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## **Voicing the Unvoiced: With Reference to Gwendolyn Brooks's Poems "The Sonnet-Ballad", "The Bean Eaters" and "Strong Men, Riding Horses"**

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### **Abstract:**

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most important poets of the twentieth-century America. She voices issues unvoiced before her. Her poetry deals with gender, misogyny, violence and the like within the broader periphery of class and race. Her depiction of life of the African-Americans in her poetic career since 1945 till the seventies explores the angst and anguish of the coloured people. Brooks's poems provide excellent examples of the lives of the Black, and Black women in particular. Though she voices the Black and female experiences, her primary focus was on the lives of the African-Americans in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events in the United States. Brooks has not shunned the traditional roles of Black women in American society: on the contrary, she has been particularly compatible in substantiating the basic cause of interracial problems within the black community as white racism and its diffusive socio-economic upshot. Over and above, being one of the chief voices of the Black Arts Movement she has developed a social outlook.

**Keywords:** blackness, women, race, class, gender, utilitarian, legitimacy.

"Black and female are basic and inherent in her poetry"(119), asserts Hortens J. Spillers about Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for her 1950 book *Annie Allen*, and a post-war poet, best known for her poetic vignettes of African-American inner city life. Much acclaimed as a Chicago poet and a Bronzeville native, Brooks said, "I lived in a small second-floor apartment at the corner, and I could look first on one side and then the other. There was my material" (Schlabach, ix). Having chosen poetry as the major pursuit, she underscores the wretched and pathetic life of the Black. Her poetry, prior to 1967, was "conditioned to the times and the people" that seemed to flourish at an early age of eleven. Many of her early poems are in the form of traditional European sonnets and English ballads characterized by self-awareness. The critical years of the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century that were stricken by hunger and poverty are depicted in her early poetic oeuvre as she had always been brooded upon the problems of the Blacks in America, and the stronger sense of social reality unnerved her as well.

As Brooks was a Black, she needed first the legitimization by the White, and the Pulitzer did that miracle. This international acclaim also helped her to be popular among the Black. *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) laid the foundation for that great accolade, and *Annie Allen* (1950) brought her the shower of fame in 1950. Brooks boldly asserted that she was an African poet, and by acknowledging her blackness, she was out of the trend as she desired to be defined by the traditional negative identity. Her experiences in America were nourished and cherished by her essential Africanness, the black identity. Despite being the 'other', she had got the stamp of legitimacy because of the international renown Pulitzer brought to her. She was poetically conscious, and her essence was lyrical crystallized by social consciousness. Unconscious of the rare poetic beauty she had possessed and unaware of the power she had engendered, she was concerned by the issues of race, class and gender. She was the viewer of a tragic scene and the listener of a tragic tale.

William H. Hansell notices that Brooks's poetry falls into several categories in accordance with the strain of her time as Brooks confessed in a 1976 interview at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse that her works fell into three periods that "corresponds to 'changes' in her perspective." Hansell also discerns that the works of her first period encompass the groundbreaking poetry collections – *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1950) and *The Bean Eaters* (1960). "New Poems", a section of *Selected Poems* (1963) and the two uncollected poems, 'The Sight of the Horizon' (1963) and 'In the Time of Detachment, in the Time of Cold' (1965) fall under the second period. And the third phase encircles the recent collections – *In the Mecca* (1969), *Riot* (1969), *Family Pictures* (1970) and *Beckonings* (1975). Having experienced the social atrocity as a victim of an intra-racial prejudice, Brooks's vigour was concretized in her poetry against the social injustice. *In the Mecca* picturizes such harsh experiences where she engrossed herself assiduously in the experiment of the poetic form, tone and grandeur embodied in *A Street in Bronzeville*.

Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry may again be divided into two distinct groups. Her early poetry is more formal and gleamed with technical perfection in comparison with that of the later phase. Though primarily, if not exclusively, she portrayed the tribulation and wretchedness of the Black populace in her earlier collections meant for the white readership, the technical finesse brought her the success. As David Littlejohn in *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes* perceives:

Mrs. Brooks appears only to pretend to talk of things and of people; her real love is words. The inlay work of words, the precieux sonics, the lapidary insets of jeweled images (like those of Gerard Manley Hopkins) can, in excess, squeeze out life and impact altogether, and all but give the lie to the passions professed in the verbs. (89-90)

In the second phase since 1967, Brooks was riveted with informal exuberance and simple and clear presentation with the end to delineate pressing social issues: the target was both the Black and the White readership. To achieve the acceptance by the reader, to establish the affinity between the reader and the poet, and to demonstrate her anger and angst against the appalling societal enormity of turbulence, her poetry of this phase became the appropriate

medium. She happened to be enormously popularized by the intellect and the academia. Thus, racial issues are sometimes pervasive enough in one hand, and her utilitarian motif comes into prominence on the other through her writing. Her aim to gain mere success and renown is now left out but she is vibrated with vitality and simplicity of tone, form and rhythm.

Concrete social aim tinges every gamut of Brooks's poetic artistry. The contemporary situation forced her to become utilitarian as she witnessed several social upheavals. The Civil Rights Law of 1964, The Voting Rights Act of 1965, the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and several others, the uprising of the Black literatures in America in the early 1960s all these characterized her later life. The tension between the Black and the White was necessarily enlivened in the poetry of her later phase. This utilitarian attitude manifested in the second phase was not only due to the social and historical perspective but also because of her yearning to be established and get importance in the contemporary literary tradition. Literary norms of the time moulded her earlier poetic approach which is based upon an integrationist-assimilationist philosophy prevailing at that time. From Langston Hughes to James Baldwin, American literary tradition of the Blacks and the black life extolled the idea of relating the Black with the White life, and hence she adopted the White European-based poetic forms and norms.

Brooks, the Black and well-established in the White tradition, was transformed drastically and radically. It was a time of anxiety and cataclysm, of pledge and assurance, and of agreement and commitment. This greater aim catalyzed her transformation, and a utilitarian panorama enriched her observation. The negritude movement came into prominence, and the Black writers' conferences were becoming more and more common. In one such conference at Fisk University the combined interest, concern, attachment and objectives led her to a reappraisal of her early literary strategy. The outcome was the production of the efficient, practical and the utilitarian approach in her poetry of the later period committed to the concern for the Black aesthetics. Henceforth, Brook started writing about the Black with a new vigour and enthusiasm to ameliorate their condition. As she was perturbed by the Black issues, her commitment was to cure the pain of the Black, to make useful of her artistry to their benefit, and to derive fulfillment, pleasure and satisfaction which was beyond her reach through mere availing technical excellence and formal execution in the earlier works. This stern voice was firm enough to substantiate her Black identity as Brooks declared, "It frightens me to realize that, if I had died before the age of fifty, I would have died a 'Negro' fraction" (*Report From Part One* 21) . In "Requiem Before Revival", she further asserted:

To be Black is rich, is subtle, is nourishing and a nutrient in the universe... I continue my old optimism. In spite of all the disappointment and disillusionment and befuddlement out there, I go on believing that the weak among us will, finally, perceive the quality and legitimacy of our essence, and take sufficient indicated steps towards definition, clarification." (*A Primer for Blacks* 14-15)

Keeping in her mind these greater objectives, Brooks dealt with more serious and sensitive issues in the poetry of her matured days than before; *Annie Allen* (1950) and *The Bean Eaters* (1960) are bright examples in this respect.

*A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks's first poetry collection, scathingly reflects and criticizes the harsh reality in urban life of the Blacks. The poems enliven the individual experiences of all and sundry such as of the flamboyant Satin Legs Smith, the sad hunchback girl yearning to be relieved of her pain and of the like. With a careful eye for detail and an interest in the complexities of the urban gritty realism, Brooks's poetry is arresting and engaging. The heart-wrenching poems, beautiful and lyrical as well, provide insights into the Black experiences of the 1940s. While *A Street* is more implicated with the black pain, *Annie Allen*, the Pulitzer-winning poetry collection, brings into forefront the concern for the White. "The Anniad" also shows her technical excellence as it exhibits the poet's dexterous use of rhyme royal. She invented the form of the sonnet-ballad in part three of the poem "Appendix to the Anniad leaves from a loose-leaf war diary" and many poems in this form exemplify her societal concern for the ordinary Black folk. But "The Sonnet Ballad", though it is titled so, may not be regarded as a formal ballad. Brooks's experiment with this poetic form in consonance with the Black theme began with this poem, the third and last one in this sequence, a section of *Annie Allen*.

"The Sonnet Ballad" expresses Annie's understanding of the inconsistency and incompatibility of love and war. The opening line is full of the plaintive strain to express Annie's poignant and painful quest – "Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?" (1) which is repeated at the very end of the poem probably to substantiate the endlessness and asperity of her agony and anguish. She is the unexceptional tragic protagonist suffused with romantic longing without having the high tragic stature. She is the representative of the ordinary Blacks who may question the ruthlessness, which she is inflicted with, but without the expectation of reciprocation. Daily tragedies torment her but she is never bereft of the warm passion, ardour and aspiration. The first line is surcharged with romantic longing while the repetition in the concluding line demolishes the romantic illusion. The black and feminist theme looms large in "The Sonnet Ballad" as far as it is in "The Anniad". Brooks carries on an inquest into the gender relations as is explored in this ballad-sonnet. Annie Allen is the black woman caught in the whirlwind of the prejudiced society and has to perform her gendered roles. Brooks's feminist concern is being more and more revealed intrinsically through each line of the poem. The jejune and naive woman in the poem accepts the structure of the male-dominated society as its restrictions and regulations are impinged upon her throughout her life: she feels to be left out to moan and mourn. She is treated as the robust competitor of war, as it is commonly understood, as the latter seems to attract her lover-husband and take him away forever by dwindling her on the verge of dejection and disappointment. The gendered societal system is well exemplified all through the poem, written in the backdrop of World War II: its dominant theme is war conceived as the antagonist of the female protagonist. Brooks here represents the acrid gender experiences of the African-American women. Satire is lurking within the poem inherently. Brooks has woven her consciousness through the palimpsest of "The Anniad" against the backdrop of

post-war dilemma. Within the close-knit structure of a sonnet and with the swift pacing and soft cadence of the language, the poem thus intensifies the helplessness of the women and post-war tension of the Black. Here, the woman is pining to her mother expressing her befuddlement and astonishment and is eagerly in search of love and happiness. Moreover, the poem vividly depicts the image of a soldier, the lover-husband of the morose woman, who is doomed to die. War is portrayed, here, as a separate woman snatching him away from the warm embrace of the bereaved beloved. These themes of race, class and gender remain in the pivot of the literary oeuvre of the poet at her matured stage. Brooks has filled the void between “the academic poets of her generation in the 1940s and the young militant writers of the 1960s” as Marie Rose Napierkowski observes in *Poetry for students: Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on Commonly Studied Poetry*:

In 1941 Brooks attended poetry workshops at Chicago’s South Side Community, Art Center, producing poems which would appear in the first published volume, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). This work was a poetic description of the everyday lives of the black people who occupied a large section of Chicago called “Bronzeville”. Its themes would feature prominently in Brooks’s works during the next two decades: family life, war, the quest for contentment and honour, and the hardships caused by racism and poverty.  
( 231)

Though one may necessarily come into the conclusion that the poem is about war and death, of its viciousness and perplexity, it may also be analyzed and represented as a poem bringing in a faithful picture of the society of her time. The beloved’s use of the words “heart cup” ensues connotations regarding class and gender. One might observe and understand well that here a woman’s heart is compared with a cup, a commonplace yet an important thing of everyday use. The soldier may prove himself “untrue” to her ladylove as he has to go to the war and accept death. She has to be accustomed to with this kind of ironic betrayal rampant in the then society. The reader finds a very pathetic representation through the entire gamut of the poem. Hence, it is a poem of death and destruction of romantic illusion, of demystification of marriage and war, having “possessive arms and beauty”. The husband has to bow himself to the cruel dictates of the war only to be deceived finally. The soldier is as if “the hard man” answering to the call to war who meets his fatal end.

He won’t be coming back here any more.  
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I know  
When he went walking grandly out that door  
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.  
Would have to be untrue. (5-9)

War turns to be “coquettish” here. The vulnerable sadness persists till the end as the closure of the poem reintroduces the unanswered question of the woman who seems to be betrayed by her husband. The lover-soldier may be compared with the titular character in “Negro Hero” laying bare the sapient American military aesthetic dictating that the Black must fight for American democracy. As a young black woman, Annie suffers the searing and scathing

aftermath too. The dimension of interracial prejudice is, to a great extent, alive here. The dark-skinned woman is frantic ranting for much coveted happiness and love, and this struggle continues.

In the next volume of the present discussion, *The Bean Eaters* (1960), Brooks concentrates on the minute details in the everyday life of the African-American people. The collection, in particular, draws scholarly attention as its poems are simultaneously simple, symbolic and real, and full of pathos and simplicity of grandeur. The title poem of this collection describes the pathetic condition of an aged couple. The phrase "old yellow pair" perhaps connotes the racial dimension, though not obviously. In the article *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Life*, Mary Washington cogently comments in this context:

*The Bean Eaters* was a "turning point 'politically', its civil rights poems and its pointed critiques of class prejudice and racial violence so scathingly different from her earlier work that the reviewer for *Poetry* wrote that it had too much of 'a revolutionary tendency' and was too 'bitter'". (43)

The title of the poem itself suggests the poverty of the working class African-Americans and this is perceived even in the rhythmical use of the commonplace words in the poem such as "casual", "pain" *et al*:

Dinner is a casual affair.  
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,  
Tin flatware. (2-4)

Brooks, here, describes the dinner of an aged couple. Though the dinner is simple they find comfort to remember the past. The repetitiousness and tediousness of the daily lives of the common people make their lives colourless. Contradictorily, the act of remembering makes their lives bitter too. Poverty and alienation force them to live in their "rented back room". Economic and racial tensions afflict the common populace, and they are without any sort of activity except remembering. As they grow old, they end up living in a small room eating chiefly beans. The simplicity of tone and form of the poem signifies their quotidian lives full of ennui and boredom. Isolation is a poignant theme to which Brooks draws our attention to in the final stanza:

And remembering...  
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,  
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that  
is full of beads and receipts and dolls and clothes,  
tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes. (9-13)

Brooks's use of the symbol of bean to represent the theme of poverty serves her purpose appropriately. In her mid-career writings, Brooks concentrated herself on portraying individual experiences fraught with communal implications. The themes of Class

consciousness, old age and the like occur in those poems with great ease raising issues of hunger and poverty.

While Brooks's early poetry exhibits technical perfection of the traditional poetic form, these also showcase mythological figures in the European language of the time. "Strong Men, Riding Horses" from the collection, *The Bean Eaters* is an excellent example of how she presents the unhappy situation of her time under the veil of a mythology. The subtitle of this poem, "Lester after the Western" aptly implies the attachment of the traditional with the modern. "After the Western" elicits the image of the Old West while "western" people symbolize the strength referred to in the title. The poem is about a strong and sturdy male mythic figure, Westerner: he was a frontiersman, who headed the West. This myth is subtly used to emphasize the contrast between the strong and the weak. Here the speaker embodies the frailty and fragility, and trepidation and timidity of the shaky and infirm as he acknowledges in the last stanza of the poem:

What mannerisms I present, employ,  
 Are camouflage, and what my mouths remark  
 To word-wall off that broadness of that dark  
 Is pitiful.  
 I am not brave at all. (13-17)

In this present poem, Brooks writes an appraisal of the strong westerners from subjective standpoint as opposite to the feeble speaker. Lester is perhaps that speaker-figure who compares his own life to the robust and sturdy Westerner and unlike the "strong men" of American western mythology Lester cannot show his heroism lacking the same physical strength and energy. Instead he is timorous, and seems to be habituated to use his "camouflage" in order to protect himself. The space of the American west is dangerous enough, and this is implied in the ending of the poem.

As Gwendolyn Brooks was firmly infused with her concern for the Black community, her poetry features the intimate depiction of lives of the African-Americans, and of the women in particular. Her meticulous concern with the contemporary social mayhem torments her, and hence, racial overtones is underlying in the rhythm and tone of her poetry. Her poetry vibrates with issues related to women such as beauty, motherhood, marriage, abortion attracting feminist critical attention. Not only the Black academia but also the White intelligentsia welcomes Brooks positioning her in the centre of objective revolutionary attitude as Hortens Spillers succinctly observes:

[w]e cannot always say with grace or ease that there is a direct correspondence between the issues of her poetry and her race and sex. (224)



Voicing the Unvoiced: With Reference to Gwendolyn Brooks's Poems "The Sonnet-Ballad", "The Bean Eaters" and "Strong Men, Riding Horses"

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