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Motherhood as Resistance: Systemic Injustice and Black Maternal Subjectivity in Tayari Jones's an American Marriage

[1]Sandhya Rani B & [2]Dr. Ancy Liyana A

[1]Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Liberal Studies
CMR University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India
[2]Research Guide, Assistant professor, Department of English, School of Liberal Studies
CMR University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

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Abstract

This paper examines Black maternal subjectivity as a site of resistance to systemic injustice in Tayari Jones's An American Marriage (2018), through the lens of Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. Crenshaw argues that Black women's experiences of oppression cannot be understood through race or gender alone, but only through their simultaneous intersection. Applying this framework to the character of Celestial Davenport Hamilton, the study traces how she navigates the overlapping structures of racial injustice, gendered expectation, and class vulnerability that Roy's wrongful conviction sets into motion. Through close reading of key episodes, including Celestial's testimony at trial, her letters to Roy during his imprisonment, her decision to terminate her pregnancy, and her artistic practice as an act of self-constitution, the paper argues that Celestial's motherhood, both actual and deferred, becomes a form of political resistance to the interlocking systems of racial capitalism and carceral state violence. The findings demonstrate that Jones's novel offers a sustained literary interrogation of how Black women bear the compounded costs of intersectional injustice, and how maternal agency, even in its most constrained and ambivalent forms, constitutes a meaningful counter-hegemonic practice.

Keywords: intersectionality, black motherhood, an american marriage, tayari jones, celestial davenport, systemic injustice, carceral state, african american fiction

Introduction

Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018) is a novel about love and loyalty, but at its structural core it is a novel about what systemic injustice does to Black women. When Roy Hamilton is wrongfully convicted of rape and sentenced to twelve years in a Louisiana prison, the weight of that injustice falls not only on him but, with equal and differently contoured force, on his wife Celestial Davenport Hamilton. It is Celestial who must navigate a legal system designed to render her invisible, a social world that expects her to perform loyal suffering, and a domestic future that has been unmade by the carceral state. Jones herself has spoken of how racial injustice in the criminal justice system is, for Black Americans, something that is simply in the air, a structural condition rather than an exceptional event. The novel asks, with quiet but relentless force, what

it means for a Black woman to survive that condition.

This study reads Celestial's experience through the theoretical framework of intersectionality as articulated by Kimberle Crenshaw in her landmark essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991). Crenshaw argues that Black women occupy a distinct and often unacknowledged position at the intersection of racial and gender-based subordination, and that this position generates forms of disadvantage that neither antiracist nor feminist discourse alone can adequately address. Applying this framework to Celestial allows the analysis to move beyond seeing her simply as a grieving wife and to recognize her instead as a subject whose every decision, from her courtroom performance to her artistic labor to her reproductive choice, is shaped by the compounded pressures of race, gender, and class operating simultaneously. The paper argues that Celestial's deferred and embodied relationship to motherhood constitutes a form of resistance to these intersecting structures of oppression.

The significance of this reading extends beyond the novel itself. Black maternal mortality rates in the United States remain disproportionately high, the prison-industrial complex continues to devastate Black family life, and reproductive justice remains a contested political terrain for Black women. *An American Marriage* places these realities at the center of its narrative, making Celestial's story not a private tragedy but a literary map of interlocking public injustices. To read Celestial through Crenshaw's intersectional lens is to take seriously the novel's insistence that Black women's lives are shaped at the crossing of multiple systems of domination, and that their resistance must be understood as emerging from precisely that crossing.

Theoretical Framework: Crenshaw's Intersectionality

Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," and elaborated it fully in her 1991 essay "Mapping the Margins." In the latter, she defines intersectionality as a framework for understanding how Black women's experiences of oppression arise not from race or gender as separate forces, but from their convergence. As Crenshaw writes, "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (1245). This formulation is foundational to the present study because it insists that Celestial's suffering in *An American Marriage* cannot be accounted for by focusing on Roy's racial victimization alone, nor by focusing solely on Celestial's gendered vulnerability. It is only at the crossing of these two axes, and the class dimension that inflects them both, that her experience becomes fully legible.

Crenshaw identifies three dimensions of intersectionality that are particularly useful for literary analysis: structural intersectionality, which examines how social institutions position women of color at the point of maximum vulnerability; political intersectionality, which shows how Black women are marginalized even within movements ostensibly organized in their interest; and representational intersectionality, which addresses how cultural narratives construct and constrain the identities available to Black women. Crenshaw argues that "women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas," and that "the need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing political agendas is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront" (1252). This formulation describes with precision the impossible position Celestial occupies throughout Jones's novel: expected to be loyal to Roy as a Black man victimized by a racist system, while simultaneously being denied recognition as a Black woman who is herself a victim of that same system and of the gendered expectations it enforces.

Crenshaw further argues that "although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices" (1242). Jones's novel dramatizes this gap: the institutions and discourses that surround Celestial, including the court, the prison, and the social expectations of Black marriage, consistently treat Roy's racial victimization as the primary and organizing injustice, rendering Celestial's compounded burden secondary, supplemental, and ultimately invisible. Intersectionality provides the analytical vocabulary for making that burden visible, and for understanding the resistant practices through which Celestial asserts her subjectivity against it.

Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative literary research methodology, with close reading as its primary analytical tool. *An American Marriage* is read through the three-dimensional framework of Crenshaw's intersectionality, namely structural, political, and representational intersectionality, to examine how Jones constructs Celestial as a subject shaped by and resistant to overlapping systems of racial, gendered, and class-based oppression. Four key episodes in the novel are selected for close reading: Celestial's testimony during Roy's trial, her epistolary correspondence with Roy during his imprisonment, her decision to terminate her pregnancy, and her practice of crafting handmade baby dolls as an artistic and economic enterprise. These episodes are chosen because they represent the sites at which Celestial's intersectional positioning becomes most visible and most consequential, and because they collectively constitute the trajectory of her emergence as a resistant subject. Supporting scholarly context is drawn from Crenshaw's primary theoretical essays, Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body* (1997), and bell hooks's *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000).

Findings and Results

The Courtroom: Structural Intersectionality and the Politics of Performance

The most structurally illuminating episode in the novel for an intersectional reading occurs during Roy's trial. Celestial is called to testify in her husband's defense, and her uncle, who serves as Roy's attorney, instructs her to abandon the composure and articulation she has been raised to deploy as a Black middle-class woman: "Now is not the time to be articulate. Now is the time to give it up. No filter, all heart" (Jones 54). The instruction reveals the double bind Celestial inhabits. A lifetime of performing competence and respectability as a Black woman in professional spaces has equipped her with a social armor that the courtroom, in this moment, renders dangerous. To appear educated, composed, and controlled is to alienate the jury. But to perform vulnerability and grief on demand is to betray her own subjectivity, to play a role scripted by white racial expectations of how a grieving Black wife should appear. After her testimony, Celestial reflects that "not even the black lady juror would look at me," registering the isolation of a woman who has satisfied no constituency: too controlled to be sympathetic, too Black to be credible.

This episode is a precise illustration of what Crenshaw calls structural intersectionality: the way social institutions position Black women at a point of compounded vulnerability. The court is a structure that processes Roy's Blackness as criminality; it processes Celestial's gender as secondary, emotional evidence; and it has no framework for understanding her as a Black woman whose testimony is shaped by both race and gender simultaneously. As Crenshaw argues, the failure of institutions to account for intersectional positioning means that women of color absorb the cumulative impact of multiple systems of disadvantage at once. Celestial in the courtroom is not simply a wife failing to save her husband. She is a Black woman caught in a structure that has already decided the outcome and that requires her to perform a role that erases her subjectivity in the process of defending her husband's humanity.

The Letters: Political Intersectionality and the Burden of Loyalty

The epistolary middle section of the novel, in which Roy and Celestial communicate through letters during his imprisonment, is where the political dimension of Celestial's intersectional burden becomes most visible. Roy's letters from prison are filled with pain, need, and the raw urgency of a man whose humanity is being systematically stripped. Celestial's responses reveal a woman who is simultaneously grieving, rebuilding, and being held to account for that rebuilding. When Celestial confesses in one letter that she had known, in the abstract, that wrongful conviction was a reality in Black American life but had never imagined it could touch her own life, she writes: "I knew that things like this happen to people, but by people, I didn't mean us" (Jones 83). The confession is significant not as naivete but as an acknowledgment of the class-inflected dimension of her intersectional position. As a Spelman-educated, professionally successful Black woman, Celestial had believed that middle-class achievement offered a degree of insulation from racial violence. Roy's conviction demolishes that belief and exposes the structural lie at its center.

What makes Celestial's position politically intersectional, in Crenshaw's sense, is that the dominant framework for understanding Roy's situation, that of racial justice and Black male victimization, leaves no room for Celestial's compounded experience to be recognized as its own form of injustice. She is expected to be a loyal wife, which means subordinating her grief, her professional ambitions, and her own future to the project of Roy's eventual exoneration and return. Roy's father articulates the community's expectation plainly when he says that Roy "didn't do anything but be a black man in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Jones 167), centering the narrative of racial injustice entirely on Roy and implicitly positioning Celestial as a supporting character in his story. But as bell hooks argues, Black women are consistently expected to suppress their own struggles in the name of racial solidarity organized around Black male experience, an expectation that constitutes a form of gendered oppression within the community itself (hooks 14). Celestial's gradual refusal to accept this role, her insistence on continuing to build her artistic career and her emotional life in Roy's absence, is the political heart of her resistance.

The Pregnancy: Reproductive Injustice and Deferred Motherhood

One of the most significant and underexamined episodes in the novel is the revelation that Celestial was pregnant at the time of Roy's trial and that the couple decided she should terminate the pregnancy. Jones does not render this decision as a moment of moral crisis but as a practical reckoning with an impossible situation: neither Roy nor Celestial wanted their child to enter the world with its father in prison. The abortion is a consequence, direct and concrete, of the carceral state's intervention into Black family life. As Dorothy Roberts has argued, the state's control over Black women's reproductive lives has historically been exercised not only through explicit coercion but through the creation of conditions that make free reproductive choice impossible for Black women (Roberts 6). Celestial's situation enacts this logic with devastating precision: the choice to end the pregnancy is a choice, but it is a choice manufactured by a system that has made any other option unconscionable.

Crenshaw's concept of structural intersectionality illuminates why this reproductive loss must be understood as a specifically intersectional injury. The carceral state targets Roy as a Black man; it injures Celestial as a Black woman, in her body and in her reproductive future. The legal system that convicts Roy without adequate evidence is the same system that, by imprisoning him, forecloses the domestic and maternal future that Celestial had imagined. Her deferred motherhood is not a private grief but a structural consequence of racial injustice, one that falls on Celestial precisely because of her position at the intersection of race and gender. She is harmed as a Black person, because her

husband is targeted by a racist system; and she is harmed as a woman, because the reproductive costs of that targeting are absorbed by her body.

The Dolls: Representational Intersectionality and Creative Resistance

Celestial's artistic practice, the crafting of handmade Black baby dolls she calls "poupees," functions throughout the novel as the clearest site of her resistant subjectivity. The dolls are meticulously constructed, expensive, and commercially successful; they represent a form of creative and economic autonomy that Celestial maintains and even expands during Roy's imprisonment. Jones presents the doll-making as something more than a career: it is a practice through which Celestial makes Black childhood legible, beautiful, and worthy of care in a culture that has historically denied Black children those qualities. The dolls are, in a very real sense, representations of the Black children who are not yet in the world, and their commercial success is a small but meaningful act of insistence on the value of Black life.

This is the dimension of Celestial's resistance that Crenshaw's concept of representational intersectionality illuminates most directly. Crenshaw argues that representational intersectionality involves the significance of representing people of different genders, races, and identities in cultural production, and the political stakes of doing so against dominant images that devalue or distort those identities (Crenshaw 1283). Celestial's dolls counter the long history of representations that have rendered Black children invisible or pathological; they insist on Black childhood as worthy of artistic attention and economic value. Moreover, the fact that Celestial builds this practice during Roy's imprisonment, maintaining and growing her independent economic and creative life rather than suspending it in deference to his needs, constitutes a form of resistance to the gendered expectation of loyal self-erasure. Her mother's counsel, that more women should be selfish, is not an endorsement of indifference to Roy's suffering but a recognition that Celestial's subjectivity cannot be permitted to dissolve into the orbit of his victimization.

Discussion

Read through Crenshaw's intersectional framework, Celestial emerges not as a flawed or selfish wife but as a Black woman whose every significant act is shaped by the compounded pressures of racial, gendered, and class-based oppression, and whose resistance to those pressures constitutes the political and moral center of the novel. At the trial, she is required to perform a gendered vulnerability that erases her class-inflected subjectivity in the service of a racial justice narrative that centers her husband. In her letters, she is expected to subordinate her own grief and ambition to the project of Roy's survival, an expectation that reproduces the political intersectionality Crenshaw identifies as a form of disempowerment specific to Black women. In her body, she bears the reproductive cost of a carceral state assault directed at Roy. And in her art, she fashions an alternative space of subjectivity and resistance that the systems of racial capitalism and carceral violence cannot fully reach.

Jones refuses, throughout the novel, to render Celestial's resistance as uncomplicated or cost-free. Celestial is ambivalent, inconsistent, and at times cruel; she falls in love with Andre while Roy is in prison and cannot straightforwardly account for her own feelings. But this complexity, far from undermining the intersectional reading, deepens it. As Crenshaw argues, the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of its parts: it produces forms of disempowerment and contradiction that cannot be resolved by either antiracist or feminist discourse alone. Celestial's ambivalence is the lived texture of that irresolvability. She cannot be a perfect loyal wife because she is also a Black woman with her own subjectivity, ambitions, and survival needs. And she cannot subordinate those needs without reproducing, within her own intimate life, the same erasure that the carceral state has visited on her from outside.

The novel's resolution, in which Celestial and Roy separate and Celestial returns to Atlanta and her work, refuses the sentimental reading that would see her choice as a failure of love. It is instead an insistence on the right of a Black woman to refuse the terms of her own erasure, even when those terms are offered in the name of racial solidarity. Jones has spoken of wanting readers to find themselves unsure which character they identify with most, precisely because the novel is not interested in apportioning blame but in mapping the structural conditions that make such impossible choices necessary. Intersectionality is the framework that makes that mapping legible.

Conclusion

This study has argued that Celestial Davenport Hamilton's experience in Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* constitutes a sustained literary engagement with the intersectional oppression that Kimberle Crenshaw theorizes in "Mapping the Margins." At the courtroom, in her letters, in her body, and in her art, Celestial confronts the compounded structures of racial and gendered subordination that define Black women's particular position at the intersection of racism and sexism. Her motherhood, deferred by the carceral state's violence and expressed obliquely through her artistic practice of crafting Black baby dolls, is not a peripheral theme in the novel but its structural and political center. It is through Celestial's relationship to maternal possibility, its destruction, its displacement, and its resistant reimagining, that Jones most powerfully maps the costs of intersectional injustice and the conditions of Black women's survival. Crenshaw argues that any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. *An American Marriage* is precisely such an intersectional analysis, conducted in the medium of literary fiction. Reading Celestial through Crenshaw's framework reveals a character whose significance exceeds her role in Roy's story and whose resistance, ambivalent, embodied, and creative, constitutes a form of political agency adequate to the structural complexity of her situation. Future scholarship might extend this intersectional reading to other Black women characters in contemporary African American fiction, examining how Jones's novel participates in a broader literary tradition of representing Black maternal subjectivity as a site of both vulnerability and resistance to interlocking systems of domination.

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