

Gender stereotypes influence perception of and attitude towards characters



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The world has constructed itself around a mainly patriarchal view. This view of a patriarchy is altered from country to country to country, but it has its roots in the same idea: men over women. This idea forced people to compartmentalize gender into a binary vision. Someone is a man, or they are a woman. There is no in between, no middle ground. Certain attributes and personality traits were, over time, assigned to each binary gender. In *Silver Sparrow* by Tayari Jones, the patriarchally assigned binary gender traits are challenged through the dichotomy of Raleigh's soft-hearted nature and Gwendolyn's intense independence in order to provide commentary on the notion of binary gender.

This is immediately evident in Gwendolyn's character from the moment Dana introduces her. The first comments on Gwendolyn are characterized by the idea that, "to call her only [James's] "wife" doesn't really explain the full complexity of her situation" (Jones, p. 4). Gwendolyn should, by common American patriarchal society, be labelled with one of two names based on her position in the novel: a wife or a whore. Society dictates that a woman married to a man must be his wife. According to how Alan G. Johnson analyses the gender of women in his book, *The Gender Knot*, wives are to be gentle, caring, careful, submissive. Society also dictates that a woman who has slept with a man who is married to another woman must be a whore. Whores are to be crass, prickly, unladylike. There is a strict and definite line between the two forms of women who sleep with men, despite the fact that both share some generalized "womanly" traits (weak-willed, emotional, hysterical, etc.). Gwendolyn, however, walks down the middle of the line. Gwendolyn is neither a whore nor a wife; instead, she is a more complicated

person, one that there is no name for. She exemplifies the caring and careful aspects of being a wife while still being slightly gruff.

Beyond her complicated “feminine” identity, Gwendolyn deviates into what the patriarchy has labelled masculine territory when it comes to personality and emotions. Gwendolyn is independent enough to stand up to her husband and to raise her daughter by herself. She is strong and powerful and can provide and work for herself because that is what she wants. Those personality traits and that strength of character are generally assigned as “masculine” when analyzing the gender issue. Instead of neatly fitting into a simple “feminine” role as defined by the patriarchy, Gwendolyn defies that position and creates her own unique position between masculinity and femininity.

This is complimented by Raleigh’s character traits. Raleigh, according to what Johnson claims is a part of the patriarchal culture, is supposed to be, “aggressive, daring, rational, emotionally inexpressive, strong, cool-headed, in control of themselves, independent, active, objective, dominant, decisive, self-confident, and unnurturing” (Johnson, p. 61). Despite that, Raleigh is portrayed by Jones to be a softer figure, one more prone to expressing himself emotionally and allowing himself to be used in order to help others. Those traits are, through the traditional patriarchy, “feminine” traits and should not be portrayed by a man.

The dichotomy of these two characters who express themselves on a gradient between “masculine” and “feminine” instead of staying at one polar opposite or the other allows the audience to more fully understand the

characters and to relate to them more as people. There are very few people in the world who can accurately claim to perfectly fit patriarchy's description of a man or a woman. Most people fall somewhere in the middle. They might be close to one side or the other, but most people hold some ability or trait or attribute that is reminiscent of the opposite gender (when assuming a binary gender system). Therefore, when characters represent real people rather than catering to the patriarchal definitions of gender, the audience is more capable of relating to and empathizing with those characters. This is further demonstrated by the way the two characters are played off of each other. Raleigh is in love with Gwendolyn and wants to marry her, make an honest woman out of her, but Gwendolyn is in love with James. Raleigh allows that to happen, giving up on that love and allowing Gwendolyn to be with the man she loves even though it leaves her and her daughter in a complicated situation. This is against the traditional relationship positions that a man and a woman have. According to patriarchal culture, Gwendolyn should have found herself swept away by the man ready to make an honest woman out of her and take away her problems. Instead, she rejects him and continues to work towards fixing her own problems. Raleigh should, traditionally, have continued to "woo" Gwendolyn until she submitted to him. Instead, he let her go to live her own life.

With Gwendolyn and Raleigh's roles in the story of rejecting the patriarchy and playing that interaction off of each other, they challenge the patriarchy itself. They are proof that people do not have to ascribe to the binary gender system in order to be able to live the lives they want. Being themselves was more important to them than catering to the institution's ideas of what they

should be and how they should act. This is Tayari Jones's way of demonstrating that the binary gender system is not conducive towards successful living and self-respect. Without being able to accept oneself, a person cannot find a truly happy life. This is shown by the way that Raleigh is soft-hearted and Gwendolyn is aggressively independent.

Works Cited

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