

The Study of Postmemory And Trauma in Let the Great World Spin

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Abstract: This article explores the concept of postmemory and its manifestation in Colum McCann's novel *Let the Great World Spin*, with a particular focus on the character of Gloria. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Marianne Hirsch and Cathy Caruth, the study examines how traumatic experiences—specifically those related to slavery and racial discrimination—are transmitted across generations not through direct recollection, but through everyday practices, family culture, and societal cues. While Gloria's mother conveys the trauma of slavery unconsciously, Gloria receives and processes this inherited memory within a context shaped by social change and historical awareness. The article also considers how Gloria's academic and personal achievements reflect both resilience and the continuing presence of trauma, illustrating the complexity of postmemory in relation to race, gender, and identity. Despite Gloria's conscious engagement with her past, the lasting effects of trauma persist, revealing the enduring nature of historical wounds.

Keywords: Postmemory, trauma, intergenerational memory, African American experience, racial trauma, identity, gender.

Introduction: This analysis examines the figure of Gloria as a bearer of postmemory, based on the theoretical approaches of Marianne Hirsch and Cathy Caruth. The focus is on the ways in which traumatic experience is unconsciously transmitted across generations, as well as the mechanisms through which it is later processed within a changing historical and social context. Particular attention is given to how Gloria's personal story, her upbringing, academic achievements, and everyday encounters with prejudice, illustrates the persistent presence of trauma, even when it appears to have been overcome.

METHOD

According to Marianne Hirsch's theory, Gloria is a bearer of postmemory, perceiving traumatic experience through stories, objects, gestures, and family culture. As Cathy Caruth notes, trauma is not always consciously recognized at the moment of its transmission, which leads to its latent manifestation in the next generation. In this case, Gloria's mother does not form a conscious understanding of trauma in her daughter, but her everyday behavior and memory

serve as carriers of that trauma.

Gloria grew up in Missouri during the Great Depression. She was the only girl in a family with five brothers. Life was poor, but the family strived for unity. Gloria's mother, according to Gloria herself, "was old enough to have heard all the slave stories firsthand..." — meaning she had direct access to stories about slavery. [McCann, 286] However, despite this memory, Gloria's mother likely did not realize the full depth of its impact. Thus, the transmission of trauma occurred unconsciously, but Gloria perceived it with a certain level of awareness, as the society and historical context in which she lived fostered an understanding of that trauma.

Thanks to numerous political and cultural events (the civil rights movement, films, literary works), the trauma of the generation of African American slaves, becoming affiliative, became accessible to the wider public. The modern environment in which Gloria finds herself creates conditions not only for the reception of postmemory but also for its comprehension. Therefore, the question of whether the second generation receives trauma in a more conscious form, if the time

and society contribute to it, can be answered affirmatively.

It is also worth noting that Gloria's name means "victory, glory, triumph" — and, like her name, she overcomes and transcends her past. Despite the burden of postmemory, trauma, and discrimination, she achieves academic success: "Still, I graduated with honors. I was one of the first colored women at Syracuse to do so." [McCann, 156] This achievement speaks not only to her high level of education but also to her courage, determination, and inner strength. It is especially important to emphasize that Gloria was one of the first African American women to graduate from Syracuse University with honors. Thus, her story conveys a sense of triumph not only over racial discrimination but also over gender stereotypes. Through this episode, the image of a strong, resilient woman is revealed, and feminist undertones are perceptible in the subtext — namely, the pursuit of equality, independence, and recognition.

However, despite Gloria's awareness of her ancestors' trauma and the society she lives in having already acknowledged and supported the memory of that trauma, she still faces prejudice because of her skin color. Even her friend Claire displays unconscious arrogance in certain moments. In one episode, Gloria catches her look and thinks: "She almost thought for a second that Gloria wanted to be the help. Presumptuous. Two seventy-five an hour, Gloria. Clean the dishes. Mop the floor. Weep for our boys. A chore indeed." [McCann, 102] These words, as Claire's internal voice, reveal her bias, even if she herself does not realize it. This cautious and underlying condescension only deepens Gloria's perception of discrimination.

This underscores the fact that even with higher education, a conscious postmemory, and strength of character, Gloria cannot fully overcome the trauma, which, as Caruth reminds us, remains inside as an indelible trace. Trauma lives within a person, even when they manage to cope with it. A particularly significant role in the transmission of memory is played by so-called triggers. One such trigger is the receipt confirming the sale of Gloria's grandmother: "She had been given, as a memento, the exchange slip from when my grandmother had been sold." [1, 286] This item functions as an artifact, analogous to the photograph in Marianne Hirsch's theory. It does not explain the trauma, but rather symbolizes it. It evokes an emotional response, serving as tangible evidence of historical violence.

In American history, another important type of document existed: "freedom papers," or certificates of

emancipation. These played a crucial role for formerly enslaved people, especially after gaining their freedom. Such papers confirmed that an individual was no longer property. In a context where even a freed African American risked being re-enslaved without written proof of emancipation, possession of these documents became a matter of survival. The category of freedom papers included various forms: official certificates of freedom, so-called manumission papers, documents recording a slave owner's voluntary relinquishment of ownership, and other government-issued records confirming the change in legal status. Some of these papers contained information such as a physical description of the freed person, their name, age, and the date of emancipation. The absence of such documentation could lead to arrest, imprisonment, or re-enslavement. Authentic historical examples of these documents are preserved today in archives such as the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas and in the digital collections of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

The significance of the receipt for Gloria's family is supported by historical fact. Although the document itself symbolizes liberation—granting Gloria's ancestors the legal right to freedom and independence—its perception remains ambivalent. Objectively, the receipt can be viewed as a sign of positive change in the family's fate, as a step toward freedom. However, subjectively, for Gloria, it remains a link to a traumatic past. It is a piece of paper that, on the one hand, symbolizes the end of slavery, and on the other, serves as a reminder that freedom itself once required formal validation. Thus, the receipt does not emotionally liberate Gloria; on the contrary, it confines her once again by connecting her to the experience of dehumanization. This is precisely where its function as a trigger emerges: while legally certifying freedom, it simultaneously serves as a psychological reminder of unfreedom.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Gloria's experience exemplifies how postmemory operates not only as an inherited emotional and cultural imprint but also as a dynamic process shaped by historical awareness and personal resilience. While trauma is transmitted subtly—through family behavior, language, and silences, it is also reinterpreted within the framework of evolving social narratives. Gloria's success, both academic and personal, demonstrates an active engagement with this inherited trauma: she does not merely carry it but transforms it. However, as Caruth emphasizes, trauma leaves a lasting trace; thus, despite social progress and individual strength, its residue remains. Gloria's story reveals the complexity of postmemory, how it is lived,

understood, and resisted across time and identity.

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