

Postmemory Analysis In Jacqueline Woodson's Brown Girl Dreaming

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of transgenerational trauma in *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) by Jacqueline Woodson through the theoretical lens of postmemory as developed by Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory, originally formulated in the context of Holocaust studies, refers to the affective and symbolic inheritance of trauma by generations who did not directly experience the original events. This research argues that *Brown Girl Dreaming*, although presented as a poetic memoir of a Black girl's childhood, serves as a complex narrative space in which the legacy of slavery, racial segregation, and structural injustice is mediated and internalized across generations. The study employs a qualitative literary analysis method using close reading as the major tool to identify three key mechanisms of postmemory in the text: familial transmission, embodied memory, and narrative fragmentation. These mechanisms reveal how collective trauma is not only preserved in language and story but also in gestures, silences, and poetic form. Furthermore, this research investigates how Woodson constructs her identity through the internalization of inherited loss and imaginative identification, demonstrating how a post-traumatic subject can move from a position of passive inheritance to active narrative agency. By applying the postmemory framework to an African-American children's memoir, this research contributes to the growing field of memory studies in the scope of postmemory theory beyond Eurocentric contexts. It also opens new directions for the analysis of Black diasporic and children's literature. Significantly, the findings demonstrate that children's literature is not merely a didactic or developmental genre, but a powerful medium through which intergenerational trauma can be reimagined and critically engaged. *Brown Girl Dreaming* exemplifies how children's narratives can carry the weight of historical memory while cultivating critical consciousness in both young and adult readers.

Keywords: *Brown Girl Dreaming; postmemory; transgenerational trauma; identity formation; embodied memory; narrative fragmentation*

Introduction

In many societies that have experienced collective violence, whether in the form of war, slavery, colonialism, or discrimination, the past has never fully passed. It continues to be present in various forms, and even unconsciously. When collective wounds are not dealt with fairly and openly, the experience will remain alive, scarred, and even passed through generations through implicit forms of communication. LaCapra (2001) adopted Freud's idea of repetition compulsion, which is the urge to constantly repeat traumatic experiences, to explain how trauma is sometimes not sublimated, but returns in a compulsive and unfully conscious form. This process he called acting-out, a condition in which individuals and collectives are caught in a cycle of repetition through flashbacks of memories, dreams, or narratives that are constantly produced by culture without

realizing it. Freud himself attributed this impulse to the death drive, which is a destructive tendency in the human soul that resists recovery and change, and instead dwells on the repetition of suffering.

However, LaCapra offered a more reflective alternative, which is working-through. Working-through is a process of consciously and slowly processing trauma, not by forgetting it, but by creating a critical distance between the past and the present. For LaCapra, working-through does not mean completely resolving trauma, but rather seeking a deeper understanding, which opens up the possibility of personal and collective transformation. Repetition can still occur, but in a working-through, repetition is accompanied by awareness and intention to understand, not just revive the wound (LaCapra, 2001). This process of acting-out and working-through is reflected in the way trauma is represented. According to Balaev (2008), trauma is rarely explicitly present, it more often appears as a symbolic imprint scattered in narrative fragments, material objects, and affective expressions that do not always have an intact form. This representation can be seen as part of the acting-out, but it also holds the potential for working-through, especially when the fragments are critically reread, rearranged, and given new meaning.

Based on that, it can be understood that historical experiences in the form of trauma are recorded in personal memories formed by family, community, and affective relationships that are not always explicitly visible. This memory is not always communicative in verbal form, but also embodied, contained in gestures, habits, and emotional structures in the family. Assmann (2011) distinguishing between communicative memory inherited directly in social interactions, and cultural memory which are stored through institutional forms. But when traumatic events such as genocide, forced migration, or slavery break the chain of direct communication between generations, memory becomes distorted and is left only in incomplete affective fragments. This fragment, according to Hirsch (2012) is the raw material for what is referred to as postmemory.

The concept of postmemory was first introduced by Marianne Hirsch in the context of Holocaust studies. Hirsch (2012) defined it as "the relationship of generations after traumatic events to the traumatic experiences of previous generations, which they did not experience directly but were inherited through narratives, imagery, and affective practices." In this case, the next generation has no factual memory of the event, but feels it as if it were part of their own personal experience. Postmemory working through deep affective identification mechanisms, and also through symbolic mediation processes such as photography, storytelling, silence, and even body language. Hirsch explained that postmemory is not a direct memory, but a form of memory that is instilled indirectly through family and community relationships. In her interview with Garcia dan Braga (2024), Hirsch emphasized that postmemory is not a claim of experience, but a recognition of other people's experiences that are so intense that they shape the identity and consciousness of the next generation. She rejected the term "second-generation survivors" which is often misused, because according to her the second generation is not survivors, but "heirs" who inherit trauma in the form of emotions, gestures, and even narrative ambiguity. She also stated that postmemory applies not only in the context of the Holocaust, but also in the history of colonialism, slavery, and other forms of structural violence that have not received adequate recognition socially and legally.

This concept is important for understanding the dynamics of identity and memory in the African-American diaspora community in the United States. Although slavery was legally abolished in the 19th century, its systemic impact is still felt today in the form of

structural inequality, discrimination, and racial stereotypes. According to Hartman (2008), the legacy of slavery is never completely lost, but rather lives on in the bodies and affective experiences of the descendants of slaves who face a world that is still continuing to negotiate the legacy of injustice. Hartman used the term “afterlife of slavery” to describe how the social life of blacks in America is still overshadowed by the value systems and racial hierarchies of past legacies.

One form of the legacy of trauma appears in literary works. Literature is often a medium in which officially undocumented narratives can be rearticulated through poetic, symbolic, and affective language. According to Hollindale (2001), one of the main concerns in the study of children’s literature is how these authors imaginatively use their childhood memories to create works for young readers. In this case, *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014) Jacqueline Woodson’s work, considered as middle-grade or children’s book, is a vivid example of how family memories and historical experiences are passed down through children’s poetry and narratives. This book is a poetic memoir that recounts Woodson’s childhood in the 1960s–1970s, a significant transition period in post-segregation American history. Although Woodson did not experience firsthand slavery or *Jim Crow*, this work shows how family narratives, everyday experiences, and language become channels of the legacy of collective trauma that remain imprinted and shape their racial and gender identities.

Academic studies on *Brown Girl Dreaming* Jacqueline Woodson’s work have developed quite widely in the fields of education, literacy studies, and children’s literature. Several previous studies have highlighted aspects of identity, the representation of children’s voices, and the power of narratives in *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Turner dan Griffin (2020) discussed the importance of this book as a means for black children to build identity through literacy, stating that Woodson’s narrative shows how the desire to be a writer is a form of claim to agency and representation. On the other hand, Lierop-Debrauwer (2021) read this work as a “political memoir” that shows the complex relationship between personal voices and collective history, as well as how the narrative of girls is used to challenge the dominance of patriarchal and Euro-centric representations of history.

Moreover, Anatol (2016) Analyzed *Brown Girl Dreaming* as a postcolonial text *Gothic* haunted by the “spirits of history”, a metaphor for the presence of past traumas in the lives of characters. He pointed out that although the book is classified as children’s literature, its narrative structure and emotional atmosphere reflect a much more complex historical depth and trauma. However, this study emphasizes more on aesthetics haunting rather than the memory transmission mechanism itself, so that it has not yet directly connected it to the concept postmemory. Research by Silva (2024) opens up new directions in memory studies in children’s literature. Through her writing *Reconstructing Childhood via Reimagined Memories*, Silva explored the negotiation process between memory and imagination in writing life writing in children’s literature, including *Brown Girl Dreaming*. She analyzed records, manuscripts, and Woodson’s mindmap in the creative archive to show how childhood memories are not simply recalled, but imaginatively reconstructed in narrative. These findings are very much in tune with the postmemory framework, especially when associated with the child’s narrator conveying a historical legacy that does not experienced directly, but that felt as part of oneself.

Out of *Brown Girl Dreaming* context, postmemory theory has been widely used in literary studies, especially for works related to the Holocaust. Hirsch herself applied this concept in reading the work of Art Spiegelman (*Maus*) and the visual and photographic works of the second generation of Holocaust survivors (Hirsch, 2012). Ortner (2016)

examined how contemporary post-Holocaust Jewish narratives use postmemory aesthetics to express diaspora trauma. She identified three types of aesthetics, namely photographic, nostalgic, and transcultural. Photographic aesthetics, as Hirsch discussed, reflect irreplaceable absences and loss; while nostalgic aesthetics describe a longing for a "final homecoming"; and transcultural aesthetics actually voice the diaspora experience as a space of cross-cultural connection. However, there have been no studies that explicitly integrate the postmemory framework in analyzing *Brown Girl Dreaming*. In her 2024 interview, Hirsch stated that postmemory is not only applicable in the context of the Holocaust, but also relevant in the history of slavery, diaspora, and colonialism, especially when trauma does not receive historical or social recognition and resolution (Garcia & Braga, 2024). This makes *Brown Girl Dreaming* a very relevant object of study to be tested in a postmemorial framework.

Based on the above background description, this study departs from the realization that *Brown Girl Dreaming* is not only a poetic memoir that narrates the childhood experiences of a black girl, but is also a complex representation of collective trauma that is inherited affectively and symbolically. Therefore, the main focus of this study is to analyze how *Brown Girl Dreaming* represents collective trauma that is inherited transgenerationally through postmemory mechanisms. Based on this focus, this study asks two main questions that are the basis of the analysis. First, how *Brown Girl Dreaming* represents collective trauma that is passed down across generations through postmemory mechanisms. Second, how the collective memory inherited in the narrative of *Brown Girl Dreaming* plays a role in shaping the author's identity as the subject of the post-traumatic generation.

The aim of this study is to identify the representation of cross-generational experiences in *Brown Girl Dreaming* as a form of postmemory, as well as to explain how the structure of collective memory passed down from previous generations plays a role in the process of constructing the author's identity as a historical subject in the postcolonial and post-traumatic communities. The benefits of this study include expanding the scope of the application of postmemory theory, which has been more widely used in Holocaust studies, to the study of contemporary African-American children's literature and memoirs. In addition, this research is expected to contribute to readers, educators, and researchers in understanding how past representations in children's literature are not only educational, but also shape critical thinking about history and racial identity.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with the method of analyzing literary texts, especially through close reading of Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the purpose of the research, which is to examine in detail how the narrative in the text represents the mechanism of postmemory as well as how the collective memory inherited shapes the construction of the author's identity. The readings were carried out with a focus on aspects of narrative structure, poetic imagery, inter-generational relationships in stories, and forms of memory mediation displayed through poetry. The main theoretical framework used is the postmemory theory of Marianne Hirsch, especially as developed in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012), as well as elaborated in a 2024 interview with Garcia and Braga. Hirsch emphasized that postmemory is not just a historical narrative that is recounted, but a form of emotional and imaginative

connection of the next generation to the trauma of the previous generation, mediated through stories, image, and family affectation (Hirsch, 2012). Analysis will be directed at identifying how these elements are brought up in the poetic structure of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, as well as how Woodson's narrative of children actualizes the collective memory of the African-American community postmemorially.

The initial step of the research begins with a thorough reading of the main text (primary data) to identify the parts that display the relationship between the narrator and his or her family's past, including the stories of grandmothers, mothers, and life experiences inherited through stories or silences. Furthermore, these sections are analyzed by linking them to key concepts in postmemory, such as mediation, affective identification, fragmented representations, and historical experiences that are not directly experienced but are emotionally perceived. Secondary data sources include academic articles on *Brown Girl Dreaming*, postmemory theory, and interdisciplinary studies on childhood trauma, memory, and literature. This secondary data is used to build a strong conceptual framework and support interpretations made of the main text.

Results

Representation of Collective Trauma and Postmemory Mechanisms in *Brown Girl Dreaming*

In postmemory as explained by Hirsch (2012), collective trauma is inherited through relationships that are affective and mediative, rather than through direct experience. She called this relationship a "deep personal connection to the past they did not live." In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, this kind of relationship is seen in Woodson's relationship with her mother, her grandmother, his grandfather, and family stories that are not always explicit, but present in repetition, prohibition, and narrative symbols. This mechanism of inheritance can be read through three main forms: familial transmission, embodied memory, and narrative fragmentation.

Family Transmission

Family transmission is a form of inheritance of trauma that occurs in the domestic realm through symbolic mediums such as prohibitions, corrections, or family stories. Hirsch emphasized that family-passed down trauma is not just about *what is told*, but also *how the body and language mark it*. One of its forms appears in the poem "The Right Way to Speak," when Woodson's mother corrects her children's way of speaking:

"You will never, my mother says, / say ain't in this house. / You will never / say ain't anywhere."

"Each switching is a warning to us / our words are to remain / crisp and clear."
(Woodson, 2014:68)

This correction contains a legacy of historical fear of stereotypes against "southern" accents that are often associated with uneducated or backwardness. Woodson's mother wanted her children to adopt a northern language that was considered more socially appropriate, more "safe" in the public domain. A mother's prohibition is both a protective expression and a form of mediative trauma, an attempt to ensure that her children do not experience discrimination similar to the one she may experience. Trauma here comes in the form of control over language, not explicit narratives. This familial transmission is also performative because it does not need to be explained or debated, but is accepted as an internal truth. Thus, it can be said that *Brown Girl Dreaming* shows how historical trauma can be inherent in the domestic realm and passed down

through linguistic etiquette that governs the way of speaking and thinking about oneself in front of the outside world.

Embodied Memory

Trauma transmission does not only occur through language, but also through the body. As explained by Hirsch (2012), embodied memory is a form of memory that is not transmitted through verbal stories or historical documentation, but through a body that experiences, endures, and transmits traumatic experiences affectively. Embodied memory works not only as a trace, but also as an experience that “lives in the body” and shapes the sensitivity of the next generation to history that they did not experience directly. In the poem “daywork”, embodied memory is present through the physical depiction of the narrator’s grandmother after returning from work as a domestic worker in a white home. The description of the body is very detailed:

“When she returns in the evening, her hands / are ashen from washing other people’s clothes... / her ankles swollen from standing all day / making beds and sweeping floors.” (Woodson, 2014:58)

The narration of the grandmother’s body is not only to display exhaustion, but to become a medium that accommodates the historical memory of racial subordination. In the historical context of black women in America, domestic work is a continuation of power relations that have been formed since the days of *Jim Crow* slavery and segregation. What reinforces postmemory work here is the grandmother’s statement:

“Don’t any of you ever do daywork... / I’m doing it now so you don’t have to.” (Woodson, 2014:58-59)

These utterances are the articulation points of memory that have lived in the body and are now mediated in an affectionately dense language. That sentence, as Hirsch called coded speech, is an expression that carries the content of history without the need to talk about the whole event. She created a distance so that the younger generation would not have to repeat the same history, but also that they would not forget it—which is why she still told her story in the “daywork” poem that Woodson managed to narrate.

A similar thing is seen in the poem “Gunnar’s Children,” when the narrator remembers her grandfather as a gentle but harsh caretaker figure to the surrounding political context. The narrator does not yet have the capacity to understand the structure of discrimination that the grandfather faces, but the emotional atmosphere and the way his grandfather faces the world indirectly becomes the way the legacy of memory is transmitted. It shows how postmemory works through affection and performativity, rather than through formal historical narratives.

Narrative Fragmentation

One of the most obvious aspects of *Brown Girl Dreaming* is its narrative form that is not chronological, but composed of poetic fragments that seem separate but emotionally interconnected. This fragmentation is not just an aesthetic choice, but a structure that reflects how Woodson’s memory works as a narrator. The form of free poetry used by Woodson supports a narrative pattern that is not linear and incomplete. Instead of chronicling the narrator’s development from childhood to adulthood, the narrative in this book is broken down into poetic parts, each containing flashbacks of memories, feelings, and reflections that are not always logically connected. Woodson’s narrative moves associatively from one memory to another, from one gesture to

conversation, and from one event to another. Hirsch (2012) explained that memories inherited from trauma usually present as “shards and interruptions”, which are cuts and breaks that are not continuous but full of meaning. In the poem “how to listen #6,” for example, the narrator writes:

“When I sit beneath / the shade of my block’s oak tree / the world disappears.” (Woodson, 2014:200).

The poem “how to listen #6” contains only those lines and does not describe a specific event. These can be interpreted as shards, fragmented pieces that seem to have no connection to the story, but actually imply a feeling of loss, disappearance, or disconnection that cannot be directly defined. The world disappears not because it is completely gone, but because the narrator experiences a moment that is disconnected from the continuity of ordinary experience. This is where the fragment of the poem works as a representation of post-traumatic experiences that are not intact, but still retain the intensity of meaning. In addition, the breakdown of narratives into fragments of poetry creates a space of pause that allows the reader to experience emptiness, repetition, and undefined tension. In many poems, such as “second daughter’s second day on earth,” references to collective history such as Ruby Bridges and Malcolm X are not explained, but rather simply mentioned, like a trail left without context. It shows how historical trauma is present as a setting that sticks to the narrator’s body and time, but is never fully defined. What is present is the intensity, not the narrative.

Establishment of Author Identity

Postmemory not only influences an individual’s perception of the past, but also shapes how a person becomes and how post-traumatic generations negotiate their place in history that they did not experience directly. In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Woodson presents the process of forming her identity not as a linear progression from childhood to adulthood, but rather as an ongoing negotiation between her personal voice and the collective historical heritage she receives. The narrator’s identity is not born from an intact individual experience, but rather from a complex interaction with the collective memory of his family, particularly through women in the family such as her mother and grandmother, who carry with them a long history of slavery, racial segregation, and structural injustice.

Internalization of Loss

The process of forming the narrator’s identity begins with an imaginative connection to the collective historical events that are the background of her life. *The internalization of loss* in Hirsch’s postmemory refers to the process by which post-traumatic generations internalize losses that they did not experience directly. This loss is transmitted through affective memory, visual representation, and narrative practice, shaping their emotional structure and identity. The concept of *internalization of loss* is seen in the way Woodson as a child “feels” historical traumas such as segregation and inter-regional displacement experienced by her parents. In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, this mechanism is evident in the way Woodson, as a child, experiences a fracture of geographic and emotional identity. Although she was born after the most repressive times of racial segregation in America. She lives between two worlds: the North (Ohio and later New York) that promised freedom, and the South (South Carolina) that inherited her family’s cultural and spiritual roots, but also kept traces of the collective trauma of the segregation era. In the poem “february12, 1963”, for example, the narrator writes:

"I am born as the South explodes, / too many people too many years enslaved / then emancipated but not free, / the people who look like me keep fighting and marching and getting killed so that today... I am born in Ohio / but the stories of South Carolina already run like rivers through my veins." (Woodson, 2014:12-13)

The narrator attributes her birth directly to a major historical moment, although she does not consciously experience it. She was born into a wounded history, and unconsciously, the wound formed an emotional web within her. This sensitivity is an internalized form of loss, as Woodson affectively "feels" the burden of injustice inherited through her family and community. Woodson also absorbed an emotional atmosphere from her mother that was not always spoken, but felt. In poems such as "ribbons" or "on the bus with Del", for example, she notices her mother's expression when faced with structural racism, even when her mother does not explain it. She sees, feels, and stores those memories without rational understanding, but with affection. Woodson learned that there are things that should not be talked about directly, but still shape the way she sees the world. Silence becomes language, and from that silence is born an affective awareness of her family and community.

Imaginative Identification

One of the important aspects of postmemory according to Hirsch (2012) is imaginative identification, which is the process when the post-traumatic generation does not simply remember the past that they did not experience, but imagines and identifies themselves in ancestral narratives or collective history. It is not an objective form of historical identification, but rather an affective and creative identification that allows post-traumatic subjects to form a personal connection to inherited loss. The subject of postmemory does not remember, but rather feels and imagines herself in the history of others.

In *Brown Girl Dreaming*, this form of identification becomes crucial in building Woodson's subjectivity, not only as a child absorbing her family history, but also as someone who would later become a writer. This process begins with the experience of representational alienation: when she reads a book and does not find a figure from the "people" like her. In the poem "Stevie and Me", Woodson writes:

"I'd never have believed / that someone who looked like me / could be in the pages of the book / that someone who looked like me / had a story" (Woodson, 2014:203).

Here, identification is not done with the characters in the book, but rather with emptiness. The absence of representation triggers the emergence of the desire to create. Woodson did not see herself in the available history, so she imagined and then worked on a narrative space for herself. What distinguishes imaginative identification from mere imitation is that Woodson does not stop at the consumption of stories or connections with ancestors, she decides to write. The absence of a character like her in the book is a gap that she wants to fill. Thus, imaginative identification in *Brown Girl Dreaming* becomes a bridge between affection and agency. Initially, Woodson absorbed the history and identity of her community through stories, readings, and silence in her family. But over time, that affective connectedness turns into an existential awareness that she has a responsibility to write history that is not given a place. It is the transition point from a child who inherits trauma to a post-traumatic subject who rewrites history through her own perspective. This was emphasized when she said:

"I'll be a writer. I'll be able to hold on to / every moment, each memory / everything." (Woodson, 2014:244-245).

This moment of declaration is not just a personal aspiration but a symbolic act of reclaiming narrative space. It marks the culmination of the postmemory process where trauma is no longer passively inherited but actively transformed into authorship. By choosing to write, Woodson performs what Hirsch (2012) refers to as the ethical response to postmemory; an act that acknowledges inherited suffering while also reshaping its legacy through creativity and voice. In this way, Woodson's imaginative identification does not only recover lost representation, but also it reconstructs a future in which Black girls can see themselves not as silent heirs of pain, but as agents of history and meaning-making.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson is not merely a poetic recollection of childhood, but a nuanced narrative that embodies the workings of postmemory in the context of African-American historical trauma. Through close reading and the application of Marianne Hirsch's postmemory framework, the analysis reveals that transgenerational trauma is represented in the text through mechanisms such as familial transmission, embodied memory, and narrative fragmentation. These mechanisms enable the narrator, and by extension the reader, to experience historical events that are not directly remembered, but deeply felt through affective identification and symbolic mediation. The construction of the narrator's identity unfolds as a postmemorial process in which inherited loss is internalized, not as a burden to be silently carried, but as a space for imaginative reconstruction and narrative agency. Woodson's portrayal of the child's perspective becomes a site for negotiating racial identity and historical consciousness. The child's eventual declaration to become a writer signals a movement from passive inheritance toward active authorship, reclaiming space within a history that often excludes Black voices.

Importantly, this study expands the application of postmemory theory beyond its traditional focus on Holocaust narratives, showing its relevance in the study of Black diasporic memory and African-American children's literature. It highlights the critical role that children's literature can play in representing trauma, preserving cultural memory, and fostering intergenerational dialogue. As such, *Brown Girl Dreaming* not only contributes to the literary landscape as a memoir in verse but also serves as a pedagogical and political text that challenges dominant narratives of history while affirming the power of memory, identity, and voice in the lives of marginalized communities.

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