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Whispers of Grief:
Exploring Coping Mechanisms
with Loss and Refusal in Another
Brooklyn through Trauma Theory

Asst. Lecturer
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Whispers of Grief: Exploring Coping Mechanisms with Loss and Refusal in Another Brooklyn through Trauma Theory

همسات الحزن:

استكشاف آليات التأقلم مع الخسارة والرفض في بروكلين أخرى من خلال نظرية الصدمة

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المدرس المساعد

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جامعة الكوفة - كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

Abstract: Another *Brooklyn* is a novel by Jacqueline Woodson. It tells the story of August's life as an African American woman who lived in America during the 1960s and 1970s when Brooklyn was subjected to a comprehensive alteration in its ethnic and cultural structure. Woodson depicts loss and refusal, which manifest in different ways for each character. In August's case, she struggles to deal with losing her mother, friends, and lover. Nevertheless, this causes August to wonder if it's worth attempting to

move on after experiencing so much loss or continuing to live with so many negative emotions bottled up inside her head. The paper delves into the psychological traumas that August undergoes during her life and how August's experiments with loss shape her identity and relationships with others, as well as revealing the mechanisms by which the protagonist copes with loss and refusal by analyzing the text using trauma theory.

Keywords: Coming-of-age, Loss, Refusal, Trauma Theory

المضي قدما بعد تجربة العديد من الخسارات أو الاستمرار في العيش مع الكثير من المشاعر السلبية المعبأة داخل رأسها. تتعمق الورقة في الصدمات النفسية التي تعرضت لها أغسطس خلال حياتها وكيف تشكل تجارب أغسطس مع الخسارة هويتها وعلاقاتها مع الآخرين، وكذلك تكشف عن الآليات التي يتعامل بها بطل الرواية مع الخسارة والرفض من خلال تحليل النص بواسطة نظرية الصدمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: بلوغ سن الرشد، الفقدان، الرفض، نظرية الصدمة

بروكلين أخرى هي رواية للمؤلفة جاكلين وودسون. تروي قصة حياة أغسطس كامرأة أمريكية من أصل أفريقي عاشت في أمريكا خلال ١٩٦٠ و ١٩٧٠ عندما تعرضت بروكلين لتغيير شامل في هيكلها العرقي والثقافي. تصور جاكلين وودسون الخسارة والرفض، والتي تظهر بطرق مختلفة لكل شخصية. في حالة أغسطس، تكافح للتعامل مع فقدان والدتها وأصدقائها وحبيبها. ومع ذلك، يتسبب هذا في تساؤل أغسطس عما إذا كان الأمر يستحق محاولة

Introduction

Jacqueline Woodson was born in Durham, North Carolina, on February 21, 1947. She received a BA in English Literature with honors from Wayne State University before earning an MFA at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Jacqueline Woodson is one of many talented authors who write books dealing with issues of race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality in a complex way accessible to young readers and adults alike. Woodson's works are aimed at children and adolescents

and are involved in nature but also real at their core. Her work has been praised by critics and readers alike, who have called her “one of our most important writers and one of the greatest storytellers”(Slab, 2022).

A highly acclaimed novel by the author is “*Another Brooklyn*,” praised for its exceptional literary merit. The writer's fantastic talent and dedication to crafting captivating stories are showcased in this work. Through this novel, the writer seamlessly intertwines a touching and expressive account of friendship, loss, and the challenges

of growing up. The author's ability to profoundly and memorably convey the human experience's fundamental aspects is a testament to their exceptional writing gift.

Jacqueline Woodson has received praise for her writing in general; nevertheless, some critics have emphasized how Woodson depicts black children encountering racism and how these experiences influence them as adults. Specifically, in her masterpiece "*Another Brooklyn*," Woodson uses language that is poetic and lyrical, yet it's also very simple and straightforward. It could be compared to poetry or diary entries because it's written in the first person, which makes the novel feel more personal than some of her other works and more intimate than some other works that have been written about black culture in America. It has held many awards, including the Over the Rainbow Project book list from 2017 and the Dublin Literary Award 2018 long list. Despite its subtlety and understatement, "*Another Brooklyn* Novel" is still powerful because it shows readers that it isn't alone in caring about loss and mourning; it also exposes an important lesson about finding happiness in life

despite all the obstacles that come with being around others who are different from you because of race and culture.

Moreover, Jacqueline Woodson's novel "*Another Brooklyn*" is a poignant portrayal of adolescent friendship and the coming-of-age experience. The term "coming-of-age" refers to the transformative process of transitioning from childhood to adulthood. This journey is characterized by significant changes in physical, cognitive, and emotional development. In the context of literature, a coming-of-age story typically centers on a young protagonist's experiences and challenges as they navigate the complexities of adolescence, grapple with identity formation, and confront life-changing events. In "*Another Brooklyn*," Jacqueline Woodson masterfully captures the essence of adolescent friendship and the complex, often tumultuous journey of coming-of-age. With vivid prose and richly drawn characters, the novel follows the protagonist as she navigates the formative years of her youth in the vibrant neighborhoods of 1970s Brooklyn. Through her

experiences and relationships, we witness the joys and sorrows, triumphs, and challenges of growing up in a world that is both familiar and yet constantly shifting. Woodson's poignant and lyrical storytelling transports the reader to a time and place that is both specific and universal, touching on themes of identity, memory, and the enduring power of friendship.

Literature Review

Another Brooklyn has been widely praised as one of the best contemporary autobiographical novels about black girlhood. Academic research on *Another Brooklyn* has steadily increased over the years, scholars making extensive efforts to explore the novel from various perspectives and investigate a range of issues.

In Łapińska's study (2018), the author delved into the mourning process portrayed in the novel *Another Brooklyn*. The author applies Elizabeth Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief and the concept of memory to study this novel, to explore the notion of continuing bonds and selective

amnesia to examine the idea in depth (Łapińska 2018).

Peacock's article (2019), this article delves into the eerie motif found in contemporary Brooklyn literature. It specifically investigates how the transformation of socioeconomic dynamics through gentrification or renovation affects both tangible and intangible aspects. The study is keen on exploring how physical spaces depend on memories and ghosts and vice versa. This will be achieved through a detailed analysis of three novels: Kate Christensen's "*The Astral*" (2011), Ivy Pochoda's "*Visitation Street*" (2013), and Jacqueline Woodson's "*Another Brooklyn*" (2016), all of which can be categorized as ghost stories (Peacock 2019).

In Kinnunen's study (2022), the author explores the socialite structure of Black girls in *Another Brooklyn* novel. Specifically, it analyzes the main character's journey as she grows up and navigates the intersection of multiple systems of oppression that shape Black girlhood. To accomplish this, the author employs two theoretical frameworks: intersectional feminism and social constructionism. The study focuses on two main concepts.

Firstly, womanhood is influenced by different power structures, leading to unique experiences for women. Secondly, these power structures uphold negative stereotypes of Black femininity through societal knowledge that is constructed (Kinnunen 2022).

Besides these previous studies, this paper will investigate how the main character deals with loss and rejection within the framework of trauma theory by examining the protagonist's use of defense mechanisms as a coping mechanism and how she overcomes the challenges she faced throughout her life by adjusting to what was previously refused. This will also uncover the reasons behind the character's path to recovery and aim to understand the novel's depiction of loss better.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory encompasses a wide range of topics, including sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and its impact on the traumatized's growth and personal relationships. Trauma study has passed in three stages throughout the last century. The first stage emerged in the late nineteenth century in France, and researchers primarily focused on studying hysteria, the quintessential psychiatric disease of women. The second stage blossomed in England and the United States following World War I and peaked after the Vietnam War when experts became interested in studying combat neurosis. The third phase emerges in Western Europe and North America, focusing on sexual and household vehemence.

Trauma is defined as an experience that "overwhelms existing defenses against anxiety in a form which also provides confirmation of those deepest universal anxieties" (Garland, 2018, P. 11). Moreover, Cathy Caruth, a humanities professor at Cornell University, defined trauma in her book as "an inescapable experience of sudden, catastrophic events. Reactions to the

event are often delayed, uncontrolled, and involve repeated hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 15). Furthermore, Victims who have lifelong traumatic memories are unable to escape mental tension, dissolving the benign link between daily life and society. Their craving for and rejection of human connection has gradually become an everlasting psychological agony. In her well-known psycho-medical book *Trauma And Recovery* (2015), Judith Herman stated that “the pain of psychological trauma stems from the feeling of powerlessness. At the time of the trauma, the victim feels helpless under overwhelming force” (Herman, 2015, P. 29). Therefore, this study focuses on exploring how the protagonist deals with loss and rejection through the use of defense mechanisms within the framework of trauma theory. The investigation will look into how the character manages to overcome the challenges she encounters by adjusting to what was previously refused and will provide insights into the reasons for her journey toward recovery from trauma. Additionally, the study aims to offer a more profound

understanding of how the novel depicts the theme of loss

The Mechanism Coping of Loss and Refusal in *Another Brooklyn*

1- The Impact of Loss on the Protagonist’s Identity

In the novel’s opening, we notice the author highlights the idea of loss and the refusal of Augustus to acknowledge that her mother has died and how this loss caused trauma to her during childhood. Despite that, the concept of the loss of Augustus’ mother will accompany her during her lifetime. Moreover, it impacts her relationships with other people when she does not get support from her family to face this trauma. She found herself alone in this world, facing her problems without assistance. She tries to immerse herself in companionship as a mechanism for coping with losing her mother. She uses this way to meet her mother’s death by getting back up from her friends to move forward in her life.

“My brother and I grew up motherless yet halfway whole. My

brother had the faith my father brought him to, and for a long time, I had Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi, the four of us sharing the weight of growing up Girl in Brooklyn, as though it was a bag of stones we passed among ourselves saying, Here. Help me carry this”(Woodson P.3).

This passage appears in the early part of *Another Brooklyn*; readers discover that Augustus didn't have a mother during her upbringing. Despite this, she was able to overcome this obstacle and move forward in life, which suggests that she had a robust support system around her. However, her father's presence wasn't enough to make up for her mother's absence. Augustus's brother and father turned to religion for support, but she had to deal with her emotions alone. Fortunately, Augustus has her friends Sylvia, Angela, and Gigi to help her navigate through life. The concept that these girls carry the burden of growing up as girls in Brooklyn is crucial to the main idea of the novel. *Another Brooklyn* primarily focuses on examining the portrayal of female friendships.

The story also investigates the difficulties that young women often

face growing up. Though Augustus doesn't articulate what, exactly, causes the “weight” that she and her friends feel, she makes it perfectly clear that one of the only ways she has managed to shoulder this “weight” is by uniting with her friends, thereby demonstrating the sustaining nature of companionship. On the other hand, Augustus's reluctance to not admitting her mother's demise is apparent when she repeatedly reassures her brother that their mother would return to the house with them shortly. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear to the reader that Augustus's mother has passed away somehow.

Despite knowing this, Augustus continues to hold onto the notion that her mother will snap back and tries to persuade her brother to think the same. “I'd said tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow”(Woodson P.15).

Her struggle to overcome the trauma of losing her mother, along with the loss of her family's support for her, will be a great challenge for her. Augustus uses the rejection method as a form of protection for her in order to be able to overcome this

obstacle. We note that Augustus uses all ways that surround her to keep herself rescued from the trauma of losing.

In addition, Augustus lacks support during childhood, which deepens the concept of loss in the novel and makes Augustus find herself thinking about her mother even when she's actually thinking about something else, thereby demonstrating just how difficult it is for her to focus on anything else. The concept of loss appears to be clear evidence of how Augustus was exposed to the trauma. She can't think about anything else except her mother. She faces what her mother faced when Augustus' mother lost her brother during the Vietnam war affected on mental health and led her to commit suicide.

"The woman had staggered to the corner, grabbing for the stop sign and missing it before disappearing around the corner. How were we to learn our way on this journey without my mother?" (Woodson P.46).

This passage begins with a description of a strange interaction between Augustus and her other friends. While playfully dancing for her friends on the sidewalk, Angela

suddenly stops and tenses but won't say why. By turning the corner, Augustus sees a woman stumbling toward the corner of the sidewalk. Although neither Augustus nor the readers know it at the time, this woman is Angela's mother, who is a heroin addict. Because *Another Brooklyn* is narrated retrospectively, though, the older version of Augustus telling the story now knows that this woman is Angela's mother, which is why she follows this story with a line about navigating the world without the help of a mother, knowing that—like Augustus herself—Angela effectively had to find her way into adulthood without motherly guidance or support. Interestingly enough, Augustus begins the line universally, using the word "we" to ask how she and her friends are supposed to "learn [their] way on this journey." By the end of the sentence, though, Augustus has shifted to her own experience, focusing on the absence of her mother. This is an important change as it highlights the fact that Augustus is constantly thinking about her mother's absence. She finds herself thinking about her mother even when she is supposed to be focusing

on something else, indicating how challenging it is for her to concentrate on anything else.

However, Augustus's remembrance of losing her mother continues to materialize as the novel progresses. Augustus's intuition commences realizing, though, that there is no other place to go. Although people can depart from Brooklyn, this won't necessarily alter how they feel about their lives. This is a valuable lesson, that most likely resonates with Augustus because she knows—on a certain level, at least—that her mother killed herself, which is the most desperate way of trying to escape existence.

"I watched my brother watch the world, his sharp, too-serious brow furrowing down in both angst and wonder. Everywhere we looked, we saw the people trying to dream themselves out. As though there was someplace other than this place. As though there was *Another Brooklyn*"(Woodson P.77).

In this passage, Augustus reflects on the experience of gazing out of her apartment window with her brother during their teenage years. When they were young, they would stare out of this exact window and

imagine what it would be like to live in the world beyond the glass. Now that they have experienced this world, though, they're capable of recognizing all the ways people yearn to be elsewhere. Looking out the window with this knowledge, Augustus can feel her brother's "angst and wonder," sensing that he, too, has picked up on the fact that everyone is "trying to dream themselves out" of their own lives. This is made overwhelmingly evident, so many residents of the Augustus neighborhood are excessive drug users, which they use as a way of escaping their own realities. What Augustus begins to intuit, though, is that there is no other place to go. Although people can depart from Brooklyn, this won't necessarily change how they feel about their lives. This explains that Augustus is trying hard to find a way to rescue her mental health by finding different ways of coping with the loss of her mother. She knows—on a certain level, at least—that her mother killed herself, which is the most hopeless way of trying to flee what she feels. Augustus realizes that running away doesn't change how she feels inside, nor does it make up for the loss of her

mother, while the best way to heal her from the trauma of losing her mother is to come to terms with and acknowledge her loss.

Moreover, Woodson embodies the concept of loss by using the symbol of the jar having the ashes of Augustus's uncle, who was the cause of her mother's suicide. Augustus refuses to acknowledge that she lost her mother by asking her father what is inside the vase. Augustus's confession about knowing what's inside the jar confirms that she lost her mother. This makes Augustus continue to refuse to accept what is inside the jar.

2- Refusal as a Coping

Mechanism

However, we note that Augustus begins to mention the pot as a hint to give up on the illusion that she feels her mother is still alive and that she will return soon, as the pitcher depicts a symbol of Augustus' refusal of her mother's death, which begins to fade with his mention of the jar several times, which explains the gradual abandonment of the idea of refusing, and coping of losing her mother.

"What's in that jar, Daddy?

You know what's in that jar.

You said it was ashes. But whose?

You know whose.

Clyde's?

We buried Clyde"(Woodson P.78).

This conversation occurred between Augustus and her father sometime after moving to Brooklyn. The context surrounding this exchange isn't exactly clear since Woodson presents it at the end of a chapter without explaining what "jar" August is asking about. However, it is revealed that the "jar" is actually an urn filled with ashes. More importantly, Augustus's father provides answers without ever actually answering her questions, thereby revealing that Augustus is deliberately avoiding confronting things that she already has knowledge of. Indeed, when she asks what's inside the "jar," her father replies, "You know what's in that jar," to which she admits remembering that he has already told her it contains ashes. Going on like this, she asks whose ashes are in the "jar," but he once again insists that she already knows. In this way, Augustus is effectively interrogating herself, which means that she is also purposefully prohibiting herself from

accessing certain information. As a result, readers realize for perhaps the first time in the novel that Augustus's mother isn't simply absent but dead—after all, why else would Augustus so adamantly keep herself from accepting her mother's suicide? This gives clear confirmation to the reader that the mother of Augustus had indeed died, and she begins to undo her lack of acknowledgment of her mother's death by trying to come to terms with the loss.

As the novel progresses, The idea of loss continues with Augustus during the loss of her father. The author illustrates the development that took place in Augustus's personality and her acceptance of death, which she was afraid to accept. During her journey around the world, Augustus discovers a way to adapt to losing her loved ones by immersing herself in the field of death. She copes with the loss of her mother by studying the rituals of death during her journey and finding out about different cultures.

This makes sense, considering that she spends her time as a child trying as hard as she can to ignore the fact that her mother killed herself, meaning that she actually spends

quite a bit of time thinking about death since striving not to think about something inevitably amounts to thinking about it. At the end of her journey, Augustus realizes that death is an inevitable process for a person, and she must accept it. This helps Augustus tolerate the loss of her mother and makes her father's death normal for her.

"I had seen death in Indonesia and Korea—death in Mauritania and Mongolia. I had watched the people of Madagascar exhume the muslin-wrapped bones of their ancestors, spray them with perfume and ask those who had already passed to the next place for their stories, prayers, and blessings. I had been home for a month watching my father die. Death didn't frighten me. Not now. Not anymore" (Woodson P.9).

In this passage, Augustus reflects upon the experience of coming home to watch her father die. In doing so, she reveals that she has spent the majority of her adult life as an anthropologist who studies death and the various rituals and customs surrounding it. Throughout *Another Brooklyn*, Augustus frequently provides descriptions of different ceremonial bonds with death that people practice around the world.

Even though these bits of information may seem disjointed, they serve as a reminder that death is a major theme for Augustus and that she has gained knowledge about different mourning practices from her travels around the world. This is important because Augustus used to be strongly opposed to accepting death when she was younger.

Additionally, her newfound ability to closely examine death shows a keen interest in the concept, which may have played a role in her previous reluctance to confront it. She has witnessed the ways that multiple different cultures respond to the passing of loved ones, observing people in Indonesia, Korea, Mauritania, and Mongolia, to name just a few locations.

By highlighting her familiarity with death, Augustus provides an explanation for why, exactly, she isn't afraid of death or even all that bothered by her father's passing. After all, she has turned the mere subject of death into an academic topic, thereby enabling her to approach it objectively and with an understanding of the wide-ranging nuances that accompany the mourning process. However, she

also hints at the fact that she hasn't always been capable of facing death in this manner, saying that it doesn't "frighten" her "anymore"—a hint that she used to be unable to think so openly about the subject.

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Augustus's interest in death has actually emerged from her original unwillingness to accept it as part of the human experience, suggesting that it can often be cathartic and productive for people to face the things they fear most.

Furthermore, Woodson reveals that negation is an untrustworthy coping mechanism, one that falters as people get older and are forced to admit certain irrefutable realities. In this way, Woodson spotlights the ways in which maturity helps to see the world in a holistic way that is undefined. Whereas Augustus refuses to acknowledge the loss of her mother, she finds a certain amount of comfort in eliminating her sense of uncertainty by simply accepting that their mother is gone. She eventually realizes that ignoring the reality of the things that happen to her prevents her from moving forward in her life, and the best way to move forward in her life is to

accept the reality that her mother will not return.

“When you’re fifteen, the world collapses in a moment, different from when you’re eight and you learn that your mother walked into water—and kept on walking. When you’re fifteen, you can’t make promises of a return to the before place. Your aging eyes tell a different, truer story”(Woodson P.150).

This passage appears when Augustus spots her best friend Sylvia and her lover Jerome holding hands in the park, and she realizes that Sylvia has betrayed her by secretly dating Augustus’s ex-boyfriend. What’s unique about this moment is that it contains two revelations: first, Augustus learns about Sylvia’s betrayal. Augustus faces the loss of her best friend, as well as the loss of her lover, after seeing them together. This loss deepens Augustus’s understanding and leads her to the fact that acknowledging the facts and not refusing them relieves a person’s feelings and makes him move forward in life. More importantly, though, Augustus also finally admits that her mother committed suicide. The reason these two acknowledgments come at the same

time is that Augustus finds herself incapable of denying reality when she sees Sylvia and Jerome holding hands. Although Augustus usually tries to protect herself from heartache by overlooking anything that might trouble her, there’s nothing she can do at this moment to ignore the fact that Sylvia and Jerome are in a romantic relationship.

As a result, her world “collapses” around her, and this makes it all but impossible for her to continue deluding herself about her mother, too. Whereas she used to be able to convince herself to live in the past of her childhood without acknowledging the present reality that her mother is dead, she now has no choice but to live in the present. She has, it seems, become too old to convince herself of false realities.

In turn, Woodson implies that refusing is an unreliable coping mechanism, one that falters as people get older and are forced to admit certain irrefutable realities. This deep trauma that Augustus experienced had a profound impact on her understanding of reality. It made her realize that her persistence in rejecting these facts prevents her

from moving forward in her life. She eventually understood that to live in peace; she needed to accept and acknowledge the facts of her life as they were, even if they were difficult to confront and come to terms with. This realization was both deepening and challenging for Augustus, as it required her to face her own resistance to accepting reality and work towards overcoming it in order to find inner peace and move forward.

Conclusion:

Another Brooklyn is a beautifully crafted novel that captivates readers with its intricate plot and well-developed characters. The story follows a group of interconnected characters over several years as they navigate through life's challenges and cope with their losses. The main character, Augustus, is written in the first person, which allows readers to gain a deep insight into her thoughts, emotions, and reactions to events. Her character is complex, and the author, Jacqueline Woodson, does an excellent job of portraying the depth of her emotions. Augustus's struggle to deal with her losses is a central theme of the novel, and the author delves deeply into her character's psyche to explore her reactions to these events. The losses that Augustus experiences are profound and devastating. She loses her mother at a young age and is forced to navigate life without her. Additionally, she loses her best friend and her lover, which further compounds her grief. Despite these losses, Augustus is a resilient character who finds ways to adapt and cope with her pain. The novel explores the mechanisms of her

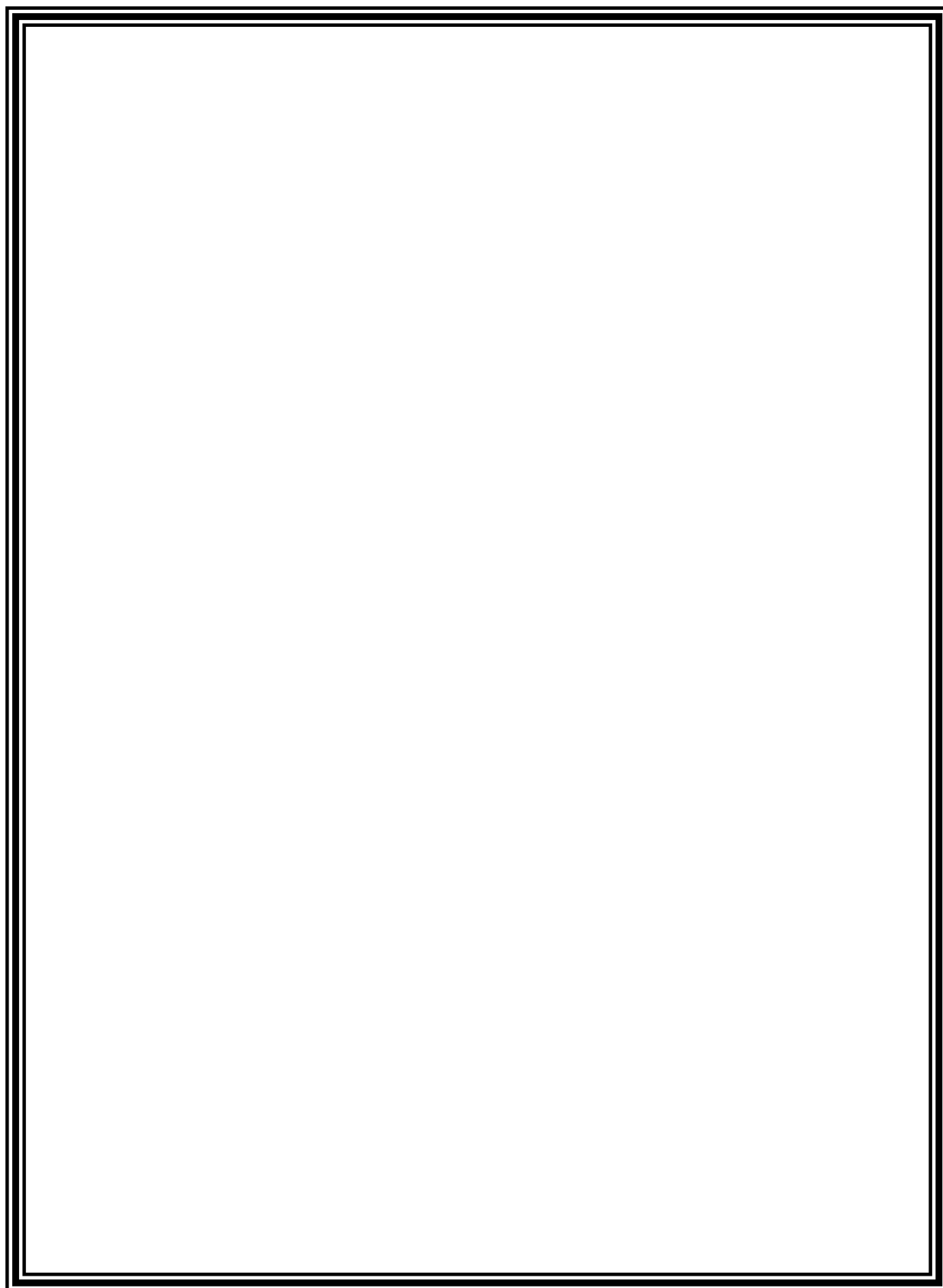
adaptation and examines how trauma shapes her character.

Therefore, this paper carefully examines the characterization of the protagonist's loss in *Another Brooklyn* and studies the mechanisms of her adaptation to loss and rejection by using a trauma theory to analyze the text. On the other hand, the novel also emphasizes the significance of

sisterhood and solidarity through the relationships between the female characters, which is considered a new perspective for future study of this novel by employing a feminism theory to analyze the text, highlighting the importance of women supporting each other and how their relationships aid in overcoming obstacles in the novel.

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