



UGC Approved Journal



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065

Impact Factor : 5.7



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume 6, Issue 5
May 2018
www.ijellh.com**

Ms. RACHITHA POORNIMA CABRAL

Assistant professor

Department of english

School of social work, roshni nilaya

Autonomous college

Valencia

Mangalore

India

cabral.rachitha@gmail.com

Assimilation and Estrangement in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks

Abstract:

This Research article aims to study the themes of assimilation and estrangement in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks. She is the female poet who has been most responsive to changes in the black community, particularly in the community's vision of itself. The first African American to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize; she was considered one of America's most distinguished poets well before the age of fifty.

The African American identity is something simultaneously internal and presented by oneself, and external and perceived by others. Alienation, estrangement seem to be a major theme in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks as it reflects the lifestyle and culture of the then existing Afro-Americans, especially the womenfolk.

Her works reflect both the paradise and the hell experienced by the black people of the world. Her writing is objective, but her characters speak for themselves. Although the idiom is local, the message is universal. Brooks uses ordinary speech, only words that will strengthen, and richness of sound to create effective poetry.

Keywords:

Estrangement, Gwendolyn Brooks, African American Literature, African literature, Poetry, African American Writers, Assimilation, Feminism, Women Writers, Diaspora, Identity crisis.

A powerful voice of black consciousness and social protest in mid-century America, Gwendolyn Brooks is among the most distinguished African-American poets of the twentieth century. With the publication of her second volume of poetry, *Annie Allen* (1949), she became the first black American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize. Noted for her mastery of traditional forms and poignant evocation of urban black experience, Brooks emerged as a leading black literary figure during the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing upon both European models and African-American folk tradition, her lyrical poetry addresses racial injustice, poverty, and the private struggles of young black women with exceptional precision, psychological depth, and authenticity. In addition to *Annie Allen*, Brooks is best known for *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *The Bean Eaters* (1960), *In the Mecca* (1968), and her only novel, *Maud Martha* (1953). During the late 1960s, Brooks embraced the Black Power and Black Arts movements, marking a dramatic shift in her poetry toward increasingly polemical declarations of black pride and African cultural nationalism.

Gwendolyn Brooks portrayed the stark reality of her limited circumstances as a Black Woman, Wife and Mother in her poetry and novels, which portray their life, youthful innocence, growing self-awareness and romantic relationships amid the grim, poverty stricken setting of a poverty stricken community.

I have chosen to apply Black Feminist theory because its professed aims are to create unity among oppressed and marginalized women, regardless of their class, colour, caste, or creed. This theory also emphasizes women's need for a voice of their own if African American women, that is to say, every woman who is facing discrimination and oppression, are to transform their identity and role in their society. bell hooks, in her book, *Talking Back* draws the attention of the reader to this need for "finding a voice" as "metaphor for self-transformation" (12).

Advocates of Black Feminism, like Mae Henderson, urge black women to acquire expression that will transform them from individuals being defined to the definers, from

objectivity to subjectivity, and from addressee to speaker. Black Feminism aims at changing the denigrated images of African American women and presents them as respectable, confident, and proud women with a solid and fervent social and political consciousness. It envisages coexistence and cooperation, not confrontation between sexes. Hooks, in her book, *Feminism is for Everybody*, addresses men, assuring them that they can also play a positive role in the Black Feminist movement. She remarks, "'enlightened' feminists see that men are not the problem, that the problems are patriarchy, sexism, and male domination" (67).

The crux of hooks' ideas about Black Feminism is that "feminism is a movement to end sexist oppression" (6). Its aim is to create awareness of the various factors of oppression and how society idealizes the oppressors and its oppressive values. The Combahee River Collective Statement also sets forth similar ideas in its statement defining its goals, "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives."

The main aim of Black Feminism may be understood as this: first struggle against racist and sexist oppression; second, find a black female voice, in order to articulate aspirations, feelings, and grievances; third, empower them to struggle against and subvert the unjust and oppressive systems without losing their identity and roles as women. Some African American feminists may disagree with the ideas and purposes of the Combahee River Collective Statement, Alice Walker's ideas of Womanism, or Bell Hooks and Mae Henderson's assertion of the necessity of 'voice, and 'black female expression' for the transformation of African American women's position and identity in the society, but all of them agree on one point, that they must struggle against racism, sexism, and colour discrimination.

This view into African American Culture recurs in several of Brooks other works, including *The Bean Eaters* (a view into the life of impoverished yet content elderly African-Americans) and *We Real Cool* (a stream of thoughts of poor inner-city African Americans who have adopted a hoodlum lifestyle.)

"A Song in the Front Yard", by Gwendolyn Brooks, illustrates the desire people develop to experience new things and live life according to their own rules. In the first stanza, Brooks uses diction of propriety and unfamiliarity to emphasize the author's desire to change her life.

In the first line, the author establishes that she is only familiar with one way of life since she has “stayed in the front yard all [her] life.” The author “stayed” in the front yard suggesting that she was able to leave the yard and experience new things, but she just was not ready. She was raised in the “front yard,” highlighting the idea that the “front” is the proper way for her to live her life. In the second line, the author realizes there is much more to experience in life and she “[wants] a peek at the back.” At this point in her life, she is not ready to abandon the only life she knows, but she wants to look at the other side of things and all of the different experiences she can have.

In the third line, the back yard is described as being, “rough and untended and hungry weed grows,” again representing how Brooks is only used to one place. In the front yard, everything is neat, properly tended, and no weeds grow. After seeing this, she realizes that life is not always as perfect as she was raised to believe, so she wants a taste of something new. In the fourth line, the author says, “a girl gets sick of a rose,” showing how Brooks has had enough of the front yard life and needs to experience new things. The “rose” is used to represent life in the front yard. A “rose” is usually associated with perfection and beauty, reflecting the author’s life in the “front yard.”

In many ways *A Street in Bronzeville* is decidedly non-political. It doesn’t take up causes or protests but seeks what is genuinely universal in the human condition. While ostensibly the book’s poems are about the urban black poor, on a deeper level they are about that which is universal and true in all humans.

Brooks’ *Annie Allen* is a Bildungsroman, a coming of age poetic tale of Annie Allen, a young black urban girl. In a larger sense, the book is Brooks’ social commentary on the stymied lives of black women, given their economic, social and gender constraints. The Poet-Speaker of *Annie Allen* examines emerging womanhood, mother/daughter, and male/female relationships and the ways in which they impact the life of Annie Allen.

Brooks details the social conditions that ensure Annie’s dreams remain unrealized, that force her to mature early, and ultimately leave her disillusioned. “*The Anniad*” takes place against the backdrop of World War II. While almost all Americans benefitted from the post-war boom — both economically and socially — African-Americans failed to reap the full benefits of a country still fraught with racial tensions. Annie Allen suffers the effects of the war: Her husband returns with post-traumatic stress disorder and a depressing awareness of the “white

and greater chess” of America. He eventually abandons Annie, who is left “derelict and dim and done.”

Through Annie Allen’s coming-of-age and her interaction with her mother, Brooks puts a human face on the inhumane violence of racial oppression and economic inequality that affected families in the black community post-World War II. This violence is voiced through the black girl figure and felt through Brooks’s modernist poetics—in stiff, uncompromising stanzas, truncated sentences, boiled down thoughts, and clipped, stifled, muffled rage. The black girl’s voice and her girlhood interiority permit readers to hear the larger black community’s suffering voices and feel its vulnerability. Brooks insists on the importance of hearing these marginal voices—black, urban, poor, female—to impart the realities, frustrations, and changes that many black families experienced due to economic inequality in post-WWII America. These voices depict relationships that are often ignored and unrecognized. They reflect the private, personal relationships of people without power, living in overcrowded kitchenette buildings or tenement halls whose lives are hampered by economic inequality and oppression. Thus, a singular journey of one black girl, Annie Allen, humanizes and gives power to the everyday lived experiences and thoughts of the working-class poor. This emphasis on the working-class poor is a highly political intervention on Brooks’ part that refuses to ignore their existence.

Brooks’ poetry reveals how ordinary people create power through their experiences and voices to demand change. Brooks’ preference for displaying black female interiority through a subversion of conduct literature, a traditionally white and male-centered genre, expresses the inequalities affecting African Americans in Post WWII America, and Brooks’ demand for change.

Brooks’ poems are deeply grounded in her experience as a black woman and a black mother. Her historical experience and her awareness of the reality of the “white gowned democracy” (Black 49) of America seemed to have shattered her faith in democracy and God, for both of them could not protect Brooks had a broader vision of transformation of African American women. Her vision is not only the transformation of one or two individuals; rather her message is one for change for the whole African American community. Annie’s lessons of self-dignity and resistance are meant not only for her children but also for every black child. Brooks’ message through Annie Allen, the militant mother, is loud and clear that the

transformation will come not from outside—from the old systems based on white social, cultural, and political hegemony, but from within black people themselves, as they subvert and destabilize the predominant culture and reconfigure a new milieu for themselves. and save African-Americans from racial injustice and discrimination.

A Street in Bronzeville addresses Black life in “Kitchenettes” and other enclosed spaces, poems such as “The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith” and the title poem of the collection itself also locate Black life in the Street. Implied is the sense that this world not only borders, but also surrounds and impinges upon, the privileges containment of white life.

What Brooks’ book does for Mosby is focus his gaze on the exterior space he inhabits- the street he walks, the other outsiders he knows there and transform that exterior into a privileged site of self-knowledge and a different kind of insight. And what his response to this call reveals is that the poet is not merely a spokesperson addressing whites on his behalf but that she is in an important way speaking to him, to Blacks.

She in all her works emphasizes the inside/outside distinction of race, but suggests it is a social effect rather than an essential feature. The Poet’s goal thus becomes to reach all Blacks everywhere with her call to identification as Black, and to convert those who do not as yet understand the “New Black”.

Moving on to the concept of Alienation and the dilemma as to whether Brooks is an Insider or Outsider, Brooks social location as interpenetrated space must be taken into consideration.

In the most obvious sense of “location”, Gwendolyn Brooks is a Chicago Poet. She was Poet Laureate of Illinois for more than three decades, and the constancy of her geographic identification lends continuity to her long and varied poetic career.

For many years Brooks lived in a series of cramped and damp apartments- basements, garages, and kitchenettes and struggled to make ends meet with Henry Blakely, whom she married in 1939.

As Blacks, they faced both a severe housing crisis in the urban migration “Mecca” of Jim Crow Chicago and a job ceiling that prevented economic advancement.

Brooks lived in the same quarter, frequented the same neighbourhoods, and described the same streets, for a lifetime, and from her earliest published collection, her poetry addressed the realities of poor and working class African Americans in the urban environment.

As many critics note, Brooks possesses an uncanny ability to transmute commonplace subjects into the extraordinary, especially those seemingly insignificant events in the lives of the poor and dispossessed in her native Chicago. According to Cheryl Clarke, "Brooks's entire oeuvre has been studies of black subjectivity, of African-American oral and written traditions, sources of knowledge and faith systems; of the psychic and physical effects of racism on the lives of black and white people; and of the richness of the lyric."

One notices her focus shifting from the individual to the community. Another very important fact noticed during the study was that Gwendolyn Brooks's movement from an observer to a doer. While in the first phase Gwendolyn Brooks presented her characters as they are, in the second phase we see her donning the mantle of a prophet, showing the path her people should take to gain their due place under the sun.

In conclusion we see how Gwendolyn Brooks presented life as she saw it from the windows of her house in Chicago. She writes that one had to only look out of the window and there was raw material just without. She saw life straight and steadily. Therefore, her characters are invested with feelings and emotions and portray the theme of alienation and duality of identity that they all faced in some form or the other.

Brooks, in her works, situates her women in such circumstances and conditions that the society, as well as its victims, may realize the afflictions and oppressions that these underclass women are undergoing. Brooks portrays so called "bad women" in such a way that their humanity is brought out very clearly. They are not given any image except the image of human beings, with all humanity's vices and virtues, weaknesses and strengths. They are neither flawless angelic figures, nor unredeemable sinners; they are presented as human beings of flesh and blood. They are women with sensitive souls and womanly passions.

Brooks' works also gave such messages to African American women in the 1940s-50s with the intention of transforming them from audience to speakers. Her works reflect all the features of Black Feminism, although she never claims herself to be a feminist. The study of Brooks' works, in the context of the salient characteristics of Black Feminism, could give a

new dimension in the understanding of the need for feminist ideas, particularly black feminist ideas to the whole wide world. Although they are primarily meant for African American women, they can be related to every woman who survives in an oppressive system , facing sexual exploitation, and gender discrimination.

References

- Baker Jr., Houston A. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks (Complete Works)*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1992. ---. *Report from Part one*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1973.
- Brooks, Gwendolyn and George Stavros – “Along the N.A.A.C.P. Battlefield”. *The Crisis* March 1942, 100 “An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks.”
- Brooks, Gwendolyn – Quote from her *Autobiography, Report from Part One*, Broadside Press, 1972.
- Cannon, Katie Geneva. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1970.
- Clark, Norris B. “Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic.” *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. U of Illinois P, 1987. 81-99. Literature Resource Center. Gale. Indiana U of Pennsylvania, Stapleton / Stabley Lib. 9 Oct. 2007.
- Drake, St. Clair, and Horace R. Cayton. *Black Metropolis: A study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. 1994.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge: South End P, 2000.