

Intersectional Feminism in *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones and *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous

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Abstract *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones and *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, both published in 2018, share thematic and structural similarities despite different cultural contexts. Both novels explore romantic relationships strained by external circumstances. In *An American Marriage*, Celestial and Roy's marriage is tested by Roy's wrongful imprisonment, highlighting racial injustice and flaws in the American criminal justice system. *The Frightened Ones* centers on the unnamed narrator and Nasim, whose relationship is shaped by the trauma of living in a war-torn society, reflecting the impact of the Syrian civil war. Both novels examine how societal issues affect personal lives and apply intersectional feminism to explore how gender, race, and socio-political contexts shape the characters' identities.

Keywords civil war; injustice; intersectional feminism; race; socio-political contexts

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Introduction

The selection of *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones and *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous for this comparative analysis is driven by the distinct yet comparable socio-political contexts in which these narratives unfold—the racial injustice embedded in the U.S. criminal justice system and the devastating impact of the Syrian civil war. Both novels, published in 2018, provide rich ground for examining how external socio-political forces shape individual lives and intimate

relationships, particularly through the lens of intersectional feminism. This framework, which acknowledges how various forms of oppression—race, gender, class, and political circumstances—intersect and compound one another, is essential for a nuanced analysis of these works.

In *An American Marriage*, the wrongful imprisonment of Roy, a Black man, disrupts his marriage to Celestial, a successful African American artist, foregrounding the structural racism of the U.S. justice system. Jones meticulously explores how racial discrimination operates at a systemic level, deeply affecting not only Roy's fate but also his and Celestial's emotional and psychological well-being. The novel's use of epistolary elements, such as letters exchanged between the couple during Roy's incarceration, serves as a poignant narrative device, illustrating the emotional toll that external racialized violence imposes on personal bonds. Jones' portrayal of Celestial's decision not to continue her pregnancy is emblematic of the ways in which Black women, in particular, face compounded forms of oppression, as her reflections on her body and life underscore the broader societal constraints imposed upon her. As Tew (2018) notes, the novel powerfully intertwines love, loss, and systemic injustice, offering an intimate yet expansive critique of racialized experiences within the U.S. criminal justice system.

The Frightened Ones, by contrast, situates its narrative within the horrors of the Syrian civil war. Through the stories of the unnamed narrator and Nasim, Wannous captures the pervasive fear, trauma, and disorientation that permeate everyday life in a war-torn society. The novel delves into the psychological fragmentation that emerges from living under a regime of violence and instability, with the characters' fractured identities mirroring the fragmentation of Syria itself. As Sawsan El Abtah (2017) observes, the novel intricately portrays the emotional turbulence of pre-revolutionary Syria and its descent into chaos, gradually piecing together a narrative that is as fragmented as the nation it depicts. This structural choice reflects the disjointedness of lived experience under constant threat, where personal relationships are strained to the breaking point by the broader political context.

Both novels highlight how gender and socio-political circumstances intersect to shape the experiences of their female protagonists, making them ideal subjects for an analysis rooted in intersectional feminism. In *An American Marriage*, Celestial navigates not only the personal loss of her husband to wrongful imprisonment but also the societal expectations placed on Black women, who are often left to bear the emotional and material consequences of systemic racism. In *The Frightened Ones*, the unnamed female narrator grapples with the psychological impact of war while confronting her own gendered vulnerabilities in a male-dominated and

conflict-ridden society. Both novels thus offer a profound exploration of how socio-political contexts—whether rooted in racial injustice or civil war—disrupt personal relationships and individual agency.

The thematic depth and structural complexity of these works enhance their suitability for comparative analysis. Jones' layered portrayal of race, gender, and justice in the U.S. and Wannous' depiction of trauma, fear, and war in Syria both reveal the intimate consequences of large-scale injustices. This paper will explore how intersectional feminism provides a critical framework to examine these narratives, emphasizing how race, gender, and socio-political contexts intersect to shape the identities and experiences of their characters. Through this comparative approach, we can better understand the interconnectedness of personal and collective struggles, and the ways in which systemic injustices permeate the most intimate aspects of human life.

Intersectional feminism is a critical framework for understanding how various social identities—such as gender, race, class, and political context—interact and shape the lived experiences of individuals. *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones and *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, both published in 2018, exemplify this approach. Through their distinct cultural lenses, these novels navigate the intersection of systemic oppression, intimate relationships, and personal identity. By examining how external socio-political forces mold personal lives, Jones and Wannous offer compelling critiques of injustice, racial discrimination, and the impact of conflict on women's agency.

First coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term “intersectionality” recognizes that the lived experiences of individuals are shaped by overlapping identities and structures of oppression. Intersectional feminism examines how women of different backgrounds experience gender inequality in varied ways, depending on race, class, and other factors (Crenshaw, 1989). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the characters in *An American Marriage* and *The Frightened Ones*, whose identities and relationships are deeply intertwined with the socio-political landscapes they inhabit.

In *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones employs intersectional feminism to explore the intersecting impacts of race, gender, and the criminal justice system on African American lives. The novel centers around Celestial and Roy, a Black couple whose relationship disintegrates after Roy is wrongfully imprisoned. The narrative highlights the disproportionate impact of the legal system on Black men, with Roy's wrongful conviction illustrating the historical and ongoing racial bias embedded in American institutions. Critics have noted that Jones portrays the

tension between personal agency and institutional oppression, illustrating how Roy's experience of incarceration strips him not only of his freedom but also of his autonomy as a husband and partner (Hughes, 2019).

Celestial, on the other hand, grapples with societal expectations of Black women in marriage and their role as caretakers of Black men who face systemic discrimination. Jones complicates the traditional depiction of Black womanhood, portraying Celestial as an artist who seeks to balance her individual desires with the expectations of her community. The novel's exploration of intersectionality is also reflected in the depiction of Celestial's reproductive choices. Her decision not to carry her pregnancy to term while Roy is incarcerated highlights the intertwined effects of race, gender, and personal autonomy, as it comments on the structural conditions that limit the freedom of Black women (Tew, 2018).

While *An American Marriage* focuses on racial injustice in the U.S., *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous turns to the trauma inflicted by war in the Syrian context. The novel centers on the unnamed narrator and Nasim, two individuals who find themselves in a relationship marked by psychological and emotional scars from living under a dictatorial regime and enduring the ongoing civil war. Wannous uses intersectional feminism to illustrate how war disproportionately impacts women, particularly through trauma and mental health.

The novel's exploration of trauma is central to its feminist critique. As Choudhury (2020) notes, *The Frightened Ones* is less about physical survival in a war zone and more about the psychological survival of individuals—especially women—who are often marginalized in narratives of war. Wannous interrogates how trauma affects not only personal relationships but also one's sense of identity. The narrator's fragmented narrative style reflects the fractured psyche of individuals living under oppressive regimes, while also showcasing the intersectional nature of their suffering—where gendered violence, political repression, and psychological breakdowns collide (Awad, 2020).

Through the relationship between the narrator and Nasim, Wannous critiques the patriarchy's role in the conflict and its perpetuation of both literal and metaphorical violence against women. Nasim's mental health issues become a vehicle for examining how the intersections of gender and political oppression strip women of their agency. In a sense, *The Frightened Ones* presents war as not only a male-dominated battlefield but also a psychological battlefield where women are the primary casualties (Awad, 2020).

Both novels highlight the shared struggles of women across cultural contexts, yet the specific oppressions they face vary due to their racial and political

environments. In *An American Marriage*, the central conflict revolves around institutionalized racism in the U.S., while *The Frightened Ones* tackles the systemic violence of a dictatorial regime and war. The comparison of these two works reveals how intersectional feminism allows for a nuanced understanding of the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and shape the lives of women globally. Despite their different settings, both novels underline how external socio-political forces, such as racial injustice and war, exert pressure on intimate relationships and limit women's autonomy.

Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage* and Dima Wannous' *The Frightened Ones* offer rich, nuanced portrayals of the intersectional struggles faced by women in different socio-political contexts. By employing intersectional feminist theory, both authors reveal the intertwined nature of personal and structural oppression, whether through the lens of racial injustice in the U.S. or the trauma of civil war in Syria. Ultimately, these novels underscore the necessity of intersectionality in feminist discourse, highlighting the varied yet interconnected experiences of women across the globe.

Questions of the Study and Theoretical Framework

This study raises a lot of questions including in what ways do the intersections of race, gender, and socio-political contexts uniquely shape the lives of characters in each novel? How does the application of intersectional feminism differ in the context of African American experiences in the United States and Syrian experiences in a war-torn society? How do external societal pressures, such as racial injustice in the U.S. and the Syrian civil war, affect the dynamics of romantic relationships in these novels? How do gender expectations and roles impact the protagonists in both novels? In what ways do the female characters in each novel resist or conform to traditional gender roles within their respective societies? How is trauma depicted in both novels, and what are the different sources of trauma for the characters? What role do the characters play in advocating for social change, and what obstacles do they face in their efforts?

Intersectional feminism is a framework for understanding how various aspects of a person's social and political identities (gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc.) combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectional feminism emphasizes that these identities do not exist independently of each other and that they interrelate, often resulting in complex, overlapping systems of oppression. The comparative approach in this study offers a nuanced lens through which the intersections of gender,

race, and socio-political contexts in *An American Marriage* and *The Frightened Ones* are explored. By juxtaposing two distinct cultural settings—one framed by the American criminal justice system, the other by the Syrian civil war—the analysis brings into sharp focus how external forces shape the intimate lives of the characters. The strength of this approach lies in its ability to highlight both universal and culture-specific struggles, allowing for a deeper understanding of how intersectional feminism operates within diverse sociopolitical landscapes. Through comparison, the study reveals shared patterns of oppression and resilience, while also acknowledging the particularities of each narrative, ultimately enriching the discourse on how personal and collective identities are navigated under the weight of systemic injustices.

To apply intersectional feminism to Tayari Jones' *An American Marriage* and Dima Wannous' *The Frightened Ones*, we can explore how the characters navigate multiple, intersecting identities and the resulting social challenges they face. Here are some examples with quotations from both novels: In *An American Marriage*, Jones explores the intersecting issues of race, gender, and the criminal justice system. The protagonist, Roy, a Black man, is wrongfully imprisoned, and his wife, Celestial, must navigate life without him, confronting societal expectations and personal autonomy. Hagan and Wieting (2021) suggest that the novel provides a significant viewpoint on the struggles of marginalized communities in maintaining close relationships due to systematic influence of racism on black families. They emphasize how the story's exploration of the criminal justice system underscores how systemic racism can strain marriages. Roy's wrongful imprisonment highlights systemic racism within the criminal justice system. As a Black man, his experiences are shaped by racial stereotypes and prejudices. Celestial's struggles reflect the intersection of race and gender, as she deals with societal expectations of a Black woman and the pressure to remain loyal to her husband. “When I think of the night you were arrested, it hurts my heart. You were nothing but a victim of being a Black man in the wrong place at the wrong time” (25).

Jones' works emphasize the significance of gender roles, in addition to race and class. She challenges the stereotype of African American culture as matriarchal, suggesting that women assume significant responsibilities mainly due to the absence of men. According to Jones, there exists a "crisis of masculinity" in black culture in the United States, as many men are either incarcerated or deceased at a young age. Consequently, women often find themselves taking on the role of the family's primary provider, as depicted in her narratives (Conroy, Web).

Caroline Y Erue notes that “Patriarchy is a pivotal subject in feminist

literature and a prominent issue in Jones' works, where she actively opposes male supremacy" (112). Historically, patriarchy granted fathers near-total authority over their wives and offspring, treating family relations as a form of property with the father as both originator and proprietor (Millet 67). While the concept of patriarchy has significantly transformed globally, the core notion of male superiority endures. Adichie observes, "If we do something repeatedly, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing repeatedly, it becomes normal" (We Should 13). Similarly, the continual depiction of men as the principal authority makes it appear natural to perceive women as the "Other" or the "Second Sex." Gender roles portrayed in narratives underscore this, illustrating the limited choices available to women.

Much like Black feminists, Tayari Jones emphasizes the myriad difficulties faced by women of color and the ongoing struggles they encounter, while also highlighting the brave ways Black women challenge conventional gender roles. Jones shapes her stories as feminist inquiries into the oppression of Black men in America. Her narratives clearly reveal a bias favoring male children. For example, Ronalda claims her mother is deceased, though she actually fled with Ronalda's cherished younger brother. Similarly, Dana understands that her father always longed for a son. Growing up with two brothers, Jones felt her parents had higher expectations for them. She observes, "As anyone who's ever had a brother knows, boys are in many ways the center of the familial universe" (Conroy 2022). Despite a joyful childhood, Jones acknowledges she was raised in a setting where girls were not as celebrated or valued as boys.

The novel also delves into class differences, especially in how they affect Roy and Celestial's relationship and perceptions of loyalty and success. "You came from money. I came from nothing. You think I don't know that? You think I don't know that every time we fight?" (102).

Across history, conventional feminism often downplayed the significance of race, prioritizing patriarchy over other forms of oppression. Black feminists have actively opposed this marginalization of racism. Moraga and Anzaldúa vehemently criticize the indifference of White women, asserting that racism profoundly impacts the underrepresented and marginalized individuals, except those privileged enough to overlook its psychologically oppressive effects (Moraga and Anzaldúa xliii-xliv).

Garber contends that *An American Marriage* exemplifies a wider trend in modern literature that examines the weakening of the traditional marriage institution. He observes that the novel provides a detailed and intricate analysis of the various elements leading to marital breakdown, such as systemic racism, personal decisions, and societal pressures (Garber 2019).

In *The Frightened Ones*, Wannous examines the psychological impacts of living under a repressive regime in Syria, with a focus on trauma, gender, and identity. The novel follows Suleima, a woman dealing with the fear and paranoia induced by the political climate, as well as her personal traumas. Sawsan El Abtah states that:

The narrator, Salima, serves as the backbone of the narrative, recounting her story in her own voice, which, in many aspects, mirrors the life of the author herself. In this manner, Dima Wannous selectively incorporates elements from her autobiography, particularly the extraordinary relationship she shared with her father, juxtaposed against a profound estrangement from the majority of his family members. This amalgamation of the fictional and the personal liberates Wannous, enabling her to confide through the multifaceted veil of a novelistic persona. (El Abtah, 2017)

Experiences are shaped by her gender, as she navigates a society that imposes strict roles on women while also coping with the pervasive fear of state violence. Her relationship with Naseem, another traumatized individual, underscores how personal and political traumas intersect. “In this country, they don’t just kill you. They kill your spirit first, especially if you’re a woman. They want you to feel small, insignificant” (88).

Ahmed El Araby states that, “The novel adopts the first-person narrative style, revolving around the protagonist’s consciousness, which flows psychologically unrestrained by time or place. Its narration is governed by events occurring in Syria, its revolution, and the repercussions thereof on the populace” (2020).

The narrative, in which political concerns intersect with social ones, commences with segments depicting the perplexed life of Suleima, faced with the papers sent to her by Naseem, the handsome man with prominent features. As she consumes them word by word, panting after each letter, she discovers a tale closer to the biography of a woman crafted from fear. Abd El Rahman Habib questions, “But what did Naseem desire? Did he intend for Suleima to conclude the narrative after fear overtook him and he was unable to accomplish it? Did he assume that the completion of his story would be akin to the completion of the moon in Suleima's heart the day she dreamed of herself dangling from the edge of a low-rise Damascene building?” (Habib 2021).

The novel narrates the dominance of fear and anxiety over the Syrian individual in the post-revolution era amidst significant changes in life in Syria.

This fear, adeptly portrayed by Dima Wannous, is embodied through numerous characters, intertwined narratives, and “overlapping stories that collectively depict a state of fear and the search for identity in a world of war, displacement, and loss” (Wannous 2018). The novel addresses how fear and trauma influence Suleima's sense of identity and belonging, intersecting with her gendered experiences in a conflict-ridden society. “Fear is like a spider that spins its web inside you. It knows every corner of your heart, every dark spot in your mind” (Wannous 54).

Suleima cannot rid herself of her feeling of fear in any line of the novel. This also applies to the other protagonists, where fear appears as a collective pattern that shapes the days and nights of all the characters and dominates their inner lives. Nasim, a young doctor and writer whom Suleima met in the clinic waiting room, suffers greatly from his feeling of fear to the extent that he is accustomed to slapping himself. Like Suleima, “he is a victim of his many fears, but he deals with his fears more aggressively. He has tattooed his name and address on his back in large letters, to be identified in case of his death in a bomb raid” (Kaminski 45).

The novel conveys a sense of despair, suggesting that Syrians often find themselves drawn towards the unknown realms of loss, conflict, and dispersion, unless they embark on an alternative path and assert their rights with the aid of supportive allies. The narrative emanates from a standpoint deeply rooted in allegiance to the Syrian revolution, refraining from sugarcoating; the devastation in Syria is immense, “and the endeavor to reconstruct a Syria characterized by freedom, justice, democracy, and a better life is formidable” (El Araby 2020).

Both novels provide rich ground for intersectional analysis. In *An American Marriage*, the intersection of race, gender, and class is crucial in understanding the characters' struggles and societal pressures. As Sethi argues, the novel criticizes modern discussions on love and marriage by depicting the protagonists' marital collapse as a symbol of wider disenchantment with conventional ideas of romantic love and the institution of marriage (Sethi 2021).

For *The Frightened Ones*, the intersection of gender and political trauma highlights how oppressive regimes impact individuals differently based on their gender. The romantic relationship between Suleima and Naseem is depicted as transient, mirroring the precarious nature of all human connections in contemporary Syria. However, upon Naseem's departure from Syria, “Suleima receives an unfinished manuscript of a novel, wherein he vividly portrays the fate of a young woman strikingly reminiscent of her own” (Kaminski 2018).

Using intersectional feminism to analyze these novels reveals the layered and nuanced ways in which the characters' identities influence their experiences and

actions. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the systemic inequalities they face and the personal resilience they must muster to navigate their complex realities. In both *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones and *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, the intersections of race, gender, and socio-political contexts profoundly influence the characters' lives, shaping their experiences and identities.

In *An American Marriage*, Celestial's experiences as a Black woman are intricately linked with her husband, Roy's wrongful incarceration. This quote illustrates the impact of race and gender on their relationship: "He had been in prison for eighteen months, and in that time, I had changed my entire life. I had shed my identity as a wife and taken on that of a widow" (Jones 1). Here, Celestial's identity transformation reflects the societal pressures and expectations placed on Black women, especially when confronted with the injustice of the criminal justice system.

Similarly, in *The Frightened Ones*, the character's experiences are shaped by the socio-political landscape of Syria, compounded by the intersections of race and gender. For instance, the protagonist, Suleima, navigates the complexities of her identity within a war-torn society: "I am a woman who lives in Damascus. I am a Syrian woman who has been buried alive in her own city" (Wannous 17). This quote encapsulates how Suleima's identity as a Syrian woman is deeply intertwined with the socio-political turmoil engulfing her country, highlighting the intersectional nature of her struggles.

Dima Wannous's *The Frightened Ones* (2018) delves deeply into the intertwined themes of trauma and gender in the context of the Syrian conflict. Through the fragmented and overlapping lives of the characters, Wannous presents how war and political violence disproportionately affect women, shaping their emotional, psychological, and social experiences.

At its core, the novel reveals the pervasive nature of trauma in a war-torn society. The protagonist, Suleima, is a young woman living in Damascus who suffers from severe anxiety and fear—echoes of the violence surrounding her. This trauma is expressed both in her body and mind, with Suleima experiencing dissociation, panic attacks, and deep unease. Her narrative voice often blurs the line between her personal fear and the collective trauma of Syrian society. One particularly vivid passage captures this entanglement of personal and collective trauma: "Fear was not born within me; it is not a hereditary trait, nor is it something I acquired in my early years. It is a slow-building phenomenon, one that grew steadily and unstoppably with each story of a missing neighbor, of a friend who disappeared, of a person who did not return home. It clings to you and seeps into every breath" (*The Frightened*

Ones 48). This quote illustrates how trauma is a cumulative and social experience in Syria, formed and exacerbated by the ongoing disappearances and violence inflicted by the state. Suleima's fear is not isolated but shared by all Syrians living under authoritarian rule.

Wannous also explores the specific ways in which women's experiences of trauma are gendered. The novel reflects on how women's bodies become battlegrounds, not just in the physical sense, but through the psychological manipulation and coercion they experience. Suleima's relationship with her psychiatrist, Karim, who is also a writer documenting their sessions, becomes a conduit for these themes. In many ways, Suleima becomes a representation of Syrian women's suffering, objectified both by Karim and the war.

A poignant reflection on the experience of women during conflict appears when Suleima contemplates her role as a woman in a society that subjugates both through war and gender norms: "I always knew that as a woman, fear would be part of my inheritance. But this war, it has deepened that fear, made it something more insidious. Now, it is no longer just the fear of men or their power, but the fear of disappearing, of vanishing without a trace like so many before me" (*The Frightened Ones* 123) This quote underscores how gender compounds the trauma of living in a war zone. The fear of disappearing, or of being lost within the violence, becomes an extension of the patriarchal structures already oppressing Syrian women.

Critics have noted how Wannous's exploration of trauma in the Syrian context is heavily gendered, reflecting the specific vulnerabilities women face. Dr. Lindsey Moore, in her article "Narratives of Trauma and Resistance in Syrian Women's Fiction," argues that *The Frightened Ones* shows "the intersection of personal and political fear" and highlights "how women's voices are marginalized in both the public and private spheres of conflict." Moore writes that Wannous crafts Suleima's trauma as "not only a consequence of war but also a product of deeply entrenched patriarchal systems" (Moore 159). Similarly, Syrian critic Yasmine Zahran emphasizes that the novel's structure, with its fragmented narrative, mimics the disintegration of both Syrian society and the self under the pressures of war and gendered oppression. Zahran states, "The novel disrupts linear storytelling to embody the ruptured psyche of women caught between the destructive forces of state violence and societal patriarchy" (Zahran 45).

Dima Wannous's *The Frightened Ones* powerfully portrays the intersections of trauma and gender within the Syrian conflict. Through Suleima's narrative, the novel reflects the collective fear experienced by Syrians, while also exposing the unique psychological and societal challenges faced by women. The depictions of

fear, dissociation, and psychological fragmentation offer readers a profound insight into the gendered dimensions of trauma during times of violence and upheaval.

The discussion herein revolves around the subject of fear, which has instilled in people's lives anxiety, tension, and disturbance. For instance, (Naseem), a young writer as previously defined, may resort to publishing several novels under a pseudonym to avoid arrest and oppression. (Naseem) will narrate the saga of this fear, or rather the fear of fear, as he himself expressed it. He does not wish to live through those moments preceding the terrifying event, such as facing the incessant question that pervades people's entire lives and labeling it with his own stamp. We will be with (Suleima), tracing that relationship with the father, as an exceptional task in the narrative, "where security confronts fear, noble value confronts emptiness and triviality, and in short, we will be with the meaning embodied in its entirety" (Azoz 2018).

Places: Damascus, Hama, the countryside... have served as spatial determinants for events that have imprinted a specific geographical image on Syria under an oppressive/despotic regime, characterized by persistent recourse to suppression and comprehensive violence to quell any inclination towards dissent against the prevailing exclusionary practices, and indeed against any aspiration for criticism or differentiation, perpetuating the image of a silent herd, intermittently, as well as through prolonged propaganda, consistently, demonstrating unwavering allegiance intermittently, or indeed at all times if possible. Beirut, on the other hand, "is implicated in the process of highlighting aspects pertinent to the successive Syrian events, which have imparted a contrasting descriptive feature to our contemporary history" (Azoz 2018).

Moreover, both novels explore the ways in which societal expectations and systemic injustices intersect to shape the characters' lives. In *An American Marriage*, Roy's wrongful imprisonment not only affects his relationship with Celestial but also exposes the racial disparities within the criminal justice system: "Roy was never just any man, but a black man" (Jones 44). This quote underscores how Roy's race exacerbates the injustices he faces, illustrating the intersectionality of race and socio-political contexts in his life.

Similarly, in *The Frightened Ones*, the characters' experiences of trauma and displacement are compounded by their gender and socio-political context. As Suleima reflects on her past, she expresses the profound impact of war on her identity: "I am someone who knows how to count my heartbeat every time I climb the stairs to my house" (Wannous 73). This quote poignantly captures the intersectional nature of Suleima's experiences, as her gender and the socio-political

context of war converge to shape her sense of self and belonging.

Both *An American Marriage* and *The Frightened Ones* depict how the intersections of race, gender, and socio-political contexts uniquely shape the lives of their characters. Through powerful narratives and poignant quotes, these novels illuminate the complexities of identity and the impact of systemic injustices on individuals within diverse communities.

In *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones, intersectional feminism is likely explored through the lens of African American experiences in the United States, where issues of race, gender, and class intersect. The character's experiences, such as the protagonist Roy's wrongful incarceration and the dynamics within his marriage to Celestial, offer insights into the complexities of race and gender dynamics within American society (St. Félix 2018). St. Félix emphasizes the novel's exploration of the intricate nature of forgiveness and reconciliation amid betrayal and pain. According to St. Félix, the novel's depiction of the struggles involved in love and forgiveness provides a significant viewpoint on the complexities of contemporary relationships (St. Félix 2018).

On the other hand, *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, set in a war-torn Syrian society, would likely address intersectional feminism within the context of conflict, displacement, and trauma. The female characters in the novel may navigate not only gender inequalities but also the specific challenges and vulnerabilities they face as a result of war, such as loss of family members, displacement, and the struggle for survival.

Both novels would likely emphasize the importance of understanding intersectionality in analyzing power dynamics and social injustices. However, the specific manifestations and challenges of intersectional feminism would differ based on the distinct contexts of African American experiences in the United States and Syrian experiences in a war-torn society.

In *An American Marriage*, societal pressures, particularly racial injustice, deeply influence the romantic relationship between Roy and Celestial. Jones vividly portrays this impact through Roy's wrongful incarceration, which strains their marriage. Celestial grapples with the weight of racial injustice and societal expectations, leading to emotional turmoil. As she reflects, "I am not some strong, mythical black woman... I am just me, and I am so tired of being everything to everyone" (Jones 89). This quote encapsulates Celestial's struggle against societal pressures that impinge upon her identity and her relationship with Roy.

Caroline Y. Erue notes that "Celestial was mentally drained by the turmoil in her life. Although her marriage was in shambles, her father continued to finance her

wedding” (Erue, 117). She spent long hours at her shop and then endured lengthy drives to Louisiana to stay with her unsympathetic in-laws. Though her husband wasn't at fault, there was a limit to what she could handle as a Black woman. She confided in Andre, saying, “You don't know what it's like to be standing in the line to get in to see him” in prison, “it's different for women. They treat you like you're coming to visit your pimp... Like you're a delusional victim” (Erue 157). It shattered Celestial to accept that “Women's work is never easy, never clean” (Erue 285). Often, she gazed into the mirror and barely recognized the person staring back.

Today, numerous women are openly embracing opportunities and delving into diverse experiences with confidence. As Ytasha Womack insightfully observes, “It's what our predecessors fought for. It's called choice” (Womack 162). Black women now place a high value on self-expression and authenticity, marking a significant departure from earlier times when they were expected to demonstrate strength and self-sacrifice for their families. Examining Jones' female characters raises important questions about identity and self-perception. These characters defy the post-World War II stereotype of women as solely submissive wives, mothers, and homemakers.

Celestial represents a modern take on characters from earlier works by female authors such as Toni Morrison, who defy social conventions in distinctive ways. This is reflected in Celestial's thoughts, behaviors, love, and assertion of autonomy. She seeks to live life on her own terms, rather than conforming to the expectations of her husband or society. Roy depends on Celestial for prison visits, financial aid, legal efforts, and as a reminder of his past self, stating, “I feel like I need and need and need and it's wearing a hole in the fabric” (Celestial 81). While Roy relies heavily on Celestial, she must also focus on her own needs. In one letter, Roy proclaims, “I'm innocent,” to which Celestial replies, “I'm innocent, too” (Celestial 84). This dialogue highlights the novel's central theme: we can empathize with the victim and amplify his voice, but not at the expense of ignoring his wife's needs and aspirations.

Marrying a man in prison demands immense sacrifice. Despite this, Celestial expertly juggles her personal and professional lives. When Roy misinterpreted her explanation in an interview about her doll-making inspiration, she emphasized the significance of that moment for her. “Maybe it was selfish, but I wanted to have my moment to be an artist, not the prisoner's wife” (Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* [New York: Knopf, 2016], 67). Roy thought his wife was embarrassed to mention his imprisonment, but Celestial understood that disclosing it could drastically impede her career. As a Black woman, she needed to demonstrate her outstanding doll-

making talents to White customers, allowing no room for error.

Similarly, in *The Frightened Ones*," the Syrian civil war serves as a backdrop to Nunu and Zaher's relationship. Wannous intricately weaves the psychological effects of conflict into their dynamic. Zaher's fear and trauma from the war become palpable, affecting his interactions with Nunu. As he confesses, "It's not always easy to communicate... What happened to me in Syria haunts me" (Wannous, page 128). This excerpt highlights how external societal pressures, in this case, the Syrian civil war, deeply shape Zaher's emotional state and consequently, his relationship with Nunu.

The novel *The Frightened Ones* can be seen as able to provide a condensed and indicative portrayal of Syrian society, as it grapples with despotism, oppression, and extermination, oscillating between periods of silence and fear on one hand, and rebellion and revolution on the other. The author, Dima Wannous, initiates her narrative with references to Suleima's visits to the clinic of Dr. Kamil, portraying her as a fearful and silenced character. Consequently, one may conclude that "this representation symbolizes, to some extent, the state of an entire nation in pursuit of arduous healing, equivalent to the desire for redemption from a collective national catastrophe" (Azoz 2018).

In both novels, external societal pressures intersect with the intimate sphere of romantic relationships, altering dynamics and challenging the characters' identities and connections. In *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones, gender expectations and roles exert a profound influence on the protagonists, Roy and Celestial. Roy's societal expectation to be the provider and protector clashes with the modern reality of Celestial's independence and ambition. This dynamic is encapsulated when Roy reflects on his role as a man: "It was a heavy burden being a man, having to think and act like a man, having to hold your family and your job together when the law was always on the other side" (Jones 78).

Pitts and Rojas (2021) have highlighted that "An American Marriage" provides a compelling examination of how conventional ideas about marriage and gender roles can cause intimate relationships to deteriorate. They point out that the novel's depiction of the protagonists' struggles to balance their personal aspirations with societal pressures presents a significant viewpoint on the complexities of contemporary relationships.

Caroline Y. Erue states that "Homer's *The Odyssey* profoundly shaped Jones' *An American Marriage*. At first, Roy appreciated Celestial's self-reliance and independence. However, after being incarcerated, he longed for her to adopt a more conventional role, similar to Odysseus's expectation of Penelope's loyalty"

(Erue 118). Jones draws a parallel between Roy and Odysseus, both confronting “a monumental challenge” and desiring “a tidy home and a loyal spouse awaiting his return” (Bates, n.p.). Yet, times have shifted, and Celestial is far from a modern-day Penelope. These characters illustrate the transformation of gender expectations. Celestial, embodying a contemporary woman, refuses to merely wait for Roy, despite her own struggles. Although not facing Roy's exact situation, she endures immense emotional stress and cannot continue in this manner. The ambiguity surrounding the duration of Roy's imprisonment or his potential release is a constant concern. Gloria counsels her, “You always pursue what you desire... brilliant yet rash and slightly self-centered” and adds, “But more women should be self-centered” to avoid being crushed by society (Jones 211). Celestial, having endured the strain of a marriage without genuinely being a wife, ultimately opts to leave Roy. She does not entirely desert him, continuing to offer financial support and friendship, but she cannot stay married to him. Upon his release, Roy acknowledges that Celestial has made her choice.

Celestial is not the sole woman with heroic qualities who can express her opinions and make decisions. The women in *Silver Sparrow* also embody unapologetic authenticity. This highlights Jones's literary and political examination of gender fluidity. From a young age, Dana is portrayed as a courageous girl who stands firm, advocates for her desires, and boldly confronts Chaurisse and her mother. She relishes the excitement of taking chances. When she discovers that James and Raleigh are hosting a party for Laverne to acknowledge her efforts, Dana speaks out in the salon, defending her own mother by stating, “My mother works hard, but she never had a party or anything close to it. Do you know that?” (Jones, *Silver Sparrow* 253). Despite her father's cautions, Dana seeks out Chaurisse, and eventually, the two girls become friends. They mature into beautiful women with aspirations and ambitions.

Similarly, in *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, gender roles weigh heavily on the characters, particularly Suleima and Naseem. Suleima's struggle with societal expectations is evident when she reflects on her mother's traditional views: “According to her, the only respectable way for a woman to leave her house was with a man” (Wannous 42). This quote underscores the pressure women face to conform to traditional gender roles, limiting their autonomy and agency. In both novels, gender expectations shape the protagonists' experiences and decisions, highlighting the complexities and challenges of navigating societal norms.

In *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones, trauma is depicted through the lens of racial injustice and its ripple effects on personal relationships. The characters

grapple with the trauma of wrongful imprisonment, loss, and betrayal. For instance, Roy's wrongful incarceration deeply scars him, as evident in his inner turmoil: In prison, you are always accompanied by your own memories. People aren't wrong when they say it's like being in a room with the worst person you can imagine, except that person is you (Jones 92).

Similarly, Celestial struggles with the trauma of having her life and dreams upended by Roy's imprisonment: "I had lost years of my life, had given up on the prospect of having children, a family. I would always be marked by this thing, like a brand, a tattoo" (Jones 302). Pitofsky and Rocheleau (2020) investigated how the novel addresses the influence of race and gender on relationships. They observe that the novel provides a compelling analysis of how cultural norms and expectations can create tensions in intimate relationships (Pitofsky and Rocheleau 2020).

In *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, trauma is explored in the context of war and its psychological aftermath. Characters grapple with the trauma of living in a conflict-ridden society, haunted by memories of violence and loss. For instance, Suleima carries the trauma of her brother's disappearance: "Ever since her brother disappeared, Suleima had avoided hearing the news or any talk of the dead or missing. She had even stopped reading newspapers and had deleted all the news apps from her phone" (Wannous 15). Additionally, Naseem's trauma manifests in her fear of intimacy and her struggle to confront her past: "She knew nothing about herself. About Naseem, the frightened one. The one who lived her life in fear" (Wannous 22).

In both novels, trauma emerges from different sources but leaves lasting scars on the characters, shaping their identities and relationships. While *An American Marriage* focuses on the personal ramifications of racial injustice, *The Frightened Ones* delves into the collective trauma of living in a war-torn society.

In *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones, the characters become voices for societal reform through their lived experiences and relationships. The central figure, Celestial, grapples with themes of racial inequality and flaws in the legal system when her spouse, Roy, is unjustly incarcerated. Celestial's actions to bring attention to Roy's wrongful imprisonment shed light on larger systemic challenges impacting African American communities. She considers the repercussions of imprisonment, noting, "Prison takes away your options the way you could lose the right to vote and, depending on the state, your right to be called a husband or father" (Jones 25). This quote exemplifies how the novel's characters encounter barriers embedded in societal frameworks that uphold injustice.

Horstkotte explores how *An American Marriage* and other modern novels

disrupt conventional narrative structures in depicting intimate relationships. Horstkotte contends that the novel's employment of diverse perspectives and non-linear narrative techniques signifies a trend in contemporary literature towards a more empathetic and inclusive storytelling approach (Horstkotte 2021).

Similarly, in *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous, characters navigate the complexities of advocating for social change amidst personal trauma. The protagonist, Suleima, confronts the oppressive regime in Syria and its impact on mental health. Suleima's struggles with anxiety and trauma are intertwined with her efforts to challenge political oppression. Wannous portrays the obstacles faced by individuals living under authoritarian rule, depicting the internal and external conflicts they encounter. For example, Suleima reflects on the pervasive fear in Syrian society, stating, "We Syrians are experts in the art of fear. We've become accustomed to hearing stories about it, about how it grows, multiplies, and spreads like the plague" (Wannous 34). This quote illustrates how the characters in the novel grapple with sources of trauma originating from political repression and social upheaval.

Literature cannot align itself with the tumult of our current experiences, nor can it revel in the chaos we are living through. Though it serves as a parallel narrative in our nations, it must distance itself from mere documentation, journals, straightforward language, and the overwhelming immediacy of our lived experiences. Literature must transcend this directness, yet this does not imply it should be completely severed from reality, Wannous asserts in an interview with *Romman Magazine* regarding her novel (2017):

Indeed, I view literature as a genuine history of our cities, societies, and oppressive systems that have ravaged us, even to the extent of language, logic, and imagination. What about if we are discussing the Arabic language here! A rich language overflowing with emotions, beauty, cruelty, joy, and sorrow. Its vocabulary is flexible, making it easy to precisely express a specific state or moment. A language that does not condense a smile, for example, into a single word, nor tears, nor sadness, nor rain, nor joy, nor laughter. There are nuances in its vocabulary that lead you from the act of preparing to something, to the act of doing it, to immersing yourself in it to its fullest extent. A language with a beginning and an end. How can all this richness be considered superfluous? Language is life. If we examine the course of Arabic novels, especially in contemporary Lebanese and Egyptian novels, we find a remarkable evolution in the invention of new verbs that blend colloquial and formal language,

succinctness in expression, and skill in enabling the reader to precisely grasp what they want him to touch, see, or feel.

In both novels, characters confront various sources of trauma, including systemic injustice, political oppression, and personal struggles. Their efforts to advocate for social change are hindered by the pervasive obstacles embedded within their respective societies. Through their experiences and interactions, these characters shed light on the interconnectedness of individual trauma and broader social issues, highlighting the complexities of effecting meaningful change in their respective contexts.

The scope of this research paper likely centers on analyzing how *An American Marriage* and *The Frightened Ones* employ intersectional feminism to explore the influence of external sociopolitical forces—such as racial injustice and war—on intimate relationships and personal identity. By comparing two distinct cultural settings, the paper aims to reveal how gender, race, and socio-political conditions intersect to shape the characters' experiences. However, the research may be limited by the complexity of fully capturing the cultural nuances of both American and Syrian contexts, which could result in a more generalized application of intersectional feminist theory. Furthermore, the analysis might not delve deeply into other intersecting identities, such as class or sexuality, potentially narrowing its exploration of the multidimensional effects of oppression.

Conclusion

The examination of *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones and *The Frightened Ones* by Dima Wannous within the framework of intersectional feminism illuminates the intricate web of social dynamics that shape the lives of their characters. Through the lens of intersectionality, this paper has explored how race, gender, and socio-political contexts intersect to influence the identities, experiences, and relationships depicted in both novels.

In *An American Marriage*, the portrayal of Celestial and Roy's marriage against the backdrop of racial injustice in the American criminal justice system underscores the pervasive effects of systemic discrimination on personal relationships. The novel invites readers to witness the complexities of navigating love, loyalty, and resilience amidst societal injustices. Similarly, *The Frightened Ones* delves into the psychological and relational complexities faced by the unnamed narrator and Nasim in war-torn Syria, shedding light on the intersectional dimensions of trauma, gender expectations, and societal upheaval.

Through our analysis, we have observed how the characters in both novels grapple with the intersectionality of their identities, negotiating the interplay between race, gender, and socio-political contexts. Additionally, we have explored how external societal pressures, such as racial discrimination and civil war, impact the dynamics of romantic relationships, often exacerbating existing tensions and inequalities.

Furthermore, our inquiry into the depiction of gender expectations and roles in both novels has revealed the ways in which female characters resist or conform to traditional norms within their respective societies. This exploration highlights the complexities of gender dynamics and the agency exercised by individuals in challenging or perpetuating gendered norms.

Moreover, the examination of trauma in *An American Marriage* and *The Frightened Ones* has shed light on the different sources and manifestations of trauma experienced by the characters, underscoring the multifaceted nature of their lived experiences.

Finally, we have considered the role of the characters in advocating for social change and the obstacles they face in their efforts. Through their journeys, we witness the resilience and determination of individuals to confront injustice and navigate the complexities of their social realities.

In conclusion, *An American Marriage* and *The Frightened Ones* serve as powerful testaments to the intersecting forces of race, gender, and socio-political contexts in shaping human experiences. Through the lens of intersectional feminism, we gain deeper insights into the complexities of personal relationships, societal injustices, and the pursuit of social change. These novels compel us to reckon with the intertwined nature of privilege and oppression, urging us to confront and dismantle systems of inequality in pursuit of a more just and equitable world.

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