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A Black Feminist Consciousness in *Silver Sparrow* and *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones

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Abstract

There have been a plethora of federal government programmes, Civil Rights movements, and education programs that have had a positive impact on the dire condition of African- American women, but they still fall victims to the trifold oppressions of race, class, and gender. The Black feminist consciousness vehemently called for Black women's liberation from these subjugations. Black women today enjoy a more rewarding benefit than ever has been, engaging in permanent and established positions. This paper examines the application of the various concepts of Black feminism to the select fictional works of Tayari Jones viz., *Silver Sparrow* and *An American Marriage*. First published in 2011 and 2018 respectively, both are coming-of-age narratives that provide various forms and practices in relation to wider socio-economic developments of African-Americans in America.

Keywords: African-American women, trifold oppressions, Black feminism, Tayari Jones

Introduction

A Black feminist criticism refers to a body of critical and creative work written by Black women in the United States. A lot of the federal government programs, Civil Rights movements, and education programs have had a positive impact on the Black women's situation, but they still fall victims to the tri-dimensional factors of race, class, and gender subjugation. This led to the emergence of the Black feminist consciousness. In general, Black women enjoy a more rewarding benefit than ever

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has been, engaging in permanent and established positions. This paper looks at the application of Black feminists' concepts of ideology to the select works of Tayari Jones.

Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, Jones is a prolific African-American writer, who is best known for her novels. Jones spent most of her childhood in Southwest Atlanta, and so her stories and literary imagination also find centre stage in Atlanta. Jones wrote at a time when situations were ameliorating for coloured women in general, with all the advancements and movements of yesteryears. She provides a Black woman's point of view by presenting female-centric narratives, in which women characters are coming-of-age. Their journey however has not been unproblematic.

Black Feminism is a philosophy that calls for Black women's liberation from the trifold oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism. Contemporary Black feminist criticism was encouraged by the Civil Rights Movement, and expanded in juxtaposition with the Second Wave of feminism and the Black Power and Black Arts movements, which clearly were dominated by White women and Black men respectively. The movement rose in the United States as a result of White supremacy and patriarchal dominance on enslaved Black women, and attained a wider audience in the 2010s with the growing force of social media. Black feminists vehemently argued that gender and racial divisions abate the potency of the mainstream feminist and anti-racist movements.

Throughout history, mainstream feminism was negligible to the issue of race, considering it to be less important to patriarchy. Black feminists have therefore vigorously fought to challenge this ignorance of racism. Moraga and Anzaldúa strongly attack this disregard of White women arguing that racism certainly has an effect on people's lives, except the "white women who can "afford" to remain oblivious to these effects" (162). If we look at some of the groundbreaking feminists that led to the expansion of Black feminist criticism, we see that Audre Lorde, Sojourner Truth, Barbara Christian, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, and Patricia Hill Collins have played a significant role in the expansion of the field in different ways.

Both the select narratives provide various forms and practices in relation to wider socio-economic developments of African-American women in America. As Jones' third novel *Silver Sparrow* expands upon the subject of love and marriage, it also touches upon the everyday challenges faced by women inside and outside of home such as infidelity, class differences among partners, and bigger issues such as bigamy. Published in 2011, the story revolves around a father's life that is filled with

massive lies, and the chaotic consequences that his two wives and two teenage girls are swept up in. Following the wrongful imprisonment of a young Black man and its impact on him and on his families, *An American Marriage* published in 2018, then, explores the close association of the personal and the public by placing the intimate details of the lives of the characters within the larger social and political forces in contemporary America. Although it is structured as an intersection of culture, race, class, and gender, the novel also closely examines the inescapable niceties of family, as well as exercising one's choice.

Experience of Generational Adversities by African American Women

Gender roles hold an important position in Jones' writings, alongside race and class. Jones clarifies the notion that people have about African-American culture as matriarchal, owing to the immense responsibility that women take on. She says that women take on responsibility only in the absence of men, that "In the black culture here in the US, we have a crisis of masculinity" (Conroy, Web). A lot of their men have either been incarcerated or dead at a young age, leaving the women with no choice but to take up the men's role as the head of the family. And this is exactly what happens in the narratives.

Patriarchy is one of the characteristic writings of feminism and is also a major concern in Jones' fiction, wherein she vigorously fights against male dominators. "Traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children" and "Classically, as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property" (Millet 67). The view of patriarchy over the years has undergone a huge transformation in many parts of the world nevertheless we see that it is still shaped by the underlying idea of men above women. As Adichie has remarked, "If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal" (*We Should* 13). Likewise, if we keep seeing only men as the primal head of everything, it starts to seem natural to accept the women as the 'Other,' the 'Second Sex.' The gender roles defined in the narratives adhere to this point, revealing the limited choice of women.

The entire plot of *Silver Sparrow* is shaped by the secret life of the bigamist James Witherspoon, who has two families in Atlanta, the public and the private. James demands the secret family to live by his sayings, compelling them to live in the shadows of his main family. The women characters here manage their lives

around James, struggling to come to terms to his wills. James even had to keep her secret child, Dana, away from her hopes and dreams in fear of being exposed to his dual life. She and her mother Gwendolyn are thus marginalized. And because everyone wants to be in his favour, the daughters want him as a father and the women want to occupy the position of the wife, James is able to get away. He knows that his wife Laverne was not going to give up her marriage and Gwen was determined to stay too after all the scandalous circumstances, such as bearing a child and being disowned by her father for leaving her husband, Clarence Yarboro, for James. Jones thus presents a vivid portrayal of life and sexual awakening in Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1980s as experienced by the teenage sisters, and in the 1950s, when the shame of being unmarried and pregnant shaped their own mothers' lives, while also uncovering the transformed condition in contemporary times.

Laverne was impregnated at an early age and was practically forced into child marriage as she was only fifteen years old when she got married to James. Although James too was of the same age, he was willing to marry unlike Laverne. When she lost her first child, she no longer wants to go back home but stays with James and his mother, more because she had no choice in a judging society. When James' dual lives are gradually exposed, Laverne begins to question her worth. Chaurisse, herself being angry and broken, would ask her mother to stop droning and stand up for herself. "Mama," "Grab a broom. Put sugar in his gas tank. Something" "I just want you to be more …" (313). All these highlight the very little choices that were laid down for women around that time.

The things that happen in the story take place because Black women were forced to work as domestic labourers. Throughout history, Black women had been the most browbeaten members of the American society as she has been the object of continual exploitation. Although some White women spoke of sexual equality, on the whole they had no intentions of working together with Black women. The relations of race and sex thus exacted a heavy toll on the Black woman. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, no Black woman held a job beyond that of menial job. Laverne's mother Mattie, James' mother Miss Bunny, and Raleigh's mother Lula, worked long hours for White families. Theirs was still a generation that worked tedious jobs under White folks. Both Bunny and Lula were only fifteen years old when they were house-cleaning for the Whites. And even though it was the year 1942, far afield from slavery, Lula felt like she was living on a plantation. The systematic exclusion of Black women from other privileged areas of service continued to dominate their lives. And so while freedom opened new paths for

Black men, most women were confined to old problems that were only exacerbating with time.

When Miss Bunny told Lula about the vacancy of an overnight girl needed by a new White family, her utmost concern was, "What's the husband like?" "I can't go through this all again" and here we see how Black women's bodies were still commodified by White men (120). Although a redbone girl herself, Lula did not want her son because his face reminded her of her White owner who raped her. Female harassment is not new when it comes to predicaments faced by women. This is justified when Dana "could hear [her] own voice, shrill with lies" as she explains to James about Marcus that "He doesn't have a temper. He has never raised his hand to me" (107). To this day, for most Black women it is still a struggle against racism and sexism.

Just as that addressed by Black feminists, Tayari Jones too reveals the many challenges faced by women of colour and the issues that remain prevalent, while also unfailingly addressing the gallant ways in which Black women defy stereotypical gender roles. Jones structures her fiction as a feminist narrative around the oppression of Black men in the United States. The preference of a male child is made obvious in the narratives. Although Ronalda tells people that her mother was dead, she is still alive and had escaped with her little brother whom she loved a lot. Dana knew that her father too always wanted a son. Growing up with two brothers, Jones always felt that her parents had greater expectations of them. She says, "As anyone who's ever had a brother knows, boys are in many ways the centre of the familial universe" (Conroy, Web). Jones confronts that although she had a happy childhood, she grew up in an environment where girl children were not celebrated and valued in the same way as boys.

White supremacy and male primacy has been a painted reality in the life of a Black woman. Whether young or old, the Black woman was basically left on her own. She was exploited, commodified, and deceived. From the letters she writes to Roy, we come to know that Celestial spent a year at Howard University before Spelman, wherein she met a forty-years-old married Black teacher, Raul Gomez, with whom she was pregnant at just eighteen. Although she had a share of being immoral, with all the false promises made to her by the older man left her envisioning with hope for a future with him. However, after twelve years of marriage, Gomez was not in a state to divorce his wife which brutally shattered Celestial. She had a weight pressing on her mental health that she dolled her way out. Although the sock dolls, which was introduced to her by her aunt Sylvia, was to donate to Grady

Hospital initially, every time she made something to comfort a motherless infant, Celestial felt like she was paying back for the abortion she had and the mistakes she had made. In writing an up-close look at marriage, race, and feminism in *An American Marriage*, Jones sees that society desires their daughters to be ladies "because it's much more important that your daughter be a lady than your son be a gentleman" (Conroy, Web). Roy's observation of women as men's cure, for instance, is problematic. He believes that at times the only obsession that can cure a man is the inside of a woman, crediting Davina, the woman he sleeps with right after his release from prison, for showing him how to be himself again. This examination of Roy can be generalized in the way women are sexualized.

Jones has voiced out with regard to gender prejudices in various forms. In the art school that Celestial studied, she was one of the two Black students, in which the other was a guy, who was always angry at Celestial for spoiling his uniqueness. This calls attention to Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* where Gifty did not want to be thought of as "a woman in science" or "a black woman in science" but rather as "a scientist" (83). Gifty had tyrannical and misogynistic men like Yao in her small study group who would shut down any of the ideas proposed by women. They are products of a culture that has cultured them with the hidebound notion that men are central to women. Misogynoir comes in various forms and these are fine examples. It is in the ways in which Black women's bodies were commodified, or in the police violence against Black women as is the case with the murder of Breonna Taylor, or in the ways in which a school resource officer knocked Taylor Bracey unconscious in a high school, Florida, on January 2021, or the perception that Black women are threatening and aggressive when they speak up for themselves. Today, we live in a world that is much evolved but our thoughts on gender have not evolved much. Because humans are communal beings, we incorporate and unconsciously assimilate ideas from our society.

People have always carried the notion that Black women are wild and uncontrollable. Al Green's story in *Silver Sparrow*, about what a wife does when she finds out that her husband is being unfaithful, suggests how even their violence was taken as a joke. The wife, a Black woman, throws grit on her husband, Al Green, who gets a third degree burn from it. She then goes on to kill herself and Al Green later finds the Lord out of this mess. Jones uses this tragic story which she has been hearing all her life and weaves in to the narrative to debunk the notion of uncontrollable rage of Black women. There are other recent examples where Black women are stereotypically represented as aggressive and threatening. We see

Misogynoir pervading in women's sport media too. The unfair treatment imposed on Serena Williams during her Women's Singles finals match of the 2018 US Open by chair umpire Carlos Ramos represent a classic case. Apart from the warning given to Williams for damaging her tennis racket, the other two penalties for coaching and verbal abuse spurred controversies. Many male players like James Blake and John McEnroe have made use of much vulgar words than a "thief" against chair umpires but have been left unpenalized. This contrast treatment of Ramos between men and a Black woman is apparent of the biasness within the game of tennis. As a result of the intersection of multiple forms of oppression in the lives of Black women, they are made to feel like an outsider in all areas.

The angry Black woman thus remains a social, political, and cultural typecast that has been used to defame artists, athletes, and political figures. Former US President Donald Trump has a record of reinforcing old stereotypes on different occasions, ranging from calling Kamala Harris, the first Black woman to be elected as Vice President, as extraordinarily nasty and angry to calling a Black American woman journalist as threatening. Even former First Lady of the US Michelle Obama, in her book *Becoming* and in her several interviews, described her bewilderment on being called an angry Black woman.

These are proof enough of the systemic ways in which violence is maintained and justified as a result of hatred towards Black women. There are also other forms of structural violence in which Black women are systematically disregarded in the everyday life such as marriage, which often are brushed under the carpet with the big constitutional systems such as police violence taking all the highlights. People barely ever talk about the women who are taking care of the house and families when their husbands are incarcerated. And so it is imperative to be expansive when addressing about violence, which is exactly what Jones does in her latest novel.

Roy is a young, middle-class Black man who falls prey to the codified racism of the American criminal justice system. Making use of a single family, *An American Marriage* centres on the consequences of a cataclysmic injustice on Roy and Celestial who have been married only for eighteen months. It delves deep into the subjects of class, incarceration, love, family and marriage, with the persistent racism of the justice system at its backdrop. These subjects work beautifully in this delicate story with a bigger message about the blatant inequity in American society. While the novel accounts the physical and psychological torments of the male protagonist, it also throws ample light on the psyche of his wife Celestial. Because, even though

Roy fights against the penal system from the inside, Celestial must fight her own battles on the outside.

Jones sought to look at the collateral effects of incarceration, and the way society looks at women's roles in these relations. Women are the caretakers of the incarcerated men. But people converse very little about what is being sacrificed by these women. This can be because of the poor idea that women are defined by their relationships to men. Roy's incarceration forces Celestial into a forlorn state as her world is upturned overnight. Aside from being separated from her husband, Celestial who at one point longed to have a child with Roy, considers it pointless given their situation and decides to have an abortion. Celestial could not even bring herself to seal the flaps on the sturdy cardboard box, which contained her hand-made dolls for sell, as the memory of ripping tape troubled her. When memory gets the better of her and cannot hold back her tears irrespective of the place and time she is in, Celestial would blame it on allergies or an eyelash irritation.

Celestial was mentally tired of all that was happening in her life. Her dad was still writing checks to pay for her wedding, when their marriage has been in a pathetic condition. She worked crazy hours at the shop, and then drove for hours to Louisiana to spend the night with her in-laws, who were not even fond of her. Her husband was not at fault, but there was only so much she could do as a Black woman. She tells Andre, "You don't know what it's like to be standing in the line to get in to see him" in the prison, "it's different for women. They treat you like you're coming to visit your pimp… Like you're a delusional victim" (157). It breaks Celestial to know that "Women's work is never easy, never clean" (285). There were times when she would look in the mirror and cannot quite recognize herself.

Redefining History and Borders by African American Women

It is not recent to see Black women redefining history and borders of gender roles. Since the time of slavery, Black women like Harriet Tubman, who led slaves through sticky situations to freedom, have always been voicing out their aspirations. Today, there is a rich history of Black women taking charge in various fields and activities, with women such as Oprah Winfrey, the first Black woman multi-billionaire and the greatest Black philanthropist in American history, Michelle Obama, the first African American woman to serve as the First Lady of the United States, Beyoncé Knowles, one of the world's best-selling recording artists, and Serena Williams, one of the greatest female tennis players that the world has seen.

Many women today are expressive who like to explore and experience with everything and do not shy away from opportunities. As Ytasha Womack says, "It's what our predecessors fought for. It's called choice" (162). Black women now emphasize more on self-expression and being themselves, a trait which was uncalled for in the past as they were demanded to be strong. They overcame situations beyond their power, and sacrifice for the family and children. In the analysis of Jones' female characters, crucial questions of self and subjectivity come into sight. They find the need to deconstruct the post-Second World War ideology of woman as submissive wife, mother, and homemaker.

Celestial is in many ways a modern version of the characters in the preceding women-authored texts such as Toni Morrison, who defy social construct rules in her own way. This finds evidence in the way she thinks, acts, loves, and exerts power. She wants to live the life she wants and not the one that has been laid down by her husband or the society. Roy needs Celestial to come to see him in prison, to put money on his books, to keep their lawyer on his toes, to remind him of the man he once was. He tells her, "I feel like I need and need and need and it's wearing a hole in the fabric" (81). Roy needs her but Celestial needs herself too. Roy writes to Celestial in one of his letters saying, "I'm innocent" and she writes back, "I'm innocent, too" (84). This sums up the novel's main concept that we can be compassionate towards the victim, and make his voice heard, but not at the expense of having to represent his wife's needs and ambitions as trivial.

Being married to an incarcerated man is a major sacrifice. Yet, Celestial does extremely well in balancing her personal and professional life. When Roy had a false impression concerning Celestial's answer at her interview on the subject of her inspiration in making dolls, she makes him know that it was a special occasion for her. "Maybe it was selfish, but I wanted to have my moment to be an artist, not the prisoner's wife" (67). Although Roy felt that his wife was ashamed to tell them that he was in prison, Celestial was aware that her possibility for improvement in her profession will be greatly weakened by having her product associated with penal complexity, by mentioning about her husband's imprisonment. As a Black woman, Celestial had to make the White folks believe that she is an excellent doll maker and there was no room for errors.

Homer's The Odyssey had a huge inspiration on Jones' *An American Marriage*. Initially, Roy fell in love with Celestial's independence, someone that he cannot control. However, after his arrest he wanted a more traditional version of his wife.

She was expected the same as what Odysseus wanted from Penelope, submission. "Roy is like Odysseus" with "this huge challenge" and "he wants to find a clean home and a faithful wife waiting on him at the other end" Jones remarks (Bates, Web). But things have changed, and Celestial is no Penelope. These two women characters are a perfect quintessence of the transformation in gender roles over the years. Celestial is a modern woman who cannot just sit idly and wait for her man while she personally has a lot on her shoulder. She understands that she is not in the same distress as her husband nonetheless she too is in great pain and feels that she cannot continue to live this way. No one knows how long will Roy be behind bars, or whether he will ever be exonerated. As Gloria tells her, "You always run toward what you want… brilliant but impulsive and a tiny bit selfish" "But more women should be selfish" "Or else the world will trample you" (211). Celestial has endured so much to be married without actually being a wife for so long that she finally decides on leaving Roy. She was not abandoning him in his distress, as she will be there for him in ways she could render such as in continuing to keep his commissary up to date and visiting him as his friend, but she could no longer go on to be his wife. When Roy goes to meet his wife for the first time after his release from prison, Roy could see that Celestial had made her choice.

Celestial is not the only woman who possesses heroic traits, who could voice out and exercise her choices. The female characters in *Silver Sparrow* are also unapologetically themselves. This is Jones' literary and political account of gender mobility. From a very young age, Dana is apparent to be a bold little girl, from the way she stands her ground, the way she protests when she wants to know certain things or get things, or the way she fearlessly confronts Chaurisse and her mom. She is someone who delights in the thrill of taking risks. When she comes to know that James and Raleigh are throwing a party for Laverne for all the hard work she does, she sat up from the shampoo bowl at the parlour and fights for her mother saying, "My mother works hard," "but she never had a party or anything close to it. Do you know that?" (253). Despite the warning from her father, Dana tracks Chaurisse down and with time, the girls befriend each other. They grow into beautiful women with dreams and ambitions.

The emerging of working-class women was one of the revolutionary vanguards in history. We find women having different ambitions in the narrative. This is a solid way of breaking stereotypical representations of women to be fixed only to breeding and taking care of the household. Ronalda was not worried about college applications. She had always had the desire to go to Southern University in Baton Rouge as she

had long admired the school's marching band and hoped to be chosen as a Dancing Doll.

Although the novel is set in Atlanta, Georgia, during the 21st century, it covers three generations. Dana's mother initially had dreamt only about marriage. Hers was a generation that got women busy in learning to be a wife. Although she knew that so much had revolutionized for Black women like her and was grateful for these new opportunities, and even though she was the very first coloured woman to hold the post as a Gift-wrap girl, it was not what she wanted to do as she never really dreamed of jobs. But time made her ambitious and sensible. When she was young, she took a few classes to learn travel-agenting, but somewhere in the mid-seventies she shifted to night courses at Atlanta Junior College to become a licensed practical nurse. With her babysitting pay, she also bought a new Commodore computer. It was always a proud feeling for her whenever she mentioned about this purchase with her own money.

Laverne, then, had the life she wanted with a husband and a daughter. She converted the garage of their house into a two-station beauty salon named 'The Pink Fox.' With the increased demand in hair styling, salons were at rise in America, with some women making four to five hundred dollars per head. The salon with its two pump chairs, shampoo bowl, and three hooded dryers, represented a generation's worth of progress from the days when Laverne sat on the front steps calling customers for her mother. By 1967, Laverne was making decent money renting a chair at a salon on Ashby Street. All because James did not know how to behave, she was not losing what she had fought hard for, although at one point she was worried about if she had to move out of the house, divorce him, and even lose the beauty shop.

When Dana was about ten, her mother wanted her to enjoy the benefits of extra tutoring in science. When James was reluctant about it, Gwen confronts, "Why not? Is it because she's a pretty girl?" "I have read that parents don't make the same investment in the minds of their good-looking daughters. Dana is an intellectual, you know" and these words had been a general stipulate for women at large (33). Despite the many restrictions and rules laid down for Dana, she had her way of doing things, of voicing out. Towards the book's end, she cuts off her beautiful hair for which she had long been admired, in parts to demonstrate that she is not going to live for the preferences of men, and for society's beauty standards.

Although history has not been kind to Black women's writing, they nonetheless acquired far greater visibility as both creator and consumer of texts that went on to

debunk literary canon formation. As a way out from the long-term consequences that racism, sexism, and classism have on the lives of African American women, Jones stalwartly believes that it is imperative to change the echelon of feminism by being more inclusive of differences and changing the perspective of binary oppositions, as well as incorporating evenhandedness, empathy, and respecting multiplicity.

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