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A Contemporary Marriage Plot

The marriage plot started as a piece of reflective fiction, or as Talia Shaffer puts it, it is “a compensatory fantasy” that “commented on reality” and “improved” the oppressive marriage tradition (Shaffer 41). The traditional 19th-century marriage plot focuses on the idealised love-match, or rewarding outcome of marriage during a time when being a wife wasn’t a choice. When looking at the spheres of influence, the public vs. the private, the increase of female agency within the law is monumental, but what happens when we look deeper behind the closed doors of nuclear homes and wedding bands? In modern times, women have a choice, not just the illusion of one; however, within heteronosexual marriage, there is still an expectation for traditional gender roles within marriage. Women in these contemporary novels, such as Celestial in Tayari Jones’s *An American Marriage* and Keiko in Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*, are described as independent, working women who, throughout the story, struggle against the tide of traditional gender roles and wifely duties. Contemporary marriage plot novels address this struggle with the inclusion of liberation, turning what once was a “compensatory fantasy” into a restorative possibility where the reward isn’t a wedding but instead it’s rejection.

Both contemporary novels follow different aspects of the marriage plot and the struggles within two drastically different lives. Celestial is a Black American woman who, after a short two years into her passionate marriage, faces the ultimate devastation when her husband is falsely accused of rape and sent to prison. Keiko, on the other hand, within her unconventional reality, is in love with her job as a convenience store worker and has no interest in sex or a traditional marriage. The modern approach to marriage plots still showcases the classic motifs, such as love-triangles—Celestial has to choose between Roy and Andre, while Keiko has to

choose between Shiraha and the store—but the most notable difference within these contemporary versions is the culmination of the plot. One of the key differences in the modern marriage plots is in the ending. Heilbrun deduces that, “Contemporary fiction modulates the formula in one respect: the abandonment of marriage replaces the achievement of it” (Heilbrun 309). Rather than using the final marriage as a reward for the earlier struggles and the choices made, the “achievement” is now found within the final rejection of an orthodoxical matrimony.

To set up the marriage plot and the more candid view of the gender-based pressure within intimate dynamics, we must first look at the pressures and expectations Celestial faced as a wife. For the majority of her marriage, Celestial was married to an incarcerated man, a struggle for both of them, leading to the downfall of their marriage. Within this context, there was a new set of expectations that went beyond cooking or sex, expectations that Celestial couldn’t handle, leading to her asking for a divorce. In reply to this, Roy antagonistically replies,

Maybe it’s me, but I made a different interpretation of “till death do us part.” Because the last I checked, I wasn’t dead yet. But you do what you have to do. Be an empowered woman or whatever they taught you in college. Leave a brother when he’s down. I never thought you would be this kind of person. There are women around here who have been coming to see their men for decades, riding buses that leave Baton Rouge at 5 a.m. Walter has women he never even met in person, and they come to see him, and when they get here, they do more than talk. Some women bunk in their cars in the parking lot so they can be in the visiting room as soon as it opens. (Jones 83).

Within this letter, Roy disregards Celestial’s feelings; instead, he ridicules the vows they made, finding them shallow and false. He then moves on to criticize her education and the idea of being an “empowered” woman with a sense of mockery and insult. This is especially ironic

considering they met in college, showing how education is only a point of criticism for the woman. Finally, he describes her character as less than, that he never thought she “would be this kind of person” to “leave” him while he’s struggling. He exemplifies other women to emphasize her supposed lack of care and the expectations he now holds for her since they are married. She should be leaving at “5 a.m,” sleeping in cars to visit “as soon as it opens,” or be like the strangers Walter meets who “do more than talk.” Even within the strict confines of the prison, there are still these impossible expectations for sexual gratification and complete devotion, even if it means the depletion of their own lives.

Keiko in *Convenience Store Woman* faces the pressure to conform her life to marriage, family, and work. She feels the most direct influence from Shiraha, who reflects the deepest prejudices found within society as he consistently repeats the same arguments about the Stone Age. Reciting misogynistic ideology, Shiraha says, “Men go hunting and women keep the home and gather fruit and wild herbs while they wait for the men to come back” (Murata 51). This statement reflects back onto the continuous narrative that traps women within the home, over the constraint that women cannot be independent or leaders and instead are made to take care of the home. He continues to push this ideology onto Keiko and claim that because of her age and position she is “like a stone age woman past childbearing age who can’t get married and is left to just hang around the village, of no use to anyone, just a burden” unlike himself who is “a man” and therefore he “can still make a comeback,” but do to the roles of women, “there’s no hope” for Keiko (Murata 91)

Food and our relationship with it are reflective of gender politics and traditional nuclear ideologies. The “food system” within this context has been a part of gender politics for centuries, beginning with the requirement for working-class wives to be responsible for kitchen labor and

now within “contemporary food systems” the politics of food reflect the continual expectation for women to take care of the home, or in this specific case prepare home-cooked meals, despite the modern co-breadwinner balance (Deutsch 210). Despite the continual conversation regarding women’s roles within the household and the increase of wives and mothers who work, “Much of contemporary food reform culture reinforces women’s obligations toward meeting their families’ food needs” (Deutsch 211). The nostalgia of having a home-cooked meal continuously found itself in the margins of the argument, perpetuating the idea that in order to be a successful mother or wife, the woman must provide this nostalgic experience.

This expectation can be seen throughout the novel, *An American Marriage*, as Roy, who clearly desires a more traditional marriage, expects and receives food from the women around him. First seen with his mother’s cooking and their close bond, but even later on with the neighbor, Davina, after he got out of jail. In the second part of the novel, not-so-coincidentally titled “Prepare a table for me,” Roy is released early from prison, where he grows close to an old classmate, Davina. He describes his first “home-cooked” meal as something righteous, remarking that “it was like something out of the bible. Pork chops swimming in gravy, macaroni and cheese—brown on the top and shiny with butter” (Jones 166). Roy goes on to describe the meal with a lot of detail and sensory, the meat is “swimming,” and the crusted top of the macaroni is glistening. He cares a lot for this food and desires to be taken care of by a woman. When he leaves, days later, Roy recounts that, “Between her good cooking and her good loving, I could have stayed there forever” (Jones 176). However, he feels the obligation to his legal wife, Celestial, and wants to know where they stand after so many years apart. Despite the unannounced visit, when Roy enters their home, he thinks back to Davina, “who welcomed [him] with accepting arms and a feast fit for a man home from the war.” while he internally

scorns Celestial because he had hoped that she would, “sense [he] was on [his] way and prepare a table for [him]” (Jones 239). Logically, Roy knows that Celestial wouldn’t have made him a meal since she wouldn’t have known, but there is still a subconscious expectation for it. Roy desires to be taken care of within traditional gender roles, and despite the willingness of Davina, he holds an entitlement for Celestial to succumb to a mold she doesn’t want to fit into.

Keiko in *Convenience Store Woman* skews the traditional “home-cooked” meals expectation with herself and her suitor, Shiraha, by focusing on the necessity of food intake rather than pleasure. Before meeting Shiraha, Keiko summarizes her meals in a more straightforward, convenient pattern: “For breakfast I eat convenience store bread, for lunch I eat convenience store rice balls with something from the hot-food cabinet, and after work I’m often so tired I just buy something from the store and take it home for dinner” (Murata 22). Unlike the imbalanced expectations of women being the sole laborers within the kitchen, within this environment, the food labor becomes more balanced. Keiko prepares food for the store to sell, and in return, the store also provides food back, sometimes seen within the “hot-food cabinet” and other times in her collection of dented cans. When she does form a partnership with Shiraha, the food she gives to him is described as “dog food” (Murata 110), and the way she cares for him is less like a partner or husband, and more like “a pet” she has to “feed” (Murata 109). To Keiko, there isn’t a nostalgic desire or passion that influences her food consumption; instead, it is a logical and necessary task she described as, “I just heat-treat the food before eating it. I don’t particularly need to taste it, but if I need to up my salt intake, I add soy sauce” (Murata 110). This perception of food as survivalistic rather than loving underlined the switch from conformity for women as “care-givers” and food can still be “nourishing or productive” (Deutsch 220) despite the skew away from traditional familial dynamics.

Intimacy is a common struggle in most conventional relationships; disagreements and tension arise from the lack of sex to the unfortunate pressure to have more sex. Sexual drive, protective measures, and the potential of offspring are conversations all couples are supposed to have; within these contemporary romances, the discussion is often not there unless in the context of infidelity, a lack of contraception, or in terms of what it means to be a wife. Celestial, throughout her perspectives, carries a pessimistic overview of sexuality. A constant pressure in appearance and lingerie, and the lingering anticipation of motherhood. She explains the feeling as “This is not to say that I didn’t want to be a mother. It’s not to say that I did. This is only to say that I was certain that I was certain the check would come due” (Jones 34). There was a neutrality within the idea of having children; it wasn’t that she knew she did or didn’t want them, instead, the issue was that Celestial didn’t know, and yet there seemed to be no choice; at least not when “you’re a perfectly normal woman married to a perfectly normal man?” (Jones 34). It’s not only her husband Roy that pressures her for children, but the rest of the world as well, and there can never be a simple answer that she doesn’t want kids. Instead, she acknowledges that within this culture, if you are physically able to have children, then you have no choice but to.

Even after Roy gets out of prison, after over a decade they haven’t seen each other, he expects her to have sex with him; he begs and intimidates her, even. Celestial, in understanding what Roy expects, thinks to herself, “A woman doesn’t always have a choice, not in a meaningful way. Sometimes there is a debt that must be secured. [...] Could I deny Roy, my husband, when he returned home from a battle older than his father and his father’s father? The answer is that I could not” (Jones 246). Celestial doesn’t believe herself to have a choice whether or not she wants to have sex with Roy, that she owes it to him since he’s been victimized, that there is a “debt” that she must pay since he is her husband. Celestial questions whether or not she

can deny him and comes to the conclusion that she cannot, stripping herself of any sexual autonomy. Celestial's consent is continuously being stripped away from her. In her last plea for protection, she asks him to use a condom, which instantly sends him spiraling into a plea and anger. Roy begs her and guilt-trips her with stories from prison; that he "accidentally killed a man," that "he's in pain," and begs her to just "be [his] wife" (Jones 247-249). When she still doesn't back down in asking for protection, he menacingly tells her, "I could take it if I wanted to," and in return, Celestial "braced [herself] for what seemed fated." Although he didn't rape her, the manipulation and entitlement he felt to his wife's body brought him dangerously close to it, and it was only the simple word, "protection," that seemed to save her from the assault she felt "fated" to.

Keiko is sexless by choice, while Shiraha's celibate lifestyle is against his desire, which created an idea of sexual entitlement. After getting fired for stalking a customer and continuing to stalk the female customers, Shiraha excused himself by saying, "I haven't done anything wrong. If I take fancy to a certain woman, then I'll make her mine. Hasn't that always been the tradition between men and women, handed down since ancient times?" (Murata 85). He claims there is nothing wrong with stalking women because he has a right to women's bodies, that he can "claim" them due to his perceived "tradition" between the sexes. For Keiko, who he says won't be "able to satisfy [his] sexual needs" (Murata 106), he instead takes control of her body in a different sense. Shiraha attempts to control her body for financial gain, reasoning that her "job in a convenience store isn't enough" to provide for him, and since he doesn't want to balance the financial burden within their unique partnership, she is required to get a "proper job" (Murata 146). He ironically claims that he is the one being "victimized" (146) by society, because the man will always be responsible, despite his criticizing Keiko for not making enough and forcing

her to quit a job that she is passionate about. Although it's not through sexual attraction, he does force Keiko to change what she does with her body, which had originally "belonged to the convenience store" (Murata 144).

There seems to be a certain implication within the idea of the "working woman" that she is too aggressive, domineering, anti-family, a bitch even. In these two novels, we get two different perspectives on the "working woman" prototype and on its reactions. For Celestial, within the success of her babydolls, or *Poupées* as she calls her shop, there also comes the guilt and ridicule from being successful. She addresses the embarrassment she feels. Celestial writes to Roy, "Things are really looking up for my career. I hate using that word, *career*. It always felt like the word *bitch* is hiding out between the letters" (Jones 60). This statement addresses how, even in the success of her career, there can't be full enjoyment of it because there are certain implications when it comes to women's careers. That, within acknowledging this, she must also be perceived as a "*bitch*" as though the title automatically comes attached to the word "*career*."

The perception of career-driven women continues into *Convenience Store Woman* as Shiraha, who is described as "prejudice in its simplest form" (Murata 66), summarizes his struggle to find a wife. He claims that the women working at the store are either too old or too noncommittal, and the customers in the area are all from the corporate businesses. The women who come into the store are, in his eyes, "too domineering for [his] taste" (Murata 68) because they are all women who work in the surrounding companies. Yet, when Keiko proposes a more contractual marriage, he believes that since she cannot provide for him sexually or in any traditional wifely way, she must get one of these jobs. Keiko doesn't fit into the ideal mold of wife or mother, so instead, she is expected to be the "domineering" climb-the-corporate-ladder type of woman that Shiraha is afraid of.

The upkeep of the traditional roles of wives—domestic labor, sexual gratification, and a balance of respectable work—is exhausting at best and impossible at worst. The pressure and expectation to balance the orthodox roles with self-identity have caused further hardships for women, trapping them within this constraint and label as the natural role of “caregivers” (Hou 752). Muzhi Hou discusses this phenomenon, summarizing the impact of the continuation of domestic labor imbalances in marriage as without help, women will continue to be forced into the locked box of stay-at-home mothers and wives, eventually losing “income, identity as a worker, and power at home” (Hou 752). This conversation around the successive push for women as domestic figures is consequential because, despite the legal equality women now have, the social inequality proves to be just as impactful. This tension is reflected within the intimate and greater social pressures each heroine faces within their respected marriage plot. However, there is a final restoration within the rejection of this social pressure and a conclusion of agency and the fulfillment of women's desires.

Celestial concludes her story with the finalized divorce of Roy and the labeled communion with Andre rather than remarrying to showcase her boundaries within her relationships and the rejection of the institution that had only harmed her in the past. Despite Andre's ultimatums for them to marry, where he tells her “Either you want to marry me, or you don't. Either we've been playing house for almost three years, or we've been here building something real” (Jones 108), and the familial pressure to remarry because they, “all want to see [Celestial] in a white dress” (Jones 304) she refuses. Instead, she describes their relationship as “living [their] lives together, a communion” (Jones 304). There is still an ending with a romance and coupling, but Celestial still rejects the convention of marriage and instead focuses on the idea of communion. By focusing on communion, there is instead a level of respect and harmony

between the two people, as both still have full agency and independence from the other, and are not trapped or connected through the legal strings of contracts. In her liberation from the constraints of marriage, Celestial ends up deciding to become a mother, as it is no longer a discomfiting pressure built from the expectation that marriage means children; instead, she now has the liberty to choose without the contractual intimidation.

Keiko's conclusion doesn't end with any romance, but instead the restoration of her nonconformity and a return to the world of the convenience store. Just before she gives up her individuality for an interview with a more conforming career, she steps back into a convenience store and rekindles her passion for the job. Shiraha tries to tell her that she cannot live this way, because society will not "permit it." She finally realizes that, "It's not a matter of whether they permit it or not," instead, it's about herself and what she wants or who she is. With this revelation, Keiko accumulates the defiance she needs to reject Shiraha, where she tells him that, "The animal me, the convenience store worker, has absolutely no use for you whatsoever" (Murata 162). Within this conclusion, Keiko doesn't just reject marriage as an institution, but completely rejects the social expectations of her within conformity. Even though the perception of marriage and a different job will protect her from outside criticism, she realizes that the choice is ultimately hers and no one else's. Finally, Keiko can return to the store, describing all her "cells stirring" as they react to "the music reverberating on the other side of the glass" (Murata 163).

Both novels, *An American Marriage* and *Convenience Store Women*, highlight two very different lives that face the same gender-based recession. They take hold of the classic marriage plot tropes, but rather than giving audiences the fairytale wedding at the end, they showcase the rejection of traditional marriage. This all comes to a head after the long struggle each heroine

faces regarding domestic and sexual labor expectations and their desire to lead themselves into the freedom of a workspace rather than the entrapment of a kitchen or bedroom. Celestial and Keiko are both given the chance within their conclusions to follow their ambitions and take full control of their autonomy, much more than any Victorian marriage plot.

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