



Negotiating Identity Through Memory: A Study of Transgenerational Memory and Korean Diaspora in *Pachinko*

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Abstract

This paper explores the representation of transgenerational memory and diasporic identity in the Apple TV web series, Pachinko, a work based on Min Jin Lee's novel, Pachinko. Presented as a haunting element, memory transcends temporal boundaries to allow the past to intermingle the present both socially and politically. With its theoretical foundation in memory studies, the study attempts to find how narrative strategies used in Pachinko aids in the reconstruction and transmission of memory across generations. On close examination of some of the significant narrative strategies used in the work, like non-linear timelines, intergenerational storytelling and multilingual dialogues, the study traces the lineage of inherited trauma. Moreover, the paper reflects the broader cultural struggle of Korean diasporic subjects to secure visibility within Japanese imperial and post-imperial contexts as it engages in breaking out the silences, especially through the voice of an ordinary women like Sunja, who is an embodiment of her own nation's history. With a close textual analysis, the paper argues that, Pachinko challenges the dominant historical narratives by giving voice to the voiceless, where the story is told from the perspectives of Korean immigrants in Japan and through Solomon's search for identity in a fragmented diasporic context. By locating memory within diasporic identities, the narrative emphasizes that identity in exile transcends the concept of origin and joins the process of remembering and reconstructing the self.

Keywords: transgenerational trauma, diaspora, cultural memory, Korean identity, historical storytelling

Introduction

“It is, of course individuals who remember, not groups or institutions, but these individuals, being located in a specific group context draw on that context to remember or recreate the past” (Halbwachs 22). Memories are essentially formed within the contexts of social structures and group membership, as proposed by Maurice Halbwachs, in his theory of collective memory. When collective memory is read in connection with historical trauma, it forms what scholars such as Marianne Hirsch call “post-memory”, the connection of later generations to traumatic events they did not live but come to know through family stories, photos, and cultural heritage (Hirsch 5). Apple TV’s production of Min Jin Lee’s *Pachinko* (2022) presents a powerful case study for analyzing how emerging media can reshape

and transmit collective memory from one generation to the next, especially in the Korean diaspora experience under Japanese colonialism and beyond.

The show, similar to its book counterpart of the same name, follows the multigenerational story of a Korean family surviving, finding their identity, and belonging throughout the twentieth century. Through its creative narrative strategies and visual techniques, the adaptation transforms individual histories into mass testimony, achieving what José Esteban Munoz terms “disidentification...mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it...”, a tactic whereby minority subjects stage identity by reusing dominant cultural logics while at the same time disrupting them (Munoz 11). This paper asserts that *Pachinko* utilizes certain narrative techniques



to reconstruct collective memory and challenge dominant historical discourses, amplifying the voice of silenced Korean diasporic subjects while examining the intergenerational transmission of transgenerational trauma.

This paper seeks to investigate how *Pachinko* uses non-linear narrative forms to articulate the persistence of collective memory across temporal borders and how intergenerational narration plays an essential role in carrying cultural identity and trauma within Korean diaspora communities. The study moreover examines how multilingual conversation functions as a marker of cultural authenticity and as an act of resistance against linguistic assimilation, examining in specific detail the representation of Korean women's voices embodied in the character of Sunja, as representative of larger historical silences and their subversion. In addition, the research evaluates how the series counters dominant Japanese imperial discourses by depicting the lived experience of Korean immigrants and examining Solomon's modern-day narrative as a reflection of diasporic identity formation in fractured cultural worlds. In doing so, the study aims to ascertain how new media can be used as a means of reconstructing collective memory and offering historical testimony for marginalized groups whose histories have been systematically excluded from mainstream cultural representations.

Review of Literature

Pachinko emerges as a crucial academic discourse among scholars and researchers since its creation. Various research has been carried out based on the text, including studies in postcolonial representation, identity formation, memory studies, and global media studies. A transnational level of research has been carried out in 2023, where Winnie Yanjing Wu attempts to bring out the blend of local identity and global cultures in his essay in "Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images", by portraying *Pachinko* series as showcasing an East Asian and Western hybrid form. The analysis highlights how *Pachinko* transforms a historically marginalized narrative, the Zainichi Korean experience, into a transnational aesthetic form that resonates with audiences.

Postcolonial frameworks well suit the analysis of *Pachinko* series, where scholars read it as a subaltern resistance narrative. In the research carried out by Susilawati and Wajiran, Spivak's subaltern theory has been used to explore the Zainichi Koreans resist erasure through hybridity and self-representation. Their study reflects the larger struggles of the subaltern subject to reclaim agency within oppressive structures.

Pachinko's aesthetic realm is explored in a 2023 research carried out by Shota T Ogawa. The author describes *Pachinko*'s aesthetic strategy by using the concept of "cosmopolitan middlebrow". (Ogawa 14) This aesthetic mediation not only enhances the accessibility of *Pachinko*'s historical content but also complicates the viewer's role as both observer and participant in the reconstruction of memory.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma, the ethics of representation, and the role of visual memory within diasporic communities are still not well understood. Future studies could explore how *Pachinko*'s nonlinear narrative, visual symbolism, and multilingual dialogues reflect processes of cultural remembrance and identity negotiation across generations.

Methodology

The present research utilizes close textual analysis as its primary methodological approach, integrating insights from memory studies, postcolonial theory, and diaspora studies. The analysis is centred on the two seasons of *Pachinko* (2022), looking at narrative strategies, visual symbolism, and character construction through the theoretical framework of collective memory and trauma studies. The research draws on Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory and Marianne Hirsch's theory of post memory. The approach entails a rigorous study of recurring motifs, patterns of dialogue, temporal organization, and visual metaphors across several episodes. Special focus is placed on moments of cultural translation, intergenerational conversations, and the blurring of personal and political narratives.



Analysis and Discussion

Memory, Trauma and Narrative Innovation

Non-Linear Temporality and Memory's Persistence

Pachinko's use of an advanced non-linear narrative design undoubtedly reflects the processes of collective memory within the work. The series is pictured in such a way that it alternates between the 1910s-1940s timeline of Sunja's formative years and the 1980s story of her grandson Solomon, forming a palimpsestic narrative, where past and present coexist, each enriching the other. This temporal flexibility echoes the experiences of trauma which defy chronological constraint and persist in shaping current conditions.

The pilot episode's opening sequence demonstrates this technique, starting with Solomon's modern-day corporate life before seamlessly transitioning to his grandmother's childhood during Japanese occupation of Korea. This contrast immediately sets up the series' core idea that the past continues to be in the active present, informing identity and possibility through generations. The iconographic motif of water, from the sea that surrounds Sunja's island home to the contemporary pool-scape of Solomon's world, becomes a unifying thread, promising the fluidity of memory and its ability to cross temporal divides.

Intergenerational Storytelling and Cultural Transmission

The series illustrates how collective memory is communicated through the day-to-day sharing of experience between generations within families and communities. Sunja's position as both protagonist and keeper of family history proves her to be one of the important threads in the series who connects different generations together. Her stories, usually communicated through cooking, travel, or times of crisis, serve as the vehicle through which cultural identity and historical knowledge is handed down to the next generation. Such processes of transmission are evident in the character of Yangjin, Sunja's mother as well. Her instructions concerning survival, dignity, and preserving cultural identity under colonial domination equip Sunja with the skills needed to manage and face the discriminations she

experienced in Japan. When Yangjin tells Sunja that "survival is a form of resistance," she states a creed that will serve to guide several generations (Hugh, Season 1, Episode 3). This knowledge becomes part of the family cultural memory, shaping how subsequent generations conceptualize their relationship to Korean and Japanese cultures.

Multilingual Dialogue as Cultural Resistance

The employment of Korean, Japanese, and English language dialogue in the series plays more than a purely authentic role. Conforming to Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of "linguistic terrorism," the series illustrates multilingual dialogue not just as a stylistic choice but as a narrative strategy that exposes the mechanisms of linguistic terrorism operating within the historical context of Korean diaspora in Japan (58). Changes in power relationships, emotional positions, and cultural affiliations are also being portrayed by focusing on the code-switching by characters between languages

Sunja's step-by-step learning of Japanese is not an assimilation but strategic adjustment, what James C. Scott defines as a calculated mastery of the "public transcript" where subordinated subjects acquire the dominant language as a survival strategy rather than cultural conversion (2). Though she learns the dominant language for survival, she keeps Korean intact for close family moments, upholding cultural identity through language choice. This is a recurring pattern through generations, with Solomon oscillating between English, Japanese, and Korean according to different social and professional contexts.

The series also utilizes subtitles in a strategic manner, sometimes translating and sometimes requiring viewers to get meaning by the context and tone. Such a strategy implicates viewers in the experience of linguistic marginalization while at the same time confirming the legitimacy of non-English languages as narrative mediums.

Sunja as Embodiment of Historical Silence and Voice

Sunja's character is one of the "subaltern" subjects as described by Gayatri Spivak, "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is evenmore



deeper in shadows" (83). The series upends this silence by focusing Sunja's voice and experience as central to the historical record. Her trajectory from a young woman during colonial Korea to an older immigrant in Japan represents the larger Korean diasporic experience while retaining her own agency and nuance. The way the series handles Sunja's relationship with Hansu is an excellent example of this dynamic. Instead of treating her as a passive victim of male manipulation, the series shows her making intentional choices within limited options. Marrying Isak even when she was impregnated by Hansu is not victimization but strategic agency, a decision that guarantees her future while preserving her dignity and keeping her family safe.

Through Sunja's narrative, the series undermines how dominant groups build historical accounts and exclude alternative points of view. By reclaiming Korean immigrant women's experiences as primary to historical knowledge instead of secondary to it, *Pachinko* prioritizes marginalized experiences.

Challenging Imperial Narratives

The series always subverts prevailing Japanese narratives regarding colonialism and immigration by presenting Korean experiences in the series. Instead of depicting colonialism as modernization, the show presents colonialism as a system of oppression that left residual trauma for the Korean subjects. Isak's imprisonment and torture for being a Christian exemplifies how colonial regimes employed violence to suppress Korean religious and cultural practices.

The series also subverts post-war Japanese accounts of Korean immigrants through its presentation of ongoing discrimination and marginalization they experienced. Solomon's modern-day narrative discloses how anti-Korean discrimination continues to exist in contemporary Japan, attesting that the attitudes of colonialism have been modified but not eradicated. His ordeal to complete the land transaction despite being discriminated against due to his Korean origins illustrates what postcolonial critics refer to as neocolonialism, the maintenance of colonial power dynamics through economic and cultural means.

Solomon's Formation of Diasporic Identity

Solomon's identity formation evolves out of diasporic life and cannot be confined by essentialist cultural categories. Raised in Japan but born of

Korean culture, schooled in America but career-minded in Japan, Solomon is the very complexity of modern diasporic identity. His bond with his grandmother Sunja is also an important place to investigate the ways collective memory operates across generational and cultural divides. Solomon at first seems distant from his Korean background, yet his encounters with Sunja demonstrate the strength of cultural transmission even over linguistic and temporal distances. Their meals together, for example, become such spaces where taste and rituals speak more eloquently than words ever can. The series depicts Solomon's identity formation as a process of negotiation rather than an achieved state. His romantic relationship with Naomi, a Japanese woman, and his career aspirations in the Japanese corporate world are efforts to become part of dominant society while staying connected to his Korean heritage.

Conclusion

Pachinko shows how media today can be used as a means of reconstructing and passing down collective memory, specifically for oppressed groups whose histories have been suppressed in mainstream narratives. With its experimentation with non-linear temporality, intergenerational narrative, and multilingual dialogue, the series generates a cultural transmission that questions historical amnesia. The success of the series does not rely just on its accurate adaptation of Min Jin Lee's novel but on its elaboration of the literary work's themes via visual storytelling practices. By foregrounding Korean diasporic life and deconstructing Japanese imperial narratives, *Pachinko* participates in a kind of "disidentification", as José Esteban Muñoz puts it, "the management of an identity that has been spoiled in the majoritarian public sphere" (185). The handling of transgenerational trauma by the show demonstrates how collective memory is both a burden and a resource for diasporic populations. Characters not only inherit the suffering of past oppression but also inherit tactics of resistance, accommodation, and cultural preservation. Sunja's transformation from young woman to family matriarch proves this dynamic by demonstrating how individual survival creates collective testimony.



The series thus implies that collective memory is not static but continues to develop through cultural production and intergenerational conversation. As successive generations are exposed to inherited trauma through the media representations of their time, they create new mechanisms for negotiating and changing that inheritance. *Pachinko* therefore becomes not just a reflection of collective memory but an active contributor to its constant construction and passing on.

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