

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY FUTURISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Analysis of Collective Memory and Cultural Trauma in *Brotherless Night* based on the Theories of Marianne Hirsch

Hussein Mohammed ABDULRIDHA AL-GBURI

Assistant Lecturer, Iraqi Ministry of Education, Directorate General of Education in Najaf Governorate, Najaf, Iraq

* Corresponding Author: Hussein Mohammed ABDULRIDHA AL-GBURI

Article Info

P-ISSN: 3051-3618

E-ISSN: 3051-3626

Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.31

Volume: 07

Issue: 02

Received: 05-07-2026

Accepted: 03-08-2026

Published: 04-09-2026

Page No: 58-62

Abstract

V. V. Ganeshanathan's *Brotherless Night* (2023) is a significant historical novel due to portraying the dreadful effects of the Sri Lankan Civil War on normal human beings. The novel focuses not only on the unconcealed aftermaths of war but also the permanent mental and societal influences that continue to disturb people and societies across generations. This research inspects the way collective memory and cultural trauma are depicted in *Brotherless Night* through the theories of Marianne Hirsch. According to Hirsch, such shocking experiences as war can be dispersed from one generation to another through stories, family accounts, photos, silence, and cultural practices, causing the succeeding generations to come up with unending emotional relations with the incidents they did not visibly bear. This paper is mostly obsessed with the link between individual and collective memory, the consequence of war on cultural identity, the significance of silence and testimony in creating historical realization, and the effect of storytelling as a means for preserving reminiscences that might otherwise be disregarded or annihilated. The results prove that *Brotherless Night* refers to memory as a shared cultural procedure that relates individual experiences with cooperative history. The novel exemplifies that the trauma of war is not limited to those who went through violence but continues to distress succeeding generations through inherited recollections and emotional bonds.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMFD.2026.7.2.58-62>

Keywords: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma, Postmemory, Sri Lankan Civil War, Trauma Studies

1. Introduction

Memory is one of the most substantial ways through which people and societies apprehend the past. It authorizes people to uphold their experiences, establish their identities, and spread their histories to future generations. As noted by Phelps (2023)^[5], Memory can feel like a loose tooth in the body of history. One can't help but lap their tongue at its vulnerable roots and anxiously wiggle it in a softened scan of security that tries to pacify the fear of loss, the fear of violent removal. To engage with memory is to feel the vulnerabilities of the loose roots of historical embodiment, the weakened threads that keep one from feeling attached to a narrative of belonging to a larger cultural and historical context. (p. 1)

Memories are not just about personal experiences since communities also develop collective reminiscences that sustain shared experiences of war, dislocation, suppression, and resolution. These memories become part of a group's cultural identity and influence how following generations figure out their history. When a generation goes through an intensely agonizing or shocking happening, the impacts can also include the succeeding generations.

Consequently, collective memory and cultural trauma have become central issues in the present literary and cultural studies. These reminiscences are unremittingly rebuilt through storytelling, literature, photographs, archives, ceremonies, and family histories. Thus, literary texts deliver helpful understandings of the bond between history, memory, identity, and trauma. They disclose how societies recollect agonizing occasions while also questioning authorized historical narratives that may disregard relegated voices. One of the most important scholars in memory studies is Marianne Hirsch (born 1949), whose notion of

postmemory has changed the understanding of how trauma is spread across generations. Ribeiro (2023)^[6] believes that: Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory implies a connection with the past that is indirect, mediated by the imagination and desire, transmitted to descendants or generations that have no memory of the traumatic event, but it can also entail a possible yearning to reconnect with the historical past as testimony, remembering and collective memory. (p. 65)

Hirsch (2012)^[4] asserts that the children and offspring of survivors can receive the emotional and psychological consequences of traumatic incidents even though they did not individually undergo them. These inherited memories are transferred through stories, photos, family chats, silence, cultural practices, and emotional relations rather than through explicit experience (Hirsch, 1997, p. 17).

Hirsch (2008)^[3] introduced the term "post-memory" to propose that the second generation can experience the trauma of the preceding generation as if they had been direct witnesses themselves. Although her theory was at first obsessed with Holocaust survivors and their children, it has since been extensively used in the studies of genocide, war, immigration, colonialism, political violence, and other forms of historical trauma all over the world.

Happening through the Sri Lankan Civil War, V. V. Ganeshanathan's *Brotherless Night* (2023)^[1] focuses on the experiences of Sashi as a young Tamil woman whose life is distraught by political ferocity, losses, obligatory work, dislodgment, and the passing of family members. Instead of portraying war solely as a political battle, this novel is obsessed with its influences on people due to horror, grief, endurance, and the destruction of normal life.

Brotherless Night similarly signifies the tension between remembering and disregarding. The novelist shows how personal testaments, family associations, silence, and storytelling become substantial apparatuses for preserving memories of war. These features closely replicate Hirsch's notion of memory spread, in which both oral narratives and silence form the inheritance of traumatic experiences.

While *Brotherless Night* has been the subject of many critical studies for its historical image of the Sri Lankan Civil War, comparatively few studies have inspected the novel through Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory and its association with collective memory and cultural trauma. Most of the current studies have emphasized the political aspects of the war, cultural fierceness, or historical representation, while the procedures through which trauma is recalled, spread, and inherited are not adequately examined. This study fills that gap by employing Hirsch's viewpoints in the investigation of how the novel signifies the conservation of traumatic memories across generations and how these memories lead to the renovation of cultural identity.

2. Statement of the Problem

Great Britain ruled Sri Lanka—then known as Ceylon—from 1815 to 1948. When the British arrived, the country was dominated by Sinhala speakers, whose ancestors had likely migrated to the island from India in the 500s BCE. While the people of Sri Lanka appear to have been in contact with Tamil speakers from southern India since at least the 2nd century BCE, the migration of significant numbers of Tamils to the island apparently occurred later, between the 7th and 11th centuries CE.

Britain granted independence to Ceylon in 1948. The Sinhalese majority immediately began enacting laws that discriminated against Tamils—particularly Indian Tamils whom the British had brought to the island. They made Sinhala the official language and excluded Tamils from the civil service. The Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948 successfully dispossessed Indian Tamils of citizenship, rendering almost 700,000 people stateless. This matter was not fixed until 2003, and bitterness over such measures fueled the bloody uprisings that happened time after time in the following years.

The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) caused huge ferocity, displacement, deaths, and mental torment that strongly distressed people, families, and communities, essentially the Tamil inhabitants. Whereas the war ended in 2009, its emotional and social consequences are still present in the lives of stayers and succeeding generations. Lots of literary studies have sought to indicate these experiences, still the ways through which traumatic reminiscences are conserved, conveyed, and inherited are not competently inspected.

V. V. Ganeshanathan's *Brotherless Night* is one of the main contemporary novels that focus on the shocking aftermaths of the Sri Lankan Civil War. Through the experiences of its main character, Sashi, the novel illustrates the dreadful results of war, such as loss, fright, involuntary dislodgment, family separation, and moral clashes. Even though *Brotherless Night* has been analyzed in many academic papers thanks to its depiction of war, political ferociousness, human rights, and social skirmishes, quite little research has concentrated on the importance of collective memory and cultural trauma benefitting from Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory.

Hirsch is selected since her theory is useful for filling this gap and clarifies how traumatic experiences are spread through stories, photos, silence, emotional interactions, and cultural narratives. Specifically, her concept of postmemory discloses that succeeding generations can have profound emotional relations with traumatic cases they did not personally see. Employing Hirsch's theoretical viewpoints to *Brotherless Night* makes it conceivable to inspect how inherited memories affect identity, preserve cultural history, and defy the forgetting or removal of downgraded experiences.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach to inspect the exemplification of collective memory and cultural trauma in *Brotherless Night* by V. V. Ganeshanathan. Ganeshanathan's critical use of memory is in line with Hirsch's explanation of memory as "a form of counter-history" that delivers a "means to uncover and restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 15)^[4].

According to Phelps (2023)^[5], Hirsch also maintains that the healing capabilities of memory are similar to "feminist art, writing, and scholarship as they counter dominant historical narratives and offer a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion, and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress" (p. 2).

The primary source for this research is *Brotherless Night* (2023), whereas the secondary sources embrace books and scholarly articles on memory studies, trauma studies, and Marianne Hirsch's theories of postmemory and memory transmission. The main theory employed in this study is

Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory, which focuses on finding how traumatic experiences affect many generations through stories, photos, silence, family narratives, and cultural practices. Hirsch refers to postmemory as:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5) ^[4].

As said by Hirsch, although future generations do not recall painful incidents openly, they receive them through emotional and social diffusion. These inherited remembrances strongly distress one's sense of identity, belonging, and historical responsiveness. Hirsch notes, "Postmemory is an influential and very specific sort of memory just because its association with its object or source is arbitrated not through reminiscences but through a creative speculation and creation" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22).

This idea forms the central methodical outline of the present paper as *Brotherless Night* demonstrates how the retentions of war incessantly influence people and communities long after the war has finished. The analysis is done through a detailed reading and focusing on quotations that portray war, loss, dislodgment, family departure, silence, testimony, recollection, and identity. Specific attention is given to the ways in which reminiscences are conserved through personal narratives, family associations, and cultural practices. The study also scrutinizes how silence acts as an indication of trauma and how storytelling becomes a device for conserving historical memory and fighting against cultural expurgation.

4. Discussion

4.1. Collective Memory, Testimony, and Cultural Remembrance in *Brotherless Night*

One of the most important themes in *Brotherless Night* is the conservation of collective memory through personal testimony. Rather than depicting the Sri Lankan Civil War as a result of political incidents, V. V. Ganeshanathan narrates the story through the reminiscences of Sashi, a young Tamil woman whose experiences epitomize the distress of thousands of citizens. The novel discusses that history is not only conserved in official records but also in the memories of survivors who witness vehemence, dislocation, and loss.

Sashi's story renovates her individual experiences into a collective account of the Tamil community's history, and reveals that individual memories are part of a greater cultural memory. Marianne Hirsch claims that memory goes beyond open experience and becomes a collective cultural inheritance. She describes postmemory as:

[it] describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and

exceed comprehension. (Hirsch, 2012, pp. 106-107) ^[4]

While Hirsch's definition chiefly refers to the inheritance of memory by future generations, it also accentuates that traumatic experiences subsist since they are constantly spread through stories, testimony, silence, photos, and cultural practices. In *Brotherless Night*, this issue is instigated with eyewitness testimony. Sashi writes both her own experiences and those of other sufferers whose voices may disappear from history.

From the very initial pages, Sashi indicates herself as an observer rather than a political analyst. She utters, "Many people have died there.. Many people, of course, have also lived" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 7) ^[1]. This sentence promptly alters the emphasis away from political doctrines toward the real experiences of usual people. Instead of thinking only about death, Sashi is obsessed with resolution and memory.

All over the novel, memory is penetratingly related to commonplace locations and customary life. Before her hometown is uninhabited by the war, Sashi remembers the local bazaar, describing its colors, sounds, and smells brightly. She "could have drawn a map of it as it stood before it burned" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, pp. 39–40) ^[1]. According to this memory, it is more than a usual place and represents a complete way of life that the war in the end destroys.

Ganeshanathan similarly shows that family recollections are important parts of shared remembrance. Sashi repeatedly summons up the memory of her brothers before the war distraught their lives. Reflecting on her childhood, she says, "As siblings, we had cupped our hands around those tiny flames of shared laughter.. But then the lights winked out across the peninsula" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 94) ^[1]. The image of quenched lights signifies the deaths of family members and also the destruction of a whole generation. The family's reminiscences are thus signs of the greater agony experienced by Tamil families through the civil war. This means that personal memories alter to shared memory.

Hirsch claims that memory is transported through emotional care rather than direct experiences. This idea helps explain why Sashi intermittently restructures the experiences of those around her. Even memories that cannot be thoroughly recuperated are preserved through storytelling and emotional relationship. The novel suggests that memory is an ethical accountability since overlooking allows the ferociousness to be wiped out from history.

Additionally, testimony gets tremendously vital as the novel moves forward. Sashi knows that writing down the truth means fighting against political propaganda and historical silence. Near the ending of the novel, she mentions the challenging burden of recording the war, "To begin, you must put one foot in front of the other, one word after another word, one story after another story" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 265) ^[1]. This passage represents testimony as a way of amassing fragmented recollections. The reiteration of "one story after another story" denotes that no specific story can entirely suggest the multifariousness of war. Instead, collective memory arises from many discrete voices that together uphold historical truthfulness.

The novel persistently refers to storytelling as a device for cultural reminiscence. Instead of causing victims to stay nameless, Sashi prudently writes names, experiences, and relations. By doing so, she changes individual anguish into a shared historical document. This issue embodies Hirsch's allegation that memory stands through cultural dispersion

rather than through ratified historical documents alone. Personal stories become crucial sources for preserving histories that fundamental political narratives often neglect. Silence is also a substantial type of testimony. Many characters attempt to utter their grief completely since trauma cannot be expressed in normal language. Their silences, still, do not demolish memory; instead, they reveal the emotional weight of experiences that cannot painlessly be expressed. Hirsch remarks that traumatic memory is sometimes transported through actions, emotional states, and family associations as much as through straight talking.

The novel approves of this idea by revealing that silence itself conveys historical meaning and becomes another mode for remembrance. Anjali's work also underpins the novel's commitment to testimony. As Sashi's anatomy teacher, she encourages her to record citizens' experiences irrespective of political complications and threats. Her strength of mind shows that recording historical truth is morally an obligation. The closing chapters draw attention to the fact that recollection is an enduring process rather than a finished historical record. Sashi declares, "Each one a brick in the wall of a sentence.. the palace of history" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 324) ^[1]. The image of building a "palace of history" indicates that history is prudently formed through many personal testimonies. Every memory causes preserving the truth about the war. Accordingly, literature becomes a cultural archive that records experiences unnoticed by official explanations.

In the end, the novelist asks the readers to become involved in the efforts to recollect. Sashi's questions including, "Whose stories will you believe? For how long will you listen?" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 341) ^[1], encompass the accountability of memory beyond the storyteller to the reader. Cultural memory is dependent not only on those who sustain but also on those who are willing to pay attention. Via this culmination, *Brotherless Night* refers to the significant part played by literature in maintaining collective memory, glorifying the victims, and struggling against historical disremembering.

4.2. Postmemory and the Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Trauma in *Brotherless Night*

Brotherless Night is chosen as the subject of this study because it represents the implication of postmemory. In fact, one of the key points in *Brotherless Night* is its inspection of how trauma is not just limited to the generation that experiences the war. Even though the novel mostly shows Sashi's personal experiences through the Sri Lankan Civil War, it also discloses that the consequences of violence embrace many families, communities, and succeeding generations.

The pain of demise, dislodgment, tremor, and prejudice does not just include those who were present back then. Instead, they become part of a collective cultural inheritance that forms identity and historical realization. This idea is in line with Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which is about how disturbing experiences are diffused from one generation to another via stories, sensations, family relations, silence, and cultural practices. As stated before, Hirsch defines postmemory as:

Postmemory describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which

they grew up. (Hirsch, 2012, pp. 106-107) ^[4]

As noted by Hirsch, future generations do not inherit memories through open experiences. Instead, they inherit emotional links with the past through stories, photographs, family exchanges, and cultural memory. These hereditary memories become so influential that they affect identity as if they were personally undergone. Even though *Brotherless Night* is related by a direct observer of the war, the novel repetitively accentuates that traumatic experiences continuously influence those who stay alive and those who must live with the reminiscences after that.

The novel shows the family as the initial place where cultural trauma is diffused. Before violence separates them, Sashi recalls her brothers with love and warmth, "As siblings, we had cupped our hands around those tiny flames of shared laughter.. But then the lights winked out across the peninsula" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 94) ^[1]. The image of the "tiny flames" embodies the delicate reminiscences of childhood, whereas the extinguished lights stand for the obliteration of a whole generation by war.

Even though a number of members of Sashi's family are wiped out or die, their reminiscences are still present through Sashi's explanation. For Hirsch, these recollections become fervently interconnected rather than physically preserved. Family history thus becomes a vital device through which trauma survives across generations. Additionally, Sashi recurrently renovates the lives of those who are missing.

She thinks of her brothers, friends, teachers, and neighbors not just by remembering incidents but by giving meaning to their lives through storytelling. Their memories are active since they continue to affect her understanding of herself and her community. The novel also exemplifies that cultural trauma alters regular places into unforgettable sites. Early in the novel, Sashi affectionately recollects the market before it was demolished, "I could have drawn a map of it as it stood before it burned" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, pp. 39–40) ^[1].

This sentence reveals that trauma shifts the meaning of acquainted places. The market becomes more than a physical setting, and signifies a lost cultural world. Recalling its details permits Sashi to preserve the community's identity in spite of the obliteration instigated by war. These memories become inherited cultural knowledge for upcoming generations who never observed the original place.

Silence is another significant tool through which trauma is spread. Through the novel, many characters are powerless to refer to everything they have undergone since the violence surpasses the boundaries of language. Sashi herself recognizes the moral consequences of staying silent, "I was guilty of that kind of quiet too" (Ganeshanathan, 2023, p. 189) ^[1]. Here silence does not remove trauma; instead, it becomes one of its solidest expressions.

5. Conclusion

This research paper used Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory to analyze *Brotherless Night* by V. V. Ganeshanathan. It was stated that *Brotherless Night* shows memory as both a personal and a shared experience. Via the chief character Sashi and other characters, the novel signifies how war leads to grave emotional and mental damages that continue long after the battle has ended. The experiences of death, vanishing, dislocation, trepidation, and loss become part of the collective memory of the Tamil community.

The study also found that Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory delivers a valuable framework for interpreting

the novel. Sharma and Jha (2023) comment that the notions of memory and postmemory and the complicated relation underlying their reciprocated association is a new progress in memory studies (p. 383). Hirsch says that traumatic experiences are transported across generations through stories, emotional connections, photographs, silence, and cultural practices rather than through overt individual experience.

In *Brotherless Night*, the recollections of war constantly distress identity, family links, and cultural belonging. The novel discloses that trauma is not just about the generation that took part in the war but becomes an inherited cultural experience that affects the lives of stayers and their children. As follows, the narrative exhibits how the emotional inheritance of forcefulness exceeds historical occurrences and becomes part of a community's ongoing identity.

References

1. Ganeshanathan VV. *Brotherless night*. New York: Random House; 2023.
2. Hirsch M. *Family frames: photography, narrative, and postmemory*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 1997.
3. Hirsch M. The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*. 2008;29(1):103-128.
4. Hirsch M. *The generation of postmemory: writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press; 2012.
5. Phelps M. *Post-memory, inherited trauma, and fiction as resistance in Morrison and Hartman* [doctoral dissertation]. San Francisco: San Francisco State University; 2023.
6. Ribeiro OM. De-silencing the past: postmemory and reparative writing in selected works by African-American women writers. *ex æquo*. 2023;(47):65-80.
7. Sharma N, Jha S. "Memory shot through holes": the idea of postmemory in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*. *Critique*. 2024;65(3):383-392.

How to Cite This Article

Al-Gburi HMA. Analysis of collective memory and cultural trauma in *Brotherless Night* based on the theories of Marianne Hirsch. *Int J Multidiscip Futur Dev*. 2026;7(2):58-62. doi:10.54660/IJMFD.2026.7.2.58-62.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BYNC-SA 4.0) License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.