

# Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage* (2018): A Marxist Reading

Mohammed I. Mahameed\*

Dept of English, Faculty of Arts and Arts, Middle East University, P.O Box 283, Amman 11831, Jordan

**Abstract**—This paper focuses on examining the principles of Marxism as reflected in an active form in the novel and how it relates to the realistic experience of the African American society. It is obvious to humans that the society is stratified into groups or classes. The mainstream runs between the rich and the poor which when extended can include the weak and powerful, then the leaders and the led. This stratification has been better understood using the theory of Marxism. Marxism principally affects the physical, social, political and mental state of a man. Accordingly, there are countless literary texts that have been created to reflect the principles of Marxism as seen in the society. Among them is the novel titled “An American Marriage” that examines such tenets of Marxism such as racial segregation, gender roles, and violence. Themes of the novel as they relate to core principles of Marxism and popular literary and non-literary appraisal of the novel will be highlighted in the study. In conclusion, most analysts and critics feel that the theory of Marxism can only be applied to novels on core issues such as wars, violent conflict, riot, employment issues and any other forms of revolution.

**Index Terms**—Marxism, Celestial, marriage, employee, oppression

## I. INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx founded Marxism, a social, political, and economic ideology that focuses on the battle between capitalists and the working class. The link between one's social class and the means of production, according to Marx, determines one's social class. There are at least two classes in any class-based society: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who sell their labour to the owners of the means of production. The petite bourgeoisie and the lumpenproletariat were two further classes defined by Marx. The petite bourgeoisie is analogous to a little business class that never makes enough money to join the bourgeoisie, let alone threaten their status. The underclass, or individuals with little or no social position, is known as the lumpenproletariat. Furthermore, the concept of "base and superstructure," as defined by Marx, asserts that a society's economic character acts as the foundation, while culture and social structures function as the superstructure. As a result, according to Marx, the nature of a society is determined by its foundation (economy). As Afolayan contends "Marx had observed a continual conflict between two main classes—those who own the means of production and those who provide the labor. The former category is the minority, made up of people who own everything needed for livelihood, while the latter, which comprises the bulk of the world's population, consists of people who have nothing they could call their own" (2011, p. 6). Furthermore, Marx contended that capitalist-worker power relations were essentially exploitative and would inevitably lead to class warfare.

A more prudent way to reconstruct the Marxist approach to literature is to begin from Marx's unfinished introduction to his *Grundrisse* (1858, published posthumously) and his “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). Together they cater the philosophical (materialist) position of Marx as applied to the economic society and the superstructure built on it. The base represents being: the superstructure, consciousness. That being, which precedes consciousness, is a cardinal tenet of materialist philosophy (Bhattacharya, 2016).

"Marxism attempts to reveal the ways in which our socioeconomic system is the ultimate source of our experience" (Tyson, 2006, p. 277). *An American Marriage*, Jones' fourth novel, examines the discrepancies in the criminal justice system through the viewpoint of a young African-American marriage. The novel is set in modern-day Atlanta and follows newlyweds Roy and Celestial as their upwardly mobile, middle-class lives are flipped upside down when Roy is unfairly accused and imprisoned. In *An American Marriage*, Jones examines the dramatic consequences of mass incarceration on African-Americans' lives. The closely focused tale demonstrates how incarceration can devastate families, leaving them in a socioeconomic disadvantage that is impossible to overcome. The narrative is in first person, alternating among three characters Roy, Celestial, and Andre. Roy and Celestial had a fierce argument at the start of the story over the fact that Roy senior, whom Celestial thinks to be his father, is not his biological father. This information shocks and enrages Celestial, so Roy decides to go for a walk outside the hotel room where the couple is staying. When Roy goes outdoors, he comes face to face with an elderly, presumably white woman who appears to be his mother and is suffering from a broken arm. He chooses to assist her to her room, but unfortunately for them both (Roy and the woman), the woman is raped after Roy has left the room, and she holds Roy responsible. Roy is captured by cops and

---

\* Corresponding Author, E-mail: mmahameed67@yahoo.com

condemned by the judge to 12 years in prison. Meanwhile, Celestial finds contentment in a relation with Andre, a long-time companion who can provide her with the support and stability that Roy cannot. Meanwhile, after his release from prison, Roy begins dating Davina, a former high school classmate.

What are the characters' socioeconomic classes? What kinds of conflicts or relationships do different groups of characters have? Are some of the topics that this paper will cover. In addition, the elements of oppression, racism, class struggle, and class stratification as depicted in Tayari Jones' novel, *An American Marriage*, will also be identified and investigated in this study.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE THEORY OF MARXISM

Marxism, as previously said, is a theory centred on the altering of society as a result of a state's economics. Literature, according to Karl Marx, is a superstructure and hence an agent of change, so Marxism, as an ideology that preaches change, cannot be separated from it. Eagleton (2002) believes that literature is a true reflection of the social institutions that it emerges from. In agreement with Karl Marx, Georgy Plekhanov (1953) describes literature as a superstructure that may be utilized to relate to past and affect changes in the present. He defines literature as an art form that has an impact on man's psychology, making it an important weapon for Marxist ideology to use as a change agent. They all agree, for example, that literature is a process that evolves from the sociocultural elements of the societal order. Eagleton (1996) further illustrates: that Marxism is part of a larger body of the theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies the ideas, the values and feelings by which man experiences the society at various times. And certain of these ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature (12).

Marx's views on slavery and capitalism are asserted in a letter to Pavel V. Anneenkov dated December 28, 1846 which he claimed are closely intertwined, and that slavery, like other aspects of industrialization, is essential to its survival. *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), a treatise based on Marx's Civil War works, was published by an African-American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. In it, he claims that white racism impeded labor's aspirations to attain independence and that the decline of white labor to adequately aid the post-Civil War Black struggle cut short the gains "and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over." (Du Bois, p. 30) C. L. R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, a Russian American Marxist philosopher and economist, constructed a new Marxist framework that focused the American history on the discourse of race and class. They also stated that throughout pivotal eras in American history, such as the Civil War and the 1930s, the Black fight shook up society, spawning a union of Black and White labour. According to conflict criminology, which is based on the writings of Karl Marx, in order to fully comprehend capitalist society, it is necessary to acknowledge the dominance of a wealthy elite whose survival depends on the economic exploitation of others, and that such societies' ideas, institutions, and practices are designed and managed to ensure that exploitation continues. Thorsten Sellin, a pioneer in the conflict criminology, contends that when laws are enacted, they will represent the majority cultural or ethnic group's customs, beliefs, and interests, perhaps resulting in a cultural conflict. The neo-Marxists of the late 1970's Critical Legal studies movement were concerned that the practice of North American law, as well as the way law was taught in American universities, was reinforcing class (and economic) inequalities and hierarchies. This, they thought, was very critical in manifesting racism. According to Bowles and Gintis (1976), oppression of the Black race can be linked to economic standing and stratification in various parts of the world. They claim that racial differentiation is an important component of Marxism since economically powerful individuals can easily become oppressors, and their victims are frequently their employees. In a country like America, black people have long been labourers, hence they could be considered lower-class citizens. This demonstrates that racial problems are part of Marxist theory since it has to do with the creation of places for oppressors (upper classes/capitalists) and oppressed (lower/working classes).

Writers like Tayari Jones use fiction to express factual human experiences in a bid to correct them. Therefore, this study is designed to examine the novel, *An American Marriage* and identify the Marxist ideologies in it and thereafter justify the text as being compatible with the theory of Marxism.

## III. INCARCERATION IN USA AND THE NOVEL, *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*

Pashukanis connects capitalism to the systemic basis of criminal justice. He contends that "Criminal justice in the bourgeois state is organised class terror, which differs only in degree from the so-called emergency measures taken in civil war" (Pashukanis, 2002, p. 173). According to a 2014 report by Human Rights Watch, "tough-on-crime" measures of the 1980s inundated American prisons with mostly nonviolent offenders. With the end of the Jim Crow era came "The War on Drugs" which is more of a racial offensive, as African Americans are swept off the streets in large numbers and then sentenced to purposefully high sentences for small, first-time offenses, sentences that are roughly 20% greater than those imposed on white people charged with the same crime. As a result, incarceration is the most common means of punishment and reform for every crime or violation committed in the United States as the inmates form a very important part of capitalist accumulation of capital and work force. Ashley Nellie's 2021 report "The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons" showing the racial disparities of African Americans in the prisons, states that "Looking at the average state rates of incarceration, we see that overall blacks are incarcerated at a rate of 1,408 per 100,000, while whites are incarcerated at a rate of 275 per 100,000" (p. 13). According to the report,

African Americans are 5.1 times more likely than whites to be incarcerated in state prisons. The disparity is greater than ten-to-one in five states (Iowa, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wisconsin). On the other hand, states with more than half of their convicts being black include Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Virginia, Michigan, Mississippi, and other states. With 72 percent of detainees being black, Maryland has the greatest proportion of African-American inmates in the US. To conclude, one in every twenty adult black males in the US is incarcerated in eleven states. Therefore, both incarceration and racial treatment of African Americans have profound consequences on individuals, resulting in social, economic, emotional, and psychological traumas.

While responding to a question from Oprah Winfrey about incarceration, Jones said:

To black Americans, mass incarceration is an ongoing threat, like hurricanes on the coast and earthquakes or fires in California. Prison can swoop in and snatch up the men in our families at any time. I decided to write about the collateral damage around that—what happens to families, to relationships, to dreams for the future. How does this social wrong translate into the everyday? As a novelist, it was that messy gray area I wanted to explore.” Ron Charles (2018) cited Jesmyn Ward's "Sing, Unburied, Sing" and Jones' *An American Marriage* to attack racism in incarceration of African Americans. He observed that, despite their well-educated and well-paid status, the characters are victims of a distorted judicial system. While commenting on the racial disparity in the novel, Novelist and Women's Prize Founder Director, Professor Kate Williams, Chair of Judges-2019, said: "This is an exquisitely intimate portrait of a marriage shattered by racial injustice. It is a story of love, loss and loyalty, the resilience of the human spirit painted on a big political canvas - that shines a light on today's America.... (An American Marriage, p. 69)

As a result, Jones in *An American Marriage* subtly draws our attention to the laws, crime, bias, or a combination of these variables that may be leading to the racial disparities in African-American incarceration. She emphasizes that the existence of these disparities should be alarming. Furthermore, *An American Marriage* is a critique of the penitentiary system, which is predicated on unjust arrests and skewed verdicts. It's a story about racial injustice, oppression, and police brutality, as well as a critique of the socio-political conditions that contribute to these events. Tayari Jones condemns a legal system that discriminates against people based on their skin colour. It's a system in which white people regard themselves as oppressors of black people.

#### IV. MARXISM APPROACH IN *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*

Jones' novels depict African-American realities in the South, particularly how unjust legal systems affect their lives. *Leaving Atlanta* depicts how the Atlanta government neglected the black community during the 1979-81 Atlanta Child Murders, and the novel concludes with no justice given. Jones researched the issues of mass incarceration in the United States, as well as its impact on black men and women, and wrote *An American Marriage* as a result. She illustrates the difficult struggles that an African-American character has within the context of the racist judicial system. The novel is a remarkable work that has already received international praise after only three years of publication. It has won numerous accolades, including: 2018 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, 2019 Orwell Prize for Political Fiction, and 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction to name a few.

Tayari Jones, an African-American woman writer, explores socio-political issues in her writings. In her examination of the struggle of Black characters in general, and Roy Jr. in particular, she provides a Marxist perspective into the lives of many of her characters. She shows the horrible experiences that an African-American character has while in prison (academia.edu). Jones wants to underline that, as an African-American, he is a victim of racism and an unjust legal system. In Jones' works, people of colour in America are doubly oppressed, as their lives are ruled by economic racial disparity.

Tayari Jones, as an African-American writer, covers issues such as the slave trade, class, police brutality, and racism in Black American history. Jones writes from this vantage point in order to express her story of Black men's incarceration, judicial, and societal injustice. *An American Marriage* was written at a time when the injustice of mass incarceration was at the centre of civil rights debates. Furthermore, Jones ironically sets the story mainly in Atlanta city which distinguishes it from the rest of the states in USA, as this state is heralded for its successes in overcoming a history marked by discrimination, misunderstanding, and disadvantage based on race. Atlanta is a place steeped in African-American history, having played a key part in both the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This was also the home of Martin Luther King Jr. Thus, the novel *An American Marriage* is based on the history of Black subjugation by a White Supremacist system, as well as the economic position of the majority of black people and families.

The #BlackLivesMatters Movement organized worldwide protests against police brutality two years after Jones' novel *An American Marriage* was published. Its mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in state and vigilante violence against African Americans. Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, two of the movement's founders, claim to have been influenced by Marxism (61). The narrative covers a wide range of viewpoints on criminal justice reform. Because of Roy's skin colour, he was unfairly convicted of a crime he did not commit, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement wants to change the criminal justice system to make it more equal and fairer. Roy is found guilty of rape, despite the lack of evidence against him. Without a fair trial, he is condemned to twelve years in prison. Because of his dark skin, he is assumed to be guilty right away, and the injustice meted out to him has a lasting

impact on his life and marriage. In *An American Marriage*, Jones explores the far-reaching effects of mass incarceration on black Americans' lives. Roy discovers that he is oppressed by multiple powers in the form of race and class once he is incarcerated. Roy suffers because he is a black, a product of working class, a victim of biased legal system and a prisoner in jail. He is racially segregated because of living under an unjust incarceration system. He is socially marginalized on account of being wrongfully incarcerated and compelled to leave his job and break his marriage. Sidney M. Willhelm, in his essay, "Can Marxism Explain America's Racism?" claims that many Marxist thinkers believe that capitalism is to blame for racism towards African Americans in the United States (p. 1). Therefore, the novel can be evaluated from a Marxist perspective because of the various components that characterize Roy's life, as well as aspects of his social existence and his racial reality in a prejudiced-justice system. To begin, it is critical to consider Roy's suffering as a prisoner. He is treated unfairly by his country's legal system, loses his mother to cancer while incarcerated, and has a failed marriage later on. Being of black race, he has to suffer as an employee, son, and husband.

#### V. IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON ROY IN *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*

According to Marxism "the individual has limited agency; he/she is a reactionary being whose identity formation is determined by socio-economic conditions" (Parris, 2007). Roy is a young, middle-class black guy who is wrongly accused of a violent crime—something that happens disproportionately to black men—and sentenced to 12 years in jail by the American criminal justice system. Of course, this sentence has a huge impact on Roy's life. As he writes to Celestial about the conditions in prison, his trauma is evident. "Don't ask me questions about the details. Just suffice it to say that it's bad in here. Even if you killed somebody, you don't deserve to spend more than a couple of years in this place" (*An American Dream*, p. 50). While Roy is personally affected by his imprisonment as "he is unable to attend the funeral of his mother Olive, who dies while he is in prison" (*An American Dream*, p. 59). Furthermore, Celestial and Roy decide to abort the pregnancy once Celestial discovers she is pregnant soon after Roy is condemned to prison because Roy doesn't want to have a child who will have to say his daddy is in prison.

In many ways, after his release from prison he feels outcaste and unwanted. Celestial is reluctant to get physically intimate with him. He inquires as to whether she is hesitant because she suspects he has an STD or because she does not wish to become pregnant. "Don't treat me like a criminal, Celestial. You're the only one that knows for sure. Please don't treat me like I got some kind of disease" (*An American Dream*, p. 231). She remains silent and points to a scar on his ribs, which he claims was caused by a knife wound. He begs her to believe in him, telling her about how he killed a man by selling him a waste bag. Celestial understands his anguish, but he realizes that she, like the jury, has decided what will happen between them. It is evident that his experience in jail has permanently altered his marriage and himself. Roy tells Celestial "I've been through a lot, Celestial. Even if you go in innocent, you don't come out that way. So, please?" (*An American Dream*, p. 231). He has violent and furious outbursts that terrify both him and everyone around him. He even threatens to rape Celestial. However, the next morning, he regretfully considers this incident as a symbol of how prison has alienated him from the society and himself too. When Roy and Andre fight over Celestial later, Celestial is shocked at Roy's aggression but he questions her "What about you?" (*An American Dream*, p. 11). Roy was pacing now, back and forth over a short distance, like he was covering the floor of a narrow cell. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," (*An American Dream*, p. 261), he said. Roy's rage astounds his old friend Andre, who wonders if he learnt to fight with such ferocity in prison. "Had he learned this in prison, this way of beating a person? There was none of the stick-and-move than I remembered from school-yard brawls. This was the nasty scrapping of a man with nothing to lose..... Have you ever stared fury in its eyes? There is no saving yourself from a man in its throes. Roy's face was haunted and wild...His need to hurt me was greater even than my own desire to survive." (*An American Dream*, pp. 258-259). Both Celestial and Andre regard him as an outcast. His behaviours are deemed to be in violation of society's moral norms. As a result, he is shut off of society. His behaviour deteriorates as he experiences anxious strain. They assess him based on his actions rather than the sufferings he has been through. With Celestial, he feels out of place. Jones shows how incarceration has a long-term impact on a man's behaviour. The once "rising executive" has been reduced to a rogue. While describing Roy's state, Andre says "He feels like everything was taken from him—his job, his house, his wife—.... He can't get his job back; corporate America waits for no man, let alone a black man" (*An American Dream*, pp. 197-198). While a lawyer fights to have Roy's sentence reversed, Roy gradually realizes that his life after jail will be nothing like it was before he went to prison. Jones uses Roy as an illustration of how incarceration has a long-term impact on people's life. Even after being exonerated, Roy realizes that inmates are rarely able to restart their lives as they were before their incarceration—not only because of the ways in which society punishes ex-convicts, but also as a consequence of because of the ways in which incarceration separates them from their loved ones.

Roy's incarceration also has far-reaching consequences for others around him. Celestial's life is turned upside down by Roy's arrest, and she must learn to live as a single woman. Celestial's absolute terror as the cops assault their room and bring them out into the parking lot is an image that haunts her for a very long time. Roy informs Celestial that his cellmate Walter sided with Celestial in their dispute over Celestial's hiding about Roy's incarceration in her interview to a magazine. Walter sees the negative connotation of incarceration on African-American life and tells:

She is a black woman and everybody already thinks she got fifty-eleven babies with fifty-eleven daddies; that she got welfare checks coming in fifty-eleven people's names. She got that already to deal with, but she got the white folks to believe that she is some kind of Houdini doll maker, and she even got them thinking that this is an actual job. She is working her hustle. You think she supposed to get up there talking about her man is in the hoosegow? (An American Marriage, p. 70)

Walter reminds Roy that it's commendable that Celestial hasn't succumbed to any of the other terrible stereotypes she may have been subjected to.

Jones utilizes these examples to demonstrate how incarceration affects a man's social, economic, and mental health in the long run. When this type of behaviour is repeated throughout a society, a vicious cycle of crime and oppression can emerge.

#### VI. INCARCERATION AND ROY AND CELESTIAL'S MARRIAGE IN *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*

While describing the most natural relationships, Karl Marx states that "The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is the relation of man to woman" (Karl Marx Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Private Property and Communism, 1844). The narrative that Celestial relates to Roy about the success of her doll show is another illustration of how incarceration can ruin marriages by putting them in a socioeconomic disadvantage that is impossible to overcome. Celestial had achieved some success in the art world with her dolls before Roy's incarceration, but it is only after he is incarcerated that she creates a doll with Roy's face dressed in a prison uniform, which receives a great lot of attention and admiration. It was inspired by a time she observed a young kid on the street and worried that he, like Roy, might be imprisoned due to his skin colour. However, during an interview about her incarceration-themed art, Celestial fails to mention that her husband was wrongly imprisoned and that this event was the idea for the doll. Roy feels deceived by this narrative omission, believing that Celestial's mention of his case would have drawn attention to it, maybe leading to his sentence being overturned. Meanwhile, Celestial is afraid of the reputation that comes with having a spouse in prison. Her refusal to publicly acknowledge Roy's erroneous conviction exemplifies how she buries the worst aspects of her personal life in her art in order to avoid being categorized as a Black woman using her misery for financial advantage. Perhaps the other most important element in Roy and Celestial's marriage dissolution, aside from incarceration, is abortion. The decision to end Celestial's pregnancy was deliberate because of the significant responsibilities that come with parenting a child, Roy and Celestial are driven by the legal injustice and racial discrimination towards them thus leading them to make regretful and hard choices. "Marriage is like grafting a limb onto a tree trunk," (p. 107). Celestial adds, implying that it takes time for two individuals to become one. Their young marriage is significantly vulnerable to incarceration, a family broken by separation and imprisonment.

The family institution was placed in the superstructure by Marx and Engels. While highlighting the views on marriage and sexual love by different Marxist critics, Richard Weikart contends that "The view of future marriage and sexual relationships that Marx and Engels sketched was largely compatible with the conceptions of Owen and Bakunin. Owen advocated individual marriage based only on mutual affection and fairly easy divorce notion if that affection faded" (p. 667). In Roy and Celestial's marriage, Jones illustrates this. All of the traditional marital tensions, such as Roy's expectations from his wife following his incarceration and their differences in economic background, drive their relationship to an end as soon as Roy is falsely convicted in the novel.

"Are you really comparing me with the women who crowd the crack-of-dawn bus to prison? I know them, too. I've met them myself. They organize their whole lives around coming to Parson; besides working, it's all they do" (An American Marriage, p. 85). Celestial wrote these lines to Roy in a letter as an explanation for why she wants to end her marriage with him. Celestial is clearly class aware, and she believes it is beneath her to be "strip-searched by guards" at the prison on her way to see Roy every time. The above quote is also significant because it demonstrates Celestial's outrage when Roy compares her to the other "women around here who have been coming to see their men for decades, riding buses that leave Baton Rouge at 5 am" (An American Marriage, p. 84). Celestial's apparent lack of commitment irritates Roy, who believes she should visit at least as frequently as the wives of those imprisoned who, unlike Roy, are actually accountable for their misdeeds. Celestial, on the other hand, believes it is beneath her to be compared to those women who "besides working, it's all they do" (An American Marriage, p. 71). As Marxism contends, class distinctions play a crucial part in the collapse of a marriage.

#### VII. CLASS SEGREGATION AND RACISM IN *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*

From a Marxist point of view, Roy and Celestial's identity is determined by the different socio-economic conditions of the society in which they live. Roy is at odds with Celestial, who is not of his social level.

Her mother worked in education...as an assistant superintendent to the whole school system...her dad hit pay dirt about ten or twelve years ago, inventing a compound that prevents orange juice from separating so fast? He sold that sucker to Minute Maid and ever since, they have been splashing around naked in a bathtub full of money. (An American Marriage, p. 10)

Roy is extremely conscious of Celestial's high economic status. Roy's Christmas recollection with Celestial of Big Roy getting only one apple as a child, so he and his father would share an apple every Christmas morning when Roy

was a kid, is another example of a secret he's kept from her out of fear of her judging his upbringing in poverty. Even before Roy's incarceration, a large part of the tension in Roy and Celestial's relationship derives from their contrasting economic backgrounds. Celestial grew up in a relatively affluent family in Atlanta, while Roy is the first in his family to leave rural Louisiana to attend college. Celestial believes Roy's mother, Olive, thinks she's arrogant, and while Roy dismisses Celestial's concern, it's accurate. Roy reads a letter from his mother to him at the end of the novel, in which she expresses her belief that Roy is marrying a woman who reflects the society he aspires to be a member of. He loved Celestial not for who she was, but for what she represented in his eyes, as he aspired to the American dream and everything that it included. He was drawn to Celestial by her way of life. Roy was attracted by her way of life and charisma because of his previous socioeconomic conditions. Roy, on the other hand, was a "black and struggling" country boy, raised by working-class parents who worked hard to provide for him, and grew up in a family where he says "if my childhood were a sandwich, there would be no meat hanging off the bread" (p. 13). Roy was helped to get an education through a leg-up program in Elloe, a small Louisiana town with few opportunities, and after graduating from high school, he came to Atlanta, where he now has a good life and family with Celestial, after ten years of hard work.

We see class stratification within communities of colour as well. Celestial is among the "Artists to Watch," (p. 12) from a wealthy family, which aided her aspirations to become a well-known industrialist, as she succeeds in her doll-making business. She is a self-employed worker who does not rely on the wages of others to support herself. While discussing Celestial's earning and fame, Olive's statement clearly shows the inadequacy the working class can feel. "Five thousand dollars for a baby doll?" (*An American Marriage*, p. 23). Olive fanned herself with the magazine, lifting her peach-preserve hair. "I guess that's why God invented white folks" (p. 23). The preceding remark illustrates that white people's society is largely a consumerist one, and as Eagleton puts it, "the human race is constantly preoccupied with the production of materials to satisfy these needs" (p. 760), resulting in the formation in the society of two classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. Furthermore, it is difficult for millions of individuals like Olive, who work hard and take on modest jobs, to meet this type of materialist standard with their meagre salaries. This can lead to feelings of failure, inadequacy, and dissatisfaction at their inability to succeed despite their efforts.

Roy considers his socioeconomic situation to be "on the rise," despite not belonging to the "garden-variety bourgeois Atlanta Negroes," (p. 14) making him a petite bourgeois, which Karl Marx defined as a "transitional class" in which the interests of the major classes of capitalist society (the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) meet and become blurred. The petite bourgeoisie is located between these two classes in terms of its interests and social situation. According to Marx, concentration and centralization of capital was eventually to throw the petty bourgeoisie into the ranks of the increasingly immiserated working class, just as the peasantry were to become proletarianized despite their attachment to the land (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100320389>). Similarly, in the middle of a very severe socioeconomic situation, Roy wants to build his own universe. However, in the face of legal injustice and racial oppression, he is compelled to resign from his work as a rising executive, thereby halting his promising career. Furthermore, Roy appears to be a Marxist figure in his search for a position in society, attempting to discover the various forms of socio-economic forces that rule his society. As a result, Roy represents an oppressed class, revealing how they will rise up and create their own just society. Roy gradually wants to break free from the shackles of incarceration and racial oppression. Although the society is rife with racism and injustice, he wants to live.

According to Marxism, when it comes to race, it is essentially a matter of ideology. An important example of racism in the novel is the place Piney Inn where Roy is eventually arrested. Roy recounts to Celestial that his mother Olive used to work as a maid at the Piney Inn when the rooms were still decked with Confederate flags (The Lost Cause of the Confederacy, or simply the Lost Cause, is an American pseudo-historical, [2][3] negationist ideology that advocates the belief that the cause of the Confederate States during the American Civil War was heroic, just, and not centred on slavery ([https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article\\_share.aspx?guid=bfb284f1-9b32-4419-ad7b-205953ac2c73](https://enewspaper.latimes.com/infinity/article_share.aspx?guid=bfb284f1-9b32-4419-ad7b-205953ac2c73))). Olive refused to let her son be born with a Confederate symbol on his chest, therefore Roy was almost born at the Inn. Despite this, Roy is imprisoned in the same room where his mother used to clean; the flags may have been removed, but not the discriminatory racial views they symbolize.

In his article, "A Prolegomenon to Critical Race Theoretical Marxism", Walter Sean outlines Kehinde Andrews' correlation between imperialism and whiteness, arguing that imperialism and global capitalism would not have been feasible without white supremacy. Sean concludes that "In other words, racism, in the form of White supremacy, is a pre-requisite for imperialism and global capitalism, and is, in turn, re-created by this very global capitalism. Crucially, the form of racism necessary to sustain capitalism is created and maintained by *White people*, and (through ideology) this form of racism becomes as real and material as class" (p. 8). Jones demonstrates in *An American Marriage* how capitalism was the root of African Americans' enslavement, leading to racism against them. In one of Celestial's letters to Roy, she explains her mother's past, giving the reader an insight into the history of slavery in America. Celestial recounts how, when her mother was a new born, her grandmother runs into a white woman and her child while grocery shopping, who, upon seeing Celestial's mother in the pram, exclaims, "Look, Mommy! A baby maid!" (p. 53). As a result of this incident, her grandparents chose to immigrate to Atlanta. This occurrence is notable because it represents racial prejudice and class segregation that African Americans have faced throughout history, whether as slaves in the nineteenth century or later as wage labourers in the mid-twentieth century America.

Jones emphasizes the dread of incarceration and racism in the scene where Andre is going to see Big Roy in Elone. Andre's fear of driving in Louisiana shows that he is fully aware of the discrimination that black people face, particularly in light of Roy's sentencing. He says:

The last thing I needed was to attract police attention, especially on the back roads of Louisiana. If it could happen to Roy, it could happen to me. Besides my conspicuous skin, my car was a stunner..... The truck—Mercedes M-Class—had gotten me pulled over a half-dozen times in the last three years, and once I was even slammed against the hood. Apparently, make plus model plus race equaled *drug dealer*, even in Atlanta. (An American Marriage, pp. 202-203)

While police stop by themselves are unlikely to result in a conviction and prison sentence, having a criminal record is linked to the decision to incarceration for later offenses, a cycle of events that disproportionately impacts African Americans. Furthermore, the above remark illustrates that blacks' sources of income will be inspected and questioned, even if they are wealthy.

#### VIII. OPPRESSOR AND THE OPPRESSED IN *AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE*

According to Marxist criminologists, the Bourgeoisie wields power, and laws are a manifestation of Bourgeois ideology and that the Bourgeoisie's interests are also served by the legal system as well as the police. The law, according to Karl Marx, is the mechanism by which one social class, commonly referred to as the "ruling class," maintains a disadvantageous position for all other social groups (Tibbets, p. 87). Marxist analyses of political class supremacy usually commences with the state and its direct and indirect involvement in attaining the conditions for economic class domination. Its reach has grown to cover other aspects of human endeavour, such as entrenched racial bias in the criminal justice system, as depicted in Roy's incarceration.

In one of his letters to Celestial from prison, Roy writes about the number of prisoners "There is so much here that makes you stop and say, "Hmm . . ." Like there are about fifteen hundred men in this facility (mostly brothers)" (An American Marriage, p. 39). He goes on to write "I don't want to be some kind of crazy conspiracy nut, but it's hard not to think about things in that way," (An American Marriage, p. 39) and that "My dad thinks it's the Klan. Well, not the Klan specifically with hoods and crosses but more like Ameri-KKKa". AmeicKKKa is a pejorative slang for the country The United States of America. Generally used in depicting the country as fascist or racist (<https://www.wordsense.eu/Amerikkka/>). The following comment is significant because, first and foremost, the high proportion of black convicts in modern-day America illustrates racism. Second, it reveals how, on both on economic and cultural level, capitalism exploits and destroys African-Americans through incarceration.

The topic of oppression by the wealthy or upper class was on Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels' minds as they developed the Marxist notion of freedom for all. Because Roy's colour marks him as a "possible rapist and criminal," and he might spend his youth in a prison bemoaning his innocence. During his trial, Roy becomes distant and estranged because he is denied a fair trial to a significant extent. His misery is palpable as he is subjected to legal injustice. On the day of his hearing, Celestial while testifying for her husband's innocence says about the jury that "they didn't believe me. Twelve people and not one of them took me at my word. There in front of the room, I explained Roy couldn't have raped the woman in room 206 because we had been together" (An American Marriage, p. 44). "As I took my seat beside Andre, not even the black lady juror would look at me" (An American Marriage, p. 45) Celestial adds. The fact that there is just one black juror among a jury of twelve exemplifies the legal system's inequity. One juror from the minority will be forced to follow the majority's opinion, which is oppressive in itself. Celestial's plight and helplessness is evident in the situation as she narrates that "I fully believed that I would leave the courtroom with my husband beside me. Secure in our home, we would tell people how no black man is really safe in America" (An American Marriage, p. 45). Jones implies that such judicial institutions and practices are designed to keep marginalized, oppressed, and vulnerable communities under check by ignoring the testimony of witnesses. Jones is also hinting that for less serious offenses, judges may compromise with the constraints of law, allowing other factors to influence their decision. Racial bias based on a sense of racial threat is one of these factors. The novel addresses the problem of oppression, because Roy is the major victim of the state policies and its institutions, as he is falsely accused of a horrible crime such as rape, despite the fact that destiny places him in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is further exemplified in the following conversation between Davina and Roy "I know," she said. "Nobody around here thought you did it. It was just the wrong race and the wrong time. Police are shady as hell. That's why everybody is locked up" (An American Marriage, p. 159). For African Americans, the legal system is one of cruelty and retribution. "But that was when we thought incarceration had something to do with being guilty or at least being stupid" (An American Marriage, p. 121). Roy Jr. tells Roy Sr. This remark demonstrates how, over time, police violence and criminal justice against African Americans have become oppressive.

#### IX. CONCLUSION

"Marxism is a theory of liberation or it is nothing", Dunayevskaya contended in *Marxism and Freedom*. Therefore, Marxism was concerned with human freedom and the loss of its existence under capitalism. Roy's incarceration affects his family and his own sense of security and stability in their own country. Jones contends that if Roy was arrested and

imprisoned despite his socioeconomic status being "on the rise," then people from lower socioeconomic classes have an even lesser chance of being treated justly by a biased criminal justice system. The conclusion of *An American Marriage* is that, while the incarceration system appears to be meant to keep a society safe, it actually destabilizes the lives of everyone inside its sphere. Roy's race clearly plays a role in his conviction and sentence, specified the time-period of the novel's writing and the existence of widespread societal criminalization of black men.

Jones' message in the novel is Marxist in that she desires a world free of inequality and oppression, and she condemns those in positions of power for extending human suffering like incarceration. Furthermore, it is a tragic and intimate depiction of a marriage torn apart by racial and legal injustice. The story thus emphasizes African-Americans' incapacity to fully escape a system that attempts to keep them imprisoned in poverty and crime. Racial injustice is impossible to eradicate while stratification persists, according to Marxist theory. *An American Marriage* embodies Jones' ideal of a classless America free of racial injustice. Jones envisions a society in which people are treated as equal citizens rather than as criminals. Since Marxism sets forth the struggle between social classes, it predicts that revolution may take place. Therefore, the ongoing class battle will result in unrest and revolution (#Blacklivesmatter) among oppressed people, laying the foundation for a new social and economic order in which capitalism and class system is eliminated.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researcher is grateful to the Middle East University, Amman, Jordan for the financial support granted to cover the publication fee of this research article.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Afolayan, S. (2011). *A Marxist Interpretation of the Dystopian Society in the African Novel*, Kemanusiaan. <http://web.usm.my/kajh/vol%2018.2.2011/KAJH%2018.2.2011%201.pdf>. Retrieved May 16, 2016.
- [2] Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.
- [3] Charles, Ron. "Oprah's newest book club pick: 'An American Marriage,' by Tayari Jones". [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/an-african-american-couple-torn-apart-by-the-justice-system/2018/01/30/eab5bd02-0524-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/an-african-american-couple-torn-apart-by-the-justice-system/2018/01/30/eab5bd02-0524-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html). Retrieved February 8, 2019.
- [4] Eagleton, T. (1996). *Literary Theory: An Introduction: Second Edition*. US: Mimeoopolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- [5] Eagleton, T. (2006). *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Critical Method, Influenced by the Work of Althusser and Macherey, With a Concluding Chapter on the Problem of Value*. United Kingdom: London.
- [6] Engels, Friedrich. (1978). *Letters on Historical Materialism*. US: New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- [7] Flood, Alison. (2019). "Women's prize for fiction goes to 'utterly moving' Tayari Jones novel". *The Guardian*. <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/11/711421164/watch-live-aspen-words-literary-prize-finalists-go-deeper-than-the-dust-jacket>. Retrieved April 8, 2019.
- [8] Jones, Tayari. (2018). *An American Marriage*. Alogonquin. USA. Book of Chapel Hill.
- [9] Jones, Tayari. (2018). *Black Lives Matter.com*
- [10] Jones, Tayari. (2018). [www.academia.edu/42106019/The\\_Marxist\\_Aspect\\_in\\_Bessie\\_Heads\\_A\\_Question\\_of\\_Powe](http://www.academia.edu/42106019/The_Marxist_Aspect_in_Bessie_Heads_A_Question_of_Powe)
- [11] Marx, Karl. (1844). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Private Property and Communism*. [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm).
- [12] Nellie, Ashley. (2021). *The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons*. [www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/The-Color-of-Justice-Racial-and-Ethnic-Disparity-in-State-Prisons.pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/app/uploads/2022/08/The-Color-of-Justice-Racial-and-Ethnic-Disparity-in-State-Prisons.pdf).
- [13] Parris, L. (2007). Being and Totality: Ontology and Universality in Bessie Head's a Question of Power. *Stirrings Still, The International Journal of Existential Literature*.
- [14] Pashukanis, Evgeny. (2002). *The General Theory of Law & Marxism*. Canada: Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick.
- [15] Plekhanov, G. (1953). *Art and Social Life: A Collection of Plekhanov's Major Essays on Literature*. United Kingdom, London.
- [16] Ramkrishna, Bhattacharya. (2016). *Marxist Literary Criticism: What It Is Not*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291728844\\_Marxist\\_Literary\\_Criticism\\_What\\_It\\_Is\\_Not](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291728844_Marxist_Literary_Criticism_What_It_Is_Not)
- [17] Sean, Walton. (2021). *A prolegomenon to a critical race theoretical Marxism, Power and Education*. Retrieved from: [sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions). June 17, 2018.
- [18] Sellin, Thorsten. (1938). *Culture Conflict and Crime*. US: New Jersey: Social Science Research Council.
- [19] Tyson, Lois. (2006). *Critical Theory Today*. London: Routledge.
- [20] Weikart, Richard. (1994). *Marx, Engels, and the Abolition of the Family*. UK: History of European Ides, Elsevier Science.
- [21] Willhelm, S. (1980). *Can Marxism Explain America's Racism?* UK: Oxford University Press.
- [22] Winfrey, Oprah. "Oprah's New Book Club: An American Marriage by Tayari Jones". <https://www.oprah.com/inspiration/an-american-marriage-by-tayari-jones-oprahs-book-club-2018>. Retrieved February 8, 2019.

**Mohammed I. Mahameed** is an Associate Professor at the Department of English language and literature, Middle East University, Jordan, where he teaches a variety of courses in English Literature. His research interests are mainly concerned with the cultural studies subjects of British Literature. He has published multiple articles in reputed journals. He was awarded his Ph.D. from Mumbai University, in 1999.