

RACE AND IDENTITY IN JACQUELINE WOODSON'S *BROWN GIRL DREAMING*

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ABSTRACT

Brown Girl Dreaming, the novel by Jacqueline Woodson, presents her life through a series of poems. This was classified as young adult literature. Most reviewers characterized and appreciated the book both as a human rights narrative of a young brown girl's coming of age against the socio-political background of racism and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of the 1960s, and as a personal history of her development as a writer. In this article the major focus will be on how *Brown Girl Dreaming* as both a racial memoir and an autobiographical narrative of identity formation is fleshed out. The novel by Woodson presents a range of important themes, while this paper will focus on racism, in Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

Key Words - Civil Rights, Black Power Movements, Relationships, Memories, Slavery and Emancipation.

Brown Girl Dreaming follows the childhood of the author, Jacqueline Woodson, from her birth to around age ten. Jacqueline is born in Ohio, the youngest child of three, in 1963, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Jacqueline and her family are African-American. Her father, Jack, is from Ohio, and her Mama, Mary Ann, is from South Carolina. Mama and Jack fight often, eventually causing Mama flee to the home of her parents, Georgiana and Gunnar, in Greenville, South Carolina with Jacqueline, Odella, and their older brother Hope. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement touches their lives more and more. Jacqueline takes in all the ways that she and her family are discriminated against in South Carolina, from Gunnar's coworkers disrespecting him to segregated buses.

Jacqueline Woodson describes the lives of African Americans freed from slavery yet still suppressed: they "keep fighting and marching and getting killed" (7). This shows that the author

understands her belonging to the mentioned conflict as well as its inevitable impact on her future. The existing racial classification is also outlined by the author by describing her birth certificate and the Black Power Movement. Despite the emancipation of African Americans, they were still treated unequally from the very birth date that underscores racism.

The actual narrative starts in the very first chapter of the book, titled 'February 12, 1963', in which the narrating 'I', the adult Jacqueline Woodson, tells us where and when she was born. She immediately positions her younger self in the context of racial inequality:

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital

Columbus, Ohio,

USA –

a country caught

between Black and White.

[...]

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 (1-2).

As the South explodes' is an allusion to the protests by African American people against racism, taking place in the early 1960s. With the explicit connection between the larger political context and her birth, the narrating 'I' suggests that these circumstances will have an impact on her entire life. Woodson continues to provide more context, connecting her birth to her family's history of slavery, and by relating her future and that of other children to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the second chapter about her 'second day on earth', she describes how her birth certificate racialized her from the moment she was born, labeling her and her parents as 'negro'. By referring to Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, and Ruby Bridge, she further relates the first part of her life to the fight for racial equality, explicitly stating that she was destined to share their ambition 'to change the world' (5).

The story with another African American girl, Ruby Bridges, shows that children were no exception for discrimination, and they were also involved in the movement against it. By writing

about the Woodsons of Ohio, the author considers the history of her family from the point of Jack, her father, who wanted to name his daughter after him, thus suggesting that she would continue their family. This man believed that he is a descendant of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, the President's slaves. Since Woodson mentions how the family of her father was proud of the above legend, it is possible to assume that the institution of slavery was closely connected with the myths offered by the President Jefferson. There is an allusion to Jefferson-Hemings controversial story that presents a potential sexual liaison between the President and his slave along with fathering of children of the latter. This may be regarded as the onset of Black pride along with the Black Power Movement, the activism that significantly contributed to social justice.

These references reveal how the history of slavery has imposed silence on the African American people and how the narrated 'I' has learned how remembering family stories can be used as a source of strength in coping with situations in which she is the only black person and is supposed to keep silent. Woodson's mother teaches her how to survive in these circumstances by telling her the story of Woodson's great-great-grandfather, William J. Woodson, who was the only brown boy in an all-white school:

You'll face this in your life someday,
my mother will tell us
over and over again.
A moment when you walk into a room and
no one there is like you.
It'll be scary sometimes. But think of William Woodson
and you'll be all right (14)

Brown Girl Dreaming shows that despite the Civil Rights Movement, in the 1960s there was still a long way to go before all black people dared to speak out, to come to voice. The narrating 'I' exemplifies this by sharing painful memories. She tells of her grandmother 'in her Sunday clothes' having to wait in Woolworth's 'long past her turn' (238), and of her mother, teaching her children survival strategies for coping with discrimination and racism, as in the fragment just quoted. Woodson also remembers how her mother moved her and her siblings to the back of the bus to avoid problems, only daring to whisper that 'we're as good as anybody' (31). Woodson's mother also always insisted on the 'right way to speak' (69), which was the way white people spoke. She forbade her children to use slang or to listen to music with the word 'funk' in it, out of fear for discrimination by white people (see also Trites 2018, 49). She especially didn't allow her children to use words like 'ain't', 'y'all git', 'gonna' and 'ma'am', because 'the word [was] too painful a memory for my mother of not-so-long-ago southern subservient days...' (69; three

dots added by Woodson). In this fragment, the political meaning of language is thematized. It shows how language determines people's position in society and the degree of agency that goes with it. On their own, the connotation of these words is perhaps not immediately clear, but against the background of what by then has already been said in the book about racism in the South, the sentence is relatively easy to interpret. By revealing how her family and her younger self were affected by laws that denied the rights of African Americans, the adult narrating 'I' emphasizes that discrimination and racism are not just the matter of history books. All the examples that Woodson presents underline the impact of legalized segregation on the everyday life of black people, on how many African American parents did not dare to speak out and complied with the laws out of concern for their children.

Despite the fact that the 1964 Civil Rights Act had officially ended segregation in public spaces, Jacqueline's mother and grandmother still take their (grand)children to the back of the bus. Jacqueline disagrees:

But we aren't dirt. We are people
paying the same fare as other people.
When I say this to my grandmother
she nods, says, Easier to stay where you belong (237)

While her grandmother still adjusts to what white people expect her to do, young Jacqueline claims the agency established by law. Throughout Woodson's memoir there are similar instances in which the tension between voice and agency on the one hand, and silence and subservience on the other becomes tangible.

When her parents stopped their relationships, Jacqueline, her siblings, and Mama moved to Greenville, South Carolina to grandparents, MaryAnn and Gunnar. When the young girl asked her mother whether she likes the place of her childhood, she answered that it was more pleasant before. The mother stated that she did not feel at home, and her daughter "imagines her standing in the middle of the road, her arms out fingers pointing North and South" (96). This dialogue shows that Mama is more tied to people since her beloved ones were in the North, while the author feels her connection with the land as she repeatedly mentions the soil. Another scene in the garden describes the attitude of the grandfather whose work is gardening. Likewise in times of the slavery, he remains involved in the same occupation – cotton picking. In Jacqueline, this causes associations with dirt. More to the point, the author connects this with the legacy of the slavery as well as its informal continuation after the abolishment. In other words, it is possible to observe the link to the whole South where ex-slaves remained dependant on their work and, disconcertingly, ex-masters.

The analysis of racism in the given novel helps to represent the life of the African American girl moved from the North to the South of the United States and encountered specific social problems. Woodson claims that “somewhere in her brain each laugh, tear and lullaby becomes memory” (29). The above words may be interpreted as memories compose a rather important part of her life, be it positive or negative moments.

To conclude, “*Brown Girl Dreaming*” by Woodson is characterized by remarkable themes like racism. Connecting her life and the wider social context, the author creates the novel filled with stories about family, friends, and society. Thus, it seems that Jacqueline is grateful to her memory as well as other people’s reminiscence as she can utilize them in her novel and convey her feelings to the public.

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