial injustice cannot be a personal phenomenon but a collective liability, and it cannot ignore the action of Black women in the same fashion it has neglected to take into account the plight of Black men.

V. DISCUSSION

The interpretation of *An American Marriage* in terms of the Black feminist resistance demonstrates how the Voice of Celestial and her bargaining of Marriage, as well as her entrapment in the issues of racial injustice, all combine into a multidimensional agency. This observation directly addresses the gap in the scholarship identified above: unlike critics, such as Goyal (2019) and Alexander (2010), who have emphasized the way the novel has brought up mass incarceration. The fractured intimacy depicted in the novel is noted by critics such as Wilkinson (2019) and Jones and Reynolds (2021); very little research has put Celestial at the center of its discussion. This article gives a novel twist to the existing body of scholarship by both predicting, that is, foregrounding her own position, one of the ways the novel can be

interpreted is as a story of wrongful imprisonment, but also as a story of black feminist struggle.

The theme of **Voice** illustrates how Celestial transforms silence into self-definition. Previous critics have tended to underplay her letters and her art, focusing instead on Roy's reflections from prison. The speech, as a survival framework by Lorde (1984), makes it clear that the words spoken by Celestial are not the words of ambivalence but the words of resistance. In this respect, the current study builds on the conclusion made by Harris (2021) that the art by Celestial can be discussed as a symbolic language by demonstrating how her Voice shifts the core focus of the novel, not to Roy, but to the gendered aspects of racial injustice.

The marriage theme puts into emphasis the fact that Jones does not depict Marriage as a safe space but as a battleground between the patriarchal and feminist forces. Johnson (2021) sees the role of Marriage in the novel, but does not frame the resistance of Celestial as a feminist one. This study sheds light on incorporating Collins (2000) and Roberts (1997) to explain how Celestial is unresponsive to the rules of obedience in ways that create a black feminist discourse of patriarchal love. Her decision not to wait for Roy's arrival makes her action a painful and controversial one. Still, at the same time, she is declaring independence and violating cultural scripts that dictate that women must be faithful to their cultures even at the expense of their lives.

The theme of racial justice and imprisonment characterizes the overlaps of the burdens of Black women. The wrongful conviction of Roy dramatizes the notion of systemic racism, just like Alexander (2010) narrates the mass incarceration as a racial caste regime. However, the current work indicates that Celestial is not an exception, as it experiences judgment in the community and emotional loneliness. The intersectionality theory developed by Crenshaw (1991) assists in revealing the fact that the issue of racial injustice cannot be viewed through the male prism only. Through this, the novel broadens the discussion on incarceration to incorporate the gendered consequences that have not been given much consideration in earlier criticism.

By integrating these three themes into a single discussion, the study demonstrates how *An American*

Marriage contributes to the body of Black feminist literature. The novel validates the subjectivization of Black women insisted upon by hooks (1981), demonstrates that silence has to be reshaped into language, and represents the idea of self-definition that Collins (2000) is asserting against the controlling image. Moreover, it demonstrates how intersectionality, as defined by Crenshaw (1991), is more than a hypothetical concept but a material life that is dramatized in the story of Jones.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the scholarly conversation by repositioning Celestial at the heart of the novel's critique. As previous discussions concentrated on the imprisonment of Roy, this reading shows that the resistance of Celestial is also crucial as she uses her Voice, her attitude to Marriage, and even challenges racial injustice. By so doing, the study bridges the research divide as it illuminates how *An American Marriage* not only portrays systemic racism but also dramatizes the resilience and agency of Black women in the midst of intersecting oppressions.

VI. CONCLUSION

An American Marriage (2018) by Tayari Jones is a powerful narrative that not only focuses on the destructive force of wrongful imprisonment on African American communities but also, and above all, on the strength and perseverance of Black women as they maneuver between the systems of oppression. The Black feminist theory of the novel has assisted this paper in elucidating how the Voice of Celestial, her negotiation of Marriage as a hagiography, and her struggles with racial injustices are combined to create a resistance that restructures the novel as something beyond a story of Roy's plight. Instead, it is also, perhaps more so, a story of Celestial attempting to assume agency in a society that is apt to demand her silence and sacrifice.

The first significant finding is that Celestial's **Voice** is central to the novel's resistance narrative. Through her letters, her art, and her spoken words, she transforms silence into self-definition, echoing Audre Lorde's (1984) insistence that silence must be converted into language and action. Celestial is a voice that breaks the norms as women are expected to play supporting roles in most narratives; however,

Celestial seeks to express her ambivalence, her guilt, and her wish to experience life to the fullest. In this way, she reflects the radical challenge of bell hooks (1981) to Black women to reassert subjectivity and reject patriarchal silence. The paper has demonstrated that the fractured and undeterred Voice of Celestial has been a kind of feminist dissent, which is frequently ignored by the previous critical interpretations of the poem.

The second result focuses on the issue of Marriage as a disputed institution. Instead of holding out Marriage as a natural or steady union, Jones introduces Marriage as a battlefield where patriarchal demands of loyalty against feminist claims of independence fight the women. The fact that Celestial is unwilling to suspend her life so that Roy can come back throws the cultural narrative of fidelity in Marriage to the wind. It reveals that Marriage is a form of punishment for Black women. Using the works of Collins (2000) and Roberts (1997), this study has already established that Celestial resistance in Marriage is a classic of self-definition against the controlling images. Her refusal of unquestioned sacrifice criticizes the patriarchal thinking commonly used to support marital roles, which further broadens the critical insight into how Black women manage to negotiate--and resist--the parameters of intimate institutions.

The third most valuable discovery is the theme of racial justice and prisoners. The outcomes of the problem in question are not confined to Roy. However, the case of Roy, who was mistakenly convicted, is a bright illustration of the argument made by the author Michelle Alexander (2010) due to the mass incarceration as a new Jim Crow. The example of Celestial highlights the concept of intersectionality that was presented by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991): Celestial is not captive; she must bear emotional and social costs of systemic racism, including the necessity to appear as a loyal partner, the need to be assessed and judged by her relatives and society, and the agony of delayed autonomy. Focusing on Celestial, one can see that the racial injustice within the novel cannot be described solely with the help of a male experience; it also has to consider gendered elements of imprisonment experienced by women.

Taken together, these findings play an essential role in the scholarly discussion of the subject of *An American Marriage*. Although the former analyses were more oriented to the way the novel dealt with the problem of systemic racism and broken intimacy, they tended to downgrade Celestial to the periphery of the discourse. This work fills a gap in the academic community by placing her at the center and reinterpreting the novel as a narrative of Black feminist protest. It reveals that not only does Jones criticize racial injustice, but he also provides a voice to Black women so that they can listen to how they were able to survive and fight against oppressive systems.

The conceptual value of the work is that it shows how the novel reproduces and develops the main principles of the Black feminist discourse. It confirms the insistence on placing Black women at the center, reflecting the Voice-as-survival concept Lorde implies, enacting the Self-definition focus Collins is concerned with, critiquing the institutional discipline Roberts critiques, and dramatizing the intersectionality Crenshaw advocates. By doing so, the analysis confirms the status of *An American Marriage* as an indispensable addition to African American feminist literature in the twenty-first century, and Celestial can be considered a character whose agency expands the feminist and literary discourses.

Naturally, this study does not disregard its limitations, either. Concentration on one novel requires a priori restriction of the investigation. However, the decision to *An American Marriage* has its reasons in both its critical reception and cultural relevance as well as its ability to reflect urgent questions of race, gender, and justice in postmodern America. Further research would prove productive when contrasted with the efforts of Jones and other Black American women authors, such as Jesmyn Ward or Toni Morrison, or when examining how Black feminist resistance is portrayed in a larger collection of twenty-first-century fiction. The novel by Jones might also be paralleled with other works of injustice in the world (such as the works of Dima Wannous in *The Frightened Ones*) to comprehend how feminism can be resistant in different environments.

To sum up, it is essential to mention that *An American Marriage* is a book that cannot quite be read as a novel of unjust imprisonment but as a textual representation of what is yet to be experienced: the power and struggle of Black women. We are told the story of Celestial, and we realize that resistance is sometimes practiced in the ordinary in the letters, in the paintings, in the love-and-marriage choice, in the not-to-be-muffled choice. In this work, the critical discourse turns the attention back to Celestial and her agency once again, demonstrating that not only its critique of the racist system but also its affirmation of Black feminist rebellion is the most radical intervention in the whole novel.

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