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# Mother Utters: Struggle and Subversion in the Works of Gwendolyn Brooks

Kamal Ud Din

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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MOTHER UTTERS: STRUGGLE AND SUBVERSION  
IN THE WORKS OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Kamal Ud Din

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

December 2008

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Kamal ud Din

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

---

Kenneth Sherwood, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English, Advisor

---

Veronica Watson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English

---

Michael T. Williamson, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

---

Michele S. Schwietz, Ph.D.  
Assistant Dean for Research  
The School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: Mother Utters: Struggle and Subversion in the Works of Gwendolyn Brooks

Author: Kamal ud Din

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Kenneth Sherwood

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Veronica Watson  
Dr. Michael T. Williamson

“Mother Utters: Struggle and Subversion in the Works of Gwendolyn Brooks” explores how Brooks uses women's speech and traditional classical poetic forms to struggle with and subvert the predominant social, moral, and political systems which impede class mobility and oppress African Americans in general and African American women in particular. To transform the identity and role of African American women, Brooks assigns central roles to women, particularly to mothers, in most of her early works. In this way, she brings them from invisibility to visibility and from objects to subjects. In order to analyze these works and this phenomenon, particularly, I utilize Black Feminist theory.

Brooks's poetry also reflects the fine blending of classical and popular poetic forms. The tension between aesthetic and politics is one of the prominent features of Brooks's works. I explore how she skillfully and artistically transforms classical poetic forms, such as the sonnet and ballad, and uses them to protest against and destabilize the preexisting value systems and also how she maintains a delicate balance between aesthetic and politics in her poems.

In her 1968 volume In the Mecca, we find a shift in her art of narration: The use of diverse subjects, interior speech and polyvocality in this dramatic poem enable it to

operate on many levels. I investigate what this shift in the narration signifies and how it effects her poetic and political vision. Maud Martha, Brooks's sole novel enhances the themes of resistance and subversion that we find in her first two volumes of poetry. It also heralds the idea of an essential "sanity." I also look at Brooks's works from multi-social and cross-cultural context with the help of Bakhtin's theory of "dialogism." I try to understand Brooks's women in relation to Pakistani social and cultural contexts and explore the feasibility of teaching Brooks to Pakistani students at the end of the dissertation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dedication: To my wife Naveeda and all my children

I am thankful to all my friends in Indiana, Pennsylvania for their moral support and cooperation, which helped me to finish my doctoral program without any problems. I shall never forget the initial support and help given to me by Abdul Rahman of Saudi Arabia. I should thank all the professors who guided and helped me during my stay at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I want to thank especially Dr. Susan Gatti and Dr. Karen Dandurand for their timely help and guidance in every semester. I owe my gratitude to the staff of Disability Support Services of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, particularly to Dr. Todd Van Wieren, who has always helped me to get books from Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic, to get the books recorded, provided library assistance, and arranged the recorders for me. I am grateful to the staff of the Stapleton Library for their cooperation and assistance in finding the books and articles.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Since I was a young man, I have believed, with no uncertain conviction, that women are a source of unparalleled strength. Women are and always have been capable of bringing about change in the lives of individuals, families, entire communities through the strength of their indomitable will, integrity of character, and moral vision. This is what I have learned from my eldest sister, who became a widow only three years after her marriage. My sister was never cowed by unfavorable social and financial circumstances or by the challenges of a society that looks down upon women as irrational and good for nothing aside from child rearing and other domestic work. She not only proved what she was capable of as a woman, but she also educated and trained her two daughters to defy and resist oppression and injustice with grace and dignity. She had always been a source of inspiration for me and she has instilled in me the belief that women are not poor, delicate, weak creatures who must depend on men for their survival. They are also not destined to walk a few steps behind men; rather they are their equals and can be as good as men in every area of life, given equal opportunity and freedom to exercise their potential. The only thing that makes them an “other,” a second class citizen, is the preexisting system, which evolved through patriarchy and conservatism. Whenever I think of my sister, I am reminded of the gender oppression, discrimination, and the way images are imposed upon women.

The women of Pakistan, like women of everywhere, have yearned for identities apart from the ones that have been imposed on them by the values and systems established by men. For we can hear some stray voices of Muslim women of this region of the earth, even in the beginning of the twentieth century, asserting their dreams and aspirations openly, or under a pen name from which it is difficult to determine their gender identity. However, Pakistani feminist writers are now trying to change the female identity imposed by social, cultural, religious, tribal, and regional customs and traditions in an organized way. They are struggling to transform their image and role in Pakistani society and culture, as well as in the international community. Pakistani feminist writers have realized that to destabilize the preexisting social and cultural systems that have reduced them to domestics, nurses of their husbands and children, and invisible members of the family and society, women must have a voice of their own to articulate their feelings. They must have the power to assert themselves. The efforts of Pakistani feminist writers are to establish new identities as dignified, self-confident, and liberated human beings with the power to articulate themselves and be heard. Now we can hear the voices suggesting, and even demanding, their equal rights, recognition of their existence, and the end of gender oppression and discriminatory laws. It is true that some privileged women in Pakistani society enjoy relative social, political, and economic freedom and civil rights, but the majority of Pakistani women who are illiterate or poorly educated and without any regular source of income are still deprived of their rights and denied any respectable and dignified identity. If Pakistani feminists want to see their dreams of freedom and respect and empowerment for women in Pakistan, they need to bring the

women of the under classes into their folds and include them in their fight against the gender and class oppression and discrimination.

In reality Pakistani society and culture, have tolerant and flexible dimensions. They profess and teach their members to respect women and honor their rights, as defined in the Holy Koran. It has defined in clear terms their basic civic rights as the members of a society, as mothers, as wives, as sisters, as daughters, and as neighbors. The prophet of Islam also urges his followers to respect women, treat them kindly, and give them the rights that are due to them. But, unfortunately these teachings and education of the Holy Book and school text books are either completely overlooked or misinterpreted by the so called guardians of society and culture. They highlight the injunctions of the Holy Book that suit their purpose, and emphasize those verses that speak of restrictions and prohibitions on women but, play down those verses which give them permission to acquire knowledge and education, in order to perform their duties as active members of a society, as well as their role as teachers and nation builders. Feminist writers in Pakistan are struggling to transform the role and image of Pakistani women. They are challenging and subverting traditional ideas and value systems, which mostly belong to regional and tribal social customs and traditions. These primitive and conservative cultural values are responsible for rendering Pakistani women identityless members of the family, as well as the sole property of men. Social, religious, and cultural norms have defined, in theory, the roles, responsibilities, rights, and obligations of both men and women. These norms have promised equal opportunity for both sexes. Theoretically, the laws of the country grant all social, political, legal, and civil rights to

women, and they have the right to acquire knowledge, and even have access to higher education and can adopt the professions of their choice. However, some members of society, with their preconceived ideas of women - based on male chauvinism, tribal customs, and patriarchal values- are responsible for depriving women of their rights and due status.

At present, according to Zamir Badyuni, Pakistani feminism seems to be influenced by Anglo-American feminism and French feminism, for Black Feminism is rarely mentioned. However, Black feminism is a powerful movement and, in my opinion, is capable of giving new inspiration and vision to Pakistani feminists, who have not confined themselves to the educated middle classes, but are speaking for the under-privileged, poor, and semi-literate urban and rural women, who are struggling against gender oppression, as well as caste and class discrimination. Moreover, Black Feminism, as Alice Walker envisaged, stresses self-determination, appreciation for all aspects of womanhood, and the commitment to the survival of both men and women. It is meant for not only African American women, but also women of color, regardless of their race or region. Alice Walker's vision of "womanism" urges African American women not to limit themselves to a specific geographical boundary, but rather link themselves with humanity at large, especially with women the world over.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the Poet Laureate for the State of Illinois, a teacher, and the first African American poet to win the Pulitzer Prize, has been a prolific writer. She wrote and published more than twenty collections of poetry, including A Street in Bronzeville (1945), Annie Allen (1949), In the Mecca (1968), and a fictional work, Maud

Martha (1953), in rapid succession. Her poetry is a subtle blending of traditional forms such as ballads, sonnets, and popular and folk literary forms like rhythm of the blues and unrestricted free verse. In short, the popular as well as classical forms of English poetry are used in her work. Her poetry is characterized by innovation and experimentation as she juxtaposes lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetic forms. Her lyrics are marked by affirmation of life despite the social and economic oppression; the subject matter of her narrative poetry deals with simple stories of common men and women, but it has a universal appeal; her dramatic poetry is peopled by ordinary characters and it describes actions that are not heroic. Their struggle to survive in the hostile and inimical world makes them memorable and their action lofty. Brooks' works depict African-American life and culture, and they are bitter and scathing commentary on the impact of social, political, economic, and racial discrimination, on African American women. They also give a vivid picture of the social and economic pressures that have stunted their class mobility as well as the glimpses of African-Americans' day-to-day existence.

Brooks is not only just a successful American poet of the twentieth Century in literary terms, but her voice in the struggle for social and racial equality and justice particularly for African American women is also powerful. She holds the mirror with the reflection of the world around her, so that others may see the ugly and unpleasant realities of a ghetto world. Despite the sordid life and tedious questions, the vision and themes of her poems are not pessimistic. Her themes include the transformation of African American identity from denigrated to dignified, and the search for happiness despite the oppressions of racism and poverty. She is a powerful voice for social equality, political

justice, and economic mobility for both African American men and women, especially during the critical times in social and political history, particularly during the days of the civil rights movement.

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, color, 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. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face. (Combahee)

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 color discrimination.

Most of the feminists in Pakistan are also striving for these same goals, i.e. self-determination, admiration and understanding for all aspects of womanhood, and faith in

the idea of the survival of both men and women. They don't want to supersede their male counterparts; rather Pakistani women want to play their roles side by side with their male partners as equals, as dignified, respectable, and liberated persons, not as "the other" in the sense that Simon de Beauvoir has defined it. Tahira Naqvi, the Urdu short story writer, novelist and translator, points out in one of her lectures that in the beginning of the twentieth century novels about women and for women were written by men in which they "mainly stressed the role of 'good Muslim women,' how they should behave, how they should think and talk". But, according to Naqvi, with Ismat Chughtai, a famous Urdu novelist, short story writer, and essayist, things began to change, for she wants to see women through a woman's eye and narrate their experiences from a woman's viewpoint. According to Naqvi, Ismat Chughtai makes Pakistani women writers realize that "it is possible for women to write like that. It is possible for women to explore. It is important for women to write about women." What Naqvi wants to bring home to her audience, in my opinion, is what Alice Walker has stated in her definition of "Womanism": the admiration and understanding of womanhood and giving a voice to women's feelings with feminist expression and in a liberated language.

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, among female Pakistani readers as well as

ordinary readers of poetry written in English. The main feature of Pakistani feminism according to Kishwar Naheed, the Pakistani feminist poet is the struggle against gender oppression, class discrimination, and against the restrictions and inhibitions imposed on women in the name of religion, morality, and decorum. Moreover, they are also trying to transform imposed identities and destabilize the social and cultural systems that oppress and exploit Pakistani women. Broadly speaking, we find a number of similarities between these characteristics of Pakistani feminism and the salient features of the Black Feminism, so Pakistani students may not find Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry and her women characters perfect strangers when they analyze them in the light of the Black Feminism and in the context of Pakistani feminism. If we could design Brooks' study carefully and apply appropriate pedagogy, I think, reading Brooks can teach Pakistani students about some of the unexplored areas of American life and literature.

As Pakistan was a part of the British Empire till its independence in 1947, it inherited the education system introduced by its colonial rulers. It continued to follow the British model, even after it gained its independence, in which English, both language and literature, was the core subject. The syllabi reflected the teaching of grammar, composition, and classical British writers at the college level. English was a compulsory subject and every student had to pass English paper to earn a Bachelor of arts or Science degree. Moreover the professors, responsible for curriculum and syllabus designing were mostly graduates from the British universities and they had some bias for British literature; so they preferred British literature as opposed to American and the literature written in English from different parts of the world. Hence, it is understandable, why

British literature enjoys the central place in the English curriculum of Pakistani universities. Pakistani students, particularly, at undergraduate and graduate levels, are quite conversant with spoken and written English. English was taught to the Indians, in the early days of British rule in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent in order to produce such local workers who would become cogs in the British administrative machinery. They established public schools to create a class that would be loyal to and support the British government in India. As Tariq Rahman, an educator and prolific writer on place and role of English in Pakistani society and politics, has pointed out,

The great public schools, like the famous Aitchison College in Lahore, were based upon the aristocratic model of the English public schools.

Their function was to produce a loyal, Anglicized, elitist Indian who would understand, sympathize with and support the British Raj in India.

This education system that had laid a great emphasis on teaching English language and literature subjugated the body and mind of the natives as it imposed the British culture and value system on them. However, at the end of the day, the knowledge of English language and literature became a source of awareness and empowerment for the natives and it was one of the major factors of liberation from colonial rule.

Even today, long after independence, the primary aim of teaching English literature in the secondary level in Pakistani schools remains to teach the students language rather than to familiarize them with English literary forms or its aesthetic and literary qualities. The method that has been used to teach English language is “language through literature.” In this method the stories, poems, and essays written in English by

the local, as well as the British and few American writers, have been taught in the old translation method. In this method, the emphasis is on vocabulary building, using newly learned words in sentences, grammar taught through the traditional method of memorizing rules, and developing the ability to translate ideas from Urdu into English, and those concepts that they have found in books written in English into Urdu.

One of the purposes of teaching English literature is to develop the ability to communicate in written and spoken forms, which can help in obtaining a job and give access to sources of power. According to Rahman, English “is the language of the elitist domains of power not only in Pakistan but also internationally.” An apparent aim of introducing and teaching English literature during the British rule was to impose British culture and ideologies, and to assert the superiority of white men. But after the independence, the motif and purpose have changed— English literature is taught in order to teach language, which will enable people to acquire advanced knowledge in the field of natural sciences, as well as social sciences, and it can serve as lingua franca in international conferences, while cultural and ideological aspects in the works of literature are played down.

Pakistani students of the secondary and higher secondary schools are well-versed in the rules of grammar and have a fairly good treasury of English vocabulary, but are only familiar with the works of William Wordsworth, R. L. Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, and some other British and American writers, but they may not have any idea of their literary merits or their real message and ideas. Their efforts and purposes are to learn the meanings of the words, to acquire writing skills, and to prepare examination questions

which test their memory, not their knowledge. In college, they are introduced to Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Hardy, Houghton, and a few American essayists like Emerson and Twain, short story writers like Hawthorn, O’Henry, and Poe, and poets like Dickinson and Frost, but again they concentrate on the linguistic and grammatical aspects of these pieces of literature, rather than on their aesthetic, social, cultural, and literary features. At this level, also the main emphasis is again on grammar, composition, and vocabulary building. Students are asked to critically appreciate a poem or a short story, but they prefer straight questions which have less to do with literary qualities. Examiners also concentrate on grammar and expression and less on the literariness of the answers.

In the graduate syllabi of different universities in Pakistan, the main area of study is British literature, starting from Chaucer to Heaney, from Marlowe to Edward Bond, from Henry Fielding to Margaret Drabble, and from Bacon to Russell. These universities allot a small space for American literature in their graduate programs and some short story writers and poets in undergraduate study. American writers who usually find a place in the syllabi are Hawthorn, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dickinson, Frost, Wallace Steven, Arthur Miller, O’Neil, Williams, and Twain. For the last few years, we find names of some African American writers in the syllabi of some universities, such as Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes as a short story writer, and Maya Angelou, but African American literature is largely unfamiliar region for most of our students, as well as many academics.

At this level, the students are encouraged to judge and evaluate the merits of a work of literature with an Arnoldian yardstick. They do not pay much attention to intercultural or to multi-social relations or “intermingling of life experience and critical-historical judgments” (Frank Rosengarten 82). However, the outlook on the study of literature is changing, for institutions and systems are coming out of their Victorian vision of education and ideas of literature, and they are helping their students to look at these works of literature through post-colonial, feminist, cultural critical lenses. It seems that those at the helm of the affairs of English departments in Pakistani universities have realized the need to situate literary works within “the always complex and contradictory nature of historical reality, and of the specific events and trends that mediate the relationship between a writer and his time” (Rosengarten 72). Now, they seem to have realized that in order to properly grasp and evaluate a work of literature, the students, as well as the teachers, need comprehensive knowledge of social, political, philosophical, and economic currents of the time when it was created and “emotional as well as intellectual powers to deal adequately with dense, polysemous texts” (Rosengarten 72). The vision and philosophy may have undergone certain changes, but the motif of studying English language and literature remains the same.

Sabiha Mansoor in her article, “Culture and Teaching of English as A Second Language for Pakistani Students,” has pointed out, the role of English in the education system of Pakistan, that the students and others in Pakistani society consider English necessary for social mobility. A graduate in English language and literature has been a

respectable person in society and has better access to jobs and power. Tariq Rahman remarks,

English is still the key for a good future – a future with human dignity if not public deference; a future with material comfort if not prosperity; a future with that modicum of security, human rights and recognition which all human beings desire. So, irrespective of what the state provides, parents are willing to part with scarce cash to buy their children such a future. (242)

English is still a popular subject among Pakistani students and their parents for economic, social, and political reasons. Although it is still taught in old Victorian method in most of the secondary and higher secondary schools in the countryside and small towns, it is gradually switching over to the American semester system, at least at the college and university level, and we also find names of American writers more than ever, since the inclusion of professors who are the graduates from American universities to the faculty. With this shift, and other changes in social, political, and economic systems caused by revolution in computer and information technology, new world order, globalization, and free market economy, American English and American literature, particularly white American literature, are gaining popularity among the masses, as well as in the educational institutions. American accent and style in spoken English and American spelling and style of expression in writing are gaining popularity among Pakistani younger generation, especially among the student. However, American literature should be given a respectable place in the syllabi of Pakistani universities, if Pakistani academic

institutions want to teach American literature effectively to their students. It can happen only if the teachers can help the students to understand American literature from a multi-cultural perspective and in its social, historical, and political background. No doubt, one can notice an increase in American titles, yet this is not sufficient. American literature deserves more extensive and intensive exploration, for what we are imparting and acquainting the students about American literature is only the tip of the iceberg. Pakistani students need to know more, if they are to become truly familiar with American life and culture. Although we find a few American writers in various syllabi of different Pakistani universities, they have yet to include African American writers, particularly woman writers, as well as other writers from diverse ethnic communities, so that they may have a more variegated, as well as a more complete picture of social, political, and economic life and culture of Americans. By studying the social, cultural, and economic life of minorities, particularly of women, students may come to realize that these groups are facing kinds of social, psychological, and emotional problems similar to those that Pakistanis, particularly women are facing. A writer can be better understood, if we can relate him or her to the readers own problems and issues. Gwendolyn Brooks can be taught effectively and understood better if the teachers first introduce and explain to their students the social, psychological, and political background of African Americans, beginning with slavery, racial discrimination, the violence that followed Emancipation, racial segregation, the civil rights movement and the rise of Black Nationalism. Should this happen, the students will have a vivid insight into the issues and ideas which are prominent in African American literature, particularly Brooks' works. The teachers, as

well as students, may then properly analyze the problems and issues that are raised in Brooks' works in that context and then relate them to their own social, cultural, and political context.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the Chicagoan poet, interests me for her female characters and her use of traditional Anglo-American poetic forms to subvert and destabilize conventional and preconceived ideas and images of African Americans, in general and African American women, in particular. Brooks' use of classical forms, with some modifications, can appeal to Pakistani students, teachers, as well as readers of English poetry. Pakistani students are accustomed to reading classical poetic forms, such as the sonnet and ballad forms and they can appreciate the aesthetic qualities and literary merits associated with them. They are familiar with the development of these forms through the ages—from Wyatt and Surrey to W. B. Yeats—thus they may be able to appreciate the changes that Brooks has made in them. Brooks' use of classical forms to subvert and destabilize conventional concepts of African American women may not be something entirely foreign to Pakistani readers, for we also find traditional Urdu poetic forms used for political purposes since the time of British Raj. Women poets of the second half of the twentieth century have also used classical, as well as modern Urdu poetic forms to challenge the traditional concepts of Pakistani women and to voice their resistance and protest against the social, religious, and gender oppression.

Gwendolyn Brooks is an excellent choice of author to teach African American literature in Pakistani educational institutions, in particular, for her union of morality and art. An important criterion for the majority of Pakistani teachers of English literature and

syllabus designers is that a work of literature must be moral and didactic, as well as entertaining. They believe in Matthew Arnold's idea that "a poetry of revolt against moral ideas, is a poetry of revolt against life, and a poetry of indifference to moral ideas is a poetry of indifference to life" (qtd. in Lakshmi). In their article, Patricia H. Lattin and Vernon E. Lattin have pointed out that Brooks also believe in uniting art and morality for her creative process. In my opinion; a Pakistani audience will not have any problem in studying Brooks' poetry despite the differences in culture, social and moral values, and psychological and emotional issues. I have found Brooks' poetry conducive to our social and cultural values.

The choice of Gwendolyn Brooks for my dissertation has come after a careful analysis and consideration of her work in the context of social, cultural, and moral requirements of my own society and those of the academic institutions in my country. I was introduced to Brooks with a beautiful and haunting poem with nursery rhyme rhythm, "We Real Cool":

We real cool.

We Left school. We

Lurk late. We Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We Die soon. (Black 331)

The precarious conditions, uncertainties in life of these players, and maternal concerns and worries of the poem, as well as its unusual form of prosody induced me to read her collection, The Selected Poems.

While browsing through the collection, I became interested in its female characters, because of their independent minds and their moral and mental courage to destabilize and challenge unjust and discriminatory systems. Brooks' women and mothers' struggle is to subvert oppressive systems and to transform the denigrated images of African American women into respectable and dignified ones. Their effort is to evolve an "alternative system" (Erkkila 200) in which African American women will have independent identity of their own as 'makers' and an existence visible to others. These characteristics of Brooks' women made me feel that they could help me to look at the women and mothers in my society from a new angle and add a new voice to the efforts of Pakistani feminist writers who are struggling to subvert and destabilize preexisting identity and ideas. I understand the actions, reactions, and utterances of Brooks' women, particularly the mothers, as the resistance, protest, and subversion against oppression, discrimination, and injustice. They represent their individual struggles and subversion as well as a broader spectrum of the African American woman's efforts to destabilize the preexisting identity and ideas. If we look at Brooks' women and mothers as the different facets of a picture, we can understand that Brooks is creating the image and identity of a new African American woman. From this perspective, I trace their progress from silent or internalized resistance to verbal articulation of anger and resentment a transition from lack of articulation to the attainment of voice. This achievement is essential to the change in their identity and status in the society. The attainment of voice is followed by the development of their consciousness from personal to communal, as well as its transference to the majority community by widening its scope. Brooks' women are

conscious of social and political injustice, racial and color discrimination, and their identity in the society, but it is initially a consciousness limited to an individual or a part of the community. However, as Brooks' poetic career progress, the consciousness in her women also broadens. Ultimately it penetrates into the consciousness of majority community, and makes them realize their oppression, injustice, and atrocities. Brooks' women and particularly the mothers extend their anger and awareness of sufferings and injustice to the oppressor and thus make them their partners in their struggle against the race oppression and male supremacism.

Pakistani woman readers may appreciate Brooks' poetry better, as compared to men, because of the parallel features in their problems and situation. If Pakistani women are given proper insight into the nature of social, gender, and economic oppression that the underclass of African American women have to confront, it will help them to comprehend the importance and necessity of their struggle against and subversion of their given identity and preexisting systems. In this way, they will be able to look at their struggle in a multi-social and inter-cultural context. This broader vision can give new momentum to their protest and resistance against sexist and religious oppression and class discrimination.

To achieve insight into Brooks' ideas in her works and the significance of the transformation of the image and roles of African American women, as well as to attain a broader vision of feminist struggle, both the teacher and student will have to recognize the importance of the relation between literature and social, cultural, and political conditions in which that work of literature is created, and they should be able to

understand and link it with their own social, cultural, political problems and issues. In this way, Pakistani students will be able to appreciate the way Brooks treats cultural diversity and mediates between predominant values and newly evolved values in her own society. Pakistani woman writers can also strengthen their struggle to negotiate between traditional concepts of women who were not allowed to think and express independently and the new image of free and self-conscious women, who can express and assert their identity and individuality in bold and liberated language without any inhibition.

The problems that Brooks' female characters face may not be exactly similar to those that Pakistani women have to face but if we try to understand and look at them from broader perspective, we can realize that they are facing almost the same challenges. The issues that Brooks brings up through her women are basic psychological, emotional, social and economic problems that ordinary under privileged individuals, including African American men and women have to face. Their sufferings, oppressions, and injustices committed against them constitute the themes of her works. Brooks' sympathies are for the underclass of poor neighborhoods, particularly, for poor old men and women, poor and starving children, the youth who are the victims of violence committed by both whites and blacks, and, particularly, poor and oppressed mothers. The issues and problems that Brooks takes up in her poetry are the basic issues and problems that are being faced by poor, oppressed, and looked down upon persons in any society any where in the world. My effort, as an academic, is to introduce Brooks' works to the students of my institution and make them aware of the struggle of African American women to resist and destabilize preexisting systems and overcome oppression and

injustice in society. My attempt is to make them realize that despite the differences in social and cultural systems, there are still common denominators of oppression, injustice, and gender discrimination.

In Pakistani society, women are treated as inferior beings, as compared to men, and the oppression of women is a common phenomenon. Pakistani feminist writers are trying to challenge and subvert the ideas and systems that enable men to impose the identity that enhances their superiority on women, oppress them and commit violence against them. In this context, Brooks' voice of struggle and subversion can invigorate the efforts of young feminists and students who are trying to challenge the religious orthodoxy, male chauvinism, and class discrimination, for she represents under classes and discriminated sections of American society. Her voice is, therefore, more authentic than that of the white feminists who represent the privileged middle classes.

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. Some Urdu writers in Pakistan have created such women who, according to social and moral criteria, may be condemned as bad women, but they still retain their humanity and human values. Such women in Brooks' poetry, and in the

writings of Pakistani women writers, can form a common criterion to understand common issues that they have to face in their day to day existences.

To understand foreign literature, one should be able to create some links between the literature that one is reading and one's own social, political, and cultural context. In his article, "Teaching African-American Literature in Turkey: The Politics of Pedagogy," E. Lale Demirturk points out how he tries to create meanings for the Turkish students while he was teaching African American literature by using different examples from diverse cultural context and making his students realize how oppressors constructed meaning of the words according to their own visions and interests. According to Demirturk, to understand the words in new light and construct a new meaning according to one's context, one needs to shift "a location of privilege" (hooks, *Teaching Community* 99). With this shift in the "location of privilege" a new understanding and meaning will dawn on the readers. This new outlook will enable them to relocate the position of the previously colonized and enslaved classes, as well as African-Americans and also able to shift the paradigm Myung Ja Kim in her article, "Literature as Engagement: Teaching African American Literature to Korean Students." also discusses cultural, economic, social, and political implications regarding Koreans' perception of and attitudes toward African Americans, especially after the Los Angeles riots of 1992 while teaching African American literature to Korean students. She also stresses the need for the ability among the teachers as well as the students to come out of the constructed meaning imposed by the media and predominant class, concerning African Americans, and the ability to reconstruct a new meaning and image in their social, political, and

cultural context based on new paradigms, reconfigured in the light of new knowledge and information.

While I am trying to understand Brooks' poetry, the narrator's voice, and the utterances of the characters, I realize that the meaning that I am giving to the utterance and words, may not be the same as an African American or an American may understand it. The meaning of the words and language may have changed according to the social, cultural, and the value systems in which I have been brought up and lived. No doubt, I try to interpret and understand in the context of American and African American social and cultural perspective, but original learning and grooming prompt a different perspective that may vary significantly from that of Brooks' culture and ideas. It is not only the matter of social and cultural background, but as an individual, my understanding of an utterance or even a single word may differ from that of the poet or other readers.

According to Bakhtin,

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own . . . Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated -- overpopulated with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing

it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Pam Morris 77)

It is natural that when I read Brooks' words or utterances, I will assign my own meanings or interpretations to them to make it my "property" and only then will I transmit it to my audience. I may mold them according to my comprehension, which is influenced by my social and cultural perspective, as well as my education. However, my initial effort is to understand the meanings of the words and utterances in the social, cultural, literary, and political context in which Brooks utters them. My meanings and interpretations will be colored by my individuality, my culture, and my value systems. My audience, in turn, will assign them their own meanings and understand them in their own context. The process of constructing meaning starts when the readers read Brooks' words and utterances and when they first try to understand them, keeping in view the social, cultural, and political perspective in which they are uttered, then their social and cultural training prompts them to look at them from their own perspective. In this way, my, as well as their, meanings intersect with authoritative meaning and it creates a new interpretation and new dimension in the understanding of the text. The new interpretation and understanding are based on the intersection of two culture and two ideologies. In this way, we are looking at Brooks works from an angle that American readers may overlook or may fail to notice.

In this world that has shrunken to a computer screen, the interaction and struggle among diverse consciousnesses and languages are creating new understandings and new levels of meanings. Bakhtin remarks, "However, it is in this struggle with another's word

that a new word is generated. The dialogic relations of heteroglossia do ensure that meaning remains in process, unfinalizable” (Morris 74). Gwendolyn Brooks is an African American poet and has written her poems under specific social, political, and cultural conditions, but we can not limit the utterances in her works to the meanings that suit one particular community. Every individual and community can look at them from their own social and cultural perspective and understand it according to their own consciousnesses. In this way, Brooks’ works assume a broader scope and a wider audience that multiply layers of meaning to her words and utterances. In fact, with expanding readership, Brooks’ works become multi-cultural and multi-national literature. They have transcended the limits of African American social and cultural environment and can be looked at and understood from other social and cultural perspective. Bakhtin states

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush rip against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.”(Morris 76)

With an adequate introduction of social, political, and psychological perspective, Pakistani students, particularly, female students will be able to appreciate Brooks’ ideas and message. Although they are primarily meant for African American women, they can be related to every woman who is living in an oppressive system and facing sexual exploitation, and gender discrimination. Pakistani women can identify social, emotional, psychological problems of African American women and look at them in their social and

psychological context, for both the communities are facing problems of identity, recognition as respectable human beings, gender and class oppressions.

Keeping in view Bakhtin' ideas and the salient features of the Black Feminism, I explore Brooks' early poetry. My stance is, through female characters, particularly mothers and their utterances, Brooks tries to destabilize the preexisting identity of African American women and the systems that oppress and make them invisible. In the second chapter, I study how she uses women, particularly mothers, to transform the role and image of African American women from denigrated creatures to self-defined and conscious human beings, who are sensitive to their role as teachers, leaders, and nurturers of new women with refined ways of thinking and vision. I explore these various changes in the roles and images of African American women. I also highlight the progress of Brooks' ideas as an artist through these various roles that African American women play under different circumstances and on different occasions. My aim is to highlight the central place that Brooks gives to her woman and how she changes their position from objectivity to subjectivity; and from 'make' to 'maker.'

In the third chapter, I analyze Brooks' use of classical poetic forms to voice the struggle and subversion on the part of poor African American women to destabilize received identities and preconceived ideas. I discuss Brooks' choice of the sonnet and ballad forms and the transformation that she makes in them, in order to serve her purpose of subverting and destabilizing the prevalent ideas and systems. In this chapter, I analyze Brooks' use of parody and the anti-hero to destabilize the traditional identity of African American women and to subvert the preexisting ideas of African American womanhood.

Chapter four studies shift in her narrative technique. “In the Mecca,” her longest poem, she gives up the cloak of situated language and directly addresses the poem to African-Americans. The narrator and Mrs. Sallie Smith guide us through the Mecca building and tell, as well as show, us the miseries and poverty of the under-classes of African American society. They along with Pepita give the vision of liberation and collapse of the Mecca building, the symbol of confinement and constrictions. The fifth chapter looks at Brooks’ only novel, *Maud Martha* in which she gives the vision of new African American woman, who is trying to establish her identity and carved her place and role in race, color, and gender biased society. She defies and resists race and color discrimination with dignity and grace. Despite unfavorable conditions and ugliness in the society, she optimistically looks at the unpleasant aspects of life. The message of the novel is “bon voyage.” The novel ends with an optimistic note and a call for sanity. At the end of the dissertation and in the sixth chapter, I discuss how Brooks’ work is suitable to teach to Pakistani students in Pakistani colleges and universities.

The poems that I have analyzed in the second chapter mostly deal with the image and role of African American women and the social, economic, moral, psychological, and emotional problems that make them invisible and thwart their imaginations and dreams. I have selected these poems to demonstrate the progress of consciousness in Brooks’ women characters, particularly, the mothers. These poems unravel the different roles that African American women and mothers play in the society. Their progress indicates the progress in Brooks’ poetic career and the maturity of her thought. The poems in the third chapter give insight into the changes that Brooks has brought about in her use of classical

poetic forms and her innovations in them. I have selected these poems for they help me to show how Brooks adopts parodic voice and the figure of the anti-hero to subvert received identity and concepts. I have selected “In the Mecca” to show that despite the impression that her poetry after 1967 has lost her earlier aesthetic qualities and has become more political, she still continues with her earlier themes and aesthetic vision as well as her use of women and mothers to destabilize and reconfigure a new system based on “essential sanity black and electric.” My emphasis is that the shift in her poetry occurs at the levels of narrative style, which has become dispersed, and more complex, and language, which has become more direct as compared to her early poems. Although it was written in 1953, I discuss Brooks’ sole novel, *Maud Martha* in the fifth and last chapter, because of its genre. I try to show that its themes and the vision that Brooks put forth in this novel are a continuation of the preceding works and are taken up in later books. It is an essential part of Brooks’ development as an artist. My effort in this dissertation is to demonstrate that the mothers and women in Brooks’ works are different facets of a complete image. In other words, they are different phases of growth and progress of the mother character, which in turn gives insight into the progress in Brooks’ social and political roles, as well as her development as an artist.

## CHAPTER II

### MOTHER TRANSFORMED: VOICES OF PROTEST AND SUBVERSION

Gwendolyn Brooks transforms the traditional image of the African-American woman from that of a sexual object and takes them out of their general state of invisibility in order for them to become independent and self-confident women with individual voices. She uses them to voice protests against racial, gender, and color discrimination, to struggle against oppression and injustice, and to subvert the predominant culture and systems that have rendered them void of both soul and identity. Her works are peopled by images of suffering and the oppressed black women of Bronzeville, who represent the down and out of the nation's black neighborhoods. Brooks' sexual as well as racial identity and her experiences in a Chicago ghetto have enabled her to look at urban experience of black women with a new vision.

Brooks' poetic work may be read as an effort to promote the emergence of black, female subjectivity and an attempt to articulate and highlight the unarticulated and unrecognized place and role of the black woman, and particularly the black mother, in the culture and society that does not recognize her identity and, sometimes, even her existence. Ann Ducille in her book draws our attention to this attitude of both white men and women while referring to Sojourner Truth's famous speech "Ain't I a woman?": she remarks, "Truth's words were actually a scathing indictment of the racist ideology that positioned black females outside the category of woman and human while at the same time exploiting their 'femaleness'"(36). In most of her early poems, Brooks makes poor

black women subjects, for she knows that, as Paulo Freire has put it, "They cannot enter the struggle as objects in order to later become human beings" (68). The oppressors have stereotyped the oppressed in such a way that the oppressed have been transformed, either as non-persons or inanimate or invisible objects. If they want to become human beings with dynamic identities, not as stereotypes, they will have to struggle as subjects not as objects. Brooks transforms them into subjects and gives them voices to articulate their emotions, feelings and problems: Thus she makes them visible human beings with individual identities. She assigns the central roles to female characters and gives them what Mae G. Henderson calls "black and female expression" (Cheryl A. Wall 24). With this voice and expression, her characters forcefully speak against the indignities and discrimination committed against African-American women in a racist and sexist society. Her women are transformed women who have attained the awareness of their identity and voice to articulate their anger and resentment against social and gender injustice. They are also conscious of their place and role in the changing social and political scenarios.

The introduction of Brooks in syllabi of Pakistani universities, can give new impetus to Pakistani women students who aspire to change the image and role of women in Pakistani society. They are trying to challenge the identity imposed by their sexist and gender oppressive society. The study of Brooks' women's efforts to transform their preexisting identity and values in the frame of the Black feminist theory can be helpful to Pakistani women who have been expressing the urgency of the need for transforming the image and role of Pakistani women since the early half of the twentieth century when the term feminism was not yet in vogue. In those days, according to Naqvi, the concept of

“truly liberated women,” or what we later called feminists, was gaining roots among Pakistani women’s writing through the works of Ismat Chughtai. Through works like these, Pakistani women have realized the importance of changing one’s identity, as well as one’s role in society, in order to assert one’s existence and to destabilize the oppressive measures applied by patriarchy. They believe that what is needed is an agency to voice their anger, resentment, and protest and that agency is literature written by Pakistani women themselves.

The Peshawar correspondent of the daily “Dawn” of June 20<sup>th</sup> 2008 in his report on a discussion on the “Portrayal of women in Literature” Organized by the Aurat (Woman) Foundation, quotes Atiya Hidayatullah, president of the Women Writers' Forum, who has pointed out in her speech during a discussion: "There is a need to stop portraying women as a downtrodden section of society in literature. The stereotypical characterization of oppressed women in literature should be replaced with a more aware character, fighting for her social rights." We can hear the same kind of arguments and voices in Gwendolyn Brooks and among the Black Feminists as well. Brooks tries to give new identities to her women by giving them voice, which enables them to subvert and destabilize the ideas and values that subordinate them to men. The Black Feminists in the 1970s-80s also stressed the attainment of voice and expression in the pursuit of transformation from objectivity to subjectivity. Pakistani women writers, like the Black Feminists, realize that to transform their image and role, they must struggle to attain the voice of their own.

As Naqvi has pointed out, Pakistani women should not rely on men writing about women, but should themselves be writing about their lives and their feelings. Pakistani women writers know the significance of the ability to define their image, role, and feelings by themselves, for if they are described by men, they (men) will impose ideas and identity that are in conformity with their preconceived ideas and pictures of women. Pakistani women are aware that the change must come from within, not from old systems that have defined women as docile and fear-bound creatures. They understand that the tales of their woes, sufferings, and oppression are not enough to transform their lot. They should make a stand for their rights in their writings. What they need is to create understanding among the majority of the members of their society to appreciate their stance and make them accept their new identity, as well as new roles in the society. Brooks is also trying to make her society understand the social, psychological, emotional, and financial problems of African American women and their image and identity. Brooks' moral vision, artistic skill, and her ability to negotiate between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse may enhance the Pakistani women's struggle. It will not be difficult for them to assimilate her ideas and tactics to destabilize the preexisting social and moral systems in their struggle.

A prominent feature of Brooks' poetry and her novel is the changing role of black women from addressees to speakers, or from someone who is described by others to someone who speaks for herself, about herself, and by herself. This change of role from objectivity to subjectivity or makers from makes allows them to play significant roles, in

order to aspire for social and economic mobility, and to figure prominently in the moral, social, economic, and political life of their community.

Brooks' treatment of women differs from that of her senior contemporaries, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, who also set their writing in an urban environment, in that she spotlights the experiences of impoverished urban women in her works. In *A Street In Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1949), and *The Bean Eaters* (1960), her first three books of poems, her female characters, mothers, in particular, are the central characters. While there is no doubt that Wright and Ellison assign certain roles to the women characters in their works, they are not the main players of the plot, rather they are background figures or play second fiddle in their urban world. But Brooks, in her works, concentrates her attention on the effects of the "urban experience" on both African-American men and women, highlighting that of the female characters and assigning to them the most pivotal roles in order to expose the impact of urban experiences on social, moral, and emotional life of women.

Brooks' work is marked by powerful and strong female characters that play the main roles in their families, as well as in their societies. Their most prominent role is that of warriors in the battle against inequality and injustice in society. They are women with strong wills who do not submit to the unfavorable odds in their lives and fight against exploitation and injustice of all kinds. Gwendolyn Brooks' female characters, especially mothers, differ from traditional female characters in this respect: Brooks' characters are unyielding, rebellious, and non-conformist, while the traditional concept of "good womanhood", as described by Ajuan Maria Mance in her book, *Inventing Black Women*,

is that of a woman that is humble, submissive, and that accepting of social norms that have been laid down by patriarchy. Brooks situates women in notably commanding positions. In her works, they are no longer invisible or identitiless figures, fallen beings, and sex symbols, rather, they are morally, emotionally, psychologically strong and powerful characters who struggle and fight against those values and norms that choke their imaginations, crush their dreams, and relegate them to back seats.

Brooks' women expose the unpleasant and undesirable aspects of their society. Brooks' women hold up a mirror to society which reflects its follies and foibles, evils and vices, cruelties and injustices. Their speeches and utterances subvert and destabilize the predominant systems so that they may reconfigure new ones, which will be conducive to their aspirations and ambitions. Brooks' women expose ugly aspects of society, but do not fret and fume against them; rather, they touch the conscience and consciousness of the readers by pointing out the tragedies, sufferings, and miseries of poor African-American women. In this way, she gets their voices of agony, anguish, and resentment heard and their abject lives visible. Brooks uses her characters to uncover the vices and weaknesses in her society and satirizes them without resorting to cynicism and violence. Her characters do not tell us that there are evil and vices, such as, injustice, oppression, corruption, or racism; rather, they point out the tragic conditions in which they exist and its relationship to individuals in hopes, that we may learn a moral insight from the juxtaposition of beauty and ugliness, death in life, and romance and reality. Brooks, in her works, transforms not only the roles of African American women from objects to subjects and from addressees to speakers, but also their stereotyped images—from

denigrated portraits to dignified ones, and from sex objects to strong and powerful women with social, moral, and political visions. It is something unusual for African American literature of the first half of the twentieth century to depict African American woman as self-defined and self-respecting figures, because the male writers of this period, as Emily J. Orlando has pointed out in her essay “Feminine Calibans” and “Dark Madonnas of the Grave” portrayed women as “objects d’ art and beautiful corpses—sometimes both at once – reducing them to objects of their Gaze,” and also as “feminine Caliban” (Tarver and Barnes 65). They also present women as small in physical and mental stature in order to give the impression of them being disempowered beings. Another image assigned to black women in those days was that of a depraved and licentious woman who yields to her every sexual desire. Gwendolyn Brooks in her works tries to mitigate the damage done to African-American women by such images which promote them as inanimate objects, vile semi-human beings, and creatures of unrestrained and uncontrolled sexual desires. She tries to transform their image by rendering her female characters dignity, respectability, and power. She presents them as mentally and morally strong figures. Some of her women are prostitutes, like Mame in “Queen of the Blue,” but they have self-respect and rebellious natures that save them from being viewed as completely fallen beings; or powerful and determined women like Mrs. Booker T, a poor mother, who can overcome a mother’s love for her son and breaks her maternal bond when he violates her moral values.

Brooks’ works reveal diverse roles and images of African American women. Their primary role is that of the makers, who are struggling to reconfigure a social,

political, and moral system in which their social and economic mobility is possible. We observe Brooks' gradual "unmasking" of the progression in the mother's social and political roles, as well as the transformation of the image of women in her poetry. Most of Brooks' early poems are studies of the complex psychological and emotional problems of black women, particularly that of mothers. She probes into their psychology as they try to adjust their lives according to the gloomy and unfavorable conditions of the kitchenette building, where their "dreams" of social and economic mobility are frustrated by "onion fumes" and "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall" (Black 20). In the wider social and political life of racist America, their hopes and aspirations are smothered by the traumas of the lynching of their lovers and sons and the hostility of race and color prejudice—so much so that their faith in America is weakened by the racial discrimination they face even when they defend America in Patriotic Military service. In the sonnet, "the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men" in the sonnet sequence, "Gay Chaps At the Bars," Brooks is careful to note that the different boxes are assigned for dead bodies of black and white soldiers: "a box for dark men and a box for Other" (Black 70).

Brooks uses African American women and mothers to expose the multifarious problems being faced by urban slum dwellers and through their utterances she points out sources and causes of their abject poverty and deplorable social conditions. In this way, she creates consciousness in the society of prevailing inequalities and injustices, in hopes that this awareness could help to rectify the follies and vices of society. On the other hand, it might also create desire for economic mobility among African American men

and women that will enhance their social and class mobility. In most of her poems, her canvas is limited to a small kitchenette apartment or a room in a club or a bar, but her themes and the subject matters are universal, as they deal with basic human problems. “Kitchenette Building,” which Brooks described as typical of the bulk of her work, deals with the basic problem being faced by poor and deprived persons—the frustration of their dreams of amelioration of social and economic conditions and class mobility. The poem narrates the socio-economic, psychological, and emotional problems of the inhabitants of the sordid, squalid, and enclosed structure which resembles a trap, and who are preoccupied with day-to-day survival and have to give up their dreams or “imagination” and attend to urgent practical needs. Brooks employs a housewife, probably a mother, to voice the unfulfilled aspirations, unaccomplished ambitions, unrealized imaginations, and “dream deferred” (Langston Hughes 426).

The narrator's voice is a collective voice, instead of the first person singular, ‘I’, she uses the plural ‘we’: “WE ARE things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, / Grayed in, and gray,” (Black 20). The men and women living in this entrapped place are not human beings, they are inanimate objects, and “things of dry hours” (Black), and in such a dreary and oppressive atmosphere dreams have a very slim chance of survival. For those who are struggling for day to day survival, their hopes and imaginations are choked by financial stringencies: “‘Dream’ makes a giddy sound, not a strong one like ‘rent,’ ‘feeding a wife,’ and ‘satisfying a man’” (Black). According to the narrator, even if the inhabitants of the kitchenette building could keep their dreams clean, warm, and alive, the other practical problems and necessities of life will not allow the characters to cherish

them. The final lines describe how their dreams vanish into the thin air: “. . . let it begin? We wonder. But not well! not for a minute! Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now, We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it” (Black). The overtone of this line is both comic and pathetic. For an insensitive reader, the action may be seen as comic, for, the apparent, incongruity between the serious matters that are discussed in the preceding lines and the frivolity of the action being described in this line. Brooks uses Bathos, the sudden change from a serious subject or feeling to something that is silly, or not important or banal to create comic moments in her poetry. But for a reader who can feel the deprivations and poverty of ghetto dwellers dream of “lukewarm water,” this symbol of physical comfort and improved economic conditions, is thwarted by capitalistic and racist systems. Moreover, as Hansell has described, it gives a more definite sense of what was implied in the opening line. In this poem, the narrator is a commentator who is drawing the readers’ attention to the need for an alternative system that may help poor African Americans to fulfill their dreams. At the same time she is exposing social problems, economic hardship, and emotional frustrations that are destroying the yearnings of the poor inhabitants of the kitchenette building.

Brooks’ women are neither heroic nor god-like in attributes or stature; they are average human beings with typical human weaknesses, who are fighting against their fate bravely, yet with resignation. She portrays her characters lovingly, realistically, and objectively. She does not condemn any character for his/her follies, foibles, or vices, nor extol any character for his/her race, color, sex, or morality. Rather, she treats both good and bad characters equally regardless of their vices or virtues, social or economic

condition, and race. She loves every one of her characters for only one quality, that he /she is a human being. Norris B. Clark in her article "Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic," remarks,

Brooks' poetry remains one of love and affirmation, one that accepts some hate and perhaps some violence as necessary without condemning or those who have been pawns to interracial and intraracial forces. Adequately reflecting the hopes and aspirations of the black community, Brooks displays a love for her brothers and sisters regardless of psychosocial or socioeconomic position. (Mootry and Smith 92)

She does not condemn Mrs. Coley's fat daughter for cuckolding of her husband in "The Vacant Lot," she does not look down upon the poor old couple for their poverty in "The Bean Eaters," nor does she unleash her wrath against the mother who has an abortion in the poem "Mother." Rather she presents them without judgment. Her characters enable the reader to understand the plights, deprivations and social constrictions of the down and out of the society, "who are poor, / who are adjudged the leastwise in the land" (Black 116). They also help the reader realize the atrocities, discriminations, and injustices committed against them by society and the laws of the realm. "Negro Hero" and the sonnet series, "Gay Chaps at the Bar" expose many serious issues concerning race and color relation in the United States armed forces and help the reader to understand the policy of segregation and discrimination made by the laws of government agencies. In the "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," we find the racist majority community lynching a person because of his race and color, while the law stands silently as an onlooker.

Her characters are not revolutionaries or rebels in the common sense, but their voices/utterance are no less subversive than rebels or political dissidents. In this regard, the voices/utterances of the mother characters are consistent in their calls for change or destabilization of the existing social, political, and economic systems, as well as moral and cultural values that thwart and frustrate their dreams. The sonnet, "First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string," in the section entitled "Womanhood" in *Annie Allen*, has been popular and according to Melhem, "had especial currency during the Civil Rights Movement" (72). Annie, the mother, who has experienced many changes in her life, finally realized that one has to create an atmosphere that will be conducive to one's artistic talent and creative potential. Annie believes that "politics must precede art" (Melhem 72). She commands her children, "First fight. Then fiddle." In this imperative mood, there is no subject and if we read out of context, this command has wider implications for it is not directed to any specific person or race or color or gender.

Annie has seen the outcome of World War II with regard to African-Americans. They have won the war in Europe and Pacific, but nothing much has changed at home. They still suffer from Jim Crow laws, as well as racial and cultural oppression. Annie understands that to change the system and to create a favorable environment for African Americans, they need to struggle, fight at every level, and subvert preexisting systems. So she urges,

But first to arms, to armor.

Carry hate In front of you and harmony behind.

Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.

Win war.

Rise bloody,

maybe not too late for having first to civilize a space

Wherein to play your violin with grace. (Black 118)

She knows that African Americans have to fight another war at home: the war against discrimination and for their rights. They have to fight for justice, self-defense, and self-dignity. They know that they have to fight this war to attain their rights and also to protect themselves from oppression and cruelty of the majority community: “But first to arms, to armor./ Carry hate In front of you and harmony behind.” They know that they must win it if they want to live with grace, dignity, and safety.

This battle cry for the war of freedom from poverty, injustice, discrimination, and oppression comes not from a strong male hero figure, but from a poor mother. Brooks has altered the identity of African American women, especially that of the mothers from ‘makes’ to ‘makers’ and ‘audience’ to ‘speakers.’ They are, in fact, making a new space within an old environment that will be conducive to the living of life in a creative fashion. With this transformation of woman’s identity and role, Brooks destabilizes the preexisting identity of African American women. Brooks establishes her mother characters as sources of inspiration and guidance for not only African Americans, but also poor and suffering people of the world. Annie is call for “hate / In front of you and harmony behind,” and to use it as “armor and arms” may not be appreciated by some readers on the pretext that it incites hatred and violence. However, one should read carefully note that the hatred that she is advocating is to be used as a weapon of assault

against inequalities and injustice and as a defensive device to protect oneself from oppression and injustice. Her emphasis is to civilize a “space,” not people. This means that she wants to make not people. the place more favorable for her people and their potentials. One notes that she remarks that it is “maybe not too late for having first to civilize a space,” so that they may exercise their talents with “grace.” The juxtaposing of “arms” and ”armor” and “hatred” and “harmony” gives insight into the functioning of Annie/Brooks’ mind, who is following the doctrine of defense being the best offense and hate being a means of subverting the system which discriminates among human beings.

Moreover, the subject-less verbs make the reader feel that this poem, if read out of context, is meant for humanity at large, particularly, to those who are suffering from oppression and injustice. Annie, the mother, is teaching her children, representatives of the children of oppressed countries, to resist and struggle against inequality and exploitation to create a milieu in which they and their art can thrive and grow. The image of the mother in this sonnet can, in no way, be called that of a weak and submissive woman who will accept the received ideas and images of black women silently and resignedly. She is a changed woman with ‘voice,’ urging a new generation of African Americans to struggle for an alternative system. One can see easily that she anticipates the militant women of the 1960s.

The speeches and utterances of Brooks’ women, especially, those of mothers, reflect the mood and temperament of the community as well as the poet herself. Brooks and her characters, in her early poems, speak in the same language body, i.e. in situated language. Brooks and her narrators as well as her characters address the audience in a

mask language to conform to the requirements of mainstream readers, the white publishers, social norms and political correctness, as well as the literary criteria of the time. The readers understand them according to their own social, cultural, psychological, and political perspective or orientation. Brooks' women and mothers are given voice to express their feelings, transform their identity and to reconfigure a value system.

Brooks' women and their utterances directly, as well as indirectly, expose the social and political mood of the African-Americans in the period between the World War II and the Black Arts Movement. The women and mothers in Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry and her sole novel reveal the social, economic, and political culture and aspirations of the underclass of the African American communities living in the slums of America's larger cities. The people in her works are not only characters or personas who interact between themselves, but are also voices and utterances that destabilize accepted social and moral norms to reconfigure a new milieu, in which they will be recognized as distinct from previously imposed images. Their interactions, monologues, and dialogues give a sense of continuity to the themes in her works.

One of the social problems that African American women with dark complexions have to face is color discrimination within African American society. Brooks' women challenge the criteria of beauty defined by white culture by reconfiguring a place for black women in society. This has been a recurrent theme in her early poems and it continues in her 1960 collection, *The Bean eaters*. For example, in the poem, "Jessie Mitchell's Mother," the direct interaction between mother and daughter brings up what Arthur P. Davis calls "black-and-tan theme"—the rejection of black color girls by tan

men and its psychological, social, and emotional implications on them. But this theme takes a strange and more complex psychological turn in "Jessie Mitchell's Mother." It describes the unusual hatred between a mother and a daughter because of the difference in their complexion and makes the readers aware of the abysmal depths to which color discrimination can lead human soul. This poem can also be read as the juxtaposition of love for and pride in one's race and color, self-dignity, strength and rejection of "the old, white-inspired values" (Melhem 120), represented by the daughter, and the psychological complexity of an African American mother suffering from "black self-hate" (Melhem 120). The phenomenon of "black self-hate," represented by the mother is the outcome of the white standards of beauty. However, the message that the values represented by the daughter, the new generation, will survive and the preferences of the mother, the dying generation, will diminish sounds like an anticipation of the Black Arts Movement's slogan of black is beautiful.

When we look at the subtleties and symbols that Brooks employs in this poem from all possible angles and different levels of meanings, or with a heteroglossic approach--not only from conventional and accepted standards of interpretation, we can clearly see the direct message or meaning and indirect or refracted meaning in it. "Jessie Mitchell's Mother," apparently, tells of the antagonism between a dark complexioned daughter and a light complexioned mother, yet a close reading of the poem paying special attention to the social, cultural, and psychological context reveals that it is a criticism on the baneful influence and destructiveness of intraracial prejudice, highlighted here in the conflicts between the young and old generation and the contest between dark and light

color. Jessie dislikes and hates her aging and crumbling mother whom she considers foolish and spineless. She is so indifferent to her that she says she would not weep on her death. “My mother is jelly-hearted and she has a brain of jelly: Sweet, quiver-soft, irrelevant. Not essential. Only a habit would cry if she should die” (Black 344).

On the other hand, the mother envies her daughter for her youth and also because of the consciousness of her premature senility and dilapidation caused by marriage to a poor man. This feeling of envy for her daughter’s youth and vitality makes her already failing physical and mental conditions worse. But she has one comforting factor, that is her yellow color and she is proud of it. She knows that Jessie is black-skinned and will suffer more. The thought that her daughter will suffer more than she seems to give some pleasure and solace to her, however, the fact that she thinks this indicates her sick mind and spiritual emptiness. To save herself from despair, she takes refuge in her vanity of being yellow and beautiful:

Crept into an old sly refuge: Jessie's black

And her way will be black, and jerkier even than mine. Mine,  
in fact, because I was lovely, had flowers

Tucked in the jerks, flowers were here and there. (Black 344)

The mother, who upholds the values imposed by white culture, is depicted as a weak-willed and spiritually hollow person, who is at the mercy of her daughter. Jessie’s mother’s thought, as well as soul, is influenced by white values of beauty. She looks down upon her daughter’s dark complexion and expects that Jessie will suffer more than she does because of her complexion. However, the interaction between Jessie and her mother

reveals Jessie's pride in her race and color and it reflects the rising sense of self-confidence and self-affirmation among the new generation of African Americans. Jessie is a forerunner of future generation of African American women who we come across in the 1970s and 80s: proud and confident.

Brooks' mothers have voice and consciousness. They find diverse ways to articulate their anger, feelings, and aspirations. Their utterances are used as an agency to resist and subvert the values and systems that denigrate African-American women and also to reconfigure an alternative system. The utterances/speeches of Brooks' mothers are either direct or indirect addresses to the social, political, economic, or psychological problems being faced by ghetto dwellers, in general, and black women, in particular. Whether a mother is a speaker or an addressee, she is the source of insight into the problems and sufferings of African-Americans. We find a variety of voices among the women in her works—ranging from the cry of anguish of a poor mother who has to abort her children because of poverty, the threat of murder by society in "The Mother," to the outburst of self realization in "Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi: Meanwhile the Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," to the silent, but powerful expression of struggle, perseverance, and protest in "The Last Quatrain of Emmett Till." With voices that range from suggestive to overt to "oracular" (Melhem 2) the female characters and personae of the poems reflect the diversity and complexity of black women, their identities and the problems they face. The diverse nature of Brooks' female characters enables her to expose many problems—poverty, oppression, social, economic, injustices, and racial, gender, and color discrimination of the urban black women, and African-Americans, in

general. George Kent states in his biography of Brooks that “she felt that the turn of the times was toward relief for all ‘uncomfortable’—and that category included blacks” (64). Brooks uses her mother characters and their utterances to uplift the image of African American women and to lay bare their social and economic problems that they may come to the notice of other members of society and be brought closer to solution. Their language is aimed toward the articulation and assertion of awareness of their place and role in a racist and sexist society, yet Brooks never puts abusive language into their mouths. Rather she expresses her anger, resentment, and resistance against the injustices and discriminations in forms and dictions that reflect moral and ethical values that are humanistic in qualities. Brooks’ use of language, elevated or vernacular, reflects her idea of defiance and resistance with grace and without using violent action or invectives. Her characters rarely use an expression or discourse that goes against her moral sense or her aesthetic values. In the sonnet series, “Gay Chaps at the Bar” we can feel the intense anger of the soldiers against discrimination, but they never resort to vituperation. They show their anger in language which would not offend others: “If Thou be more than hate or atmosphere Step forth in splendor, mortify our wolves. Or we assume sovereignty ourselves” (Black 72). The anger and protest is expressed in the form of prayer to God, but we can feel its intensity, as well as the violence and usurpation that could erupt if grievances are not removed. While in “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi: Meanwhile the Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” the anger and resentment of both mothers is compared to the fragrance of “magnolias,” and its smell is so strong that it permeates both southern and northern parts of the United States. However, this powerful

feeling is expressed not by violent language or threat to “assume sovereignty ourselves,” but through color, taste, smell, and sensation. The anger of male soldiers is expressed in the language of a usurper, whereas the anger of mothers is conveyed through the language of a ‘maker.’ Brooks expresses her anger and protest against the oppression and discrimination against African Americans in her early poetry through both her man and woman characters. The anger and protest express through male characters have the elements of violence, destruction, and revolt whereas the anger and protest lodge through women, particularly through the mothers are done in creative manner and positive fashion. The women and mothers defy and resist oppression, injustice, and discrimination with dignity and grace without losing poise and balance. It seems that Brooks is demonstrating with the help of her woman and mother characters to the oppressed and downtrodden African and Americans how to give vent to their anger and lodge their protest in non-violent and positive manner: it is the message that we find in most of her early works.

Although Brooks’ mothers belong to the same social, moral, and cultural environment and share the same heritage, they have their own specific identities and voices, which reflect the social, political, moral, or economic problems they, as individuals, are facing. However, when these diverse voices merge, they become a single powerful voice that can bring about change in the traditional concept of the black mother and the black woman. Thus their voice signifies struggle and subversion against the predominant systems that would trample their hopes and aspirations by reconfiguring new identities.

The women in Brooks' works are aware of the interracial oppression and injustices in society, but they usually do not give voice to their anger, resentment, and resistance. However, when they become mothers and their children's happiness or future is at stake, they gain voice and express their rage effectively and powerfully. Annie, in *Annie Allan*, feels and shows her resistance against social constrictions, interracial oppression, and poverty, but she gives voice to her feelings only when her children face starvation, discrimination, and deprivations. According to Patricia Hill Collins, motherhood has provided "a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism" (118). In "Annie Allen," Annie registers the change when she moves from submission to protest, from passive acceptance to loud and powerful command and from romance to reality. The change comes to her when she becomes a mother.

In the sonnet series "The Children of the Poor," we can observe different facets of Annie's role as a mother. She addresses issues of poverty and the politics of protest and resistance and speaks directly to society and to her children in sonnets 2 and 4. In the sonnet 2, "what shall I give my children?" she poses a perennial question that ghetto dwellers and the underclass of society have to face in every age—how do they feed and clothe their children? She asks this question to her society in a challenging tone to shake it out of its indifference to the sufferings of black children. In this sonnet, Brooks uses the voice of a poor mother to expose the hunger and poverty that is rampant in single parent poor families, as well as the discrimination that poor African American children have to face in day-to-day life. This mother seems to be mocking the American dream and the promises that are made in the anthem.

The poem opens with an abrupt dramatic question: “What shall I give my children?” She then goes on to describe their social, psychological, and emotional problems, as well as the poverty and hunger that they are facing:

Who are poor,  
Who are adjudged the least wise of the land,  
Who are my sweetest lepers, who demand  
No velvet and no velvety velour;  
But who have begged me for a brisk contour,  
Crying that they are quasi, contraband  
Because unfinished, graven by a hand  
Less than angelic, admirable or sure. (Black 116)

The images of “lepers” and “Stones,” as Gladys Margaret Williams has pointed out, have Biblical associations and the poet’s use of Biblical images gives the message of the poem a sense of timelessness. The allusion to lepers establishes the link among the suffering and deprived of humanity. It also gives the impression that the problem of sickness, hunger and poverty has existed since time immemorial. The description “quasi, contraband” creates the image of children as outcasts, and it also reminds us of the impoverished and miserable conditions of the escaped slaves before the Civil War. “No velvet and no velvety velour” tells the reader of the deprivations these children have to face in their lives. By using the images of “lepers,” “contraband”, and “velvet and velvety velour,” Brooks wants the reader to visualize the children as lepers who are kept away from society and compelled to stay out of town and subsist on food and money that they

get from charity or begging. The children are also related to impoverished and starved slaves who escaped to Union territory during the Civil War. With the help of these images of sickness, poverty, deprivation and the disturbing questions of a mother, the poet is trying to prick the conscience of both black and white societies that are responsible for their plight, and to arouse the consciousness of the African American community. The mother in this poem throws doubt on American democracy and hints at the failure of the American dream.

The connotation of the image of the stone varies because at first Brooks creates the impression that “the children are discarded stone thought to be worthless since it has been shaped by an unskilled craftsman” (Williams) or a craftsman who is not given proper tools to trim and shape them for specific purposes. But later in the sestet, the poet changes the connotation of “stone” to seed:

My hand is stuffed with mode, design, and device.

But I lack access to my proper stone.

And plenitude of plan shall not suffice

Nor grief nor love shall be enough alone

To ratify my little halves who bear

Across an autumn freezing everywhere.

The children who have been compared with “lepers” and rejected stones, are now describes as “stone,” seed that could not be planted properly because the mother lacks the necessary devices, conducive environment, and fertile soil. The images of under-nourished, half-developed forms and the sense of restricted choice also continue in the

sestet. Brooks, in fact, through the mother and undernourished children, raises the voice of protest against poverty and hunger that is distorting and destroying, not only the physical appearance of the younger generation, but also their mental and psychic make up. The seeds of the future are frozen and destroyed by “an autumn freezing everywhere.” The “autumn freezing” is a cold and hostile milieu created by the dominant culture, and Brooks’ mothers, in conformity to their image as ‘the makers,’ the trimmers of stones and growers, are trying to change the environment in which the seed of the future of African American society cannot grow and thrive. Their effort is to instill a consciousness that their fate can only be transformed if they have the will to create a favorable environment and resources for themselves, and for that they need an alternative system. The mother, the ‘maker,’ can trim and mold the required shape and grow the required talents that are needed for alternative system, if they have the necessary resources.

Brooks is a dauntless commentator and critic of social and political injustice and oppression in her society. Her women do not confine themselves to kitchen and kitchenette building, their vision is broad and it encompasses national and international social and political situations. In “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi: Meanwhile the Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” the mother is raising an issue that has national and international importance—apartheid, racial violence, and American democracy. “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi” questions the fairness of the American judicial system and exposes the heinousness of racial and gender discrimination which allows a particular race and gender to oppress another. This poem is

written in response to the murder of Emmett Till, a Chicago teenager who was beaten and killed after being accused of making a pass at a white woman in 1955, during his visit to Mississippi.

Gwendolyn Brooks presents the situation from the point of view of Mother and imagines how both black and white mothers would feel in such a situation. The young white mother, "maid mild" is assigned the larger role of general motherhood. She, "maid mild" reviews the crime that is committed in her name in two contexts of the ballad tradition in which a beautiful maiden is saved from a villain, a symbol of evil, by a handsome knight, and from the perspective of a mother. In both the cases she is not satisfied with her role, because she feels that she is playing the role not of her choice, but the role that has been allotted to her by the white patriarchy. The realization of her husband's crime arouses in her intense anger and hatred for him. The awareness of the intensity and heinousness of the crime and her role in it fills her with agony, suffocation, and a sense of confinement: "Then a sickness heaved within her. / The courtroom Coca-Cola, The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone, /rushed like a wall against her (Black 339).

The central action of the poem is the creation of a relationship between the motherly feelings of the Bronzeville mother and the Mississippi mother. This bond enables the white mother and the black mother to form a united anger and hatred against the murderous white man—the husband of the "maid mild"—who is their common oppressor. The anger and hatred first surface in the white mother's realization of her role as "maid mild" and the fact that she has no control over her body, as it is the possession

of her husband. Her sense of identity and the common bond of infliction and suffering with the black mother, as a fellow woman, intensify the hatred and it becomes "Bigger than all magnolias," whose fragrance spreads through the barriers of race and color. The shared feeling of hatred and anger between the black and white mothers breaks the wall of separation between black and white races and north and south. Brooks' "glorious flower" of hatred, according to Betsy Erkkila, "suggests the revolutionary power of female anger and female bonding as a source of potentially transforming social energies" (208). Brooks' idea of the understanding and relation between an African-American mother and a white mother as a source of power that can bring about a revolution in the oppressive white male dominated system was a radical idea in the late 1950s, when racial discrimination had been shattering the possibility of cross-racial sisterhood

The scene of the poem opens on the wife's meditation on the murder of Emmett Till. She wonders whether the killing of "the dark villain" who "was a blackish child of fourteen," was justifiable. When her husband slaps her younger boy for misbehaving at the breakfast table, she understands her husband's nature. He is prone to violence and cruelty. She feels herself helpless for she cannot protect her child and is disgusted with her husband for his crime and for his chauvinism. Her anger and hatred intensifies with the realization of her husband's true nature and his, senseless killing of Till, as well as with the understanding of her own helplessness. Melhem observes that Brooks makes the perfume of that blossoming hate and anger so intense and strong that it overflows the limits of this poem and permeates the next one—the unforgettable and fascinating sequel, entitled "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmet Till," which describes the Bronzeville

Mother, who has been, until then, silent and, except for a passing reference toward the end of the first poem, absent. Her absence is “a brilliant example of the invisibility whites can confer on blacks” (Gertrude Hughes 383). Brooks’ subtle fusion of the white mother’s feelings of hatred for husband and frustration for ineffectual role and the black mother’s feelings of agony and resentment against white male oppression and atrocity, suggests that both white and black women are the victims of injustice, male chauvinism, gender oppression, and discrimination. Here, Brooks may be alluding to the possibility of joint struggle against the common enemy of woman, male supremacism and white culture that renders woman non-person or invisible entity.

Brooks separates these two poems in the collection, but they are placed one after another, so that the reader may link them while reading. These two poems have a smooth and coherent transition. Reading the last part of “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi: Meanwhile A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmet Till” together brings up the idea of common human bond that joins the consciousness of the two mothers for the white mother’s hatred of gender oppression and male supremacism becomes part of the black mother’s sorrow for her son who was killed as the result of racial oppression and discrimination. Thus reading the two poems together confer upon them new vision and dimension of protest and resistance against gender oppression and racial discrimination as well as other injustices in the society. The merger also broadens the context of Brooks’ struggle and subversion for she is not only speaking anger and protest against the unjust killing of a black boy by the white racist systems but also voicing a white mother’s resistance and resentment against the

stereotyping of women by the ideas and values evolved by sexist patriarchal society. When we join the last part of “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters....” and the complete poem of “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till,” including the title, and carefully read them together as one poem, they show how intense hatred engulfs them and merges them into one frame of resentment for gender oppression and racial supremacy that in turn lead to atrocity:

She did not scream.

She stood there.

But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,

And its perfume enclasped them-big

Bigger than all magnolias.

The last bleak news of the ballad.

The rest of the rugged music. (A Bronzeville Mother loiters. . . .)

The last quatrain.

THE LAST QUATRAIN OF THE BALLAD OF

EMMET TILL

after the murder,

after the burial

Emmet's mother is a pretty-faced thing;

the tint of pulled taffy.

She sits in a red room

drinking black coffee.

She kisses her killed boy.  
And she is sorry.  
Chaos in windy grays  
through a red prairie. (Black 339-40)

The expression, "But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower," brings out the intensity of the wife's repulsion of her husband and destabilizes and subverts the male hegemony over female body and white supremacy. The silence and wordlessness of the grief-stricken mother who was stunned by the tragic death of her son is another way of subverting and resisting the predominant systems. The images, "red room," "black coffee," "Chaos in windy gray" and "red prairie" evoke a sense of chaos and confusion, as well as gloominess. The "red" reminds one of the blood of Till and redness of the younger boy's face after his father has slapped him, as well as the blood that the white mother feels over her. "Red" conveys a sense of foreboding; it reminds the reader of the bloody killings of the past and hints at the possible bloodshed in future.

This poem is an "alter ego relationship" between two mothers and a "drama of consciousness" (Mootry and Smith 184). Brooks very subtly transfers the consciousness of a black mother to a white mother, succeeding in penetrating the mind and thinking of the white Mississippi mother; and through her consciousness she subverts the predominant social, political, and cultural systems. In fact, Brooks' development from her early years to her final work might be read as "a progressive unmasking and expansion of the voice and figure of the mother, as Brooks articulates a larger and larger role, both for the mother in the black community and for herself, as a kind of cultural mother to the

political project of black literary and social creation” (Erkkila 197). Throughout her career, Brooks uses the mother or her utterances to undermine the social and moral conventions that restrict the role and place of women in general and black women in particular. As her poetic career progresses, we find progress in the role of mothers in her works. The powerful mothers in “A Street in Bronzeville” (1945) are conscious of social and gender discrimination, as well as social constrictions and stringent economic conditions, but they seldom voice their anger or resentment. In “Annie Allen,” we hear Annie’s loud and powerful voice of protest and call for struggle and resistance; and in “The Bean Eaters” the consciousness of black mother penetrates into that of white mother and becomes a powerful source of change in the oppressive system.

Mothers, in Brooks’ poetry, play different roles. They assume the roles that are traditionally assigned to man, in American society in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as that of the breadwinner of the family, protector of her home and children, and even head of the family. They are authoritative figures who dictate the social and moral laws and teach the principles of life and worldly wisdom. She draws her authority from a power base within the family, of which she is the head, because in the milieu of Brooks’ mother poems there is no ‘patriarch.’ Even if there is a father or a male figure, she is equal to him, if not more powerful. In Brooks’ ‘mother’ poems, mothers are strong, dignified women who can articulate their feelings and points of views, as well as assert their authority. For example, in “Big Bessie throws her son into the street,” “When Mrs. Martin's Booker T,” and “Mrs. Small” the usual masculine duties are performed by the mother. Mrs. Small in “Mrs. Small” exerts a kind of subtle revenge for her four missing sons by spilling a few drops of steaming hot coffee on the white shirt of

a white insurance agent, a symbol of white culture. Mrs. Small is a gracious little lady who offers to an insurance agent a steaming hot coffee pot in confusion:

'Oh!' Mrs. Small came to her senses,  
Peered earnestly through thick lenses,  
Jumped terribly. This, too, was a mistake,  
Unforgivable no matter how much she had to bake.  
For there can be no  
whiter whiteness than this one:  
An insurance man's shirt on its morning  
run. This Mrs. Small now soiled  
With a pair of brown  
Spurts (just recently boiled)  
Of the 'very best coffee in town.'" (Black 341-42)

"Mrs. Small" reveals the problems and sensibility of a housewife, who is caught up in the daily grind of domestic chores, as well as other social and financial problems. Mrs. Small is a victim of the economic problems of white culture, signified by the insurance installments and insurance salesman, symbols of American capitalism. She has to attend to the demands and responsibilities of her family. Mrs. Small is angry with the whites, who she holds responsible for the death of her four sons, "four (horrors) could not be heard any more" (Black 341), and she expresses her hidden rage by spilling some drops of hot coffee on the man's shirt. This apparently accidental action can be looked at as a subtle action of revenge by a mother for the death of her sons. Although this action indicates the very weak

resistance of the mother and demonstrates imperceptible power, there is yet resistance and power in this small gracious “tan” mother’s action.

Mrs. Small’s way of taking revenge and showing her authority is more subtle than the blunt and direct action taken by Mrs. Martin in reaction to her son’s socially unacceptable action. Mrs. Booker T openly censures her son for the immoral act and shifts to another side of town as a protest when he declines to marry his pregnant girlfriend. The dramatic ballad, “When Mrs. Martin’s Booker T,” tells the story of a mother who desires to a present respectable and dignified picture of Bronzeville and its dwellers—In other words, the African American community in general. Mrs. Martin feels disgrace when her son “ruins” Rosa Brown, so she decides to move from her neighborhood to “the low west side of town,” in order to show her anger against his action. She says: “Don’t care if I never see that boy Again to the end of my days. He wrung my heart like a chicken neck. And he made me a disgrace. Don’t come to tell me he’s dyin’. Don’t come to tell me he’s dead. But tell me if’n he take that gal And get her decent wed” (Black 24). Booker T’s action and his refusal to marry the girl shatter the hope and moral vision of his mother. Booker T has gone against his mother’s sense of “advancing the Race” by refusing to marry his impregnated girl friend, but he knows the social consequences of his mother’s rejection. Mrs. Martin Booker T is an authority figure who wants to see that African Americans abide by moral principles and build their families on them. Booker T’s mother believes that strong moral sense is needed for what she calls “getting ahead” or what Paula Gidding refers to as “race progress”(179) Brooks also expresses, in most of her works, the need for moral vision among African-Americans to come out of social and economic constrictions, as well as to achieve class and

economic mobility. Mrs. Martin Booker T's sense of morality and Brooks' moral vision may appeal the syllabus designers of Pakistani education institutions and this poem can be a good choice to teach Brooks to Pakistani students. The consciousnesses of Brooks' mothers are interconnected and the ideas of each mother are a part of the total vision.

The decision of Big Bessie to throw her son out reflects her image as a 'maker' for she is preparing her son for future and her intense awareness of the social, political, and economic states that African Americans are in. She knows if her son is to become a "New pioneer," he must discover and nurture within himself the ability and strength to rely on one's own power and resources. Her message is the utterance that we hear repeatedly from female narrators, women and the mothers in Brooks' works. She says, "New pioneer of days and ways, be gone./ Hunt out your own alone./ down the street" (Black 400). In a patriarchal society, it is normally the father who instills this kind of consciousness into his children, but here Big Bessie tells her son to "go down the street." The street is the symbol of life, particularly life in Bronzeville. These mothers are the mentors of their children, symbols of resistance against injustices and unethical practices. This image of strong and powerful person, which is usually associated with male figure, represents one of the multi-facets of the roles of mothers in Brooks' works—In other words, they are a part of the whole image of motherhood that Brooks continues to develop through out her career.

The mothers in Brooks' works have moral strength. They respond in a creative manner to crisis situations that are related not only to family or domestic matters, but also to those of national significance. Mother, in her poem, "the mother" makes clear another dimension of Brooks' development of the role and image of motherhood. She, the mother, is

a woman with strong nerve, for she can fearlessly and explicitly admit her crimes or sins and has the boldness to hint at the causes that compel her to do these deeds. She (mother) shows her assertiveness and moral courage by bringing up controversial and forbidden issues like abortion. Brooks gives voice to a poor mother to express her feelings and reasons to commit such a heinous crime according to social and moral values of that time, so that the society may hear the voice of these poor victims and feel their miseries and woes. The mother, in this poem, destabilizes the traditional concept of nurture, so that society may realize the false values that it has built around itself.

Brooks' "The Mother" is a pungent and bitter comment on the society that kills innocent African American youth for petty mistakes. In this poem, the mother kills her children or aborts them so that they may not be killed by others. In this way, she not only reveals the cruelties of the majority community who lynches and murders blacks because of their race and color, but also brings to light the abject poverty that compels African American mothers to abort. In "the mother," the structure of the address, as Barbra Johnson has pointed out, is shifting and complex. The mother's dramatic monologue begins as an address to "a generalized reader" (Erkkila 199), but there is a confusion of 'speaker' and addressee, 'subject' and 'object,' and 'agent' and 'victim.' The second half of the poem is a direct address to her aborted children, "dim killed children." The mother expresses her love for them in a powerful style, but she does not lose her emotional poise. She controls her emotions and does not allow it to become overpowering. The beauty and strength of the poem is that Brooks does not allow the reader to be overwhelmed by the complex emotions of the mother but she keeps the

reader focused on the social, economic, and psychological issues that she wants to highlight.

The mother claims that she loves her dead children and that she has killed them:

I have contracted. I have eased

My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized

Your luck

And your lives from your unfinished reach,

If I stole your births and your names,

Your straight baby tears and your games,

Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and  
your deaths,

If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,

Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate. (Black 21)

Brooks' mother aborts her children not only for the fear of the killing by the majority community but also the oppressive weight of poverty. 'Mother' in Brooks' poem is aware of her maternal responsibilities, obligations, and motherly love and affection for her children. She is also conscious of the heinousness of her crime. Her action raises many questions: Why does she kill her children if she loves them? Why does she commit this cardinal sin? What do her repeated assertions of love for her murdered children signify? All these questions draw our attention to injustice, inequality, poverty, and violence in society that are killing the poor, illiterate, and deprived youth of

ghettos. However, 'mother' in Brooks' poem complicates the ideal of motherhood by asserting that matricide is an expression of love. In this poem, Brooks reestablishes for the black mothers, as Emily J. Orlando has pointed out, a certain degree of control and authority over their bodies with her suggestion that childbirth is not "a passive endeavor and in fact involves a choice"(Tarver and Barnes 65). This choice renders them powerful enough to subvert the conventions and traditional beliefs of mother and motherhood imposed upon them by the dominant culture. Brooks deliberately chooses a controversial subject like abortion, which was considered odious by all the social and moral canons of that time, to shock the readers so that she may jolt their senses and impress on their consciousness the nature of the crime that racist and sexist society is committing on poor black mothers. The image of mother in this poem is that of a destroyer, but even in her act of destruction, we can see the role of a preserver because by aborting her children she is saving them from lynching and killing at a mature age when they can feel and realize the pain of injustice and racial discrimination by the racist majority community as well as the painful existence of violence, poverty, and inequity in African American communities.

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 and save African-Americans from racial injustice and discrimination. We can see this disillusionment with American democracy and God in her sonnet sequence "Gay Chaps at the Bar," particularly in the

sonnet, entitled, "firstly inclined to take what it is told": "Thee sacrosanct, Thee sweet, Thee crystalline, / With the full jewel wile of mighty light—" (Black 71). In this sonnet as well as other sonnets of the "Gay Chaps" sequence, Brooks expresses her disillusionment with American democracy, patriotism, and God through the feelings and skepticism of the African American soldiers who fought in the World War II. These lines, according to Melhem, allude to the anthem, "America," and this sonnet exposes its unfulfilled promises and analyzes the disillusionment and skepticism of the African American soldiers. As a sensitive soul, Brooks must have been looking for, as Betsy Erkkila has pointed out, an "alternative system" (200) that would be conducive to the betterment of her people, especially to black women. By the end of the World War II, she had become familiar with "white perfidy" and realized that white culture could not give African Americans their due and the black, which was identified with African American males, could not give them their identity and make them visible, so she tried to search for a system that would substitute the existing one. According to Erkkila, "she finds this alternative system in black motherhood—a system she begins to construct in Annie Allen" (200). The central theme of her second volume, Annie Allen is a search for identity and the rise of black female consciousness that gives her the voice to protest against and destabilize the oppressive system. It traces Annie's progress from girlish defiance and vanity in the section, "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood," to her romantic ideas of love, marriage, and handsome "paladin," and as well as her unpleasant and bitter experiences in marriage in "The Anniad," to the poverty stricken and oppressed life a widowhood and motherhood that lead to the rise of self-realization and social and

political consciousness in "The Womanhood." The subject matter of the poem deals with the social, emotional, psychological, and economic problems of black women and black mothers. In the first section, Annie points out the narrowness of space, both in social set up and home, which signifies a narrow room, restrictive choice, and social inhibitions for black girls. In the second section her youthful dreams aroused by the Anglo-American romance tradition of handsome and adventurous princes are shattered by the oppression of her husband and an unhappy married life. The third section describes Annie as a black mother, 'maker' who has attained social and political awareness. She is vocal about hunger, poverty, and deprivation faced by the African American community at large and black children, in particular. From the position of a mother and a maker, she urges her children to fight for their due place in the society, as well as to struggle to create a favorable space where their artistic talents may flourish. According to Betsy Erkkila, the book narrates the story of a black woman's search for identity and power beyond her "double subjugation" (202) as a black woman living under the laws of both black and white patriarchy.

In Annie Allen Brooks gives readers insight into her conception of black womanhood. Annie Allen reveals her rebellious nature at the beginning of the book "Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood." In the first poem of the section "the birth in a narrow room," Annie (the narrator) alludes to the sense of entrapment and confinement that a black girl, as well as a black woman, has to face in her life and poses a possible question concerning the black girl's lack of "place and space" in the existing social system that baby Annie might ask when she grows up: "How pinchy is my room! /

how can I breathe! I am not anything and I have got/ Not anything or anything to do!" (Black 83). Throughout the childhood and girlhood section, Annie's sense of inquisitiveness and indomitable spirit prompts that "There was somewhat of something other," and this sense urges her to question her mother's teachings to be grateful to God's blessings, domesticity, marriage, and resignation. However, this rebellious spirit is overtaken by the romantic idea of love and fascinating dreams of handsome prince. As a young woman, she indulges in the dreams of a prince and they have muted Annie's "inner voice" for "something other." In the "appendix to *Anniad*," she attains the insight into the realities of life, and she cries out, "O! Mother, mother where is happiness" (Black 112) and this utterance can be seen as the transition from romance to reality. This cry of agony is an enunciation of self-realization.

The central section of the poem, "The *Anniad*," is a mock-heroic poem. Brooks applies this poetic form to expose the racial, color, and sexual discrimination in Annie's society and the frivolousness of white romantic tales of handsome and brave princes and the beautiful maidens waiting for them: "Watching for the paladin / Which no woman ever had," (Black 99). It also reveals the tragedy of the black woman's situation as victim of the white myth of beauty, which both black and white have adopted as their standard, and they disdain and reject her because of her color and race. In "the *Anniad*," we can see the frustration and anger of the black heroine for the unattainable standards of beauty as defined by the white culture: "Think of thaumaturgic lass/ Looking in her looking-glass/ At the unembroidered brown; / Printing bastard roses there;/ Then emotionally aware/ Of the black and boisterous hair,/ Taming all that anger down." (Blacks 100)

Annie's tamed down anger reflects Brooks' own anger against an impossible ideal of white female beauty that is the criterion accepted and recognized by black and white men alike. We again feel the disappointment of a black woman when a "man of tan," the "paladin" enters her life, with the preconceived image of male "dominion." He comes with the mind which is already infected by intraracial color discrimination that prefers light color to black and that depreciates Annie's "sweet and chocolate" womanhood.

"The Anniad" describes the conflict between Annie's romantic notions-dreams of fairy tale's love and marriage, and the realities of practical life, where the romance ends and tragic drama begins--her grief begins with the agony of the separation, when her husband leaves for war, returns to her but he has lost his manly power, wants it again:

With his helmet's final doff  
Soldier lifts his power off.  
Soldier bare and chilly then  
Wants his power back again. (Black 103)

He wants his power back, so that he may regain his dignity. The paladin leaves her again, this time, for "a maple banshee," but finally comes back again to Annie to die of his "overseas disease."

After all these sufferings, traumas, and setbacks, comes a change in Annie. This change indicates Annie's attainment of self-realization and self-consciousness, and her desire for an alternative system. Now she is coming out of the old conservative values imparted by her mother and fascination of Anglo-American mythology of romantic love. She experiences this epiphany when Annie cries out, "Oh mother, mother, where is

happiness?" in an "Appendix to The Anniad" (Black 113). From now on, Annie, the self-defined and self-conscious mother, will adopt the voice of struggle—protest that is framed in Biblical and militant diction. This development in Annie's voice also marks the shift from the third-person, mock-heroic language of "Anniad" to the first-person black female voice of a socially and politically conscious mother. Annie finds her own voice and speaks in "black female expression" only after she extricates herself from old conservative values taught by her mother and white mythologies, and she visualizes the changed system that is conducive to her children. Brooks realized that without finding a voice of her own, no change or improvement can come to a woman's life. Much later, in 1980s, bell hooks, a prominent black feminist theorist, points out in her book, "Talking Back," the necessity of "finding a voice" as a "metaphor for self-transformation" (12). With attainment of voice, Annie not only acquires the identity but also gains "a source of self-actualizing power and social vision" (Erkkila 204). It is not by chance that the transformation in Annie comes after she has become a mother. We see the same kind of transformation in Maud in the novel, *Maud Martha*, (1953) who also attained the power of articulation when she becomes a mother. In most of her early poems, the mothers have voice and they subvert and destabilize the conventions and traditions through their utterances.

Brooks' display of her erudition and mastery in technical skill in "The Anniad" is what Houston Baker Jr. calls "mastery of form" (33), through which African American writers create their own voices. On the other hand, the mock epic provides a shield or a cover to satirize without the fear of any reaction or retaliation from the main stream

readers, as well as critics. Brooks hides the sting in her satirical voice by covering it with moral tone and aesthetic qualities. Brooks' targets of satire are not individuals or communities; but her aim is to subvert the institutions and agencies that are responsible for oppression and injustice in society. Hers is a mild and imperceptible satire without malice or cynicism. The aim of her satire is to expose the evils and vices in society so as to rectify them.

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. As Betsy Erkkila describes, "Thus, the book that began enmeshed in what Brooks called the 'mysteries and magic of technique' ends as a call to black action that anticipates the more direct and hortatory voice of the female preacher and orator in her later verse" (206). In Annie Allen, we can hear the powerful voice of a mother who is challenging the injustices and inequalities in the society and the message:

Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.

Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late for having first to  
civilize a space

Wherein to play your violin with grace.” (Black 118)

This call to “civilize a space” is tantamount to creating a new system or a new environment so that they may create music and harmony with “grace.” It foretells the black feminist ideology of 1970s and militancy in the African American women of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A long time before the rise of black feminism in the last quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Brooks realized that black women need the voice and consciousness, as well as to change their role from ‘make’ to ‘maker’ to assert their identity as black women and to transform their denigrated images and effectively convey their feelings. Brooks never claims herself to be a feminist, but her ideas of black womanhood, her concept of the role and place of women in the society anticipate the black feminist movement. She, in fact, is one of the few women who have given voice, subjective position, and central roles to black women in African American social, cultural, economic, and political life in 1940s-50s. The women in Brooks’ works are indomitable, strong willed, and diligent. They should be admired for attempting to get the most out of their essentially narrow and occasionally drab lives. Whatever their shortcomings, Brooks’ women, particularly her mothers have asserted themselves stoically, without asking questions or whimpering. It may be that they have a deeper understanding of modern life than any of their privileged sisters; perhaps, they are the only ones who understand the secret of survival and the meaning of dignity and self-defense.

The most prominent voice and image in Brooks’ work is that of the mother. In fact, Brooks gives a new dimension of struggle to black women through the voice of the

mothers in her works. Brooks' mothers give new consciousness and guidance, not only to the women of her generation, but also to coming generations of black women who have proved that they are the daughters of Brooks by the dint of their unprecedented achievements in every field of life, especially in the field of literature. They have transformed their image from chattel slaves, prostitutes, and sex objects to Noble laureate, Pulitzer Prize winners, top ranking businesspersons and politicians. The dreams of gaining a respectable place in the society, and the desire to prove their worth come from Brooks' poor, lowly mothers, who voice and articulate their dreams, aspirations, ambitions, as well as their apprehensions and anxieties boldly and clearly. Almost all the important messages, radical ideas, awareness of one's identity, and the moral courage to take pride in one's race, color, and role have been conveyed through the speeches and utterances of Brooks' mothers. The progress in Brooks' poetic career can be judged by the growth in the role and stature of her mothers. The voices of the mothers in "the mother," *A Street in Bronzeville*(1945) and "The Boy Died in My Alley"(1975) show the shift from individual to communal voice and individual awareness to collective awareness. Brooks very subtly uses her women, particularly the mothers, in classical forms that she skillfully transforms to serve her purposes, in order to highlight the anger, struggle, protest, and subversion of the predominant social and political culture. By using speeches and utterances of women and mothers in transformed classical poetic forms, Brooks is trying to reconfigure a new identity for African American women and a new value system in which they will be able to live with respect and dignity.

The study of Brooks' woman Characters, particularly the mothers, can help the Pakistani students, who are interested in rise and growth of the Black Feminism and exploring the social, psychological, political, and economic problems being faced by African American women. The inclusion of Brooks in the syllabi of Pakistani academic institutions will be a good addition because it will enable Pakistani students to understand American literature from cross-cultural and multi-national and social contexts. It may also render a new dimension and vision to the students who are exploring feminism in international perspective. Brooks' woman characters can serve the Pakistani students of feminism to analyze and understand the social, economic, and moral problems that are being faced by Pakistani women and their causes in broader context.

CHAPTER III  
TRADITIONS TRANSFORMED: FORMS OF PROTEST  
IN THE EARLY POETRY OF BROOKS

Despite Gwendolyn Brooks' belief that art is inherently political, she has always used classical and American poetic forms for her own political ends. In her early works, she has addressed such social and political issues as blackness, oppression of womanhood, and poverty. Her poetry is characterized by black political-struggle, resistance, protest, and subversion from her first to her final work. An example of her usage of classical poetic forms for political ends would be the manner in which she uses the ballad and sonnet forms, with some modifications, to adopt a parodic voice in order to destabilize the conventional and accepted values. Brooks also uses Anglo-American literary device of the anti-hero to subvert preexisting identity of African American women. Almost all of her female characters, particularly, the mothers, are anti-heroes. Brooks does this as a challenge to the traditional concepts of hero and heroism, so as to create a new image for black women, as well as to subvert social and moral systems that stifle their ambitions and aspiration. Brooks' poetry exemplifies the effective use of classical poetic forms for political purposes, and she managed to do so without sacrificing the aesthetic value of her works. Brooks manages to skillfully maintain the balance between aesthetics and politics in her poetry, thus proving herself to be a true master of her trade, as well as a paragon of social and political awareness.

Like Gwendolyn Brooks, Pakistani woman writers, also use traditional Urdu poetic forms with some modification in themes and diction to subvert the preexisting identity and ideas relating to women, as well as to lodge their protest against gender and class oppression. Feminist poets in Pakistan frame their new, distinctively feminine and political voice and defiant expression in innovative poetic forms. The body of work that they have produced reflects their struggle, self-awareness, self-respect, and desire for change. They are using transformed traditional poetic forms as an agency to challenge the restrictive choice that are allotted to women and gender discrimination. They are articulating their feelings and opinions on once prohibited subjects for them to express openly, such as gender discrimination, female sexuality, politics, and social issues. The writing of Pakistani feminists is, as Kishwar Naheed remarked in an interview with Rakhshanda Jalil for the Indian daily The Hindu (4/11/2001), an attempt to redefine the man-woman relationship. In fact, this redefinition of the relation amounts to destabilizing and demolishing the culture and value systems that have depicted women as timid and frightened creatures that can be led by nose. The image of woman that emerges from the writings of Pakistani feminists is a woman who is pragmatic in approach to life, who does not allow men or circumstances to push her around, and who has indomitable will to resist oppression and injustice.

Pakistani feminist poets usually use classical poetic forms such as *Nazm* and *Ghazal* to destabilize and challenge the identity and status conferred on them by narrow minded religious scholars and male chauvinists. A nazm is “a well organized, logically evolving poem where each individual verse serves the need of the central concept or

theme of the poem”( [Urdu Poetry Archive](#)). The nazm is traditionally used for narrative, descriptive, didactic or satirical purposes which adopt an objective voice. There is a long-standing tradition of utilizing the long Urdu nazm as an instrument of social and moral reform in the past by the old masters. Though a nazm is traditionally written in rhymed verse, nazm is also written in unrhymed verse, or even in free verse. Poets of the nazm are therefore free to adopt any metrical arrangement that suits their subject or mood.

The nazm gives freedom to the poet to choose the themes and metrical arrangements according to his or her emotional and psychological conditions, but the ghazal restricts their choice because the ghazal has rigid rules which must be observed. A ghazal is according to K.C. Kanda, a collection of couplets (*shers* or *ashaar*) which follow strict rules, for example: every ghazal must have a *matla*. A *matla* is the first sher of a ghazal, and both lines of the sher must end in the *radeef*, the word or phrase that is repeated at the end of the second line in every couplet. The ghazal is a short poem, generally of seven, nine or at most, of a dozen couplets in the same meter. It always opens with a rhyming couplet. Its main theme has been love. According to Professor Gilani Kamran, the love that is celebrated in the ghazal is “mystical love”, but Kanda is of the opinion that it can be “earthy or ethereal.” Kanda further states that the ghazal treats the theme of love, “because of the exigencies of its form, in a characteristically condensed and suggestive manner, with the aid of images and allusions, without stating its case directly or in detail.” Despite the fact that the scope of traditional ghazal was very narrow and restrictive that one feels that it may have the potentials to serve the larger interests of life and society, but the ghazal, in the hands of the master-poets, has

proved its potentials to deal with the whole range of human experience. Pakistani feminist Urdu poets also transform the contents of the *ghazal* and use it to voice their struggle against and subversion of the predominant systems and culture.

Pakistani feminist poets, like Brooks, who applies restrictive forms of poetry, such as the sonnet, and relatively less rigid forms, such as the ballad, use the *ghazal*, which has rigid rules of length and the discipline of the rhyming order and the 'nazm' which is not bound by the restriction of length, or by the strict observant of the rhyming order. Pakistani feminist poets effectively use the ghazal form despite its brevity and suggestiveness. They clearly express their message and ideas in just two lines. This ability to compress their message and ideas gives them added advantage for they can convey their subversive messages without offending the male authoritative voice, for they are not addressing directly, rather they use suggestive diction. The 'nazm' enables them to articulate their view points in a more discursive style, and enables them make a more profound and minute exploration of its themes. Pakistani students, as well as serious readers, are attuned to the practice of transforming the classical poetic forms for political resistance, social change, or subversive purposes in feminist poetry. In this way, Brooks and her poetic style would not be unusual or strange for Pakistani students of Urdu and English poetry.

One of the salient features of Brooks' poetry is the tension that she creates between aesthetics of classical forms and the politics that we find in new Negro poetry. The aesthetics of classical forms is often associated with the standards of the dominant culture that is notably characterized by elitism, academy and white domination, while the

politics of "New Negro" poetry is marked by resistance, subversion, and protest. Houston Baker Jr., in his book, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, defines a term, which he coined himself, "mastery of form" (33), which is meant to signify an agency through which African-Americans can find or create a voice for themselves. It also helps to transform African-American folk literary forms into art forms that are recognizable in white mainstream culture and literary criteria. In her work, Brooks bends and molds classical forms and blends them with Afro-American literary forms. She also has great control over her poetic diction, which is a fine mixture of Standard English, French and Latinized phrases, black colloquial idioms, and womanist vocabulary. She is particular about aesthetic quality in her poetry but her aestheticism is a subtle amalgam of black aesthetics acquired from blues forms, other black folk traditions, and the aestheticism of western forms and culture. The aesthetic values that she envisaged in her poetry is Afro-American, i.e. it is neither purely black nor white, but rather a fine blending of black folk and spiritual values and the forms and traditions of western literature. However, she does not take refuge in the leafy world of the nightingale or in the "fair attitude" of the Grecian Urn, rather her poetry is steeped in the mundane, sordid, unpleasant and ugly realities and experiences of ghetto life.

Although, in her commentary, Brooks speaks of beauty and truth as her aims in the creation of poetry, the reader can observe that she does not usually abide by the conventional standards of beauty. George E. Kent, Brooks biographer, in his article, "Aesthetic Values in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks," also points out that such qualities are not necessarily qualities of the aesthetic object or situation, but qualities of the

aesthetic experience afforded by the form when it is closely engaged. It means that for Brooks, the fusion of the reader with the work of art in an act of total perception is the ultimate source of beauty and truth. Thus, the primary aesthetic value of a given poem is in the act of visualizing and hearing it. Brooks' vision of aestheticism may be described as a subtle blending of modernist depiction of modern life particularly that we find in T. S. Eliot's poems, the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and the "Waste Land," and the themes and strains that we find in African American folk poetry. Hence, her aesthetic vision differs from that of both the black and white traditional concept. The aesthetic qualities that we find in Brooks works are a realistic and conscientious "imitation" of the qualities and conditions of the people, objects, and circumstances that she comes across as a sensitive poet. Kent defines the concept of imitation that he finds in Brooks poetry, as "the creative and imaginative engagement of values, either actual or possible, in the range of circumstances stirring the artist's mind to action" (Mootry and Smith 30). The circumstances stirring the artist's mind to action are the problems of identity, poverty, oppression, and the sense of exile created by the social, cultural, and political systems of America. Brooks' efforts are devoted to making the mainstream realize the existence and reality of African-Americans, as well as attempting to bring an end to the alien status that has been imposed on them by white culture. The aesthetic qualities of her poetry comes from the form, not from the object or the situation and it depends on the reader's ability to see and hear or what Kent describes as "the fusion of the reader with the work of art in an act of total perception" (31). Brooks' poetry gives the reader a range of experiences that it is possible for an individual to undergo within the human experience: beautiful and

ugly, good and bad, banal and sublime, happy and sad. Brooks' poetry is a reflection of the circumstances and experiences that African-Americans face and undergo in their every day existence. However, we cannot confine this experience to a particular community or class because it concerns a broader human experience of injustice and oppression based on gender, race, color and class. Here in lies the beauty and strength of her poetry.

From the beginning of her poetic career, Brooks has believed that art has a political function. Despite early reviewers and critics' assertion that her poetry is above race and color, we find her poetry political, the black politics, in particular, that is based on resistance against and subversion of the predominant systems, which are characterized by racial, gender, and color discrimination and injustices. Brooks' poetic career may be looked at, as Betsy Erkkila has suggested, as a struggle to negotiate the conflicting demands of aesthetics and politics. Her predecessors in the Harlem Renaissance and the Protest groups of 1930s and 1940s had already set a precedent of the impossibility of black art being divested of politics. The black writers of the Harlem Renaissance used their intellectual discourse and literary works as a vehicle to expose the lies and distortions about African-Americans and their culture by the white majority. In the 1930s-40s, the naturalistic protest school, which possessed a radical political ideology, led by Richard Wright, used African-American literature as a powerful organ of political ideology to call attention to the oppression, injustice, and inequalities of the race relations in American society. According to bell hooks, "every aesthetic work embodies the political, the ideological as part of its fundamental structure. No aesthetic work

transcends politics or ideology” (Talking Back 136). Brooks’ poetry is appreciated by mainstream critics for its aesthetic qualities, but she never loses sight of the political problems of Black Americans.

Brooks’ aesthetic qualities are primarily embedded in classical forms that she utilizes to express the feelings and experiences of black women and mothers. She chooses to write in predominantly Anglo-American forms most probably because of her education and training in modernist techniques, as well as the insight into the significance of forms that she got from the poetry workshop conducted by Inez Stark Boulton in 1941. Another factor of her choice to utilize classical forms may be the advice of James Weldon Johnson. In his reply to a letter from Brooks, he advised her to read the best of modern poets, not to imitate them but to develop the highest standards of self-criticism. The suggestion encouraged her to continue her effort to write good poetry. The dominant ideological tendency during Brooks’ formative years as a poet-1930s and 40s was characterized by a radical political ideology, as presented in Richard Wright’s The Native Son (1940), which made a furious attack on the American racial caste system, signaling a new era in the cultural dynamics of American race relations (Robert E. Washington 119-20). However, Brooks was raised in a too conservative of an environment and “reformist middle-class democracy” to be allured by Wright’s “elaborate intellectual structure (Kent 56), which is marked by Marxism, and a desire to escape from “a simple middle-class consciousness” (Kent 56). In fact, African American literature of 1930s-40s was characterized by Marxism and anti-middle class morality. It was natural for a young blooming writer brought up in a conservative family to be

influenced by classical traditions and not to be attracted to the radical ideas of Wright, as expressed in his article "Blueprint for Negro Writing". In this article, Wright attacks the African American writers who keep their writings aloof from the Negro experience and who are more interested in entertaining the white audience than a black one. He advocates Marxism and also believes that it will give a clear vision to a writer about the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. It does not mean that there was no change in her vision when her conservative values and ideas came into contact with that new radical ideas of 1930s and 40's, indeed, there were some. However, these changes were not radical, but subtle. Brooks' early poetry is an earnest effort to fuse Anglo-American traditions with African American poetic traditions. Her poetry is a fine fusion of classical poetic traditions, such as the ballad and the sonnet, and black themes, allowing her to skillfully blend blue strains and elements of folklore and black spirituals with those of classical forms.

Apart from her early training and influences, there are other factors which attracted Brooks to traditional classic forms. The use of lyric poetry to convey messages of revolution, protest and subversion is by no means a new one. It can be traced back to English Romantic poetry, as well as to her immediate predecessors. Brooks also uses traditional lyric poetry to protest and subvert systems that are outcomes of the evils of discrimination, oppression, and injustice. She adopts varieties of poetic forms, but she seems to be fascinated by the sonnet and ballad forms in the early days of her poetic career. Brooks' attraction to the sonnet can be traced to the influence of the New Negro poets, particularly Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, her immediate literary

predecessors of the Harlem Renaissance. From these poets, Brooks learned that the four-hundred-year-old popular form, the sonnet, could be used as a devastating weapon of protest and that “the inherent tensions in the sonnet's syllogistic structure could be used to argue against racism and social injustices” (Mootry and Smith 166). Gladys Margaret Williams has pointed out, that early in her career Brooks writes short, but intense poems in the manner of powerful Afro-American folk forms, which are characterized by genuineness of feeling and passion. This sensitivity to short and intense poems may have spurred her inclination toward the sonnet form, whose movement is also short and intense. Like the blues, the spirituals, and the folk seculars, the sonnet also makes their impressions quickly on mind of the audience thus create a close tie between the poet and the audience.

Brooks' penchant for innovation may be another reason for her attraction to the sonnet form. Through the ages, the sonnet form has undergone great changes in its themes, structure and rhyme scheme. The sonnet form, which originated in Italy where love was its central and quite nearly its sole theme, was used by British sonneteers for political, social, and religious purposes. It is perhaps, the flexibility of the sonnet form and presence of the provision for innovation that made Brooks adopt the form. It is something natural that the “protean” qualities of the form should appeal the sensibility of the poet who is bending and molding the forms without breaking them (Gladys Williams 216).

Brooks concentrates her attention on “imagistic compression, ironic understatement, and temporal and spatial dislocations” in her poetry especially in the

Children of the Poor sonnet sequence (Mootry and Smith 168). These features make her sonnets different from the styles of earlier sonnet writers. As Kent and other critics have pointed out, she participated in the modern poetry class and writing workshop of Inez Stark Boulton in 1941 and it supplied a systematic exposure of techniques and points of view of the modern poetry. She had been writing poetry before this, but according to Brooks herself, she had not known much about the technicalities of poetry writing. It was in this workshop that proper and mature grooming and training of her poetic talent took place. Boulton's rigid stylistic training made Brooks a somewhat difficult poet because of her tendency to merge modernist techniques and African-American traditions. Her best work, such as the sonnets from the sonnet sequence, "children of the poor," adopts not only the protest tradition of the New Negro poetry, but also the traditional and contemporary styles of European and American poets. In short, it is the flexible quality of the sonnet forms and the subtle maneuvering of these diverse and complicated traditions that provide the metaphysical quality of her verse.

Brooks, in the manner of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, incorporates profundity of thought and complexity of emotion and range of feeling into her poetry. She employs archaism and erudite diction in her sonnets. This feature of her poetry seems to be incongruous with her commonplace and apparently simple subject matter. She is well informed in literary forms, present day philosophical trends, scientific and technological advancements, social and political happenings, and emotional and psychological issues in her society. In her poetry, Brooks applies her knowledge to demonstrate metaphysical wit that is characterized by the use of syllogisms to create

harmony in apparently dissimilar ideas, for example, the comparison of hungry children to “stone” and “seed” in the sonnet “what shall I give my children?”, first shocks the readers, but when they try to understand the various connotative meanings of the imageries and link them to the conditions of the children syllogistically, they realize that they are apt expression to bring out the miseries and deprivations of the poor children. She, like the 17<sup>th</sup> century meta-physical poets, also uses uncommon and unusual language and diction that is a mixture of formal and colloquial idiom in her poetry, especially in her sonnets.

In short, a combination of thorough knowledge of the potentialities of forms well known by African-Americans and the intellectual pleasure she received from her study of the poetry written in English language and Anglo-American forms, influenced Brooks in the 1940s to adopt the sonnet form and transforms it according to the requirements of the time and situation.

Brooks uses the sonnet form, to which she adds some of the elements of African-American folk traditions, as well as the politics of Negro poetry, to cater to the needs and demands of her audience in the 1940s and 1950s. However, the remarkable thing about Brooks’ sonnets is the way in which she maintains the tension between aestheticism of poetic art and the political aspirations of African-Americans. For instance, Brooks uses the sonnet form to protest against the discrimination in the American armed forces in “Gay Chaps at the Bar”, Brooks’ first published sonnet sequence, which appears in her first collection, A Street in Bronzeville (1945). This series of 12 sonnets is based on letters written by African-American soldiers to the poet. Brooks avails this opportunity to

expose the failure of American democracy and the American dream. Each sonnet is composed in iambic pentameter with some variations of the rhyme schemes of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets. The sonnets 3, 4, and 5 are Shakespearean, the sonnet 7 is Petrarchan and the sonnets 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12 are a combination of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets forms. In such combination, the rhyme scheme of the octave is Shakespearean and that of the sestet is Petrarchan. The rhyme scheme of sonnet 1 is the variation of Petrarchan and sonnet 9 is a variation of Shakespearean pattern.

In this sequence Brooks depicts war as a tragedy that has shaken faith in American democracy and God. The mood of the sonnets is, in the beginning, one of despair, containing meditations on death, yet towards the end their tone gradually becomes aggressive. The opening sonnet, "Gay Chaps at the Bar," sets the tone for the sequence. "Bar" in the title has a variety of meanings—it can mean a place of revelry or a liquor shop, seen in another light it can be understood as relating to law, a law-court, and justice, it can also be interpreted as a racial barrier. More generally, "Bar" can be taken as the bar between life and death or we can interpret it as barrier that stands between African Americans and the achievement of American dream and the fulfillment of the promises that are made to every American in the anthem.

The first six sonnets deal with meditation on one's own death that of one's friends, and also the narrator's questions dealing with the usefulness of soldier's sacrifices. They also express nostalgia for the comfortable life and anxiety for life after the war. Melhem, while discussing the history of the work's publication, remarks that

Brooks wanted the sonnets "Piano after War" and "Mentors" to be placed together, as they both meditate on the profound change that has come after the World War II and the futility of the sacrifice of the African-American young men and women, as well as the uselessness of their premature deaths in the War. They also allude to, as Melhem has pointed out, "the lost-generation" feeling which will not allow survivors to enjoy the civilian life because they have seen and experienced how their values have been trampled and how people have killed one another, thus savagely throwing overboard all the norms and values of civilization. In the seventh sonnet, we observe a change in theme as well as tone and the sharpening of critical edge. The question in the seventh and subsequent sonnets is not death, but loss of faith in God and American democracy. Sonnet 8 describes a soldier's profound reassessment of his patriotism, addressed within the context of received beliefs. It also analyzes the unrealized claims of the anthem. From now onward, disillusionment with God slowly, mounts up, and it also extends to earthly attachments. His/Their initial despair turns into aggressive mood. The sonnet sequence ends in the collective voice of the black soldiers, as well as with notes of anxiety, fear and call to resistance: "How shall we smile, congratulate: and how Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step Of iron feet again. And again...wild" (Black 75).

Brooks' sonnets are formally quite different from earlier sonnets in her "avoidance of exact end-rhyme, employing instead near rhyme, slant rhymes, assonance, alliteration, and, on occasion, no suggestion of rhyme" (Schweik). Brooks' rhyming pattern draws our attention to the rhyming conventions of different types of sonnets. Her use of a rhyme scheme which utilizes "the not-quite rhymes," makes her works differ from a regular

Petrarchan or Shakespearean sonnet, which are symbols of high aestheticism, culture, and literature of the middle-class. Brooks' application of different sonnet forms which deliberately fail to observe conventional rhyming patterns, not only subvert the middle-class values but also makes fun of its hypocrisies and self-imposed criteria.

"Gay Chaps at the Bar" is about the war—the war abroad, as well as the war at home.

The African-American soldiers realize that although they have won the war outside of their home country, they need to continue their war at home against racism, injustice, and sexism. As Ann Folwell Stanford points out, the war was not simply being fought in Europe and the Pacific but it was also being fought at home against racism, as the sonnets are "embodying the slogan of the 'Double V' (Stanford 199) (victory abroad and victory against Jim Crow at home). Perhaps the sonnets, as Stanford claims are also prophetic warnings for they look not only back at the devastation of war, but also forward toward the revolution and rebellion that was to come in the Sixties.

Another traditional poetic form that Gwendolyn Brooks uses is the ballad. Gordon Hall Gerould, in his study of the European folk ballad notes that, "the sorrows peculiar to women serve the ballad poets . . . for some of their most poignant moments"(48). Most of the ballads found in America are based on the Anglo-Celtic ballad tradition and their popular themes are sexual struggle from the female point of view. But, under the puritan influence, the British paganist themes were replaced by themes of repentance and doom. Until the latter half of 19th century, broadside ballads, which were written by professional composers, printed on cheap paper, and sold on the streets were popular. The themes of broadside ballads typically differed from Anglo-Celtic ballads, which focus on

love affairs. American broadside ballads tended to focus on the celebration of male-dominated occupational experiences, such as logging, ranching, and mining, as well as sensational topics like disasters, murders, and tragedies. From this American tradition, black ballad tradition arose. In which, “reflecting an actual event or action with real historical characters, and where the flow of text was highlighted by an emotional mood of grief or celebration, rather than a plot line.” was represented. (Debby McClatchy)

Brooks continues the thematic aspects of the European folk ballad tradition, often infusing them with features of the black ballad; however they often contained modifications in the central characters, who are typically women, as opposed to men. Brooks adds nuance to her literary ballads through the use of additional folk elements from Afro-American spirituals and the blues tradition. Her use of the ballad reflects her desire to recover a simpler, more direct poetic form. It also reflects her belief that the poet should "vivify"(Report from Part One 146) the commonplace." Yet, as is mentioned above, Brooks goes beyond the mere imitation of ballad themes and techniques to create more varied and complex structures. In this way, as Mootry has stated that her ballads tend to be simultaneously simple and direct, as well as deeply ironic and complex, both in theme and technique. Thus by transforming the traditional ballad Brooks tries to meet the demands of her multiple audiences, those composed of readers, critics, and publishers that look for aesthetic qualities and universality, as well as the common audience that looks for familiar structures and social or moral or political messages. Mootry notes that through this process, Brooks “recovers the ballad tradition by using its themes and techniques; she reinvigorates that tradition by infusing it with new themes and variations;

and finally, she critiques the tradition by using parodic techniques” (Mootry 279). The result of this process is the exposure of prevalent, often unpleasant, ugly, and bitter truths about both black and white American society.

The central theme of "The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie" is the “pathos of interracial discrimination,” (Mootry 280) one of Brooks’ recurring themes. Mabbie is ignored or is rejected by the boy with whom she is infatuated, due to her darker complexion, and he instead befriends a girl with lighter skin. The pathos of Mabbie’s love story is that she is punished in the form of rejection by her love interest, not for any flaw of character, but suffers this mental and emotional agony solely due to the darker color of her skin. Her crime may be considered a social one, for she exists in a society which looks down upon dark complexions. Mabbie who has been waiting for her love interest outside the school gate, is left in the company of other boys and girls of dark complexion. However, the poem ends on a hopeful note, for Mabbie, as she finds the strength to redefine her identity and reconfigure a new value system, finds comfort and empowerment in the company of her new “chocolate companions”. Brooks, in her autobiography, states her thoughts on how a black woman should behave in such conditions:

She is a person in the world—with wrongs to right, stupidities to outwit, with her man when possible, on her own when not. . . . Therefore she must, in the midst of tragedy and hatred and neglect . . . mightily enjoy the readily available: sunshine and pets and children and conversation and

games and travel (tiny or large) and books and walks and chocolate cake.”

( Brooks, Report 203)

Brooks is, in fact, urging black women, or one might even say every woman, to develop resilience quality in their character that she may survive any situation and lead the life with dignity and grace. Specifically, “The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie” tells the story of seven-year-old Mabbie who falls in love with her classmate, Willie Boone. She waits for him outside the grammar school gates. But, Mabbie's "lover" slights her and opts for “a lemon-hued lynx / With sand-waves loving her brow” (Ibid). At the end of the poem, Mabbie is left to her "chocolate companions" and to her own resources: “Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart. / Mabbie on Mabbie to be” (Ibid). This message, pressing the importance of relying on one’s own resources, is one that Brooks relates to her African-American readers in a great number of her poems, and it is, generally, a recurrent theme in her works. We find the same message in her 1963 poem, “Big Bessie Throws Her Son into the Street,” in which Bessie tells her son, “You have your destiny to chip and eat. [. . .] Hunt out your own or make your own alone. / Go down the street” (Black 400).

The "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" like “The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie” deals with the themes of “white perfidy” (Melhem 39) and color discrimination based on standards of white culture which inspires African-Americans to value light color. This poem enhances the theme of “black-and-tan motif” that we find in the “ballad of chocolate mabbie”. Pearl May Lee, the narrator, tells Sammy of his preference for white

color and his distaste for black complexion, At school, your girls were the bright little girls.

You couldn't abide dark meat.

Yellow was for to look at.

Black for the famished to eat.

Yellow was for to look at.

Black for the famished to eat.

For this desire of white meat, Sammy has to pay the price with his life: “But you paid for your white arms, Sammy boy, And you didn't pay with money. You paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy, For your taste of pink and white honey,” (Black 60). In the poem, the white woman seduces the black male, and the interracial couple has sexual intercourse in her Buick, which symbolizes the white middle class. The white woman’s seduction of Sammy and her sensuous behavior is meant to portray the hypocrisy and moral aberrations in white society. The lack of justice and white perfidy are highlighted by the false accusation of rape by the white woman and the subsequent lynching of innocent Sammy by a white mob.

There is a notable change in Brooks’ narrative technique in the “Ballad of Pearl May Lee”—from the third-person narrator, a feature of the European ballad to the first-person narrator, an element of the Afro-American blues tradition. We can also notice a number of blues elements, which are masterfully blended with traditional ballad features. The sudden change in scenes and episodes in the drama of Sammy’s seduction and lynching is, on one hand, balladic and, on the other hand, it is a salient characteristic

of the blues tradition. According to Mootry, the imprisonment of Sammy reminds us of "jailhouse" blues songs, while the lamentation of Pearl May Lee in the last stanza belongs to the conventional ballad tradition. The fusion of traditional form and blues enables Brooks to address multiple audiences and to expose and satirize the double standards and false values of white society. The mixture of ballad and blues forms also helps Brooks to foreground women and their eccentric sorrow, color discrimination and suffering, both mental and physical.

"The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" differs from the first two ballads in which the central figures are women in that the main character in this ballad is a strong and powerful male figure, as one would find in the black folk ballads of Sterling Brown. However, although Rudolph Reed is the central figure in the ballad, the heroic action belongs to Rudolph's wife, who resolves to preserve her children and move them forward through resistance and struggle against oppression, discrimination, and injustice. She does so with remarkable grace and dignity. Brooks' ballad tells the story of a black hero who becomes the victim of apartheid, social, and political injustices. In this poem, she uses the ballad form as a vehicle to send a strong political message about the consequences of political and social injustices and oppression.

Rudolph Reed takes desperate action because he expects significant social change to result from political solidarity between two communities. He expects that political transition would be followed by changes in social values. However, his racist white neighbors, who refuse to tolerate, let alone form a positive relationship with, a black family, react with hostility—throwing stones at the Reed's home and

even directly injuring Reed's daughter, Mabel. Maddened by the spilt blood of his daughter, Reed goes out to avenge his daughter's injury:

Then up did rise our Rudolph Reed  
And pressed the hand of his wife,  
And went to the door with a thirty-four  
And a beastly butcher knife. (Black 378)

After hurting four white men, he is killed by the white neighbors who kick his corpse spitefully and call him "nigger".

In the final stanza and the last scene of Rudolph Reed's drama, we find his "oaken" wife changing "the bloody gauze." According to Melhem, the mother's act of changing the bandage signifies the African-American women and mothers' stoic and determined attitude, which anticipates future struggle on the part of the African-American community, whose strength largely comes from the traditional stoicism and struggle that is here associated with black mothers. Melhem remarks that the strength of the mother in the ballad is "more potent than the rocks that have been thrown" (Melhem 115). The poem ends with the image of the mother nursing her daughter, which gives the impression that she is ready to face the challenge posed by her hostile neighbors and is prepared to shoulder the responsibilities that society and circumstances have laid on her

Here, Brooks destabilizes conventional definitions of heroism, honor, and bravery. According to traditional ideas of hero and heroism, Rudolph Reed is a heroic figure and his action is of heroic dimension for like the traditional heroes of

African American ballad, he is strong and powerful man and his action is a heroic action, as it is taken to avenge his daughter's wound. For many readers and critics Reed's action may be a heroic deed but, I think the action of his wife is more heroic than Reed's for she resolves to live with dignity, face life with grace and shoulder the responsibilities of the family after the death of her husband. It is the wife who bravely faces the hostile neighbors with grace and dignity, because she not only tries to heal the wound inflicted by the society and apparently, is ready to assume new roles that the society and circumstances have imposed on her. She, unlike her husband, does not resort to violence but bravely faces the problems. Her action is a sublime action because she is nurturing and preserving the lives of her children. In fact she is leading the life in creative fashion for she is enhancing the life, not destroying it: she is a preserver, not a destroyer.

Readers and critics may, of course, interpret Brooks' poems according to their own understandings, cultural background, and social situations; however, if we look at her works objectively, we find that they are primarily black in subject matter and thematically. From the beginning of her career, Brooks' concern has been the problems and sufferings of the down and out African-American community. She expresses her anger at the injustices and maltreatment meted out to the poor blacks of the ghettos in larger American cities, as well as the common people of the street. She protests the oppression of and discrimination against African-Americans in general and black women, mothers, wives, lovers, and professionals, in particular. Moreover, she subverts the systems that limit their

choices and the assigned perverted images and degrading roles of black women. Her works aim at giving a powerful voice to black women, transforming the conventional images of black women imposed upon them by white culture. Brooks was writing at a pivotal time in African-American history, as they were entering a new phase of their social, political, cultural, and literary life. It was a time of great transition in American society and culture. Brooks realized that African-Americans must make integral changes in themselves and their self-image if they want to transform their fate. In “Big Bessie throws her son in to the street” Bessie advises her son:

You have your destiny to chip and eat.

Be precise.

With something better than candles in the eyes.

(Candles are not enough.)

At the root of the will, a wild inflammable stuff.” (Black 400)

Almost all the messages of change, resistance, and protest stem from the female characters in Brooks’ early works and most of her female characters, particularly mothers, are unconventional and non-conformist.

Brooks adopts and adapts the traditional classical poetic forms, as well as free verse to convey her messages, ideas, and thoughts. She often parodies the content by using these forms, particularly, those in sonnet and ballad forms, to make her readers, both black and white, realize the restriction of choice that African-American men and women have to face and the injustices, discrimination, and oppression perpetrated

against them in white society. "Parody", according to The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, belongs to "the genus of satire and emphasizes its etymology as 'a song sung beside' a serious or tragic work, in order to provide comic relief through a 'comic imitation' that either heightens the original's chief characteristics or distorts them to deflate the original's pomposity" (John Gery 46). One of the main features of parody is to employ a serious style to express a subject that is odd with the style, in this way it disturbs the balance of form and content. Brooks' parody combines satirical format with tension created between its content and expression. The tension in her poetry between form and subject, especially when they are incongruous with one another, enhances parodic effect. Brooks establishes a formal distance in her poems composed from within the black community in order to devise a parodic voice "that ultimately suspends overall characterization of race for both black and white readers, thereby opening up new linguistic and ideological space." (Gery 45) In other words, Brooks, in her works groups together racial, as well as gender, identities, despite the fact that she gives them distinct and visible shapes and properties. This destabilization of the identity sabotages stereotyping of race, color, and sex. In fact, Brooks exposes and then subverts imposed or constructed identities. To this end Brooks effectively applies the traditional figure of anti-hero. Brooks also uses insignificant, ordinary, unpleasant, and ugly subjects as material for her poetry, not only to give respectability and recognition to black ghetto life and experience, but also to subvert accepted ideas and values so that she might weaken or destroy the conventional and received assumptions relating to the subjects (African Americans) of her poems. Thus, parody creates a foundation for changes in social,

political, and moral values that not only desperately needed, but also, through her work, make them clearly visible.

Judith Butler, in the last chapter of her book, *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* explains that the power of parody comes from the realization of the transient nature of individual identities and concepts that are being parodied—social, political, gender, or racial identities, as well as the insight that an identity can be destabilized: hence, a entirely new identity can be established, a reconfiguration of cultural values is made possible. Butler reaches a conclusion, after thoroughly critiquing the analyses of sexuality and ideology by different critics. She also puts forth a radical idea of gender identity after deconstructing the theories on gender identities that states that sexual identity is nothing more than a socially defined concept made up of practices, which are repeated until they become recognized and accepted ideological and physical norms:

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow, rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 140)

After establishing the fact that gender identity emerges only through repetition of particular and meaningful acts, not from "nature," she implies that "intervention into this ritualistic repetition" (Butler 146). of identity can initiate ideological and conceptual

change She locates the social function of parody as Gery has pointed out in the disruption of the dominant practices of gender and by extension race. Gery also remarks that according to Butler, while parody may also express a sense of the exclusion of the marginal from positions of power, it also exposes the lack of any "preexisting identity" for, as well as the "regulatory fiction" (141) of, the dominant gender's role. What one finds in Brooks' early poetry is the exposure of the ephemeral nature of "pre-existing identity" for gender and race, as well as the myth of superiority of race and color and the dominant gender's role. This realization of the transient nature of the identities and roles assigned to African American women and men enables Brooks in the 1940s-50s to subvert, destabilize, and finally transform the ideas and value system that make African Americans women invisible and impose the identity of the creation of white culture and ideology. Butler believes that successful parody can throw "all forms of identity into question, if not into chaos, by generating "a subversive laughter in the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects" (146). Brooks, long time before Butler and the black white Feminists of the later half of the 20th century realizes that parody could be used as an agency to help reconfigure the social identity of women. This sense and realization of the role that parody could play, forms Brooks' voice in her early poems, like "Sadie and Maud", "Rites for Cousin Vit", and "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi: Meanwhile Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon." In this respect, Brooks, through her usage of parody, seems to anticipate Butler and, in turn, the ideas of Butler and the Black Feminist writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century appear to be the

reverberation of Brooks' voice, with some variations, created by distance of time and space. Brooks adopts parodic voice in most of her early poems, particularly in the poems in which women/mothers are central characters, and also in her long poem, "In the Mecca" to subvert and destabilize the preexisting ideas and values. She parodies not the form but the contents and through her anti-heroes, who are mostly black women and mothers. The parodic voice that Brooks adopt through her women and mothers in her early poetry is a agency to satirize the preexisting systems and destabilize the preconceived ideas of African American women. The parodic voice in Brooks' poetry anticipates black feminist ideas of the 1960s-80s. One of the salient features of black feminism is the need to find an effective voice of black women, in order to articulate their identity and to subvert the hegemony of white social and cultural values. Brooks knows that a change in social arrangement cannot become effective without changing mentalities of both blacks and whites. She adopts parodic voice and anti-hero figure to convey her message so that the mainstream readers should not be offended and her black audience may comprehend these grave and serious ideas in a light mood. Moreover, parody and parodic voice are used by Anglo-American poets to point the follies, weaknesses, and evils in the society so as to create the awareness among the readers. When the society realize their injustices and oppression it has been inflicting on a particular class or gender, it is easy to change the attitude of people as well as the system. Brooks also uses parodic voice to make the society (both black and white) realize the discrimination, injustice, and double standards it has been practicing, so that she may change the attitudes of the mainstream toward black women and She realizes that the first

thing that needs to be done is to call into question the epistemology that gives privilege to males, a particular race, and lighter color within a given race. She challenges the delimitations of knowledge defined by patriarchal systems and “calls for efforts to expand cognitive capacities rather than accept principled limits to what can be known” (Gertrude Hughes 395). The main theme of Brooks’ works is the removal of imposed ideas about African-Americans based on propaganda of Western colonialism and imperialism which branded dark nations as savage, ignorant, and soulless beings born to be ruled by and be put to the service white, Christian nations. She attempts to reverse the white tendency of equating "black" with terms of negative connotation. The aim of these epistemological reforms envisaged by Brooks is to clear all recognized ideas and beliefs of obscurity which equate "black" with inarticulateness, ignorance, and inferiority and “white as enlightenment” and superiority (Gertrude Hughes 395).

One device that Brooks adopts to dispel this accepted social concept is her usage of the figure of the anti-hero in her poetry. An anti-hero usually hails from the underclass of society and is usually misunderstood his/her roles in the society. He/she is always branded as rogue or unwanted person in a community or a society. The predominant and privileged classes of the community or the society condemn and ostracize him/her by labeling him/her as a picaro, seducer, or an ineffectual person, but he/she may be a hero or a savior for common people. On the other hand a conventional hero “represents the interests of his people and, honored by them, leads them into a future that his exploits have secured for all” (Gertrude Hughes 384). Brooks uses classical poetic forms, in which she depicts her characters, both male and female, as anti-heroes that disturb

traditions that are degrading to blacks and, particularly, black women. Brooks challenges conventional definitions of heroism, honor, and bravery, by giving the central role to poor African-American men and women. To the mainstream white audience these lowly and humble characters may be anti-heroes, but to impoverished urban black audience these looked down upon persons are heroes and their actions are heroic. In this way, “anti-heroic poetry can portray seriously what is traditionally dismissed” (Gertrude Hughes 384). In short, it is more accurate to say that to white audience these characters would be anti-heroes Whereas to black impoverished, urban communities, these characters and their actions are not anti heroic; rather they vaporize them as well as their actions.

Most of Brooks women, particularly, mothers are written as anti-heroes and their adventures and actions are a combination of comedy and pathos. Brooks’ representation of ordinary black women fighting and challenging the world through small, but courageous and meaningful acts of social resistance and defiance is intended to bring about a transformation of traditional male definitions of heroism. However, while she carves a place for heroism in the domestic and maternal sphere, she also relates heroism to acts of subversion, protest, and resistance, which are paradoxically expressed through love, nurture, and social provision. Thus Brooks ideas of heroism place it squarely within African American experience of bondage and subjugation. For Brooks, heroism means persistent forms of resistance that maintain black dignity and subjectivity.

Brooks uses the ballad and sonnet forms, making sure to conscientiously observe their mechanical rules and other elements of technical detail, in order to parody the work’s content. That is to say that she applies diction and subject matter which lacks

congruity with the form. Through this incongruity between form and expression, she exposes disorder and instability in her society. Through parody, she shows the sense of entrapment in and restrictions of choice in the life of African-American women, and men. With the help of the figure of the anti-hero, she challenges accepted epistemology.

"Sadie and Maud," a short ballad, at first seems to tell a simple story of two sisters. According to Gladys Williams, "this story is seemingly told by a child who appears to be skipping rope outside an old house where one of two sisters, Maud, still lives. The story is the history of the family told in light rhythms" (Mootry and Smith 209). The deeper question of the tale of Sadie and Maud is whether the story narrated in the poem is the story of two particular sisters or if it is the story of every young African-American woman that belongs to the ghetto. If we closely study the issues that are being raised in this poem, or, in fact, any of Brooks' poems, we find almost the same amount of problems being faced by the women belonging to underclass of the African-American community: if there is any difference, it is the matter of degree not kind. John Gery states that "Sadie and Maud" like "the ballad of chocolate Mabbie" uses parody in a subtle way to reveal ironies in the social options available to a black woman from the ghetto. Brooks writes about two sisters with distinct temperaments, appearances, and life styles. Maud conforms to conservative values of morality, whereas Sadie leads a more licentious life. However, both of them have restricted choices in the presence of social constrictions, especially meant for African-American women:

Maud went to college.

Sadie stayed at home.

Sadie scraped life  
With a fine-tooth comb.  
She didn't leave a tangle in.  
Her comb found every strand.  
Sadie was one of the livingest chits  
In all the land.  
Sadie bore two babies  
Under her maiden name.  
Maud and Ma and Papa  
Nearly died of shame.  
Every one but Sadie  
Nearly died of shame.  
When Sadie said her last so-long  
Her girls struck out from home.  
(Sadie had left as heritage  
Her fine-tooth comb.)  
Maud, who went to college,  
Is a thin brownmouse.  
She is living all alone  
In this old house. (Black 32)

Apart from the clear difference between Sadie and Maud, that of the contrast in personality, life style, and vision of life but also a kind of contest between them. When

one judges their achievements by conventional standards, we feel that despite her defiance of the social norms and recognized moral values that urges her to abide by the ideas of good woman, Sadie seems successful when compared to the colorless, drab, and lonely life of Maud: "Maud, who went to college, / Is a thin brown mouse. / She is living all alone / In this old house."

Yet the parodic application, not only of the ballad structure, but of the characterizations also, according to Gery, makes the reader skeptical about the moral message and the problem of choice in the milieu in which Sadie and Maud breathe. The metaphor of the "fine-tooth comb" with which Sadie pulls out "every strand" of life, refers to her unrestrained sexual passion and her experience of giving birth, and is later in the poem described as her only "heritage." In fact, this metaphor of "fine-tooth comb" implies lack or the dearth of spiritual experience, not physical or financial hardships. Her farewell to her two daughters, her "last so-long" symbolizes losses, not only in Sadie's life, but also in those of "Maud and Ma and Papa." We can feel the change in Sadie's daughters, the receivers of her heritage, the daughters do not follow their mother's precedence of staying at home, rather, they decide to leave, like Maud, who has left home for college. The last line of the poem describes Maud as "a thin brown mouse." It describes not only her color tone but also her physical structure that indicates the lack of vigor and vitality, but she survives Sadie, who apparently leads a vibrant life. The last line also gives the impression that despite Maud's attitude towards sex conforms to the middle class morality, she is not appreciated by the society for she is not integrated into the mainstream of the society as she has to live alone in "the old house." Brooks seems to

be telling her readers through both Sadie and Maud, that in a society where there are few alternatives in choice for blacks and which is guided by stringent social and moral laws, that restrict human actions and confine human pleasures to certain patterns will not appreciate any action that does not conform to its social and moral norms. Maud's action of leaving the house and going to college does not conform to the middle class morality that according to Mance, it is not becoming of good women to leave their house for work or on any errand. Maud ignores this social value and goes to college. She has to pay the price for it in the form of isolation from the society and living alone in the big old house. However, if we look at both the characters in the context of the prevailing social and moral values, we find that both Sadie and Maud have opposed the accepted social and moral values, as Sadie has contested the dominant sexual norms and Maud has overlooked the new American middle-class social values that insist on domesticity as the mark of the "True Woman" (Mance 1).

The actions of Sadie and Maud destabilize middle class moralities by blatantly defying them. The white middle class may consider their actions bad, but for an African-American reader, it is a gesture of defiance and subversion of false standards imposed on their society by the predominant culture. Brooks' intention, in presenting them as such, is to destabilize middle class values and to bring to light the hypocrisies of the existing social and moral criteria. In this society neither Sadie nor Maud is able to establish an identity that is truly appreciated by it. The poem does not indicate the racial identity of Sadie and Maud, until the end of the poem, where it describes Maud as "a thin brown mouse" (Black 32). Yet, the reader knows that both the women belong to the African-

American community because of the character portrayal of the sisters and because of its hints at the restricted and limited choices that they have in their lives. Gery remarks that To be either Sadie or Maud is, to use Butler's terms, to be falsely "naturalized" by one's gender. The parodic structure of the poem unveils the "regulatory fiction"(141) of their contest, even as it draws attention to their dilemma.

A casual reader who is not prepared, as Kathryn V. Lindberg has stated in her article, "Whose Canon? Gwendolyn Brooks: Founder at the Center of the 'Margins'," "to hear music in the heteroglossia that assaults the urban eye and ear" (285) may miss the rhythm of anger, pain, subversion, and reconfiguration of new identity. An ordinary reader is misled by the simple narration, set in the manner of a nursery rhyme rhythm, and is swept away by its simple, yet deceptive music, a trait typical of Negro folk songs and spirituals. Consequent upon, the reader misses the tragedy of African-American women concealed in this simple artless form.

Brooks, like Shakespeare and John Donne, uses the sonnet form to parody traditional ideas and satirize conventional concepts by adopting a parodic and satirical voice in this traditionally serious and restricted poetic form: thus, she creates incongruity between form and content. In her parodies, Brooks destabilizes the social and moral conventions of the white middle class by depicting and glorifying so called 'wicked women.' "The Rites for Cousin Vit" is the poem that celebrates and valorizes black female "blues figures who wickedly defy the social and gender rituals of polite and white middle-class society" (Erkkila 195). It is true that Cousin Vit throws middle class moralities into confusion, as well as blatantly defying them, but her actions can not be

considered to have been done “wickedly.” For the white middle class, it may have been done “wickedly”, but for an African-American reader, it is a gesture of defiance and subversion of false standards imposed on their society by the predominant culture. Brooks’ intention, in presenting her as such, is to destabilize middle class values and to bring to light the hypocrisies of the existing social and moral criteria. The incongruity between the sonnet form and the content of the poem exposes the dichotomy between white society, with its stringent social and moral laws, which delimit human actions and confine human pleasures to certain patterns, and black society, where individuals like Cousin Vit’s strive to live life fully and intensely. The sonnet begins the description of Bit’s funeral: “Carried her unprotesting out the door. / Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can't hold her,/That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her” (Black 125). Vit is so robust and full of life that even death cannot contain her. The story of Vit is the celebration of life. Melhem points out that her name is derived from the Latin word “vita”, meaning life. Vit is true to the etymology of her name. Even in death, Vit demonstrates vigor and vitality of life.

She is so full of life that it is well nigh impossible for her to survive in a world of "stuff and satin aiming to enfold her". It is the world which does not forgive any one who violates its social and moral norms and extracts “contrition” for any breach of its social and moral codes. Vit’s world also locks its people in social and moral confinement. It “bolts” on living and dead alike. The playful mood and satirical tone of the opening line of the second quatrain “Oh oh. Too much. Too much,” seems to be incongruous with the occasion, but “Too much. Too much” reminds the reader of the second line of the first

quatrain, “Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can't hold her.” Vit is so large that “life” as defined by white society cannot accommodate her presence. This poem also censures society for its indifferent and cold attitude and for its lack of effort to understand Vit’s life and that of those like her. The parodic tone of the sonnet reminds us of Shakespeare's parodic Sonnet 130 "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," in which the poet parodies the traditional theme of the love sonnets and in that the poet eulogizes his beloved’s beauty. In this sonnet, Brooks is apparently, celebrating Vit’s vibrant life, but in reality she is subverting the social and moral values that render African-American women invisible.

The sestet gives a more elaborate description of what Vit's world contained during her life. In the second quatrain, the narrator describes the kind of life Vit has been leading before her death: “She rises in the sunshine. There she goes,/Back to the bars she knew and the repose/ In love-rooms and the things in people's eyes.” The first four lines of the sestet provides a detailed description of Vit’s activities in the above mentioned places after rising “in the sunshine”: “Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss./Slops the bad wine across her shantung, talks /Of pregnancy, guitars and bridgework, walks/In parks or alleys.” Her actions and dress indicates that she is going against the accepted mores laid down for “good women” by the predominant culture. Her dress is an offensive dress of women of pleasure--those usually found in nightclubs and juke joints. Brooks deliberately uses the image of Vit slopping “the bad wine across her shantung,” in order to shock her white middle class audience who confers invisibility to black women. Vit’s actions and dress make her conspicuous and attract the attention of the audience, thus

making her visible to the society who does not recognize her presence: in this way Vit's social, moral, and economic problems will be brought to light and the society can understand its roles in making Vit what she is at present. Brooks also realizes that portraying women as a pitiable and downtrodden section of society can not change their identity and role. To transform their image the stereotypical characterization of oppressed women should be replaced with a more aware and powerful characters, struggling for their rights. Brooks portrays Vit as a woman who is trying to assert her identity by not conforming to middle class values. Her talk is indecent or not becoming of a cultured woman, as defined by the white middle class, for it is neither pompous nor earthly, "but a mixture of the dramatic 'pregnancy' and the mundane 'bridgework,' mediated by talk of the music of 'the blues guitar' in the nightclubs she frequents" (Gery 53). Finally, Vit "comes haply on the verge of happiness, haply hysterics. Is." The alliteration of "haply" and "happiness" gives the sense of elation and an impression of approval of Vit's perfunctory life style. However, the enthusiasm that we feel in these lines is not real emotion. In fact, what the closing lines mean is that Vit has not actually received happiness, but she has almost got happiness. She has come to "the verge / Of happiness," not happiness itself. Gery remarks that The word "hysterics contrasts "happiness" as much as it complements it, just as "alleys" contrast "parks" and "bridgework" contrasts "pregnancy." The poem ends with "Is," and this abrupt ending resonates with the abrupt ending of Vit's life. This copula verb is without a subject like the first two lines of the sestet, but the reader knows that it refers to Vit. The subject-less condition of the verb also suggests the identitylessness of Vit. It also gives the impression that although Vit "is"

alive, not dead; her life is reduced to mere existence without the vitality. It conveys the sense of passive existence rather than active life. "Is" can also be looked at as a contrast to the verbs of doing in the earlier lines, such as, "does," "slops," "talks," and "walks." The sudden closure of the poem with the verb of being facilitates her message—how white culture and values relegate African-American women to position of an object and assign them passive roles. It is this sense of existing in a place of passivity that Brooks wants to transform by instilling a sense of value on action and doing—on being the actor and not the acted upon.

Vit, like other women of Bronzeville, has to negotiate with "undesirable choices" (Gery 53) that her society and circumstances have offered her for survival. Her life, like of that of her sisters, is marked by tenacity, struggle, and defiance, against preexisting values, conventions, and identities. Brooks portrays her with resolve and respect and seems to appreciate her spirit of defiance and struggle. But the parodic language of the poem is skeptical about Vit's character and her world. The reader is not certain whether Vit is dead or alive. The change in the tense from past to present, and Vit's rising after her funeral creates doubt about Vit's status. In the same way, the is not sure about Vit's world because it is difficult to decide whether the praise of Vit is ironic and her world is created to destabilize the preexisting world. Because the parodic tone gives the feeling of lack of order in Vit's world through out the poem, but particularly in the sestet. And it is this lack of order that not only kills Vit, but also destroys many women of Bronzeville.

Parody is a powerful weapon for Brooks to use in the destabilization of the preexisting identities of African-American women and to subvert systems of oppression.

She uses parody in her early poems such as "the ballad of chocolate Mabbie," "Sadie and Maud," "the mother," and "the rites for Cousin Vit," "a song in the front yard," "hunchback girl: she thinks of heaven," "the vacant lot," "Mrs. Small," "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon," and others in order to destabilize the conventional image of black women and also to create chaos in existing social and moral values.

Brooks' poetry has always been political. She uses traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet and the ballad to express anger, protest, and struggle against the restriction of choice for members of the African-American community, as well as to destabilize and subvert the prevalent systems, in order to reconfigure new values and systems. In her early poems, Brooks' aims seem to be to pull African-American women out of torpor and degradation by giving them voice and destabilizing the identity that they have received from their slave masters, and sexist white and black men. She skillfully applies traditional poetic forms in order to attain her political and social ends. She saw new spirit and identity among African-Americans during the 1967 Fisk conference and realized that, the ideas and visions that she had been trying to convey to her audience in classical forms and situated language should be expressed in simple, but powerful language and American poetic forms. She shifts her mode of address from classical forms—the sonnet and the ballad—to American poetic forms, such as free verse, and adopts more direct expression. Between "The Bean Eaters" (1960) and "In the Mecca" (1968), she had seen many changes in American society. She has seen that African-Americans had become more conscious of their social and political rights and that they were struggling for them

through peaceful means, as well as violent protest. At this important juncture, Brooks' voice is the voice of a "cultural mother to the political project of black literary and social creation" (Erkkila 197). "In the Mecca" marks Brooks' transition from traditional classical poetic forms to free verse, a typical American form of versification. This shift also signals that she is ready to assume the expanded role that time and circumstance have assigned her to perform. In short, there is no major shift in her political voice from that which we came to be familiar with in her in her first three volumes of poetry, which were heavy with classical influence in her choice of forms. This voice continues in "In the Mecca," which can be seen as a transition from one stage of her poetic career to another. The development in her poetic career and political vision is a continuous growth, not a sudden change. The change we notice is the change in her narrative technique. Her use of anti-heroic women characters to struggle against and subvert the preexisting values and to voice the feelings of women may not be strange to Pakistani audience, particularly to the students in higher education intuitions for they are familiar with traditions of using anti-hero to subvert and protest against gender oppression and class discrimination, as well as to destabilize conventional middle class morality that is based on hypocrisy and so called observance of decorum, for they are recurrent themes in Urdu literature and electronic media. There are sections of the society who may not be able to appreciate such characters, but they are small in number. Pakistani academic institutions are already teaching anti-heroic literature written in English and Urdu and in my opinion it will not be problematic for Pakistani students to assimilate Brooks women and mothers who are

mostly anti-heroes and are subverting the social and moral value systems that brand them bad women and transform them into non-persons or lifeless objects.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISPERSED NARRATION: SHIFT IN "THE MECCA"

Brooks' art is a progression from one stage to another and one phase to the next. Her art is one continuous whole, and we must view its unity, in order to completely grasp her growth as a poet. In the previous two chapters, I have discussed how Brooks uses women, particularly mothers, to subvert and destabilize existing ideas of black women and to reconfigure an alternative system for them to exist within and relate to society, as a whole. I have also discussed her adoption and transformation of classical poetic forms for political purpose, as well as to make black women visible and to get their voices of protest and resistance heard. She subtly blends traditional Afro-American folk literary forms with classical forms to give an effective and powerful voice to African-American women, especially mothers. By using the sonnet and ballad forms to subvert traditional and imposed ideas and values, she destabilizes preexisting identities and systems. "In the Mecca" is another facet of Brooks' growth as a poet and it demonstrates Brooks' mastery on every technique that she has learned, so far." In the Mecca" is a culmination of her poetic art. In this poem Brooks continues the use of women and mother character and the western literary traditions to struggle against and destabilize the preexisting ideas and values, but her narrative technique becomes complex as compared to her early poems.

Despite Gwendolyn Brooks' statement in her 1976 interview at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, that her work falls into three periods which correspond to "changes" in her perspective, a discerning and careful reader might not agree. There is no

major change or shift in her poetry, so far as subject matter and artistic skills are concerned. Nor did Brooks radically change her poetic themes and the role of mother. A change that we do observe in her poetry is a shift from the white Anglo-American canon, the sonnet and ballad forms to American tradition of free verse.

The dramatic poem *In the Mecca*, (1968) is Brook's longest single work. Its 807 lines are divided into 56 stanzas of irregular length, ranging from 1 to 53 lines. It is distinctive for its direct treatment of race and class oppression. It describes the erosion of an aggressive system and is a bitter commentary on American capitalism and the American dream. Melhem has pointed out that the African-American world that Brooks' delineates through "In the Mecca" reflects the psychological and social isolation and separation of black and white environments. This isolation and poverty, supplemented by injustices and discrimination, compel "the embattled Mecca residents to arm themselves with indifference" (Melhem 158).

The setting of the opening poem "In the Mecca" describes an actual black tenement building, of Chicago called The Mecca. John Bartlow Martin describes It in his article, "The Strangest Place in Chicago," as the "great gray hulk of brick four stories high, (87), Built by the D.H. Burnham Company in 1891. R. Baxter Miller considers this date important because "it designates a post-Darwinian world," (147) and according to him it is also significant for American history, because industrialization had ended "the dream of an agrarian world"(147), and urban progress and technology were replacing communal and spiritual ideals. The Mecca was at first celebrated as a "boldly innovative architectural prototype for luxury apartment living" (John Lowney 3). It was formerly a

splendid palace, a showplace of Chicago, “with its atrium courtyards, its skylights and ornamental iron grillwork, its elaborate fountains and flower gardens, the Mecca was a major tourist attraction during the Columbian Exposition” (Lowney 3). By 1912, it housed the black elite; the Depression of the thirties hastened its decline into a slum building. The gradual degeneration of the Mecca building from a show place of Chicago to African American ghetto, gives us insight into the ironic progression of the building, which signifies the white cultural, social, and political domination and oppression: “from modern urban palace the symbol of material progress” (Sheila Hughes 269) and wealth to the sign of social and economic oppression and confinement of African American under classes. “The actual Mecca building is a palimpsest, marking the processes of American history” (Hughes 269). For Brooks, the Mecca has personal significance also. It was one of the places where Brooks worked in her early youth as the secretary to a patent-medicine man, "Prophet Williams," who sells the magic and love potions in the poem.

According to Lowney, “Perhaps no other building symbolized post-World War II urban decline more starkly than the Mecca Building” (Lowney 3). The Mecca building is, as Erkkila has pointed out, “an ironically nuanced symbol,” (214) that signifies the historic vision of America as Mecca or Promised Land, and “the Black Mecca of the Nation of Islam envisioned by Malcolm X and other black nationalists”(214). The discrepancy between the metaphorical expression of ‘Mecca’ and the Mecca building that Brooks describes, gives insight into the difference between the American dream and realities of African American existence. “In the Mecca”, from the beginning, tells the readers that its message is “the collapse of old mythologies in preparation for a new black

consciousness” (Erkkila 214). This message is the subject and theme of the poem and that, in turn, instills the optimism in the poem. Brooks' description of the Mecca building as Lowney has pointed out serves as a discourse to describe a dystopia in the context of urban decline in relationship to postwar African American life. The dystopian Meccan society- is the symbol of very bad life characterized by human misery, poverty, oppression, violence, disease, and corruption.

Earlier Anglo-American critics deliberately ignored, or could not discern, the politics of anti-racism and anti-sexism in Brooks' poetry. They turned a blind eye and deaf ear to the heteroglossic and dialogic elements in her early poetry and tried to obscure its political and racial elements. They appreciated her classical forms, technical perfection, and elevated diction of her early work and dismissed her later poetry as “flat and too political” (Kathryne Lindberg 285). But, they failed to see that her poetry has been political from the beginning of her career, as it is about African-Americans and their social and political problems. She is addressing, directly or indirectly, an African-American audience in her early poetry and the contents of the poems are always related to African-Americans or about African-Americans issues. She has not given up any of her early artistic accomplishments. As Henry Taylor states, “in strategy and style ‘In the Mecca’ is an extension, not repudiation, of her earlier excellences.” (119) If there is any change, it is in the shift from situated language or mask language to simple and uncloaked expression of protest and subversion and in her art of narration, which has become dispersed and more complex, for diverse subjects are speaking in multi-voice. Also, her shifting subjectivity creates complication in narrative style. In “In the Mecca,”

there is a multitude of speakers and each of them has his/her own idiosyncrasies in style and language, but their speeches are either related to Pepita or sprung from Mrs. Sallie' search for her." In the Mecca," "exemplifies every technique that Brooks had learned, to this point, and is a culmination of her power to wield a flexible free verse" (Kent 218). "In the Mecca" may be taken as a display of the maturation of Brooks' poetic art, not as the beginning of a definitive new phase of her poetry, even though she gives up traditional Anglo-European forms and adopts free verse.

At first glance, the narrative framework of "In the Mecca" seems simple. It tells the story of the search of Mrs. Sallie Smith, a domestic and mother of nine children, for her youngest daughter. However, in the third line of the poem, "the fair fables fall," the narrator makes the reader realize that this narration will be no straight forward and predictable narrative, such as "Annie Allen" or "Maud Martha." Annie and Maud are transgressive, but the difference lies in the fact that they remain the centers of the narration, whereas, in "In the Mecca," there are subjectivity shifts: many speech acts are performed by the narrator, as well as by the many subjects of narration. The action of Brooks' poem, apparently, revolves around the search of Mrs. Sallie Smith, for her missing daughter, Pepita, whom she and the reader ultimately discover has been murdered. The reader is confronted with "a relentless narrator who compels the reader to hear the stories--in multi-voice and multi-vernacular irony--of characters speaking their own atrocities and failings which are contextualized, or framed, by a fictional Mecca," (Cheryl Clarke 139). Although The Mecca building was, once a reality, by the time, brooks published her poem it had been demolished for 16 years. Brooks has recreated it

according to her own vision, and it is not a historical document based on statistical data. Thus Clarke is right in calling it a “fictional Mecca.” The style of narration, allusions to the Holocaust and tales of cruelty and sufferings infuse the poem with mystery and fear.

Brooks’ narrative style in her early poems is marked by dramatic elements for they are either dramatic monologue like in “the mother” and “Ballad of Pearl May Lee” or monologue such as “the queen of the blues” or the direct interaction between mother and daughter in “Jessie Mitchell’s mother. However,” the dramatic style of narration in “In the Mecca” has become more complex and mature. In this poem of epic dimension, brooks has merged the narrative style of Spencer in his allegorical epic “Fairie Queen” in which different adventures undertaken by different characters are unified by the Prince Arthur, who appears at the end of every adventure to give cohesion to diverse adventures. Almost in the similar vein, Brooks use Mrs. Sallie, the mother and her lost daughter, Peppita to render unity to the different stories narrated by the multitude of characters. Along with dramatic monologue, monologue, and interior monologue, she uses in her narrative technique, the elements of ancient dramas, in which most of the actions take place in poetic description rather than on-stage action, due to limited resources in stage craft. The art of narration in this long, complex narrative poem resembles that of early Greek tragedians, such as Aeschylus, who by the power of words depicts the action on stage. The narration of “In the Mecca” can be divided into different sections and the speeches of various characters can be viewed as the speeches of the dramatic characters in a Greek drama. Its different sections can be viewed as different acts of a drama and the stories and incidences narrated by the characters as scenes. R. Baxter Miller divides the

plot of the poem into three parts: Brooks opens the first scene of part I (Act I) with the return of Mrs. Sallie Smith home from work. The focus of this part, or act, is on the description of the neighbors that she encounters on her way to her apartment and the introduction of her children. In this section, we see the narrator describing the characters, as well as the characters revealing of their personal traits. In the second part (Act II), the central action of the drama takes place. Mrs. Smith notices that Pepita, her youngest daughter is missing. This knowledge of Pepita's absence prompts Mrs. Sallie and her other children to search through the tenement for the lost girl. This search, which is the first of two, enhances the plot and allows the reader to attain deeper insight into the lives of inhabitants of Mecca. It also allows for further characterization of more inhabitants of Mecca.

The narrative style in this section is diverse. Through it, we can observe the omniscient narrator sometimes adopting the tone of an objective observer and at another time using a satirical tone. This part is also a reflection on the paradox of the American myth. Part III (Act III) is the longest section of the poem, which makes up almost half of the verse. In this Part/Act the police return and join the Smiths's search. Because of its themes and styles, such as the aggressive and open declarations of separation, liberation, and violence, this section differs in tone from the other sections of the poem, as well as from that of her early poems. Along with political themes, the theme of interracial sexual relations and the betrayal of white men, rhetorical questions, and the use of Christian mythology make Part III (Act III) the richest part of the poem, in ideas and thoughts, as well as in narrative technique. The poem ends with the discovery of Pepita's dead body

under the bed of Jamaican Edward. The narrator serves the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, and monologues, dramatic monologues, and interior-monologues of the characters can be studied as asides and soliloquies of a drama. However, the central action of the drama is Mrs. Sallie's search for Pepita and through this poor mother Brooks exposes the folly and vices that are prevalent in the Mecca. Brooks uses this mother figure to subvert and destabilize the predominant system.

Brooks' narrative style in "In the Mecca" is a fine blending of highly sophisticated poetic diction of Anglo-American narrative poetry and African-American oral and folk traditions, as well as Black English. In "In the Mecca" the language and diction some time change so abruptly that the readers need few moments to adjust themselves for the transition from one narrative style to another, which is totally different from the first. For example, line 255 introduces the central incident of the plot. Here, the narrative style changes from highly formal to vernacular. From here onward, the narrator and diverse subjects use different voices and style of narration to acquaint the readers with the progress of the quest for the lost child. The dramatic shift from the narrator's heightened style is clear, "What shiny tended gold is an aubade for toy-child's head! Has ribbons too! Ribbons. Not Woolworth cotton comedy, not rubber band, not string. . . ." Then Sallie's children's reply to the question of their mother, "WHERE PEPITA BE?" in the Black vernacular: "Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er /Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er" makes the reader realize the existence of two worlds—the beautiful world of elite culture and the mundane life of ghetto dwellers.

The different narrative styles and voices also create an aura of confusion, which is a prominent feature of the life of the inhabitants of Mecca. With the change in style and diction from the refined diction of the narrator to the vernacular refrains of some of the characters, the rhythm changes from sober and deep rhythm to urban black rhythm and from the “sermonic rhythm” (Mootry and Smith 196) of Julia Jone to the litany of “Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er /Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er.” This abrupt change in music and pace of rhythm sometimes creates confusion for the reader finds difficulty in adjusting to the change and also problematic for them to follow the speakers. It also reflects the confusion and uncertainty in the under classes of African American society. The discrepancy between the tone of the narrator, which is authoritative, powerful, relentless, and judgmental and that of characters, which is subjective, vernacular and sometimes ironic, gives an impression of distance between the tone and style of the narrator and that of the characters. The diversity in narrative style and multiplicity of voices in “In the Mecca” demonstrate Brooks’ maturity as an artist, as well as it renders her more effective and powerful voice to subvert received ideas and reconfigures a new value that will give a new identity and freedom from restrictions to African-Americans.

One of the salient features of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry is the use of voice/utterance to subvert and destabilize the preexisting identity of African-American women and the culture that relegates them to denigrated positions. In her early poems, she uses the voice/utterance of women, particularly that of mothers, to subvert predominant systems. The voice/utterance, of Brooks’ female characters comes through

in dialogue, dramatic monologue, or interior monologue. It centers on one or two characters, but in “In the Mecca,” there are a number of subjects speaking in their own voice and style. However, the unifying factors of these diverse characters and dispersed narration is Mrs. Sallie, the mother and Pepita, murdered girl, who could have become a poet, a woman with voice had she been not murdered. The voice and narrative style changes with the change of speaker. With the shift in subjectivity the vocality also shifts. For example, the narrator speaks in authoritative voice and elevated language whereas the characters speak either in Black Vernacular or in ironical tone that is some time parodic. Among the characters, we hear the voices that adopt various style: for example, Great-great Gram’s voice reminds the readers of slave narrative, Loam Norton tone is ironical that is framed in the Biblical form and diction, St. Julia voice is enthusiastic and she expresses her religiosity in ironical evocation of Psalm. In this poem, there are more than 50 characters but all of them do not speak in it because the narrator speaks for them. The narrator lends her voice to those characters whose role either needs her interpretations and comments or those who have no significance roles in the enhancement of the plot or the themes of the poem. Brooks brings in some characters repeatedly to show the progress in his or her thought or consciousness, such as Alfred who appears five times in the poem. We see his growth from a failed poet to a poet with a vision, a poet who is indifferent to the problem of his society, but interested in the ideas of foreign poets to a poet who understands the immediate need of the Meccans—freedom from social, economic, and psychological bondage through “essential sanity” and the collapse of the Mecca building, the symbol of oppression, failed dreams, and abject poverty.

This polyvocality creates complex and disperse narration. It is difficult for the reader to keep pace with changing voices and styles, because the changes are dramatic and sudden and sometimes the reader is not prepared for that transition. For instance, the reader is still musing on the narrator's rhetoric of Don Lee's call for revolution, after thought provoking lines on death, when they find themselves reading Alfred's reverie expressed by imitating a Biblical episode.

Says Alfred:

To be a red bush!

In the West Virginia autumn.

To flame out red.

"Crimson" is not word enough,

although close to what I mean.

How proud.

How proud.

(But the bush does not know it flames.)(422).

While we are still trying to comprehend the Biblical allusion in Alfred's narration, we are shocked by Amos's violent, aggressive, and misogynistic voice, advocating violence and revenge against America, which he portrays as a white woman. These different voices come from different characters one after another, and the reader is baffled by diverse and apparently incoherent vocality. Melhem points out, "From time to time, the poet's voice modulates from objective narration to subjective, to style indirect libre, to protagonist Teller. Yet the shifts cohere. Through Brooks' purposeful vision. . . the real and fictive

worlds interact to present a social panorama”(158). The voice in the poem is unpredictable because it keeps on changing from one mode to another, such as the objective voice of the narrator, who describes the persons and events from the point of view of an discerning but impartial observer. For example, the description of Hyena is photographic, for she is portrayed without showing any personal feelings on the part of the narrator: “Out of her dusty threshold bursts Hyena. The striking *débutante*. A fancier of firsts. One of the first, and to the tune of hate, in all the Mecca to paint her hair sun-gold” (407-8). However, like the other inhabitants of Mecca, her response, (indirectly narrated by the the narrator) to Pepita’s loss is also indifferent: ”She has not seen Pepita” and then the narrator quotes Hyena’s direct comments, which reflects her indifference to Pepita’s fate: “a puny and putrid little child”(Black 420). The narrative voice of individual characters is subjective, for their responses are usually the reflections of their personal experiences and opinions. For instance, Great-great Gram tries to relate Pepita’s incident to her personal experience during the period of slavery, the story of her sister, Pernie May, in slave narrative style:

Great-great Gram hobbles, fumbles at the knob,  
mumbles, "I am seen no Pepita. But  
I remember our cabin. The floor was dirt.  
And something crawled in it. That is the thought  
stays in my mind. (416)

Great Grand Gram remembers an incidence belonging to her remote past, but she is not aware of the present happenings. Like all Meccans, her answer also is, "I am seen no Pepita."

Mrs. Sallie Smith's voice externalizes the conflict going on in the mind of the anxious mother. Her voice wavers between hope and apprehension: "She comes soon alone. / Comes soon alone or will be brought by neighbor. Kind neighbor. / Kind neighbor. They consider" (419). But, this optimistic note changes into an interior monologue of fear and apprehension, when she speculates on the other possibility of her daughter's fate in the context of intrinsic evil in human nature:

Suddenly

every one in the world is Mean.

Could that old woman, passively passing, mash a child?

Has she a tot's head in that shiny bag?

And that lank fellow looking furtive.

What

cold poison could he spew, what stench commit

upon a little girl, a little lost girl,

lone and languid in the world, wanting

her ma, her glad-sad, her Yvonne?(420)

In this poem there are more than fifty characters and every subject is an independent speaker and he/she has his/her own voice.

However, these diverse voices are given unity and cohesion through a transgressive narrator and the omnipresent character of Mrs. Sallie Smith. "In the Mecca" is a subtle blending of the multi-logues, interior monologues, and speeches that renders depth and breadth to the narration and widens the vision and scopes of the poem, by increasing its range, and revelations of Afro-American characters. It crosses the borders of race and culture, time and space, and it continues to address, in languages of liberation, both black and white, and Jews and Christians.

In "In the Mecca," the assortment of subjects and variety of voices give the sense of unity and harmony in diversity. Although each character speaks in his/her individual voice and has an idiosyncratic personality and each voice and person can form a separate poem, but search for Pepita and answer to Mrs. Sallie's question gives the impression that they have the same attitude to life and issues that surround their lives. However, the combination of these voices and persons gives Mecca a sense of the world at large. Gayl Jones remarks, "Its many voices enable Brooks' poem to operate on many levels at once and to move in many directions (inward, outward, vertically and horizontally, or backward, forward, up, and down)." (Mootry and Smith 194) The narrator can introduce different characters into the scene and allow them to speak their external experiences or their internal thoughts and feelings; they can transport themselves into their personal or collective past of the suffering humanity or into the future. The polyvocality makes possible the collapse of the historical and geographical, as well as racial boundaries. The reader hears the stories in multi-voice, sometimes in the vernacular of the characters speaking their own plights and failings in the context of Mecca and sometimes in the

highly formal language of the narrator. The multiple voices and diverse subjectivity render the poem aura of vastness.

Brooks' style has never been simple, but in "In the Mecca" we come across diverse voices of different speakers that are independent and inter-connected at the same time. This polyvocality gives the poem an epic dimension to its subject matter and canvas. It also enables Brooks to make African-American's problems and issues more visible to the world. She can also speak in vernacular without any cloak of situated language or authoritative discourse. Brooks' strategies of shifting subjectivity, dispersed narration, and polyvocality are more akin to the strategies of future writers like Toni Morrison, than those of her predecessors.

The narrator in this poem appears to be a person watching a kaleidoscope and describing it to her audience. Apparently, these pictures are disconnected and incoherent, but if we read the poem as a continuous whole, we feel that they are coherent and interconnected. In this kaleidoscope, the advent of a new character brings a new picture of Mecca, which reveals a new aspect of the life in this mysterious building. These, apparently diverse pictures are unified by the character of Mrs. Sallie Smith and Pepita, who are at the center of the reader's consciousness. The movement of the poem's 807 lines shows different pictures of Mecca to the reader. The hesitant and baffled reader is dragged along by the insistent narrator, through the corridors of this picture gallery. A sequence of pictures starts with Mrs. Sallie climbing the stairs of Mecca:

Mrs. Sallie

hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest;

ascends the sick and influential stair.  
The eye unrinsed, the mouth absurd  
with the last sourings of the master's Feast.  
She plans  
to set severity apart,  
to unclench the heavy folly of the fist.  
Infirm booms  
and suns that have not spoken die behind this  
low-brown butterball. Our prudent partridge. (405-6)

“Mrs. Sallie hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest;” in this description we can feel as well as visualize the urgency in Mrs. Sallie’s movement. The verb, “Hies” suggests two actions and gives two sides of Mrs. Sallie’s picture: in the first picture, she is in haste to reach home for “hies to marvelous rest”, we can visualize Mrs. Sallie’s hurrying footsteps and energetic strides that are carrying her “home”-the place of “marvelous rest” after a hard day’s labor. “Marvelous rest” is a dramatic irony, because the reader knows that she will not get peace and rest in her home, for it will become the place of discomfort and agony because of her lost child, Pepita, and her death. The second picture that the readers visualize in the context of the original meaning of “hie” the derivative of Middle English and old English “hien” and “hgian,” respectively, which means to strive, is the picture of Mrs. Sallie as a “warrior” struggling against social, economic, and psychological pressures or a fighter contending against poverty and, social constrictions that have checked her social and economic amelioration and mobility. The image “sick

and influential stair” reveals the poverty, depression, and hunger that surround the inhabitants of the Mecca. The “stair” has, as Kent has pointed out, a personal meaning for Brooks, for in her early days when she was working for the prophet (a phony) she used to climb such a stair to deliver the merchandise of the prophet. It is also a traditional symbol of climbing to higher place or mobility-spiritual mobility, social mobility, economic mobility, and class mobility. However, Brooks “stair” is “sick” and “influential” at the same time. The connotative significance of “stair” in Brooks’ poem may be looked in the context of Langston Hughes’ poem, “Mother to Son,” in which the mother tells her son that to change his lot, he has to climb the stair of life persistently. This persistent climbing of the stair which is full of painful experiences, sufferings, dangers, and obstacles is necessary for the social and class mobility:

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor --

Bare.

But all the time

I've been a-climbin' on (Langston Hughes 30).

In Brooks’ poem also the mother, the symbol of struggle and resistance, “ascends the sick and influential stair” in search of “marvelous rest”. Although she knows that rest and

peace is not for her, she dreams for it. The description of her demeanor: "eye unrinsed", "mouth absurd", and "the last sourings of the master's Feast," gives a glimpse of her psychic and mental makeup. According to Kent, "The 'sourings' are everything Mrs. Sallie, as a domestic, has had to react to under the tightest discipline" (214). The "souring" very subtly brings out her choleric and morose nature, which is the result of drudgery and poverty. The image of a warrior that "hies" has created is enhanced by such images as "set severity apart", "unclench the heavy folly of the fist", "Infirm booms", and unspoken "suns." As Kent has pointed out these expressions also suggests repressed violence and inner explosion of anger and hatred. However, "infirm" indicates that Mrs. Sallie is physically sick and perhaps emotionally and psychologically unsound, despite her image of a strong and powerful woman. The narrator skillfully elaborates "folly," which obsolete meaning is lewdness or lasciviousness, by referring her as "brown butter ball" and "partridge." Both these expressions allude to her round and soft physical appearance and sensuality: she is a sport for men. In short the picture of Mrs. Sallie as delineated by the narrator is the epitome of life and conditions of the Meccans in general. The sequence ends with the gruesome picture of murdered Pepita lying under the bed of Jamaican Edward:

The murderer of Pepita  
looks at the Law unlovably. Jamaican  
Edward denies and thrice denies a dealing  
of any dimension with Mrs. Sallie's daughter.  
Beneath his cot

a little woman lies in dust with roaches. (431)

These are not lifeless and static pictures; they are living pictures that appeal to our five senses. We can not only visualize the images, but also taste, smell, hear and feel the people and things.

The adoption of the disperse narrative style, the shift from western classical conventions to American poetic forms, and tilting towards Black English demonstrate Brooks' maturity as a poet and progress from one stage of her career to another. They do not mean that one phase of her career comes to an end and a completely new chapter begins, rather we should look at it as development of the poet's mind and moving towards the perfection of her poetic art. "In the Mecca" shows advancement in Brooks' poetic skills, especially the narrative technique and handling of diverse material, as well as in the application of 'voice.' Her style, apparently, may have become simple, but according to Melhem, it is the combination of Homer's "simplicity" and Milton's "severity"(3) that serves her poetic and political purposes well.

Brooks has demonstrated her complex narrative style in her shorter poems, such as "mother," but we don't find the diversity of subjects that one finds in "In the Mecca." According to Clarke, "In the Mecca" "is a frantic splitting of the narrative strategies of showing and telling." (138) Mrs. Sallie Smith shows us different characters, the dwellers of Mecca, while she is combing all the floors of her building in search of her youngest daughter, and the omniscient narrator, as well as the characters themselves, tells their social, psychological, emotional, financial and other problems.

The narrative art in this poem is both aural and imagistic in technique, for we see the images of the characters through the telescopic lenses of Mrs. Sallie and the narrator. We hear their voices from their own mouths and the mouth of the narrator, who introduces the characters, comments on their actions and describes their thoughts. We see Mrs. Sallie Smith through the eyes of the narrator, as she is the one who tells us that she is a “low-brown butterball” (405). Also, Mrs. Sallie’s monologue delineates Pepita, our “Woman with her terrible eye, with iron and feathers in her feet, with all her songs so lemon-sweet, with lightning and a candle too and junk and jewels too?” (413-414). We hear old St. Julia Jones' exuberant voice expressing her faith in an exaggerated manner in the imitation of a psalm:

Isn't our Lord the greatest to the brim?  
The light of my life. And I lie late  
past the still pastures. And meadows. He's the comfort  
and wine and piccalilli for my soul.  
He hunts me up the coffee for my cup.  
Oh how I love that Lord. (405)

The reader can see that her enthusiasm is not because of strong faith in God, but she is pleased with her Lord for He satisfies her material and carnal requirements. Through the character of St. Julia Jones, Brooks exposes the affected devotion and false zeal for religion among the inhabitants of Mecca. They are religious in appearance and words, but in reality they lack the Christian spirit of fellow-feeling and love for one’s neighbors. St. Julia Jones may express her enthusiasm for religion and gratitude to God, but she is

indifferent to the fate of Pepita and misery of Mrs. Sallie or the plight of other Meccans. For Brooks, the indifference to the problems of poor and alienated African-Americans is an unpardonable sin and she uses the images of a poor mother and an innocent child to expose and condemn this sin. The hypocrisy, exploitation, and oppression of Prophet Williams are ironically brought out by the omniscient narrator: “and rich with Bible, pimples, pout: who reeks with lust for his disciple, is an engine of candid steel hugging combustibles. His wife she was a skeleton. His wife she was a bone. Ida died in self-defense” (Black 406). The narrator’s description of lusty Prophet Williams gives insight into how religious phonies, like Prophet Williams, use religion to exploit, as well as to corrupt poor ignorant Meccans. The description of the nature and practices of St. Julia Jones' and Prophet Williams provide some ideas of the confused and diverse nature of religious belief and practice among the Meccans, as well as their moral degeneration.

Brooks’ narrative style is quite complex throughout the entirety of this poem. She adopts, not only various techniques, such as apostrophe, inter-textuality, ironic evocation, and allegory, but also multi-layers of voices. The allusion to the apostrophic address from McKay’s sonnet, “If We Must Die: O kinsmen,” renders the narration complex. We find the intersection of voices, in this reference to McKay’s poem. McKay wrote this poem after the 1919 race riots, in which African Americans had been targeted by the whites. McKay incites African Americans to live and die with dignity, not to bear humiliation without struggle and resistance. He urges them to fight valiantly and die an honorable death. The narrator/Brooks adopts the same tone in the line, “Kinswomen! / Kinswomen!” and it reminds us of McKay’s call to his nation to rise up and oppose the

oppression of the dominant class. As Clarke in her article has pointed out, this “interior eruption”(Clarke 140) of the narrator, in Brooks’ poem may be looked at as a call to African-American women to realize the sacrifices and sufferings in black women's lives, bodies and souls, and signals further sacrifices and miseries to come "on this wise." This call to “kinswomen” is a call to African-American women to rise up against male oppression and injustices of the society, as well. It gives this impression, for it comes after the description of Prophet Williams and his wife, who apparently died of her husband’s oppressions and cruelty. Prophet Williams, the religious charlatan, is "rich with Bible," but his wife, Ida, "was a skeleton / was a bone", "died in self-defense" and “Ida died alone”(Black 405). The use of apostrophe in this line is meant to shake African-American women out of meek submission to male oppression and to give them voices with which to articulate themselves. However, According to Julia Kristeva:

Intertextuality implies a complexity of addresses immanent in the poem. Intertextuality also refers to the fact that a textual segment, sentence, or utterance is not simply the intersection of two voices in direct or indirect discourse; rather, the segment is the result of the intersection of a number of voices, of a number of textual interventions, which are combined in, the semantic field, but also in the syntactic and phonic fields of the explicit utterance.

In “Kinswomen” we find the intersection not only of many voices, but also in semantic, syntactic and phonic fields. It is unusual for a black woman writer, in the midst of the Black Art Movement to address her community, particularly underclass women of the

ghetto as "kinswomen"--but in using this language, Brooks is also addressing and evoking the language and conventions of high art, the culture of power, and thus speaking to not only to the oppressed African-American women but also the culturally elite. The use of elevated language, which common African American men and women may not comprehend, also indicates that Brooks is speaking not only to blacks but also to the society at large. On the other hand, Brooks may be using this mode of address to give a positive image of African-American women and up-lift their status, because such rhetoric was used by Elizabethan poets for the aristocracy and nobility. In this way, Brooks renders dignity and respect that are associated with elite to lowly African-American women, and enables them to move towards freedom from male oppression and obtainment of self-affirmation. The adaptation of "Kinsmen" to "Kinswomen" not only creates a new meaning, but it also combines vernacular and elevated discourse.

In "In the Mecca," the narrative style, in certain places, assumes a satiric tone, in order to expose the sordidness, ugliness, and vices in urban ghetto life. The text ironically evokes the Twenty-third Psalm, which gives hope and solace to humanity, in order to expose despair, miseries, death, and decay in Mecca, the urban tenement. This Psalm is usually sung on the occasion of funeral, and its adoption at this point also forebodes the death of Pepita. Loam Norton, a non African American inhabitant of the Mecca, has not seen Pepita and noticed sufferings of the African-Americans, but his reference to "Belsen and Dachau," an allusion to Holocaust, with reference to the Twenty-third Psalm, renders the poem a wider perspective and broader canvas. It also links the sufferings of and

atrocities committed against two nations: African-Americans and Jews, during the days of slavery and World War II respectively:

The Lord was their shepherd

Yet did they want.

Joyfully, would they have lain in jungles or pastures,

walked beside waters. Their gaunt

souls were not restored, their souls were banished.

.....

Goodness and mercy should follow them

all the days of their death.

In this ironical allusion to a Psalm, the message of hope, comfort, prosperity, and life is replaced by expressions of despair, sufferings, cruelties, and death. For example, either the narrator or Loam Norton, at this point the reader is not certain who is the speaker, changes the subject of the Psalm from first person possessive adjective “my” to third person possessive adjective “their.” In this way the narrator generalizes the inflictions and woes and makes them impersonal experiences. Loam Norton’s substitution of negative vocabulary and imageries for positive ones brings out the pessimism arising from the cruelty, oppression, and misery that the Meccans have to face day-to-day. When we place the original language and imagery of the Psalm and the language and imagery of Brooks’ ironical evocation, we have better insight into the nature of oppression and sufferings of the inhabitants of Mecca: “lie down in green pastures”/“they have lain in jungles or pastures”; “He restoreth my soul”/“their souls were banished”; “I will fear no

evil: for thou art with me”/“they feared the evil, whether with or without God”; “thy rod and thy staff they comfort me”/“They were comforted by no Rod, no Staff,”; “thou anointest my head with oil”/“Anointings were of lice”; “my cup runneth over”/“Blood was the spillage of cups”; and “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”/“Goodness and mercy should follow them all the days of their death.” The images of death, decay, sufferings, and oppression give the sense of rotten and unwholesome atmosphere in the Mecca. In fact, the description comes from a non-black, perhaps a Jew who survived the holocaust, and is framed in biblical poetic form, this dark and bleak vision may be extended to conditions of the poor and suffering humanity all over the world. However, we cannot say that pessimism is that of brooks, for it is associated with one of the characters of the poem

The style of narration in the third person plural and the allusion to the Twenty-third Psalm creates complexity in the narration, because it is difficult to distinguish between the voice of omniscient narrator and that of Loam Norton. The narrator tells the reader that he has not seen Pepita, but he seems to be more concerned with the Holocaust; rather than present plight of Mrs. Sallie’s family or other Meccans. The narration then abruptly changes to third person plural, thus creating confusion because the reader cannot easily distinguish the speaker. Here, the speaker seems to be indulging in a kind of loud thinking, in which the speaker is contemplating loss of faith in man and God. It reminds us of the sonnet sequence, “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” in which Brooks, through the soldiers, expresses loss of faith in God and failure of faith. The adoption of Biblical language and style gives the poem seriousness and semblance of sublimity. The rewriting of the Psalm,

with ironical evocation, renders a mocking tone and highlights the function of the narrator as an interpreter and critic. Here the narrator is looking at the miseries and sufferings of the Meccans from wider context and linking it to the sufferings people belonging to different time and space. Thus She/he is commenting on the oppression and cruelty inflicted against the weaker sections of the society and is critical about the role played by God and man in this respect.

“In the Mecca” is, apparently, the story of a mother’s search for her loss child, but close and analytical study of the poem reveals that it has many layers of meaning because Brooks’ narration is allegorical in this long narrative poem. Mrs. Sallie Smith’s journey through the Mecca building and her search for her daughter can be studied as the journey into the consciousness of African Americans in search of self-identity and self-knowledge, as well as the liberation from social and economic bondage imposed by white culture and value systems. Brooks, who has been trying to transform the identity of African American women for 23 years, realizes that the key to freedom is the liberation from the preexisting systems that stereotyped African American women as non-persons and invisible objects. She uses mother figure, Mrs. Sallie, to convey her message, that until the edifice of western culture and ideology, collapses, the African American cannot hope for the change. This change characterized by free sky and free earth with the new music screaming in the sun will come through What Alfred calls “essential sanity, black and electric,” not through the violence that Amos advocates. Mrs. Sallie’s search for Pepita, a seed or a piece of gold, may be taken as the search for the seed or the hope of African American Future. During her search, she exposes the forces that are destroying

the future of African American and makes her readers realize that if they want freedom, they need to remove the evil and sins that are sources of indifference to African American future.

The narration comes to an end with an allusion to a Biblical episode that depicts Pepita as the possibility of redemption for and hopes for the liberation of African Americans. The plot of "In the Mecca" is woven around Pepita and the central action of the poem is the search for her by her mother and her brothers and sisters in the accompaniment of the narrator and the law. Pepita has a symbolic significance for her loss and death symbolizes the need for African-American society to reconfigure and re-imagine a new identity and new consciousness. It is her death and victimization that arouse a realization for the need for freedom from all kinds of oppressions, restrictions and poverty. The death and removal of Pepita's body from Mecca signifies the beginning of the collapse of the Mecca building, the symbol of confinement.

Pepita never speaks in the poem and nobody sees her alive, but it is her silence and invisibility that make economic hardships, oppression and discrimination of African American women, as well as the problems of African-Americans as a community visible and heard. Her dead body and the narrator's comment, "She never went to kindergarten" (Black 431) suggest that had she been given an opportunity, she would have been a woman with voice, for she has the potentials to become a poet with powerful voice: "I touch"—she said once—"petals of a rose. A silky feeling through me goes!"(432).

It is the ignorance or lack of knowledge of one's self that makes African American women non-persons and invisible. To come out of invisibility and subjugation, African

American women need education (knowledge) that in turn will give them voice that will liberate from social, economic, and gender bondage. It will also give them the ability to express their dreams, hopes, and aspirations, as well as their anger and resentment. But, if the society remains indifferent to destruction of Pepita, hope for future redemption of African Americans, their dream of freedom from social, political, and economic constrictions will remain forever deferred. Thus the death of Pepita is an eye-opener as well as a loud and clear message to the African Americans to shake off the torpor and indifference and to build a new milieu by demolishing the old edifice built by the predominant culture and value system. Hence, there is optimistic note in the death of Pepita, the seed that will resurrect when the conditions become favorable.

Pepita's death frees her from the restrictiveness of racism and poverty. She has come out of the Mecca building, although as a dead yet her departure signals the beginning of end of oppressive and discriminatory systems signified by the Mecca building. Her departure from Mecca creates a breach in the tenement. The fissure that the death of Pepita has created in the faith of Mrs. Sallie in her people and place is also a rupture in the structure of Mecca. It is the first step in the direction of collapse of Mecca, the symbol of oppression, poverty, deprivation, and race, as well as gender discrimination. Her death, can be viewed as the sacrifice for the redemption and betterment of her community, and it is thus both a dismemberment of the Meccan "community" and the sign of a needed re-membering and re-imagining of a more powerfully self-identified Black community" (Sheila Hughes). Moreover, her death heralds the advent of communal consciousness for the search for her brings the inhabitants of Mecca together

and brings them out of their holes, where they are confined physically and mentally. Mrs. Sallie may not be very loud in her protest and struggle against the oppression, but her question to the inhabitants of Mecca, “Where my Pepita be” and their answer, “I ain’t seen her” can shake the society and readers out of their indifference to sufferings and miseries of underclasses of the society. The question of Mrs. Sallie and the response of the Meccans to it can also make the readers realize the nature of relationship among the Meccans or so as to say among African Americans and their indifference to the problems of individual Meccans as well as those of the community. The voice of Mrs. Sallie is the voice of every African American mother. It is the question or the cry that has been raised by every black mother since the first slave mother landed on American soil. But Brooks make it more poignant and audible by the use of a mother searching for her lost daughter, Pepita, which means a small seed or a piece of gold. The search for Pepita, the seed which can grow into a powerful tree of liberty for she has potential to become a poet with vision and powerful voice, is not an ordinary search for a lost child, it is the search for new identity and liberated voice and freedom from all kinds of constrictions and repressions. The search for Pepita and discovery of her murdered body, make the readers realize that the danger to African American’ future is not only from outside but also in the community. Here unlike, in the other stories of sexual exploitation of African American women and girls, in which the predator is a white male figure, in this poem the culprit is an inhabitant of mecca and his name indicates that he belongs to the black community. Brooks may be suggesting her people that they have to fight not only the predominant community but also the members of their own community who are

destroying the seed of their future because of their ignorance, poverty, and indifference to the oppression and injustice from both black and white communities. Despite gloomy and oppressive atmosphere, the poem is not pessimistic in the vision it presents to its readers. Through Pepita, the narrator portrays an optimistic vision. As Miller has pointed out, despite differences in sex and age, she resembles Jesus, who sacrificed his life for the redemption of mankind. With this Jesus image, the idea of the possibility of redemption of the Meccans (African Americans) and resurrection of their liberated identity also comes to our mind. Pepita, the seed of future of African-Americans, will rise again when the frost of the ignorance and indifference of African-American is lifted: hence the symbol of hope for better time and space. She is also compared to a “robin,” the bird that even sings in the dead of winter and looks ahead to coming spring. It may be wriggling with pain at present, but her songs continue. Although it is “chopped” it instills optimism into the listeners’ heart and soul for it is the harbinger of the spring that is not far away. Thus, the poem ends with “chirping” of robin, the bird of hope.

If the readers analyze and explore “In the Mecca” in international context, particularly context, they can extend Mrs. Sallie’s plight and the abject social and economic conditions of the Meccans to those of their own underclasses and oppressed sections of their community. “In the Mecca” apparently deals with the problems of poverty, miseries, and multitude of constrictions that African Americans have to face and struggle against gender and racial oppression. But, it has broader context, as Lowney remarks: “the struggles defining Brooks' characters are confined neither temporally nor spatially to their lives in the Mecca.” In the light of this statement, Pakistani students may

look at the theme of loss of faith in space and systems that cannot provide security and class mobility to its dwellers.

This poem describes the loss of faith in the system and space that its inhabitants, especially Mrs. Sallie considers it a place of rest and sanctuary: “Mrs. Sallie hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest ;”(Black 405), but it turns out to be a inimical place that resembles Nazi concentration camps or a prison. Freedom is excluded or is absent in this vast structure, and its rotten and unwholesome atmosphere. A line like: “Sit where the light corrupts your face.” (405) gives the impression of the hell or hades. Brooks, through the narrator and characters, gives prophetic call for liberation—freedom from the Mecca building, the symbol of oppression, exploitation and poverty, but she also make them realize that it is not possible unless the inhabitants of the mecca dismantle it from inside. Pakistani students can relate Brooks’ call to come out of spatial and temporal confinement or restrictiveness of mind and vision and to fight against the ignorance and indifference, to the prevalent social and political situation in Pakistan. They can draw some parallels between the conditions of under classes of Pakistani society, particularly those of women and the conditions of the Meccans. Then they will be able to comprehend the plight of the down and out and sufferings of women in Pakistan better. They will also understand that the prevalent social, political, and moral values need to be subverted.

However, the dismantling of the Mecca building, the symbol of white social and cultural values is initiated by the murder of Pepita, a young African American girl, who has the potential to become a poet, a woman with ‘ voice’ and vision if she were given an opportunity to survive in a conducive milieu. Her disappearance and subsequent death

shakes the walls of a Mecca building that has kept them away from the mainstream and, physically and mentally confined them to its narrow spaces. According to S. H. Hughes, “It is, then, her victimization that ultimately signals the necessity of freedom, her loss that points to the meaning of her life, and her silence that signals the necessity of speech and of poetry.” The narrator’s assertion: “She never went to kindergarten.” (Black 432) makes the readers realize the need of education among African Americans, especially among women. She further insists “She never learned that black is not beloved” (430). The implied meaning of the lines is that Pepita never learns that African Americans are an oppressed class, for she has never comes out of her mental and physical constraints. To liberate her body and mind she must acquire knowledge and for that she as well as her community needs to demolish the prison of western culture and values signified by Mecca building.

Pakistani students can look at the message from their own context of the stories of victimization of women in different areas of Pakistan in the form of the tribal courts punishing them for the crime or sin that they have not committed, or forced marriage as a retribution for the crime that the male members of their tribes or clans have committed, or the victims of sexual abuse by powerful land owners. The majority of the women in Pakistan is kept ignorant and is not allowed to be part of society at large because of social taboos, and so-called religious injunctions. To see their way out of these restrictions and inhibitions, they need education and knowledge of their rights and potentials. The call of Pakistani feminists and the human rights activists to resist the victimization of women

requires the acquisition of knowledge and voice so that Pakistani women and other oppressed classes may articulate their feelings.

Pakistani students will be able to appreciate a poem such as "In the Mecca," if they look at the building as a signifier of the restrictions, discrimination, and oppression imposed on a community or people; it also represents the torpor and indifference of some amongst the people to their abject conditions, they can relate it to the present social and political situations as well as to the conditions of women in Pakistan. The majority of Pakistani women and men are poor and illiterate and so are living, symbolically in a Mecca building, without opportunity, under the fear of tyrannical political and religious groups, , and confronting social, political, class, gender, and religious oppression. Brooks' "In the Mecca" can draw the attention of Pakistani students to Brooks' message that if they want liberation from such injustice, Pakistanis need to "damn"(Hughes) the systems that constrain them from social and political freedom as well as the transformation of identity.

Brooks' poem may enhance the realization of Pakistani students that women and men need to become aware of the power that allows groups to oppress and impose the identity of their choice on women and other weaker sections of the society; Brooks leads her readers to the realization that this power derives not from divine ordained laws, but from man-made realities that can be transformed. She applies the Mecca building, a dilapidated structure as the signifier of an obsolete system that needs to be dismantled from within. In this way Pakistani students gain a cross-cultural vision of the systems which make the women tongueless, as Kishwar Naheed has described it in her poem "We

sinful women.” Like Brooks, Naheed writes on behalf of those “who find that tongues which could speak have been severed”, the invisible members of the family and society. When Pakistani students view Brooks’ “In the Mecca” in the context of Bakhtin’s ideas of ‘word’ and “dialogism,” they will realize that Brooks’ poem is not only applicable to the African Americans of late 1960s and early 1970s, but it is also true for Pakistan of today. Pakistani students can look at the Mecca building as the signifier of those systems, values and ideas that have delimited their vision, restricted their thoughts, denied them their rightful opportunities for social and economic mobility, and deprived them of their legal and civic rights. They can also comprehend that the identity and values imposed on women by a male-dominated society and its power groups are transient and they can be changed. Brooks provokes them to see that in Pakistan, both men and women will have to dismantle the structure of social and moral norms that gives authority to oppressors to impose their monologic truth on others.

Mrs. Sallie Smith’s search for her lost girl can also be understood in the context of the classical tradition of the descent into the underworld by the heroic figure, particularly, Dante’s descent into Hell. Sheila Hughes has made a passing reference to Dante’s descent into hell, in her article, “A Prophet Overheard: a juxtapositional reading of Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘In the Mecca’,” when she states, “It draws together the remnants of Dante’s descent into hell,” but she does not explain and elaborate her state. I have traced some parallels between Dante’s hell and Brooks’ Mecca, and the purpose of Dante’s descent into the hell and that of Mrs. Sallie’s and narrator’s journey through the Mecca building. The journey of Mrs. Sallie Smith through the structure is described in the style that is

usually adopted in the narrative of the quest. In such stories, particularly in Dante's "Inferno," the poet adopts this narrative technique. The purpose of the descent into Hell is the Journey undertaken to vindicate lost honor and dignity or to attain self-knowledge and identity. The descent into Hell, or Hades, has been a recurrent theme in European literature. In Virgil's epic, "The Aeneid," the hero, Aeneas, descends into the Hades to speak with his ancestors, in order to gain wisdom and knowledge of the future. Robert Hollander remarks that Virgil's hero, Aeneas, after his journey into the underworld becomes "a new Aeneas," a changed person.

Dante is taken through the nine layers of Hell by the spirit of Virgil, who leads him through the gates of Hell, marked by the haunting inscription "all hope abandon, you who enter here" (Inferno, III.9), so that he may rise to heaven, where his Beatrice is. "In the Mecca" opens with the narrator's dark and haunting warning in blended Biblical language and African-American vernacular: "Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise." The narrator and Mrs. Sallie Smith lead us, the readers, through Mecca, and they not only tell us, but also show us the woes, miseries, abject poverty, crimes and sins that have given Mecca semblance of a Hell. The images of sickness, corruption, dirt, filth decay and death in "In the Mecca" tell the reader that it is a rotten place with an unwholesome environment, much like that of Dante's Hell. The reader's journey through Mecca, in the company of the narrator and Mrs. Sallie Smith, helps them to understand human nature better and enables them to feel the presence of evil and destructive powers more acutely. After the search through the Mecca building for Pepita, Mrs. Sallie and the narrator/brooks may not be the same. Mrs. Sallie, who hies home for rest, may not have

the same faith in her place and people after the experiences that she has to undergo during the search for lost daughter. The narrator/ Brooks who starts the narration with dark and haunting warning, ends her narration with optimistic note and prophetic vision of “A material collapse that is Construction.”(Black 432).

Dante has to descend into Hell so that he may rise to Paradise, where his Beatrice lives: in other words, Dante must descend into the Hell, in order to understand the nature of human evils and gains insight into human nature, and therefore his own. According to John Freccero, Dante’s “Inferno, like Plato's cave, is a place where all men come to know themselves” (168). Dante’s Hell is a description of the nature of punishments given to sinners according to the intensity and grossness of their sins. In this way, Dante makes his readers realize the intensity and potentiality of sins and evils present in human nature, so that a nation, or a community, or individual men and women may peep into their souls and understand their sins and the evil that they have to encounter and overcome, before they can attain self-realization or self-knowledge.

The journey through Mecca in search of the lost child is also the quest for the liberation and a new identity for African-Americans. But, they must gain the consciousness of the evils and sins that are plaguing their community. The narrator, along with Mrs. Sallie Smith, takes the readers to every cell and to every floor to acquaint them with prevalent evils and crimes among the dwellers of this Hell-like structure. Dante assigns different levels of Hell for different sins, according to their grossness and intensity. The grosser the sin the deeper the level of Hell and the more severe the punishment assigned to the sinner. Although Brooks has not demarcated the level or the

grossness of sin and severity of the punishments, she, no doubt, makes the readers realize the intensity of evil and sins that are pushing the community to indifference, hypocrisy, and gender oppression. Brooks is exposing these sins with reference to inhabitants of the Mecca, but they are not limited to the space and time of the building and its inhabitants for they are the sins that are present in every region, age, and nation: hence they are universal in nature. If Dante's idea of the greatest sin is fraud or betrayal to one's benefactor, Brooks' idea of the most deplorable crime is ignorance, which in turn leads to poverty and indifference to the real problems of a community.

Brooks' message in "In the Mecca" is political, but the means that she envisioned to achieve the end is guided by "sanity," which is characterized by the unification of moral and aesthetic values in a piece of artistic creation. She uses the dilapidated and sordid building, Mecca as a symbol to represent the social, moral, and political state of affairs of African-American society. The narrator and Mrs. Sallie Smith serve as eyes and ears for the readers, for they show the abject life and various social and moral sins of the dwellers, tell their tales of sufferings and woe resulting from oppression and ignorance, comment on their physical actions and psychological conditions, and make the readers hear the sad music of agony and anguish that is reverberating throughout Mecca. The main theme of Dante's Inferno is the exposition of the perfection of God's justice and punishment for the crimes and sins that human beings have committed, but it also has other themes, which relate to the social and political issues of Dante's time. Ciaccio, a Florentine who Dante talks to in the Third Circle of Hell, makes a prediction of Florence's political future, which according to him will be filled with discord and

dissension. Frank Rosengarten, in his article, “Gramsci's ‘Little Discovery’: Gramsci's Interpretation of Canto X of Dante's Inferno,” draws our attention to the political elements in the Canto X, which are brought out through the dialogue between Dante and the shade of Farinata, Dante’s political opponent, when he was alive, as well as the theme of punishment and endowment of “the gift of prophecy.”

Although the central idea of “In the Mecca” is the quest for the lost child, some complex and important social, political, and moral theme are embedded in this poem, as well. In “In the Mecca,” we find visions concerning the future of African-Americans. We hear from the narrator what Don Lee wants in a powerful rhetoric. She tells the reader that Lee’s vision is complete liberation. He wants a new earth, a new sky, a new anthem, as well as new and powerful music for African-Americans. The narrator says that he “wants a new nation . . . new art and anthem; will want a new music screaming in the sun” (421-422). Another vision comes from Amos, who advocates violent change and retaliation against what White America had done to the Black during the slavery days. And Amos (not Alfred) prays, for America:

Bathe her in her beautiful blood.

A long blood bath will wash her pure. . .

Great-nailed boots must kick her prostrate,

heel-grind that soft breast, outrage her saucy pride,

remove her fair fine mask

. . . flogging her dark one with her own hand,

watching in meek amusement while he bled.

Then shall she rise, recover.

Never to forget. (422-23)

At the beginning of Amos's speech and a little later the narrator reiterates twice, "Amos (not Alfred) says," to make the reader realize that the vision is not of the narrator or that of Alfred, but of Amos alone. In fact, this assertion makes the reader feel that the narrator and Alfred do not approve Amos's ideas of violence and bloodshed.

However, the narrator brings in Alfred for the fifth time and he describes his vision of "essential sanity," which will be "black and electric" and will light the path of liberation. Alfred's idea of "essential sanity" is related to moral vision in art and its significance in society. It also includes the concept of beauty in its totality, i.e. beauty of forms, objects, and actions. In fact, Alfred's vision, an epiphanic moment, as Melhem has pointed out, can be viewed as the sudden vision that the Romantic poets, like Wordsworth, have experienced in an intense moment of powerful feeling. They attain "the sense of continuity with nature through which human life perceives the universal bond" (Melhem 166). In Wordsworth and in the works of other British Romantic poets, such vision and experience arouse "intellectual love" (Melhem 166) for they merge their imagination with Platonic idealism, but with Brooks, the stress is on mundane and day-to-day problems of survival in hostile and unfavorable conditions. Melhem remarks, "In Brooks there is a similar emphasis on imagination as empathy, but the engagement is more immediately applicable to daily life. In a destructive environment, she suggests, black sanity will be curative, not by passive alienation but through a passionate "estrangement" from prevailing values" (Melhem 166). Brooks has already demonstrated

in her Novel, *Maud Martha* (1953) through her heroin, Maud, that violence and alienation are not the only means to Register one's protest or disapproval of a system, one can also shows one's anger, hatred, disapproval by not becoming a part of that system. Alfred recurrent appearance in the poem indicates the development of his consciousness. In the beginning, he is more concerned with problems and issues that are not related to the immediate problems being faced by his neighbors; rather he is more interested in the works of Browning, Narula, and Singh. But, toward the end of the poem, he talks about "essential sanity that is black and electric. However, he does not advocate violence like Amos or demands new nation or new anthem like Don Lee, what he envisions, is the material collapse and coming out of the confinement symbolized by The Mecca building:

I hate it.

Yet, murmurs Alfred—

who is lean at the balcony, leaning—

something, something in Mecca

continues to call! Substanceless; yet like mountains,

like rivers and oceans too; and like trees

with wind whistling through them. And steadily

an essential sanity, black and electric,

builds to a reportage and redemption.

A hot estrangement.

A material collapse that is Construction." (Blacks 432)

Alfred's vision of "the essential sanity" is the maturing of the sanity that we find in "Maud Martha": and Maud breaking away from restrictive choices and confined places and coming out into open places and the real light of the sun, as well as merging into mainstream social and political life.

The center of Brooks' vision seems to be the collapse of the structure of Mecca, a symbol of both restriction and confinement and the rise of African-American consciousness based on "essential sanity." The death of Pepita and her leaving of Mecca mark the beginning of the collapse of Mecca, which is painted as a prison. The apartments and rooms of Mecca have been described as prison cells in which the African-Americans have confined themselves or imprisoned by the predominant systems. Freedom and cheerful bright light seem to be absent from this urban tenement. The sense of lack of freedom and the gloomy depressing atmosphere make this building resemble Hell. But, the difference between Mecca and Hell is that Mecca, the symbol of restrictive life and choice, is a crumbling structure and its rupture has already begun. Its inhabitant can hope for better days whereas, the inhabitants of Dante's Hell have no hope of escaping from their punishment and confinement.

The death of Pepita signifies the need for African-American society to reconfigure and re-imagine a new identity and new consciousness. The journey through this Hell-like building reminds the readers of the traditional theme of the journey downward in order to rise as Freccero has pointed out with reference to Augustine, Aristotle, and Dante in his article, "Dante's Pilgrim in a Jyre," "this is the literal justification of the moral truth which Augustine expressed with the exhortation: 'Descend, so that you may ascend. In

spiritual life, one must descend in humility before one can begin the ascent to truth, and in the physical world, according to both Dante and Aristotle, one must travel downward with respect to our hemisphere in order to rise”(170). This downward journey or journey into man’s inner self ultimately leads the protagonist, as well as the reader to the attainment of self-knowledge or self-affirmation. The search party of Mrs. Sallie Smith leads the readers into heart of the darkness of African-American material, psychological, and spiritual wilderness, and it gives insight into the existence of evil in human nature and the destruction it can cause to an individual, as well as to a society. This journey through the restrictive, mundane, and squalid world of poor and oppressed people shown as described by two women, a poor mother and the omniscient narrator, acquaints the audience with not only material deprivation and comfort, but also the lack of fellow feeling among African-Americans. Thus she exposes the weaknesses in African society that need to be overcome before reconfiguring an alternative system for themselves. This journey through Mecca also is journey conducted by a suffering mother into the inner recesses of the African- American psyche, and it helps her African-American as well as the larger audience to understand their weaknesses and sins such as, greed, lust, hypocrisy, torpor, indifference to the sufferings and problems. This consciousness and self-knowledge will enable them to transform their given identity and social and political status.

Brooks, who has been talking from the margin about blackness and African-American’s problems and issues for 23 years, finally descends into the center of African-American life, Mecca, in order to gain self-knowledge. With the attainment of self-

knowledge and knowledge of her people, Brooks realizes that what her people need is, “essential sanity,” that will empower them to destabilize the old value systems based on white values, as well as to liberate African-Americans from their confined atmosphere and narrow visions. This reconfiguration of a new values, Brooks seems to suggest, should be based on: “. . . . An essential sanity, black and electric, builds to a reportage and redemption” (Black 431).

Brooks’ poetry is not appreciated in its complete perspective by both the white and black critics. Euro-American-centric critics of late 1960s and early 1970s, and even her biographer George Kent, believe that Brooks poetry before the second Fisk University Black Writer’s Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, 1967 is better in aesthetic and literary quality compared to her poetry after what is popularly known among Brooks’ critics as her ‘rebirth of consciousness.’ On the other hand, some radical younger poets of the Black Art movement consider that her early poetry is aimed at a white middle class audience. But, her works, whether they belong to before or after 1967, always address questions of poverty, the social issues of the down and out of African American society, and the oppression of woman. There is no major shift in the themes and subject matter of her poetry. The poetry written before 1967, “with its intense experimentation in traditional poetic forms” (Annette Debo 143) is appreciated by the main stream critics for its aesthetic and lyrical qualities, but, her later poetry which does not conform to the elitist literary canons is disapproved on the pretext that they lack aesthetic quality and universality.

“In the Mecca” has proved that these observations and objections are not based on the impartial judgment. “In the Mecca” is rich in aestheticism, for Brooks infuses black aesthetics into the conventional aesthetic values, thus she not only destabilizes the traditional notions of aestheticism, but also reconfigures it in the perspective of larger and broader human values. We can look at the Anglo-American--centric criticism against Brooks’ later poetry as the question that the African-American writers had to confront after 1967, whether a poet should write in traditional form and diction which are acceptable to mainstream Euro-American literary canons, or in open form and vernacular language that African-American writers and critics appreciate. However, now it is the other way around, for dominant position would be that black writers ought to draw upon folk and vernacular culture and language. Perhaps the tables have turned. This would explain why the most anthologized of all Brooks’ poems is not a sonnet, but “We Real Cool” with its urban setting and use of simulated vernacular English. Critics like Sheila Hassell Hughes believe “In the Mecca” marks the end of one literary period for the poet and the beginning of another, but, in my opinion, there is no early, middle, or last age in Brooks’ poetry, and there is no major shift in the themes and subject matter of her, because subversion, struggle, protest, satire, irony, and experimentation of literary forms, as well as aesthetic quality have always been prominent features of her writing.

## CHAPTER V

### MAUD MARTHA: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN'S ATTAINMENT OF VOICE

Maud Martha, (1953) Brooks' sole novel, enhances the themes of resistance, protest, subversion, and the "Black-and-tan motif" as well as aspiration for the social and class mobility that we find in her first two volumes of poetry, "A Street in Bronzeville" (1945) and "Annie Allen" (1949). It also heralds the idea of "sanity," which she enhances in her longest poem, "In the Mecca" (1968). Brooks adopts a different genre in Maud Martha: the novel, but her style and technique is poetic. While the genre is different, the themes and subject matters are not. Maud Martha is the story of an African-American woman's growth from girlhood to womanhood and motherhood. It can also be viewed as the progression of consciousness in and attainment of voice by the protagonist. Both these merits are essential for an African-American woman to transform herself and to articulate her emotions, feelings, anger and protests. Maud is aware of discrimination in society, injustice perpetrated against African-Americans, oppression of black women, and the social and economic factors that are obstructing the class mobility among the African Americans, particularly African American women, but she lacks the ability to voice her anger and protests, until she becomes a mother and her daughter's happiness and childhood are at stake. Her act of resistance and protest against racism and sexism demonstrates her insight into the nature of these problems and manners of countering them. Her extraordinary vision and approach to these problems, as well as the method she

adopts to challenge discrimination and injustice is immediately recognized as uncommon attributes by the reader.

The name of the protagonist, Maud Martha, suggests conflict in the mind of the Maud. Maud grows up a docile and submissive girl, who apparently accepts her pre-defined role, and this aspect of her nature is reflected by the first part of her name, Maud—which comes, as Melhem has points out, from the New Testament, "Magdalene," the adulteress who became a devout Christian after conversion. The ambivalence in the name also reminds the readers of Tennyson's "Maud," grappling with passion and duty" (Melhem 86). The second part of her name, Martha represents her aggressive nature, for "Martha" according to Melhem, in the New Testament is a warrior. Thus the name of the protagonist, reflects conflict between the 'Maud' who seems to accept color stratification in her early days and the 'Martha' who is always ready to challenge and fight against color and racial discrimination as well as injustice. According to Melhem, "Collocation of the names 'Maud' and 'Martha,' therefore, suggests the conflict between self-assertion and self-restraint." She carries this conflict from her previous two poetic volumes and continues it in her epic poem "In the Mecca". Her vision in this novel and in "In the Mecca" is that to gain liberation guided by "essential sanity" African-Americans must attain self-knowledge and self-definition, for which they must simultaneously exercise "self-assertion" and self restraint.

Another theme that she continues from her previous volume of poetry, Annie Allen, is the act of looking for alternative systems through the figure of the 'mother.' "Annie Allen" narrates the growth of a African-American woman, from childhood to

motherhood. The ultimate change that comes to Annie, in this tale, seems come about abruptly. However, in Maud Martha, Brooks gives an elaborate description of the changes that have taken place in the life of Maud, and it traces the gradual rise of consciousness and progress to her attainment of voice. We can discern the transitions in Maud from girlhood to womanhood, to married life and to pregnancy, child birth, and finally motherhood. These changes in her are not only the changes in her physical and biological conditions, but also in her mental, psychological, and emotional situations. It is during maternity and motherhood, that Maud gains self-realization and empathy, for all creatures. She cherishes values such as, love, restraint, self-affirmation, defiance and resistance with grace and dignity. These values, Melhem calls “sanity” (87). It is this “sanity,” which later becomes the “essential sanity” that is “Black and electric” in “In the Mecca.” The light of sanity that we see in “Maud Martha” is dim, but it is harbinger of the bright light of African-American consciousness (Black consciousness) that will come later in her works.

“Maud Martha” is a black bildungsroman, which narrates the story of Maud Martha, a simple, plain, timid black girl who grows up accepting woman’s defined and prescribed roles, as well as race discrimination. However, the section that deals with her young womanhood and married life narrates her struggle to establish her identity and to find a voice, which will enable her to register her existence and articulate her aspirations and dreams. Later, when she becomes a mother, she not only asserts authority but also challenges the values and culture that render black African-American women invisible to

the rest of society. Her role as a mother turns her into a rebellious individual, who righteously resists and protests against all forms of dominations and discriminations.

This poetic novel, like most of her early poems, gives a central role to a common African-American woman. This act is unusual for the time, because the 1940s-50s was an age of powerful male characters, like Richard Wright's *Bigger Thomas* and Ralph Ellison's *invisible man*. This novel traces the growth of Maud's mind, along with descriptions of her journey from girlhood to motherhood. The reader is more familiar with the functioning of her mind and the development of her thoughts than her physical appearance. Brooks' description of Maud Martha Brown begins with an explanation of Maud's passion for a common flower, a dandelion. She is conscious of her black complexion and is acutely aware of how others feel about her race and color. We do not find much direct action in the novel, except in a few places, particularly toward the end of the novel. It enables the readers to follow and understand the development of her consciousness that ultimately renders her voice. A sympathetic third-person narrator describes most of the actions that are taking place in Maud's mind. We look at and understand Maud's character through the narrator who can be intrusive as well as objective at the same time. Brooks, in her later works, applies this narrative device, particularly in "In the Mecca". In *Maud Martha* the main voice is the "undramatized narrator, the fictional self" (R. Baxter Miller) who can penetrate into the consciousness of the characters and can also maintain a distance from them.

The narrator, who seems to be more interested in the working of Maud's mind than in her physical actions tells the readers in the novel's opening chapter how Maud

cherishes plain things such as the dandelions in her parent's backyard and identify them as “a picture of herself” for their “demure prettiness” and “everydayness” (Blacks 144). Yet, the reader is made aware that while Maud’s aesthetic tastes and physical appearance may be simple and ordinary, her mind and thought are quite complex. She is a poet by temperament and is capable of understanding other’s emotions and is aware that every person cannot have the same aesthetic appreciation of the “commonplace.” She struggles, resists and protests against injustice, discrimination, and oppression without losing grace and dignity. She is a new African-American woman, who is conscious of her dignity and at the same time, knows how to snatch her rights from reluctant hands for herself and her daughter, through positive means i.e. without losing grace and dignity. Over and above all, she has developed the consciousness that she is “a human being” with self-respect and an independent identity. She is a common and plain-looking girl in outward appearance, but her power to verbally articulate her thoughts and feelings links her with the struggles and aspirations of African-American women of the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Maud is a type of African-American woman that Brooks wants to help bring into being in African-American society through the influence of her works. Brooks seems to be giving a guide line to African-American women of how to defy and resist the discrimination and injustice through Maud’s approach to life and her method of protest and resistance against the prevalent evils in the society. We can trace Maud’s resistance in three levels: in the first level, although she feels the color stratification, in her family, as well as in her society, she does not externalize her anger and resentment; in the second

level, she registers her protest and resistance by refusing to become a part of the system that reduces African American women to invisible objects or a mindless child; and in the third level, she finds voice and articulates her rage and powerfully demands the rights of her daughter. Her resistance and struggle are not only against white culture and values, but also against her own color conscious and sexist society. Till her marriage, we do not find any extraordinary quality that distinguishes her from other black women in physical actions or mental qualities except that she likes common and ordinary flowers, like dandelions, and that she prefers reading books to going to parties. But, after marriage, we, with the help of the narrator who is tracing the changes in her feelings and consciousness, can observe some changes in her character. She is not satisfied with the identity that is given to her by society and her husband, Paul. She constantly feels that she is not given due recognition, because of her color and gender. She even feels that her husband, who prefers light color skin, is incapable of appreciating her beauty and the higher qualities that she possesses.

This novel takes up the theme of “black-and-tan theme” (Davis) that we find in the “Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie,” the “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” and “Annie Allen” and develop it further. Light color skin, the standard of beauty in white culture, which is adopted by African-Americans of every complexion, as well as both genders continuously, disturbs Maud, as well as Brooks, herself. Brooks brings up this issue time and again in her early works, and she exposes its baneful effects on the life of darker-complexioned African-American women. However, we usually find a message that black

and dark color women should create a new value system and new criteria of beauty for themselves.

Maud is aware of the supposed ugliness of her color, as well as the racial discrimination against it. She has experienced this color discrimination since her childhood, not only in the outside world but also at home. Her parents and brother prefer her sister, Helen because of her fair color and golden hair. At school, she is rejected or ignored by her male counterparts for her black color. Emmanuel refuses to give her a ride in his wagon, because of her color and remarks, "I don't mean you, you old black gal"(Black 176). This experience of color discrimination among African-Americans weighed heavily on her mind and feels it more sharply when Paul, her husband neglects her in the ball of the Foxy cats club. Melhem remarks, "But the black-and- tan dilemma more cruelly afflicts Maud at the Annual Dawn Ball of the Foxy Cats Club, a group of pleasure-seekers" (89). Maud realizes that her husband, Paul does not like her and cannot appreciate her merits because he is judging her with standards set by white culture. She also knows that due to her dark complexion and pregnancy, she is an unimpressive and unattractive figure among the revelers. Paul also neglects her, seats her on a bench and goes to dance with a fair skinned girl. Maud, watching Paul dance with the red-hair Maella, realizes that her color will always be "like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. . . . He gets awful tired of all that Jumping" (Black 229-230). Paul's attitude and her consciousness of her black color, constantly disturbs her and, at times, the reader may feel that she succumbs to traditional white idea of beauty. However, she, like Mabbie in "The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie," realizes that

she has to rely on her own resources and reconstruct her self-identity, in order to struggle against the racist and sexist society. Maud is pragmatic in her approach, she neither romanticizes her dark color like the Harlem Renaissance writers, nor shouts like the Black Arts movement, “Black is beautiful”; rather, she realistically faces her psychological and social problems and tries to overcome them with grace and dignity.

Maud is angry with her society for their standards of beauty, which are based on the criteria of white culture. For many black men of that time, “Pretty would be a little cream-colored thing with curly hair” (Black 195). She does not react violently or behave improperly despite the fact that she is choking with anger for the color discrimination that she has to face everywhere. She knows that Paul does not love her, as he would love a wife with light color. But she continues to love him and tries to understand the social, psychological, and emotional problems that compel him to behave the way he does. When, at the Foxy Cats Club dance, Paul leaves her to dance with someone “red-haired and curved, and white as a white,” (Black 227), Maud realizes Paul is abandoning her because of her color but, she does not condemn or censure her husband for what she considers his weaknesses. She understands that to have good relations between them they should accommodate and understand each other. In the Foxy Cat Club dance, Maud watches her husband dancing with a beautiful light skin woman. She is so enraged by the sight that she wants to scratch, spit at, and scream at Paul's dance partner, but she checks herself and does not yield to her anger and jealousy. “Maud seems to realize that she will never have the opportunity to defy the gods and mountains responsible for her oppression, so she, like Paul, will simply keep jumping at the wall” (Lattin and Lattin).

She can also feel the high barrier of racial discrimination in her society and wants to break that barrier and come out into the open. She wants to become a part of the larger world, not confined to small spaces and a limited circle: “Maud Martha, with her daughter, got out-of-doors. She did not need information, or solace, or a guidebook, or a sermon—not in this sun!—not in this blue air!” (Black 320). Maud is a changed woman—she is ready to face every challenge by herself and has transcended spatial, as well as mental and psychological limitations. At the same time, she seems to have resolved to coexist in American society, but in a different environment—in the atmosphere of freedom and openness.

Brooks, in her early two volumes uses images of “bad woman,” in poems such as “Sadie and Maud,” “a song in the front yard,” and “the rites for Cousin Vit,” to destabilize and subvert conventional moral values and to reconfigure a new image and new values, which render African-American women recognition as human beings. However, in “Maud Martha,” Brooks, through the image of Maud and her struggle as a married woman and as a mother, seems to be giving a new set of moral and social values, which are essentially African-American and necessary for the change in social and economic life. Brooks/the narrator is suggesting that an ideal of new African-American woman is in possession of a powerful individual ‘voice.’ Maud chooses to live with dignity, resist with grace, and make her life as meaningful and beautiful as possible. She upholds the moral and social values that Brooks has, directly or indirectly, advocated in her first two books—the moral vision of Mrs. Booker T, social awareness of Big Bessie, and Annie’s ideas of civilized space.

Brooks and Maud, the heroine of her autobiographical novel, are struggling to overcome the invisibility that has been imposed on African-American women by white culture. Maud has to suffer discrimination from within the African-American community, but she also has some bitter experiences of racial segregation and discrimination in her wider social life. During a visit to movie theater, the “World Playhouse,” Maud’s girlhood fear of the white world, which she sees as “always hunched and ready to close in on you....” (Black 151) resurfaces—she feels shaky, nervous, and afraid in the presence of the cold and indifferent white audience, who does not acknowledge their presence and treats Maud and her husband as they are invisible. Brooks and her women, particularly, the mother figures, are struggling and raising voices of protest against the invisibility of African-American women. Maud’s effort to establish and assert her identity as a dignified and respectable woman with a liberated voice, is meant to lift her out of the invisibility that racial, color, and gender discrimination has imposed on her.

Maud is simple, but not naive; she has an intense awareness of social, economic, and racial problems. She tackles and solves them in her own way. Her intelligent and active mind is always in search of means and ways of asserting her identity and challenging oppressive racist and sexist practices as well as to climb the social and economic ladders. She is conscious of the prevalent problems in her society, particularly those problems that black African-American women have to face in their day-to-day lives.

Maud actions and interior monologues as well as the narrator’s comments provide the reader an opportunity to peep into the mind of a woman who is struggling against

racism and sexism which are responsible for the denigration of African-American women and the impediment of their class mobility and economic improvement. Her ideas and manner of thinking are blatantly unconventional for her time. Maud wants to have an identity of her own and desires an environment in which she may be able to lead a life in which her hopes and ambitions may come into fruition. Maud believes that life should be creative. She understands the implications of racism and injustice. She also knows that they can stunt “her ability to exist in a creative fashion” (Lattin and Lattin). Creativity in life needs self-affirmation and self-realization, as well as an independent identity. This desire and awareness urge her to resist racism and sexism so that she may create for African American women, at least for herself, a milieu in which African American children may live a free life, sans racial and color barriers, look forward to a future in which Paulette's (African American) children will not have to lose their childhood dreams and fancies, and look at life hopefully. She realizes that the best way to achieve this end is to defy and resist the system that has rendered her, and other women with dark complexions, invisible. She expresses her disapproval, anger, and resentment, as strongly as she can, without losing her dignity and moral values.

Her idea of living in a “creative fashion” is meant to give life positive and hopeful views and to create life out of death and destruction. Her action of freeing the entrapped mouse that has been dodging her for many days and granting it life is a creative act and reveals that Maud is empathetic and can understand other’s feelings. Her action of freeing the mouse out of sympathy and fellow feelings gives a glimpse of her self-realization, which will lead her to self-definition and self-affirmation. Maud finally traps the mouse

that has been giving her the slip for days, but after the capture, she begins to empathize with the captive, thinking that he/she may have a family and that he/she is anxious about his/her children and perhaps feeling sorry that she/he will miss the pleasures of his/her family. The love for this fellow creature, empathy, and fellow feeling overwhelm her, and she lets the mouse go.

At this point, Maud suddenly realizes her potential and “sees that she has the power to preserve or destroy” (Lattin and Lattin). She chooses the positive and creative power, i.e. to preserve the life of the mouse. She now understands that her action should not be subservient to the circumstances, but that she can create value and meaning which will make her actions creative and positive, in her own way. Patricia H. Lattin and Vernon E. Lattin remark, “Through her simple restraint, she had created a piece of life. By letting the creature go, she has been not only an artist/creator, but also a moral good. Uniting art and morality, she sees herself as having a godlike loving-kindness”(184). Maud’s action reflects Brooks’ idea that even small and insignificant actions of our everyday existence can give meaning and beauty to our lives. In this incidence, Brooks is trying to bring home to her audience that one does not need to move heaven and earth to create something good, an act based on sanity, i. e. merger of art and morality, can bring about a desired result—violence is not the only solution or the only means to achieve one’s goal, one can adopt more constructive and positive means to destabilize oppressive and unjust systems. The final message from Maud to the readers is to create a world where the most insignificant and meanest flower even has a respectable place and that people of different race and color may coexist in it, without denigration.

Maud's struggle is to create an independent identity on her own and to empower herself by transforming the image and role of African American women. She is conscious of the fact that to achieve her goal, she has to defy and oppose the preexisting systems, and it could be possible only if she has the voice to articulate her feelings. As soon as she finds a 'voice,' she feels empowered and ready to face and challenge predominant ideas. With this newly attained 'voice,' she has the necessary sense of independent identity, while still remaining an integral part of the society at large. Her vision of life is not isolation, but coexistence under the free sky and with a new anthem.

She is a dynamic character; her ideas and thinking grow and mature with the passage of time. Her vision of life broadens as her contact and experiences with other people increases. She finally realizes that she must come out of her confined space and narrow ideas; she must demolish the wall that has kept her out of the wider world, and conquer the white racial mountain. The last vignette of Maud Martha, "back from the wars!" provides insight into the changes that have come in Maud's vision of life. After under going diverse experiences of race, color, and gender discrimination, she has finally reached at the conclusion that life has to be lived with grace and dignity, despite its ugly and unpleasant factors. Although, the war in Europe and the Pacific has ended and life seems to be filled with joy, because of the reunion of the members of the separated families, it is not all optimism for African Americans, as she is aware that African-Americans have to continue the war at home—war against racism and sexism, and war for equality and social justice. She notices that some struggle and fighting against oppression are continuing. She seems to have accepted life as it is, after going through

both pleasant and bitter experiences, for she has realized that whatever may happen, life will go on. Maud observes that life and death, beauty and ugliness, and good and evil are integral parts of life, and they are placed side by side. "And the Negro press (on whose front pages beamed the usual representations of womanly Beauty, pale and pompadour) carried the stories of the latest of the Georgia and Mississippi lynchings. . ." (Black 321). The juxtaposing of the pictures of beautiful women and those of the victims of racial violence suggests that all the wars are not yet over for African-Americans. They have to fight for freedom and struggle against oppression and restrictions, in the same way that African-American women have to fight against the criteria of beauty defined by white culture and wage the war against male domination and sexism.

Maud Martha's struggle is a struggle against injustice against African-Americans, racial discrimination and segregation, as well as color prejudice. In the beginning, we feel that she accepted color stratification, but she has never approved discrimination based on color, for she tries to resist color discrimination at every possible level. Later, when she has to encounter racial discrimination her reaction at first is silent, but visible and strong defiance. Before she can verbally articulate her anger and protest against racial and color discrimination, she suffers a number of setbacks in her life, due to her race and shade. She resists discrimination and injustice, at first silently, then through gestures and in the end verbally, but throughout her defiance and protest, she does not lose poise in her behavior; rather she always maintains dignity and grace.

She is optimistic of the coming days. She knows that as the winter has passed, spring has come, and bleak days have changed into bright sunny days. So will the days of

African-Americans change. Her hope lies in the fact that man's foolishness cannot destroy even "the basic equanimity of the least and commonest flower: for would its kind not come up again in the spring? Come up, if necessary, among, between, or out of—beastly inconvenient!—the smashed corpses lying in strict composure, in that hush infallible and sincere" (Black 321). Maud may have the optimistic vision of life and look forward to better days, but her optimism is not a shallow optimism. She is not oblivious of the ugly and unpleasant realities of life. She knows that she has to fight against the discrimination and oppression and has to win the fight, but she wants to do it in a dignified way. She defies the racial discrimination of the white manager of the Millenary shop by refusing to become her customer and protests against the racism of Burns-Coopers by giving up a well paid job. In both the cases, she maintains her dignity and at the same time makes her adversaries feel her anger and resentment against their unjust and discriminatory treatment.

Maud has positive vision of life. The imagery and language used by the narrator and in Maud's interior monologues in the novel, particularly in the later half of it, reflects Maud's positive vision and her confidence in her self. From her school days, the narrator gives the impression that Maud has the habit of looking at things from a positive angle. She believes that even a bleak day has some promises and one can hope for a better one. The images, like the sun and the children in the chapter "spring landscape": "The sky was gray, but the sun was making little silver promises somewhere up there, hinting" (Black 146). Such an attitude toward life enables Maud to shut out all the world's inhibitions and absurdities. Maud's ability to appreciate the beauty of common flower, like the

dandelion, and see “little promises, just under cover,” (Black 146) even in a bleak situation enables Maud to end the story on a note of optimism and promise:

And was not this something to be thankful for?  
And, in the meantime, while people did live they  
would be grand, would be glorious and brave,  
would have nimble hearts that would beat and beat.  
They would even get up nonsense, through wars,  
through divorce, through evictions and jiltings and  
taxes. And, in the meantime, she was going to have  
another baby. The weather was bidding her bon  
voyage. (Black 321-22)

The remarks, “The weather was bidding her bon voyage” gives the sense of moving forward dauntlessly and sailing to the new land of opportunities where there will be no class and color discrimination, social and economic constrictions, and restrictions on a particular community for its race and color. Brooks continues this vision and enhances further in “In the Mecca,” in which she talks of the “material collapse” and creation of the world, in which “essential sanity” prevails, and will be “black and electric.”

Maud is an organic character, and her personality and ideas grow with the change in time and circumstances. These changes in her ideas and personalities also indicate Maud’s gradual shifting toward attainment of authority and voice. There are four incidences that demonstrate growth in her mental and psychological stature. All these incidences are racial encounters and lead Maud to the attainment of voice to articulate her

consciousness, which is expressed in the form of rage against Santa's slight to her daughter.

Maud is proud of her race and color, although we sometimes feel that she is not happy with her blackness. Her self-respect and pride in her color and race come to surface when a young white woman comes into Sonia Johnson's beauty shop to sell lipstick. Sonia listens to her eulogies about the product and finally orders some of them. Maud, who is in the shop at the time, is furious with Sonia's response and the sales woman's remarks. Maud was watching Sonia intently—how she would use the opportunity that she had got to humiliate a white person. Sonia did not use the opportunity for a small victory over this young white woman, with what Maud thinks of as "beautiful legs." Maud is aware of the attitude of some beauticians, who will not miss any opportunity to humiliate the white saleswomen, whenever they come to sell their products. They are, sometimes insulting, rude, and then they "applied the whiplash." "Then they sent the poor creatures off—with no orders. Then they laughed and laughed and laughed a terrible laughter" (Black 278). Maud is angry, because the saleswoman is trying to sell the product to Sonia, convincing her that "this new shade . . . is just the thing for your customers. For their dark complexions" (Black 278). Maud is annoyed by the ignorance of the saleswoman, whom she doubts realizes that the "Negro group" included all complexions ranging from very fair, sometime fairer than the white saleswoman herself, to "brown, tan, yellow, cream which could not take a dark lipstick and keep their poise" (Black 279). However, these are the secondary reasons for Maud's anger, Maud is furious, because the saleswoman has used the word "nigger" and has not

been reprimanded by Sonia. The saleswoman has said, "I work like a nigger to make a few pennies" (Black 281). Here, Sonia could have asserted her superiority by rebuking the saleswoman, yet she does not do so.

No doubt, Maud is furious, but she is not ready to unleash her fury. She does not want to pick up a row with the saleswoman, because she thinks it is not the right moment to do so, or, perhaps, she has not yet found her voice with which to articulate her anger and resentment. Maud does not utter a word against the white saleswoman or express her anger verbally, but the omniscient narrator, who can penetrate into the minds of the characters, externalizes the conflict in the mind of Maud as well as her anger. In fact, in this novel, Brooks, has developed a narrative technique by, as Miller remarks, "creating an undramatized narrator, the fictional self conceived in the work, who can enter characters' minds or withdraw into objectivity" (161). She also uses this narrative device in her epic poem, "In the Mecca" to expose the evil, miseries of African Americans, and oppression that are rampant in the Mecca building. In a later incidence, she does not miss the opportunity to register her disapproval of the behavior of a white manager of the Millenary shop, not verbally, but through her actions and behavior. She cuts the white saleswoman to her size who is trying to slight her by ignoring her beauty, thus making her invisible, while praising the virtues of the hat that she wants to sell to Maud. She refuses to buy it although she is given a reasonable discount. Maud's refusal to buy the hat demonstrates her sense of self-respect.

In the vignette, "at the Burns-Coopers," we find Maud shattering the old image of black women. Maud Martha asserts herself and proves that she is human being, who has

self-respect and self-dignity. Economic difficulties force Maud Martha to accept a job as a maid. Mrs. Burns-Cooper treats Maud as an ignorant mindless person, who does not know anything about her work. The description of domestic tasks that Mrs. Burns-Cooper assigns to Maud Martha brings out the constricting nature of such tasks. The employer is severe in her dealing with Maud and wants to impose rigorous discipline on her. At this moment, Maud understands the humiliation and indignity that Paul must have experienced at his work, everyday. His employer must have also been officious and dominating and may have tried to treat him as someone with no awareness, incapable of performing his duties without being treated as an ignorant child. With her own experience of indignity and humiliation, she begins to empathize with Paul. With this realization, she decides not to return to Burns-Coopers. “In a positive act of refusal, confirming that of ‘millinery,’ Maud decides not to return” (Melhem 91). The decision not to return to her work, reveals Maud’s development from registering her anger and protest only in her thoughts or by body language to the strong physical action of refusing to work for an employer who does not treat the employee with dignity that is due to every human being. Melhem remarks, “She asserts her humanity: one was a human being.” She has progressed from acceptance of color stratifications—in family, school, marriage, and society—to rebellion” (91). Maud has changed from a demur and shy black young woman to a bold, self-asserting and confident woman, who is ready to fight for her rights. The narrator’s comments and description enable the readers to keep themselves abreast of the growth in Maud’s consciousness that ultimately leads her to the attainment of voice.

The narrator has been leading the readers through different vignettes which give insight into the working of Maud's mind and consciousness. She is preparing them for the explosion of Maud's anger that marks Maud's attainment of voice. Maud finally attains 'voice' when she feels that she has to fight for her daughter's right. So far Maud has been resisting the indignities, discriminations, and humiliations through actions and gestures. She has not yet verbally articulated her anger and resentment. However, when Santa, in the rejection of her blackness, slights and ignores her daughter Paulette, as she tries to tell Santa what she wants for Christmas, Maud finds her voice, asserts her presence and forces the Santa to hear her daughter's request: "Mister," said Maud Martha, "my little girl is talking to you" (Black 315). When Maud addresses the Santa as "Mister," she has removed the super-human aura of a genial old man reaching every house without discriminating race and color, to deliver Christmas gifts to children on the Christmas eve and reduces him to an ordinary human being with racial and color prejudice. In this way, she exposes the hypocrisy of Santa a symbol of Christmas joys and satirizes his action. In the past, Maud Martha has not articulated her rage, but with her daughter's happiness at stake, she does not hesitate to speak up in a clear and uncompromising statement that forces Santa to recognize, although reluctantly, Paulette's presence. Maud has compelled the Santa to give her daughter her rights. This experience spurs the realization that she has a responsibility to save her daughter's childhood illusions and fancies. Her powerful protest against the Santa's racial discrimination is what Annie calls "to civilize the space". Maud realizes that for daughter's happiness, she has to fight against the system. She does not want to destroy her daughter's childhood

fancies and joys by pre-mature awareness and knowledge of racial discrimination. She tries to answer Paulette's matter of facts questions regarding Santa's cold treatment, while minimizing the insult and assuring the child that Santa's affection will be proved when her demands are fulfilled on Christmas morning. Her long explanation of Santa's behavior is her longest speech in the novel and an eloquent and pivotal display of her passionate disapproval off the racial discrimination that could destroy her daughter's childhood pleasures.

In Maud Martha, Brooks delineates a woman, who may be viewed as an early image of the new African-American women. She may be considered a predecessor of black feminists of the 1970s-80s. In her early two volumes of poetry, we find women who can articulate, like Pearl May Lee and Annie Allen, but their voices lack the vigor and dramatic address that we find in Maud's address to Santa. Moreover, Brooks traces the development of Maud's mind clearly and gives the reader clear ideas of her progress, from a quiet young woman to a woman with a powerful voice and vision of the future. We find Maud expressing her anger and resentment for the white saleswoman in her interior monologue and displaying her disapproval of the sales woman by closing the door on her. When she encounters Mrs. Burns-Cooper, who has been boasting about her wealth and visits to various countries, she wants to tell her of her own experience, but fails to articulate them. In both cases, we realize that Maud longs to rebuke them, but cannot find the voice to do so. In the latter case, Maud, cannot even inform Mrs. Burns-Cooper that she will be quitting the job. Maud lodges her protest by refusing to go to work the next day. She cannot articulate her feelings and thoughts. Instead she listens to

others tell her who she is, what she should do, and what is best for her. However, when she attains a voice, she not only asserts her and her daughter's presence, but also destabilizes Santa's identity. She does not address him as "Santa", but "Mister." Maud transforms her own image when she attains 'voice,' for she has assumed the role of 'subject,' that can speak for herself and define her feelings. Brooks, in the early 1950s, realized that African American women needed an individual 'voice' to assert themselves and to transform their identity imposed by the predominant culture and the majority. Later in the century, black feminists like, Mae Henderson and bell hooks, have taken up this idea and emphasize the necessity for 'voice,' in order for black women to transform themselves from being the narrated to the narrator from objectivity to subjectivity.

The changes in Maud are signified by changes in her voice, in her vocabulary, and in her expression. We can feel suppressed anger in the language of her thoughts and interior monologues, even when she is trying to justify what she calls, "noble understanding," the blamelessness of her family in preferring light color. We can feel the anger under this poise and calmness: "It was not their fault. She understood. They could not help it. They were enslaved, were fascinated, and they were not at all to blame" (Black 176). Yet, Maud's feelings are not articulated verbally, until she gives birth to Paulette. She asserts herself and voices her authority at the time of her daughter's birth. In fact, timid and polite language changes into commanding and authoritative notes. She screams at Paul, in the midst of her labor pain "DON'T YOU GO OUT OF HERE AND LEAVE ME ALONE! Damn! Damn!" (Black 234). When her mother, who is of

grumbling nature, enters the door, Maud makes clear to her that she is the authority in this situation: "Listen, if you're going to make a fuss, go on out. I'm having enough trouble without you making a fuss over everything" (Black 237).

Most of her speeches which reveal her anger and mental conditions are in the forms of interior monologues or loud thoughts. In them, we find military vocabulary and aggressive tone, which sometime resorts to the expression of physical violence. When she resolves not to return to the Burns-Coopers, she describes her action with a militaristic expression:

One walked out from that almost perfect wall, spitting at the firing squad.  
What difference did it make whether the firing squad understood or did not understand the manner of one's retaliation or why one had to retaliate?  
Why, one was a human being. (Black 305)

In the chapter entitled, "Millinery," her expression is defiant, and it reflects in her actions and behavior. In the millinery shop, Maud's behavior toward the white woman and her thought, as well as the description of the narrator, tells the reader of Maud's hatred for the whites, for their arrogance, and their sense of superiority. The narrator hints at her state of mind when the manager of the store "rushed off to consult with the owner. She rushed off to appeal to the boxes in the back room" (Black 298). At this moment, Maud seems to be enjoying the plight of the manager. In this way, Maud gives vent to her pent up anger and resentment against racism of the white majority that renders invisibility to African American women. She is very angry with the manager's attitude and behavior. She wants to articulate her feelings but she lacks the effective and powerful voice to

express her disapproval for the manager's racism. However, through her gestures and actions she reveals her anger, without resorting to aggressive manners or undignified ways. Maud's action in the Millenary shop reflects Brooks' idea of resisting the preexisting evils in the systems with dignity and grace, by rejecting what the system offer in the guise of favor to the oppressed and marginalized classes. Maud's action at the Millenary shop may be looked at as the defiance of the value system that makes African American women invisible, with what Melhem calls "sanity".

Maud is pleased to see the manager running back and forth to convince her to buy the hat. When she finally agrees to sell at the price that Maud has indicated, Maud coldly tells her, "I've decided against the hat" (Black 298). She has made this decision to make the manager uncomfortable and also to slight her. In this way, Maud has caused the white saleswoman great mental agony and frustration, which is described by the narrator in the final scene:

"What? Why, you told—But, you said—" Maud Martha went out, tenderly closed the door. "Black—oh, black—" said the hat woman to her hats—which, on the slender stands, shone pink and blue and white and lavender, showed off their tassels, their sleek satin ribbons, their veils, their flower coquettes. (Black 298-299)

In this incidence, Maud expresses her resentment for the white saleswoman's slight by her action and interior monologue, but her body language, as well as her vocabulary, also shows the rage that is overflowing in her heart. However, in the Santa episode, when Maud sees that the Santa's action is the beginning of the lessons of

inferiority and invisibility,” and her daughter’s happiness is at stake, she suddenly experiences her anger as powerful enough to lead to physical violence.” She adopts an authoritative and aggressive tone in her direct address to the Santa and also uses violent language in her interior monologue. It is the sense of danger to her daughter’s childhood happiness that enables Maud to find the voice and attain self-realization and self-determination. She contrasts her feelings of anger with the calm composure of her sister Helen: "Helen, she thought, would not have twitched, back there. Would not have yearned to jerk trimming scissors from the purse and jab jab jab that evading eye. Would have gathered her fires, patted them, rolled them, and blown on them" (Black 317). The, apparently, demurred and docile Maud of the early part of the novel is thinking what she would do to the Santa for his treatment of Paulette and how her sister would behave in such situation. Her monologue reveals that she considers herself a militant, who would prefer to resort to violent action whereas her sister, Helen may overlook the matter or react calmly. Maud’s understanding of herself also shows the progress of her consciousness, for now she seems to have realized her potential as a human being but she never resorts to violence; rather she tries to explain Santa’s behavior to her daughter, so that her illusion may not shatter and loss her childhood imagination.

In Maud Martha, Brooks proves that she is aware of racial oppression and discriminations and has not ignored the ambitions and interests of the African-Americans. Through her heroine, she shows her community how to defy and resist the ugly social and political practices and how to live, as best as one possibly can, with dignity and grace. Her mode of resistance against evil in the system and racial and color discrimination is

not to be a part of the system, or through non-cooperation. Her ideas and actions anticipate the 1954 Supreme Court decision and the civil rights movement. Her path of defiance, struggle, and resistance is lighted by “sanity,” not by blind rage and restraint not by unchecked and uncontrolled passion of hatred and violence. Maud Martha is an image of new African-American women, who may appear timid and calm on the surface, but is aggressive and asserting when the time and situation demands it. Her aspirations, ambitions, and ideas can be viewed as fore runners of the Combahee River Collective—the manifesto of Black Feminism, whose main aim is “to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.” Like these black feminists of 70s and 80s, she does not believe in separation. Like them, she believes in the peaceful co-existence and equality of both the sexes. She is a woman who is trying to keep a delicate balance between her domestic duties and her dreams, while at the same time looking for self-definition and self-dignity.

Brooks realizes that if African-American women want to play a positive and constructive role in society. They must have their voice, which they can not attain till they become the ‘subject.’ bell hooks believes that in order to come from the margin to the center, black women must find a voice. Only then can they transform their self- image and identity, which has been given to them by white culture and patriarchal society. Judith Butler points out the lack of any "preexisting identity" (141) for black women or any other woman, as well as the “fiction of the dominant gender's role”(Gery 47). According to Butler, we can change this assigned role. Brooks understands this fact, even in 1940s-50s. She assigns central roles to women, particularly to the mothers, in most of

her poems. She uses them and their utterances to subvert the traditional ideas and values and to destabilize their preexisting identities. All her works aim at changing the status of black women and giving them power by rendering them black female subjectivity and voice. In this way, she brings them from the margin to the center, from invisibility to visibility, and transforms them from objects to subjects. The main agency of this transformation is the women themselves. Their utterances herald the message of change and their voice inspires African-American women to reconfigure a new system, in which they will have a new image and a new language: the language of liberation.

Brooks' Maud Martha will not be a stranger to Pakistani women, although they may not be able to identify themselves completely with Maud, for they belong to different social, cultural, and moral systems. However, they have some common features in their lives: oppression, gender discrimination, and the imposed identity. In fact, African American women and Pakistani women are oppressed and discriminated "under different representational paradigms" (Demirturke). The oppressors of both their communities exploit social, moral, and religious elements to render the women of their respective community inferior status as identitiless objects and general invisibility. It will not be problematic for Pakistani students who are interested in feminism, as well as ordinary readers who are interested in woman's freedom from social, moral, and cultural taboos, to understand Maud's social, emotional, and psychological problems, for Pakistani women have to face almost the same kinds of problems in their own social and cultural environment, which is, obviously, different from that of Maud. Pakistani students of feminism resists the social values that make her inferior and invisible being,

for Urdu feminist writers are already using unconventional images of women to defy and resist the gender oppression and class discrimination that have made them 'others' and subordinates to men. What Pakistani students need is that they have to rise above the 19<sup>th</sup> century Eurocentric culture that stereotyped black nations as inferior people and Victorian ideas of womanhood that they have inherited from the British Raj and which the religious scholars and 'protectorates' of the social and morals values have sanctified. These students particularly at the graduate level where the emphasis of course objective is to analyze and comprehend form and content of a work of literature, need proper guidance and explanation to understand African American positionality, and should be able to view and recognize African Americans in their own social, cultural, political, and moral context, instead of judging them by the standards imposed on them by European and American imperialism. In this way, the students may have better insight and understanding of African American life and literature viz-a-viz their own.

While teaching Gwendolyn Brooks' Maud Martha, the students should be familiarized with the history of stereotyping of African-Americans, particularly of African American women, by the white American literature and culture. The students should also be acquainted with the methods adopted by the predominant powers and cultures to construct "reality on the subordinated group, so that the latter group accepts the stereotype" (Sunar 447). In this way, they will be able to look at Brooks' female characters in the social and historical context of African American woman's resistance and struggle against the predominant systems, which stereotyped them as identitiless and invisible objects. Then, they can analyze them in relation to Pakistani women, who are

also stereotyped as ‘non-persons,’ thus they will be looking at Brooks and her women from multi-cultural and multi-social perspectives. Moreover, by studying how Brooks transforms her women from the defined, to definers, they can understand, not only how Pakistani women are made invisible members of the family as well as the society, and made passive onlookers by gender positionality, religious culture, and social taboos, but also Pakistani students who are feminists in colleges and universities can explore new ideas and ways to defy and subvert, without losing their feminine dignity and grace.

Brooks, with her vision of uniting art and morality, and the feminist ideas that are akin to Pakistani feminist sensibilities, particularly in Maud Martha, would be an intelligent and important addition to the English literature curricular of Pakistani academic institutions. Brooks’ concept of African American woman, her aesthetic ideas, her unification of art and morality, and command over classical Anglo-American literary forms can give a new dimension from which to look at literature, in general, and African American literature, in particular, with a new concept of history, diverse theories of feminism, and Bakhtin’s ideas of words and utterance. She can be of great interest to Pakistani students who want to study American literature from a multi-cultural context, because her art is a subtle blending of white and black culture and values. Pakistani women students will hearken to her tiding of liberation of women from oppression and injustice and her voice of protest against and subversion of preexisting systems. Pakistani students who sympathize with the feminist movement in Pakistan, which is struggling against gender oppression, class discrimination, stereotyping, and the atrocities committed in the name of religion will find a supportive and sympathetic voice in

Brooks' Maud Martha and the women of her early poems. Her idea of the attainment of 'voice' by African American women for the transformation of their identity may become the center of interest of Pakistani woman students of English/American literature.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters, I looked at the social, cultural, political, economic, and moral problems of African American women in Gwendolyn Brooks' early works in order to analyze them in context and drawing connections to the problems that Pakistanis, particularly, women have been facing for ages. I also explore an appropriate pedagogy to teach Brooks works to Pakistani students. My effort, in this dissertation, has been to demonstrate how Brooks uses women and mothers first to expose the oppression, discrimination, and injustice that African Americans, especially the women have to face and then to destabilize and subvert them to create an alternative system. Then I explored how she adopts and adapts classical poetic forms to convey the message of struggle and resistance against the oppressors and the agencies that have denigrated and stereotyped African Americans as non-persons. I investigate how Brooks transforms the image and role of African American women from made things to makers, from defined to definers and from audience to speakers with the help of mother characters and by transforming the classical poetic forms in her early poems.

In the Mecca is studied as Brooks' effort to convey the urgent need to listen closely to the dispossessed and speak for the voiceless, signified by the lost child, Pepita. It also explores issue of the search for self-knowledge and self-affirmation that in turn leads to liberation from social, cultural, economic, and political confinement. I highlight the message that the collapse of old values and systems is possible only when the

Meccans the down and out struggle from within. I look at Maud Martha as an idea of an African American woman that Brooks wants to evolve, a woman with strong moral vision and desire to live life in “creative fashion.” My purpose in performing a feminist analysis of the problems of African American women and men in her early works is to understand them in the context of Pakistani women who are facing similar problems in a different social, cultural, and political environment. The voices of Brooks’ women and mothers speak from multi-national and cross-cultural contexts.

Teaching African American literature to Pakistani students will be an interesting project and it will be no less an adventure for the teachers than for the students, because few African American writers are familiar for the majority of Pakistani students or even academics. Brooks' poetry may pose new challenges to the teachers as well as students of English language and literature because it demands new approaches and vision in pedagogy. Still today, most of Pakistani teachers follow the pedagogy formulated by the British educators of colonial days and hold onto Pre-Independence Colonial legacies. They do not pay much attention to intercultural or to multi-social relations, or to the fusing of life experience and critical-historical judgments. The present day pedagogy demands, to properly grasp and evaluate work of literature, that the students as well as the teachers acquire comprehensive knowledge of social, political, philosophical, and economic currents of the time when the literature was created and “emotional as well as intellectual powers to deal adequately with dense, polysemous texts” (Rosengarten 72). Moreover, students should realize the need to situate literary works within the complex and contradictory nature of historical reality, and of the specific events and trends that

mediate the relationship between a writer and his time. A writer can be better understood if we can relate his or her social, political, cultural, and moral experiences to the readers own social and political experiences, problems and issues.

Some universities in Pakistan have included in their syllabi a short story or two by Langston Hughes or a poem of Maya Angelou, or a novel of Toni Morrison, or maybe works of some few other African American writers: but no African American writer is taught thoroughly. To introduce African American woman writers, Gwendolyn Brooks can be a good starting point. She is the forerunner of the Black Feminist writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century and a successor to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s. Her work can help Pakistani students to understand the history and progress of African American literature from the Primitivist school that marks the beginning of Black American Literature's public role to the rise of the counter-hegemonic Black Nationalism and the Black Feminism. Brooks can be taught effectively and understood better if the teachers first introduce and explain the student's social, psychological, and political background of African Americans in the context of slavery, racial discrimination, violence that followed the Emancipation, racial segregation, civil right movement and the rise of Black Nationalism. In this way, the students will have vivid insight into issues and ideas that are being raised and discussed in Brooks' works and also other African American writers. The teacher as well as students may analyze the problems and issues in Brooks' works (African American literature) in that context and then relate them to our own social, cultural, and political context

To truly comprehend Brooks or African American literature, Pakistani students must confront the dominant Eurocentric culture and values that they have inherited from The British Raj. These students need proper guidance and explanation to understand African American positionality, and awareness of their own positionality with respect to Eurocentric values and ideologies that have been imposed on them. Colleges and universities in Pakistan need to include more African American writers in general, so that the students may have deeper exposure to African American literature and better insight into and understanding of African American positionality vis-à-vis their literature.

An awareness of the stereotyping of African-Americans by the white American culture can help students become aware of positionality. In this way they will be able to look at Brooks' women characters in relation with Pakistani women who are also stereotyped as non-persons by Pakistani social and religious culture. Pakistani students are prepared to look at Brooks and her works from multi-cultural and multi-social perspectives. Moreover, by studying, how Brooks transforms her women from audience or being defined, to speakers and defining authority, they will find that they can understand not only how Pakistani women can transform their role and identity, but also how they are made invisible members of the family as well as the society and passive onlookers by gender positionality, religious culture, and social taboos. They will gain insight into how patriarchy, symbol of oppression, imposes its own constructed realities and identity in any given culture.

Brooks' novel, Maud Martha, and her poetic work relating to African American women can be an interesting field of study and research for Pakistani students who are

interested in multi- social and cross cultural feminism and the power politics of how the dominating or empowered group is able to impose its own “construction of reality on the subordinated group, so that the latter group accepts the stereotype" (Sunar 447). Such research-oriented study can help the students to understand and expose what is being concealed from victimized group and it may bring to light what the “subordinated groups” loses. In fact, female Pakistani students, who are also a part of the subordinate group, will come to understand that they too are being deprived of their ability to change their image and role.

Brooks’ poetry addresses primarily African Americans, but it can be extended to international audiences, particularly to a Pakistani audience. In the Mecca apparently deals with the problems of poverty, miseries, and multitude of constrictions that African Americans have to face and struggle against. But, it has broader context, as Lowney remarks: “the struggles defining Brooks' characters are confined neither temporally nor spatially to their lives in the Mecca.” In the light of this statement, Pakistani students may analyze one of the theme of the poem--loss of faith in space and systems that cannot provide security and class mobility to its dwellers in their own social and political context. Brooks’ poem may enhance the realization of Pakistani students that women and men need to become aware of the power that allows groups to oppress and impose the identity of their choice on women and other weaker sections of the society; Brooks leads her readers to the realization that this power derives not from divine ordained laws, but from man-made realities that can be transformed. She applies the Mecca building, a dilapidated structure as the signifier of an obsolete system that needs to be dismantled

from within. In this way Pakistani students gain a cross-cultural vision of the systems which make the women tongueless, as Kishwar Naheed has described it in her poem “We sinful women.” Like Brooks, Naheed writes on behalf of those “who find that tongues which could speak have been severed,” the invisible members of the family and society. When Pakistani students view Brooks’ In the Mecca in the context of Bakhtin’s ideas of ‘word’ and “dialogism,” they will realize that Brooks’ poem is not only applicable to the African Americans of late 1960s and early 1970s, but it is also true for Pakistan of today. Pakistani students can look at the Mecca building as the signifier of those systems, values and ideas that have delimited their vision, restricted their thoughts, denied them their rightful opportunities for social and economic mobility, and deprived them of their legal and civic rights. They can also comprehend that the identity and values imposed on women by a male-dominated society and its power groups are transient and they can be changed. Brooks provokes them to see that in Pakistan, both men and women will have to dismantle the structure of social and moral norms that gives authority to oppressors to impose their monologic truth on others.

Just as Mrs. Sallie Smith’s epiphany In the Mecca makes it an effective didactic text, the protagonist of Brooks’ only novel, Maud Martha, will not be a stranger to Pakistani readers, particularly women. Pakistani women students may not be able to align their problems and issues completely with those being faced by Maud, for they belong to different social, cultural, and moral systems. However, they share such common features as--oppression, gender discrimination, and imposed identity. No doubt, African American women and Pakistani women are oppressed and discriminated “under different

representational paradigms”(Demirturk). Pakistani students as well as ordinary readers might be able to understand Maud’s social, emotional, and psychological problems for Pakistani women have to face almost the same problems, in different social and cultural environment. Pakistani students would be able to appreciate the way Maud defies and resists the social values that make her an inferior and invisible being, for Urdu feminist writers are already using classical forms and unconventional images of women to defy and resist gender oppression and class discrimination. Furthermore, by introducing Brooks’ works in the curricula of Pakistani colleges and universities, young feminists can gain encouragement in the realization that they are not alone in the world which exploits through “intricately built-in stereotypes for brainwashing as the Other” (Demirturk). At the same time, the study of Brooks or other ethnic American literature will open new dimensions in their approach to feminist issues; for they will have realized that they are a part of broader movement.

The introduction of African American literature, especially Gwendolyn Brooks and others like her into the curricula of Pakistani education institutions demands some changes in approaches to established ways of understanding and interpreting literary works. It can initiate the opening up of a curricular space for teaching about American literature, particularly that of ethnic women writers of the United States. For those who recognize the importance of infusing multiple perspectives into the studies of literature, the inclusion of the literature written in English by various ethnic groups from different part of the world in the curricular will seem indispensable. But it demands significant changes in research and teaching methodology in an educational system such as that of

Pakistan, which has been following Victorian models but may now be ready for the change in the system. New approaches to teaching literature necessitate certain shifts in teachers' attitudes as well as in the students' reception of the work.

First, the teacher who is teaching Gwendolyn Brooks, or any other African American writer, needs to situate him or herself in terms of social location. After that the teacher should try to help the students by making them understand the work in a cross-cultural context. In this approach, the teacher as well as the students will have to change "a location of privilege" (hooks, *Teaching* 82). It means that they should shift their positionality from white Euro-American centered criteria to multi-cultural and multi-ethnic approach. American literature deserves more extensive exploration in the curricula of Pakistani universities, for what we are imparting to the students about American literature today is only the tip of the iceberg. Pakistani students need to know more about diverse aspects of American literature if they want to learn about American life and culture in its totality, not only that represented by white Americans. Although we find a few white American writers in the various syllabi of Pakistani universities, we still need to include many more African American writers, particularly woman writers,, so that we may have more variegated picture. By studying the social, cultural, and economic life of minorities, particularly of women, students could realize that these groups are facing similar kinds of social, psychological, and emotional problems that Pakistani particularly women are facing. They can interrelate their experiences and problems to those of other people who may be undergoing almost the same experiences and facing similar problems. With this shift, the students will not look at African

American literature with a Eurocentric lens; they will need to discard the Arnoldian yardstick or Victorian morality to judge works of literature.

However radical in some respects, Brooks is a particularly good candidate for expanding the canon of American literature in Pakistan; with her vision of uniting art and morality, versatility in poetic forms, and the feminist ideas complementing those of Pakistani feminists. In addition, her work is appropriate in a curriculum grounded in the study of English for the purpose of teaching language usage. Her clever and subtle blending of elevated language with vernacular and coining of new words basing on vernacular usage may be of great interest. Her juxtaposing of classical syntax and African American sentence construction can give new ideas to learners and teachers of English in Pakistan whose pedagogical norm is British Standard English (BSE). Now they have varieties of English that are recognized and in use in many parts of the world as the medium of communication in business and political forums, apart from the British Standard English. In this way Pakistani students and the common people who speak English in day-to-day life will be decolonizing the mode of thinking about the colored people, 'other' and destabilizing the hegemony and domination of British Standard English in Pakistani and importing something valuable for their educational institutions, life, and culture.

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