



Protesting Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks

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Empathy, shock value, symbolic action, race

Dr.N Seraman

Assistant Professor, School of English and humanity
Central University of Tamilnadu, Thiruvavur.

Mrs.S. I .Muththamizh Selvi

Research Scholar, Manonmaniam Sundarnar University,
Thirunelveli.

ABSTRACT Poetry is the natural language of man's most exalted thoughts. Gwendolyn Brooks is familiar with racial prejudice, injustice and the fertility of directly challenging dominant white values or actions which adversely impact the Black community. The poet consistently presents situations heavily weighted with injustice to members of the black community. This paper will explore the protesting poems of Gwendolyn Brooks.

Afro American Literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by the writers of African descent. Autobiographical and spiritual narratives dominated it. It reached early high points with slave narratives of the 19th century. Later it focused with racial issues, identity, liberation and universal recognition.

"Poetry is not a luxury" for Afro Americans because self-expression has been an act of self-assertion as important as protest, lawsuits, and marches to redefine the Afro American life in an American society. They used poetry to represent the complex emotional and intellectual lives of black women, registering their expressions from the inside towards the existing external space.

The term "protest poem" usually speaks out the injustice, or criticizes any government policy or a strange attitude in society. It also can be the reaction to some overriding societal ills, like war or racism. Protest poems broadly mean the use of language to reform the self and the society. They function as catalyst by mirroring the social issues and seek out. Brooks employs mainly three rhetorical strategies in the quest to persuade audience and they are Empathy, Shock value and Symbolic action. This paper deals with these strategies in her poems.

Empathy is the core of humanitarian reform, and protest poem encourages its reader to share the experiences of the victims, "to feel their pain". Shock value inspires outrage, agitation, and a desire to correct social problems. Symbolic action implies indeterminacy of meaning, rich ambiguity, and open endedness in the text, which goes beyond the poet's intent. It invites dialogue, debate, and interpretation among readers with its open-ended symbols, through a text of nuance, providing an aesthetic experience for the reader.

Gwendolyn Brooks was the first Afro American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and one of the nation's most prolific poets. She has always addressed a range of social problems of America. Her major themes and concerns remained remarkably around the details of day-to-day existence, and mundane life of "ordinary" people. She mainly deals with nature and consequences of racial identity, prejudice, black pride, solidarity, family strengths and weaknesses, the sublimity of motherhood and so on. Her poetry remained the poetry of clear vision, compassion, and artistic command. She is a master at manipulating language

until it distills the pure essence of the life and character that astutely observes the life of Chicago at its microcosm and the world at its macro level.

Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Ballad of chocolate Mabbie" approaches the problem of Mabbie who was at seven years old. Mabbie was standing near the grammar school gates, for Wille Boone who is a white man to whom she proposes her love. Mabbie got away from the chocolate bar and envisaged her life to be heaven. Mabbie is a black girl who visualizes the gates of the grammar school to be pearly gates. Due to the rejection of Wille Boone, she was disappointed and felt the desertion and loneliness. Her infantile love makes her cool and happy even in the History class.

"It was Mabbie without the grammar school gates

Waiting for Willie Boone.

Half hour after the closing bell!

He would surely be coming soon.

Oh! Warm is the waiting for joy, my dears!

And it cannot be too long. (p.7)

The long wait even after the school bell was enjoyable since she awaits his arrival. Mabbie was crushed aside by the color discrimination, which results in the failure of love. She had been living white people from the childhood lead lay disillusion. Gwendolyn Brooks empathizes with Mabbie, which ignites the shock value. The poet perceives her pain and radiates the shock value to the community. The poet has the thirst to rectify the social problems.

According to Cheryl Clarke, "Brooks's entire oeuvre has been studies of black subjectivity, of Afro American oral and written traditions, source of knowledge and faith systems; of the psychic and physical effects of racism on the lives of black and white people; and of the richness in lyric."

Another poem, "Jessie Mitchell's Mother" (The Bean Easter) is an unusual treatment of the black-tan-theme, which depicts an unnatural hatred between a mother and daughter spawned by color differences. The most morbid of these poems, is to suggest the abysmal depths to which

color feeling can influence a human soul. Jessie, who is dark, peeks at her dying mother and considers bitterly.

" 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". (p.85)

Jessy grizzles for her mother's death, as a habit. It is highly unimaginable to view the mental frame of Jessie about her mother's attitude in her grown up stage. Even an orphan daughter may feel for her unseen mother. However, no filial bondage connects these two. She reciprocates not even as a third person. Jessy suffers a lot because of her mother's feeling about the black. Jessy's life may be meaningless even with the presence of her mother. The poet concocts empathy over Mabbie and tries to give shock value to the nation.

Are you better, mother, do you think it will come today? (p.85)

This question kindles rich ambiguity to the reader. The mother stands with her daughter and waits for her day of judgment. Even then she cannot accept Jessy as her daughter, still she is longing for her mother's affection. Here the poet dissents the color discrimination and the title subordinates Mrs. Mitchell remembers "Her exquisite yellow youth". Here Gwendolyn Brooks attacked color prejudice sharply. Brooks repeatedly uses different variants of the black-and tan symbol, often of that of a dark girl in love with a tan boy who rejects her, or a mother rejects her daughter for color discrimination. Brooks is always aware of the larger implication of the theme. Her characters are not just poor but lost black girls in an inhospitable world; they are poor, lost humans in a modern world of other rejections equally as foolish as those based on color prejudice are.

As Tate notes, Brooks presents "an emotionally charged satirical comment about the tragedy of a woman's inactive life, a tragedy compounded by racial prejudice"

"Bronzeville in a Red Hat" deals a different concept that the white woman hires the black Mrs. Miles the first Negro house cleaner in the white's house. They had never had one in the house before. Really it is very pathetic to see a description of a physical appearance of a black.

"A lion, really, poised.

To pounce, a puma, a panther, a black

Bear." (p.103)

"Her creamy child kissed by the black maid square on the mouth" (p.105)

When she kisses the child, it reciprocates the colored black without any hesitation. As knowledge is the hardeinger of human sins, the innocent child may not be aware of the black color and the black people. The poet transmits the shock value through the child. Only a childlike innocence is capable of accepting the black love.

She saw all things except herself serene:

Child, big black women, pretty kitchen towels. (p.106)

The Big Black Lady expresses her thoughts to the child only in the pretty kitchen. Here the poet leaves us with symbolic action.

The anti-abortion poem "the mother" reflects the impact of an unborn.

"Abortions will not let you forget

You remember the children you got that you did not get," (p.4)

The poet inflames empathy in the very first line of the poem. The mother cannot forget the abortion and it implodes. The poet protests with the concept of life and death, resisting the instinct to label the termination of her pregnancy as a death.

"I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children" (p.4)

The mother hears the voices of the killed children. The poet gives empathy and shock value to the community, with the hope of generating basic human values such as sympathy, fellow being and so on.

Georgene Bess Montgomery writes, "Gwendolyn Brooks presents to us the pains and joys of motherhood, of knowingly bearing children in to a world of poverty, where they grow up on the mean streets of life that teach them painful truths about living, loving and losing"(p.46)

"Believe me, I loved you all.

Believe me, I knew you, though faintly,

Believe and all I loved, I loved you

All" (P.5)

The mother solicits the children to believe that she loves them, and that she knows them through few fractional means. She repeats that she loves them, and emphasizes in the final line. The sacred women wombs have become the centers of sacrilege. Theologically, the tombed foetus has been liberated from the world of woe. Throughout the poem, Brooks perpetuates empathy over the aborted child. She protests each poem with individual characteristics.

Self -identity in Brooks's poem blooms towards group identity. She does not tell us that there is evil, corruption, oppression, futility or racism; rather, she shows us the tragedy and its relationship to individuals in hopes that we may learn a moral insight. She has stated and proved her loyalty to the task of creating new consciousness in her culture. By concentrating on the concrete inner problem, she has attracted color prejudice through her protesting poems. Gwendolyn Brooks's poems are personal responses to particular events. The event may be something she saw across the street or read about in the newspaper, but always there is integrity of a direct, personal emotion, and always there is her interest in the world-the curiosity, humorous relish, and caring. She believed herself to be a black poet who tries to reach ordinary blacks. She voiced her emotions of black pride and militancy. The social curdies instigate the inner self of the poet, which in turn frames few strategies to initiate basic human values. In this sense, she became a representative of the like mined

"people". Nevertheless, she never attempted to express the "people" rather than herself. Her poetry is realistic, shrewd, sensitive, empathetic and unsentimental. Through her protesting poems, she sows the seeds of reformation in the society.

Protest is the natural outcome of the sustained suppression. The Afro-American race has been encountering this for generations as a part of colonial oppression. The poetic strategies of Gwendolyn Brooks are the civilized explosions of an enraged insight. The profundity strikes the readers to realize the authentic reality and at least an emotional emergence ensured through the protest poetry.

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