

Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Politics in Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*

Ms. N. Shajitha Parveen¹, Dr. A. Ramasubbiah²

¹Research Scholar, Mannar Thirumalai Naicker College, Pasumalai, Madurai.

²Associate Professor of English, Mannar Thirumalai Naicker College, Pasumalai, Madurai.

Abstract

Tayari Jones's first novel *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) portrays the focus the African-American encounters in the Southern United States, particularly the ways in which their lives are affected by the inequitable structures in which they reside. Jones's writing is a performance of her desire to bring the marginalized history of Blacks to the center and others to the margin. *Leaving Atlanta* is a narrative with three distinct voices that explores the process of maturing and highlights the government's failure to protect the black population in Atlanta during the Atlanta Child Murders of 1979-81. Jones brings in all the historical past within the framework of 'intersectionality' to express the tragic incidents in a wider view. The objective of the paper is to delve into the interconnectedness between age, race, class, gender, and politics in the backdrop of the Atlanta Child Murders to provide justice for the traumatizing events that happened to innocent children. Jones opted to employ the viewpoints of youngsters in her novel in order to document the experiences of those young individuals who lacked the cognitive capacity to comprehend the intricate social and political milieu of Atlanta.

Keywords: Tayari Jones, Leaving Atlanta, Intersectionality, African-American Community, Atlanta Child Murders, Trauma.

Intersectionality of Race, Class, and Politics in Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta*

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework attempts to explain how various social aspects such as age, race, class, gender, politics, and other dimensions of identity intersect with each other. (David, 2008) states that intersectionality includes "social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcome of these interactions in terms of power". Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* explores the intersectionality of age, racism, class, gender, and politics in the proclaimed America's "Black Mecca" during the Atlanta Child Murders. Atlanta was referred to as the New Black Mecca for Blacks in South Georgia. Ethnicity and race are both socially constructed, but explain different aspects of inequality and disparities that prevail in American society. (Hobson, J. Maurice, 2018) in the Guardian Atlanta Week magazine explores the reason behind the Atlanta Child Murders by discussing the racial disparity between the white and black upper class and the poor and working-class black communities. All these social issues are briefly depicted by Tayari Jones in her debut novel *Leaving Atlanta* through children's perspectives.

Tayari Jones's writings analyses the fluctuates of birth and fate, the resentment of injustice, and the unrelenting power of love. Tayari Jones has emerged as one of the most prominent voices of her generation. Through her writings, Jones recalls her life as an African individual who came of age during

the Civil Rights Movement and became markedly aware of her race. ‘The Civil Rights Movement’ pacifist social movement in the United States that aspired to eliminate legally sanctioned discrimination, racial segregation, and disenfranchisement. However, African Americans, including their children, remained cognizant of their race and social status. Therefore, Tayari Jones' writings accurately depict the ordeals of African Americans in the Southern United States, particularly how every aspect of their lives is affected by the unjust systems in which they exist. As Fulton writes about African American narrative style, “I emphasize the importance of oral tradition as determinate in texts that reflect African American culture and affirm Black Subjectivity in an environment in which it is negated and dehumanized.” (Fulton, 2006:8)

Tayari Jones's novel *Leaving Atlanta* appears to be a reaction to the dereliction of the Black Nationalist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement to achieve egalitarianism and social justice for all individuals in the nation. *Leaving Atlanta* replaces within the historical record a past that has done injustice to the innocent black children who are neglected to live freely in American society. The novel is set in the past and the plot hearkens to the customs, political aspects, social situation, and all other features of that particular time. The text provides a rival narrative to the official American history starting from 1979. This alternative history offers a comprehensive view of the enduring black experiences, which predominantly consist of tragic events. *Leaving Atlanta* takes place primarily in the Atlanta metropolitan region, starting in the summer of 1979. *Leaving Atlanta* is a three-voiced coming-of-age story that delineates how the African-American community in Atlanta was negatively impacted by its prejudiced government during the Atlanta Child Murders of 1979 to 1981. This tragic event led to the loss of 29 black children and young adults. Irrespective of the disparity in age, all the victims were slain within the same geographical context. The occurrence of all homicides is linked to racism and Atlanta's extensive urban regeneration initiative that devastated African-American communities. Over 100 emissaries and police officers were actively involved in the inquiry during the murders. Atlanta implemented curfews and black parents in the city expelled their children from school and prohibited them from engaging in outdoor activities.

Chronologically, the narration commences by telling the stories of innocent African-American children in the background of the Atlanta Child Murders from 1979. Jones uses pathetic fallacy which reflects the character Tasha's mood in the surrounding atmosphere or inanimate objects. Both the atmosphere and the characters' thoughts are filled with the impact of murders. “Hard, ugly, summer-vacation-spoiling rain fell for three straight months in 1979” (Jones 3) This atmosphere in part one of the story expresses how the main character Tasha felt about herself among her classmates “This year would be her last chance to make a place for herself among the girls in her class” (Jones 4). Tasha constantly faces an identity crisis because of her race and appearance. She tried very hard to impress her classmates by practicing jumping ropes. “Jumping rope had been the proving ground for girls as long as she could remember, and for equally as long, Tasha had been embarrassingly incompetent” (Jones 4). She was continuously mocked by her classmates Monica Fisher, Tracia, and Demetria whom she assumes to be her friend. She was deeply worried and upset about their parents' separation. She was outburst when she shouted at her mother saying ““But you didn't say separated!” Tasha Had never raised her voice at an adult before”. (Jones 14) Her father and mother present a working middle-class black community, and both her parents work very hard to sustain their family. She could not accept the absence of her father and refused to eat dinner at the table without him. As an innocent child, both Tasha and Shaun were focused on learning about the reality of

living in a racist society. “You need to know what’s going on in the world, or else, white people could reinstate slavery and you wouldn’t know it until they came to take you away.” (Jones 23).

Jones reprinted the tragic incidents that happened in Atlanta throughout her novel which reprints as an outcome of the Civil Rights History Project. In part one of the story, she records the Bowen Homes explosion that happened on October 13, 1980. “I know that a black preschool blew up just six months ago...What happened at Bowen Homes was an accident. The boiler exploded.” (Jones 76). Capital B a non-profit local and national news organization that reports for Black communities across the country published a news article about this explosion. It said that “A gas explosion at the neighborhood’s daycare, Gate City, led to the tragic death of five Black people- one teacher and four young Black children. At the time of the gas explosion, 82 children were inside the facility. On the same day, the elementary school Harris attended also received a bomb threat.” This tragic accident happened during the same year when Atlanta Children Murders shook the close-knit Bowen Homes community and also the Black community.

Another accident mentioned in the novel is “An Accident in Birmingham” (Jones 76). “Birmingham Church Bombing” brings up in their news article, “On September 15, 1963, an explosion occurred during Sunday morning services at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. This resulted in the death of four young girls and caused several injuries to other individuals.” Following a federal court order to integrate Alabama’s educational system, the third bombing occurred within 11 days. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of segregated schools did not achieve integration until a considerable number of years had passed. African Americans persistently grappled with the challenge of eradicating segregation, and such occurrences left a lasting impact on several kids, educators, and parents.

Added to the list “The Library of Congress” published an article about “The murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till” in Mississippi on August 28, 1955. In the novel, Tasha’s Father mentions “Emmett Till was a little brother in Mississippi; white folks killed him for no reason. Hung him” (Jones 76). The tragic events that occurred in 1955 sparked a nationwide awareness of the pervasive racial prejudice and injustice prevalent in Mississippi. According to the “Library of Congress,” the newspaper reporting and subsequent murder trial had a profound impact on a cohort of young African Americans, prompting them to actively participate in the Civil Rights Movement. Due to the apprehension that such a danger could occur to acquaintances, relatives, or even oneself. A significant number of interviewees in the Civil Rights History Project vividly recall the profound impact that cases like this had on their lives. One can feel the anger and tension of a father and a black man who is worried about their children being killed at any time through the character Charles. Charles outburst when he said “We been hushed up too long. These children don’t know nothing about lynching. They don’t know about white folks burning niggers alive. That’s why we had to go out today- This whole thing is because black kids don’t have sense enough to be scared of a strange white man.” (Jones 77).

In the second part of the story, Rodney Green’s father and mother represent the black elite class community. But Rodney’s constant humiliation by his father made him feel that he was not good at anything in his life. He ended up being abducted by the kidnapper willingly even though he knew he was not a real police officer. Black children were facing double discrimination due to their racial identity and were targeted by an unknown serial killer. Rodney’s father expresses his displeasure about Mayor Jackson

by stating that “He didn’t want to give them a decent wage to feed their family. But he’s acting like he is worried about the children.” (Jones 111). Jones alludes to Ron Sailor’s new reports by “Shaw” in the 80’s and 90’s where his voice was a mainstay in broadcast journalism. Ron Sailor’s voice was the same: Rich and melodic, but with a hint of something many couldn’t quite place. Jones describes his news reporting as “The shrieking teakettle cannot muffle Ron Sailor’s funereal report from the newsroom.” (Jones 85). When Rodney’s father was scolding Mayor Jackson who does not care about black children. It refers to “Maynard Holbrook Jackson Jr”, he was a prominent politician and American lawyer. He held the position of the 5th mayor of Atlanta, Georgia from 1974 to 1982. The Atlanta Child Murders occurred during Jackson's second tenure as mayor from 1979 to 1981. He provided his endorsement to the Atlanta Police as well as other law enforcement agencies in the vicinity and endeavoured to alleviate public unrest triggered by the successive homicides of African American minors. Nevertheless, under Mayor Jackson's leadership, Atlanta had a significant rise in crime rates, particularly in killings, which surpassed those of any other city. The escalation was particularly alarming, with a staggering 69% increase in homicides between 1978 and 1979 alone.

In the third part of the story, Jones describes Octavia Fuller’s story who is known as ‘Sweet-Pea’ by her family and ‘Watusi’ by her classmates. “Watusi” is the term that refers to the Tutsi ethnic group of Africa and their cultural practices encompass remarkable dance performances. Jones characterized Octavia as a person with a firm, distinctive voice and character but she was constantly humiliated because of her race. She is the darkest-skinned child in her classroom and is mocked by her classmates for that, but she has a spirit that outshines everyone. She is also fairly isolated and in multiple ways, she remains apart from the crowd as “I”. “Poor Octavia is drowning in a sea of untouchability and you don’t want to be submerged as she thrashes.” (Jones 90) Octavia is teased by Leon Simmons who calls her ‘Watusi’ and jerks a parody of an African dance. He also said to Rodney “You better be glad it’s daytime because she so black that you can’t even see her at night.” (Jones 99). Octavia felt hurt and shouted with irresistible spontaneous rudeness.

Octavia and her mother Yvonne represent the poor working-class black community. Octavia’s mother works on the night shift and struggles very hard to give her daughter a better life. She knows that “no white man ever gonna give her nothing, the better.” (Jones 143). She wants her daughter Octavia to be self-sufficient but she lies about everything to her instead of letting her know the reality of their community in a dominant society. But Octavia who faces so much criticism from her classmates is aware of her racial stereotypes. She does not want Mrs. Grier, her favourite teacher in the school to think that she is poor and she does not belong to the project that helps underprivileged African community. When Mrs. Grier said, “Octavia, when you’re poor you don’t always have a choice.” I wanted to snatch my arms away and tell her that me and my mama are not poor. We don’t stay in the projects. We stay across the street from the projects.” (Jones 238). But at last both her mother and Octavia realized that she would not be safe and have a fruitful future in Atlanta because of the hatred spreading in every form against their community.

Even Octavia’s Granny from Macon was worried about them. “She was talking about the Missing and Murdered Children. That’s all anybody wants to talk about when they call long distance.” (Jones 14). These actions of the novel characters fill the readers with the fear and tension that prevailed in the history of the original incident. “All *police* meant was they didn’t find the body yet. All the search parties that

went out on Saturdays and Sundays were looking for dead bodies, not live children.” (Jones 176). When Delvis says that the child murderer only wants black boys since “we going to get to be black men pretty soon and if it’s one thing the white man scared of it’s a black man.” (Jones 196). This makes the reader understand everyone believes only a white man is the child kidnapper who hates black people, particularly men. Jones interconnects race and social issues together to make the readers understand the plight of African Americans in the white supremacist society.

The novels’ different narrative point of view imparts a multi-layered perspective that distinctly reveals the entanglement of all extremity the story touches upon racialism, violation, shattered families, class prejudice, and indeed just the way of growing up as a black child. All these historical incidents that shattered black people were retold by Jones through *Leaving Atlanta*. Jones portrayed the history through the eyes of the black children to depict the terror and horrific state these children are forced to live in. The level of ignorance and innocence brought by the main characters of this novel make this horrific story more intolerable and heart-touching. *Leaving Atlanta* aims to chronicle the layered history of the black community's experiences from a unique African-American viewpoint. The novel provides a detailed account of the Atlanta Child Murder, a series of intentional killings that occurred in Atlanta, Georgia from July 1979 to May 1981. The narrative focuses on the sufferings of a group of African-American children and their families during this period.

In the interview titled "Tayari Jones Knows Why She Sings" conducted by Ru Freeman on May 9, 2021, Jones restates that “I don’t mind expressing my opinions and speaking against injustice. I would be doing this even if I wasn’t a writer. I grew up in a household that believed in social justice. I have always understood myself as having an obligation to stand on the side of the silenced, the oppressed, and the mistreated.” She tried her best to represent the tragic incident from 1979 history to bring these injustices towards African Americans into light. As an African American writer Jones’ writing focused on the importance of family and she beautifully traces African history, relationships, and constantly about fragmented relationships, between parents and their children and cohabitants in her writings.

Tayari Jones’ writing became the communication of her soul, which created the changing history of ethnicity. She describes the life of African American people with White Americans. She presents that both are related to each other in the American social structure. *Leaving Atlanta* has significant importance in the history of the African-American Community because it adds perspective to the national narrative that is still developing. She also accentuates an educated adult’s understanding of racism and racial consciousness in American society. It is a wonderful yet traumatizing depiction of a moment in history when Black children were deprived of the security of their neighbourhoods, which is something that still exists today.

References

1. “Atlanta murders of 1979-1981.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundations, 26 November 2023, [Atlanta murders of 1979–1981 - Wikipedia](#)
2. “Birmingham Church Bombing.”, History and A+E Television Networks, 13 September 2023, [Birmingham Church Bombing - Alabama, Civil Rights Movement, Victims | HISTORY](#)

3. “Book Tayari Jones for lectures, readings, and conversations.”, Lyceum Agency, [Book Tayari Jones for lectures, readings, and conversations \(lyceumagency.com\)](http://lyceumagency.com) Accessed 26 December 2023.
4. Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on that makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist theory*, 1(9), 67-85.
5. Fulton, Do Veanna S. *Speaking Power: Black Feminist Orality in Women’s Narratives of Slavery*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. Print.
6. Jones, Tayari. *Leaving Atlanta*, Grand Central Publishing, New York, 2002. Print.
7. “Maynard Jackson.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundations, 3rd November 2023, [Maynard Jackson - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maynard_Jackson)
8. “Murder of Emmett Till.” [The Murder of Emmett Till | Articles and Essays | Civil Rights History Project | Digital Collections | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](https://www.loc.gov/rr/history/civilrights/murderofemmetttill/) Accessed 26 December 2023.
9. Shaw, E. Michelle., “W. Ron Sailor Sr., 61: Pastor and former TV and radio personality.”, 8 October 2013, [W. Ron Sailor Sr., 61: Pastor and former TV and radio personality \(ajc.com\)](http://www.ajc.com)
10. Sims, Sydney., “43 Years Later: Former Bowen Homes Residents Remember Daycare Explosion”, Capital B Atlanta News, 20 October 2023, [Remembering Bowen Homes Gate City Explosion 43 Years Later - Capital B News - Atlanta](https://www.capitalbnews.com/atlanta/43-years-later-former-bowen-homes-residents-remember-daycare-explosion/)
11. The Guardian Atlanta Week, the Guardian, October 22, 2018. [Black mecca or most unequal US city: will the real Atlanta please stand up? | Cities | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/us/atlanta-week/2018/oct/22/black-mecca-or-most-unequal-us-city-will-the-real-atlanta-please-stand-up?hpid=hp-top-table-main-atlanta-week%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&hpid=hp-top-table-main-atlanta-week%3Ahomepage%2Fstory)
12. “Watusi (dance).” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundations, 28 November 2022, [Watusi \(dance\) - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watusi_(dance))