



Between Silence and Survival: Narrating Trauma in Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage*

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Abstract

Tayari Jones is an acclaimed African American writer known for her emotionally resonant novels that explore themes of love, identity, and injustice. Her novel *An American Marriage* presents the story of Roy and Celestial, a young married couple whose relationship is tested by wrongful incarceration. Set in the contemporary American South, the novel captures the emotional and psychological consequences of trauma through a shifting narrative structure. This paper is titled *Between Silence and Survival: Narrating Trauma in Tayari Jones's An American Marriage*. The novel portrays how trauma disrupts memory, identity, and emotional connection. Using concepts from trauma theory, this paper examines how the characters cope with personal and relational disintegration. It highlights how narrative voice, silence, and fragmented memory function as literary tools to reflect post-traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Tayari Jones, trauma, incarceration, identity, emotional displacement

Trauma in literature is the depiction of extremely upsetting, debilitating, and potentially life-altering events that frequently have long-lasting psychological or emotional repercussions. Trauma theory investigates how these events are portrayed in literature, how they affect characters and storylines, and how literary study may help us comprehend them. Tayari Jones's book *An American Marriage* examines the severe trauma that middle-class African American couple Celestial and Roy endured as a result of Roy's false conviction and incarceration. Told through shifting perspectives and a fractured epistolary structure, the novel gives voice to psychological, emotional, and social trauma while resisting closure or moral finality. Rather than

focusing solely on the judicial injustice inflicted upon Roy, Jones draws attention to the silent, enduring trauma that incarceration etches into love, trust, and identity. This paper engages with postmodern literary trauma theory, especially the works of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, to examine how Jones narrates trauma as both a rupture and a residue in the lives of her characters.

Tayari Jones was born on November 30, 1970, in Atlanta, Georgia, a city that deeply influences the themes and settings of her fiction. The daughter of academics and activists, Jones was raised in an environment that fostered intellectual rigor and social awareness. She earned her undergraduate degree from Spelman College, followed by graduate work at



the University of Iowa and Arizona State University, where she received her MFA in creative writing. Jones' debut novel, *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), draws on the real-life Atlanta child murders and presents a haunting portrayal of childhood trauma and racial tension. Her second novel, *The Untelling* (2005), explores themes of family, loss, and reinvention. With *Silver Sparrow* (2011), she gained wider attention for her depiction of a young girl growing up as the secret daughter of a bigamist. However, it was *An American Marriage* (2018) that brought her widespread acclaim. The novel was honored with the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction and gained widespread recognition after being featured in Oprah's Book Club. President Barack Obama named it one of his favorite books of the year, calling it "a moving portrayal of the effects of a wrongful conviction on a young African-American couple" (Obama 2018). Novelist Ann Patchett remarked, "Tayari Jones writes about love with a rare combination of warmth and sharpness" (Patchett 2018). Through her works, Jones continues to illuminate the personal costs of social injustice, memory, and love in African American life.

Trauma, as theorized by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience*, is not merely an overwhelming event but an event whose full emotional significance escapes immediate comprehension. According to Caruth, trauma is inherently belated: "The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent return" (Caruth 11). Jones' novel echoes this idea through Roy's fragmented emotional journey. After being wrongly accused and sentenced to twelve years in prison, Roy finds himself unable to align his present with the life he once imagined. He writes in a letter to Celestial, "You know, if you're not comfortable telling people that your husband, an innocent man, is incarcerated, instead you can tell them what I do for a living. I've been given a promotion" (Jones 65). His incarceration is not only a legal error but a psychological catastrophe. He is displaced not just in space but in time, haunted by what could have been. This haunting of the self is further echoed when Roy

reflects, "Sometimes I wonder if she would know me now. Would anybody who knew me then recognize me today? Innocent or not, prison changes you, makes you into a convict" (Jones 127).

The concept of time plays an essential role in shaping Roy's post-traumatic self. Time in prison does not flow naturally but instead lingers and loops. He reflects, "Time can't always be measured with a watch or a calendar or even grains of sand" (Jones 133). This distortion of time aligns with trauma theory's assertion that trauma fractures one's sense of temporal continuity. The past becomes an ever-present shadow, making it difficult to envision a future. Roy lives in a suspended state, where he is neither any longer part of the life he left behind, nor able to build a new one.

The trauma that unfolds in *An American Marriage* is postmodern in structure and sentiment. Jones does not construct a linear or cathartic narrative. Instead, she deploys multiple narrators and letter-writing as a means to reflect the disintegration of communication and the multiplicity of truth. Through the alternating voices of Roy, Celestial, and Andre, the novel captures trauma's fragmentary and contested nature. This technique reflects what LaCapra identifies as the difference between 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma. Roy, in particular, is stuck in a cycle of acting out constantly reliving his arrest, trial, and the betrayal he felt that night. His letters become an archive of his emotional breakdown, filled with repetition and longing. He writes, "But now where are we? I know where you are and I know where I am, but where are WE?" (Jones 65). This constant uncertainty represents the unstable identity that trauma forces upon survivors.

Celestial's trauma takes a quieter, more internal form. Unlike Roy, who is visibly and forcibly removed from his life, Celestial remains physically free but emotionally imprisoned. Her trauma arises from the gradual erosion of emotional intimacy and the moral conflict of loving someone she can no longer reach. In this seemingly simple admission lies a world of emotional upheaval a post-traumatic reorientation of love and identity. The temporality of their relationship collapses; memory no longer serves



as a bridge but becomes a burden. She later admits, “What we have here isn’t a marriage. A marriage is more than your heart, it’s your life. And we are not sharing ours” (Jones 82).

The trauma is not isolated to individuals but infects the space between them. This relational trauma — what Ron Eyerman calls ‘cultural trauma’ — occurs when collective identity is ruptured by a traumatic event. For Celestial and Roy, their marriage is not merely a legal or emotional bond but a site of shared identity. Once Roy is removed from the shared space of their relationship, that identity unravels. Celestial begins redefining herself not as a wife but as an artist and individual. Her art becomes a medium of suppressed expression. These dolls become silent witnesses to her inner struggle, reflecting how trauma is often sublimated through creative expression.

Roy’s masculinity is another site of trauma, shaped and destabilized by cultural expectations and systemic oppression. Upon his return, he attempts to resume his role as husband and provider, only to find that the world has moved on without him. His question, “Did I speak too soon? I didn’t win you back?” (Jones 286), speaks not only to personal loss but also to the traumatic collapse of his identity. He is no longer who he was, nor can he become who he thought he might be. The trauma, then, is not just in what happened but in what was interrupted, in the life deferred. His fragmented sense of self echoes LaCapra’s concept of ‘empathic unsettlement’ where trauma victims are destabilized by their own unresolved experiences.

The epistolary structure of the novel plays a critical role in exposing the emotional fragmentation and dissonance among characters. The letters serve as a medium for memory, confession, and occasionally accusation. They act as emotional time capsules, echoing Caruth’s idea that trauma is often experienced through indirect or delayed confrontation. In Roy’s case, writing becomes a way to maintain a sense of continuity, a lifeline to a world he no longer inhabits. Yet the very act of writing also reinforces his isolation, revealing the widening chasm between him and Celestial. Celestial, in turn,

uses silence as a tool of emotional distance. Her delayed or absent responses become a form of quiet rebellion, a coping mechanism that creates space for her new reality. One of her letters heartbreakingly reads as follows: “I’m writing this letter to ask you to forgive me. Please be patient. I know it has been a long time. At first it was because I was going through a lot, but now my reason for staying away is boring and uncomplicated” (Jones 78).

Andre’s presence adds further complexity to the narrative of trauma. A childhood friend to both Roy and Celestial, Andre assumes the role of emotional caretaker during Roy’s absence. His involvement with Celestial introduces a new layer of betrayal, not because of malice, but because of the ethical ambiguities surrounding trauma and desire. His justification is logical but emotionally insufficient. From Roy’s perspective, Andre embodies the life that was stolen from him, a life he can never reclaim. Trauma, in this case, does not just affect memory or emotion; it destabilizes the ethical and relational ground on which the characters stand. The love triangle is not merely romantic conflict but a manifestation of fractured bonds due to shared but differently experienced trauma. Andre admits the same in *An American Marriage* as follows:

CELESTIAL OWED ME nothing. A few months ago, this was the beauty of what we had. No debts. No trespasses. She said that love can change its shape, but for me at least, this is a lie. I kept my arms around her, my body aching and cramped. But I held her until muscles failed, because when I released her, she would be gone. (Jones 289)

Throughout the novel, silence functions not as absence but as presence, a loaded, powerful indicator of trauma. The unspoken grief between Roy and Celestial, the unanswered letters, the pauses in their conversations, all signify the emotional toll of their experiences. Silence, in literary trauma theory, is often seen as a symptom of unspeakable pain. Yet in *An American Marriage*, it also becomes a tool of autonomy. Celestial’s silence is not only born of confusion or fear but is an act of reclaiming space in a narrative that has often been dictated by male voices and social expectation. She explains, “I won’t



say that this will hurt me more than it hurts you because I know how much you're hurting every day and no matter what is happening to me, it will never compare" (Jones 81).

Memory is also central to the novel's emotional texture. The characters remember the same events differently, leading to a fragmentation of shared history. This narrative technique mirrors LaCapra's observation that trauma creates a 'mutual entanglement of acting out and working through', where the past cannot be easily reconciled with the present. Roy clings to the memory of their wedding, the hope of reunion, and the idea of justice. Celestial remembers promises made and broken, moments that grew heavy with emotional fatigue. These conflicting memories are not merely misaligned; they are symptomatic of trauma's refusal to settle into a singular narrative. As Caruth notes, trauma returns "in the form of a haunting repetition" (Caruth 11), and this is reflected in Roy's compulsion to revive their lost connection.

Jones resists the temptation to provide closure, making *An American Marriage* a truly postmodern trauma narrative. There is no moment of reconciliation that resolves the emotional ruptures. Instead, the novel ends with a fragile understanding, a tentative step toward coexistence rather than healing. This refusal to resolve the trauma aligns with Caruth's assertion that "trauma defies narrative coherence" (Caruth 4). The novel does not ask who is right or wrong but rather shows how each character has been broken in his/her own way.

In portraying trauma as layered, shifting, and unresolved, Jones affirms the importance of narrative in both representing and surviving trauma. Literature, here, becomes not just a reflection of pain but a process of working through it even when that process is messy, incomplete, or contested. The characters do not emerge healed, but they emerge honest, their voices trembling but clear. *An American Marriage* does not narrate trauma in order to explain it but to give it space, to allow the reader to sit with discomfort, contradiction, and silence.

The strength of *An American Marriage* lies not in its resolution but in its honesty. The novel does

not seek to heal its characters, nor does it present trauma as an obstacle to be conquered. Instead, it presents a more realistic and perhaps more humane portrait of what it means to live with pain that lingers. Trauma here is not just a theme but a condition of being, infusing every word, every silence, every memory. Through her nuanced depiction of trauma's ripple effects, Tayari Jones allows the reader to understand that sometimes, survival itself is the narrative.

Jones's narrative strategy, its deliberate fragmentation, shifting voices, and refusal of closure echoes the very nature of trauma as conceived by Caruth and LaCapra. The novel becomes a space where traditional narrative expectations break down, making room for a different kind of storytelling: one that honors silence, ambiguity, and emotional truth. In this way, *An American Marriage* is not just a story about two people torn apart by injustice, but a profound meditation on the invisible wounds that such injustice leaves behind. The narrative persuades the readers not to find answers, but to witness pain with compassion, and to respect the spaces where healing may never arrive, but where truth continues to echo.

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