



Racism in the Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks

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ABSTRACT *Gwendolyn Brooks has exhibited in her poetry a deep and cogent sense of living black and female in America. Her portraits of African American people – vibrant in color, diverse in the degree of their heroic response to their circumstances, and complex in the social and psychological dimensions of their lives –refute the libels of monolithic and stereotypical treatment of women in American Literature and reveal a creative consciousness rawly aware of the major racial and social traumas of her time. Racial consciousness is the awareness of genetically disposed differences based on skin color, facial features, ancestry and genetics. At best, racial consciousness produce pride and dignity, as well as important artistic and intellectual work, and the appreciation there of. At worst, racial consciousness is expressed in an intense fear, hatred, and prejudice of a group of a different race and as a result, plays an enormous role in perpetuation of racial violence. Gwendolyn Brooks's poem expresses the second part of racial consciousness through her poems. This paper will explore the internal conflict of African Americans because of racism.*

"I am an invisible man....I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids –and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible; understand simply because people refuse to see me.... When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination –indeed, everything and anything except me".

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man.

Poetry is older than a civilization. It can be plainly traced to the earliest history of man. Poetry is intense and captures distilled perception. It explores the meaning and mysteries of life.

In the broadest view, African American poetry from 1829 through 1900 is American poetry in subject, versification, and attitudes like the main body of white nineteenth – century verse, poetry by blacks reflects and responds to the changing political, social and cultural scene, to the events, ideologies, heroes and villains that constitutes American History. Black poets share with their white contemporaries a variety of poetic and personal values: unambiguous thought and refined sentiments, elevated language, Christian piety and morality, and affectionate nostalgia for a simple, homely rural life. Their poetry also shares tendencies towards didacticism, diffuseness, intellectual and emotional banality, abstractness, sentimentality, and use of archaic diction and mythologies – literary allusions. Throughout the century, poetry by blacks is influenced by not by other black poets but by such white American contemporaries as Longfellow, Whittier, and Riley, or by the British writers Shelley, Goldsmith, Scott, Byron and Tennyson. Finally, the African American poets almost universally accept the century's dictum that poetry's province is to convey truth, to teach, uplift, reform and secondarily to give pleasure. Black voices do speak from the unique perspective of an alien race in white society.

The term "racism" is often used in a loose and unreflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or "people" towards another and the actions resulting from such attitudes. Racism is therefore not merely "xenophobia"- a term invented by the ancient Greeks to describe a reflective feeling of hostility to the stranger or other xenophobia may be a starting point upon which rac-

ism can be constructed, but it is not the thing itself.

Racism has two components: difference and power. This sense of difference provides a motive or rationale for using our power advantage to treat the ethno racial other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members of our own group.

As Hall put it: "one cannot explain racism in abstraction from other social relations".

(p.21) The problem of Race in the 21st Century by Thomas C.Holt.

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 problem 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 strength and weaknesses, the sublimity of motherhood and so on. Her poetry remained poetry of clear visions, 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 and the world. The paper deals about the racism in Gwendolyn Brooks poems.

Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "The Bean Eaters" expresses the difficult experience of poverty. The poem is a description of a couple and their simple act of eating beans.

"They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair" (p.72).

Poverty is a kind of Racial Discrimination. The terms like "eat beans mostly", "casual affair", "plain chip war and "tin" denote the poverty of the yellow pair. The use of adjective yellow seems particularly interesting in that it doesn't clearly denote racial origins as so often colors describing people are intended to do. It may denote the sickness of the couple.

"Two who are mostly good.

Two who have lived their day, (.72)

They live in a good manner almost. Just they pass their day. But in contrast the sudden change occurs in the next part of the poem.

"And remembering.....

Remembering, with twinkling and twinges,

As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full". (p.72)

Everything lingers in their thought. The couple's past experience may be uneventful. They are very lean like beans. It symbolizes the poverty of the couple. Even in their old age, they pay rent for their back room. The poet shows us race as poverty.

Brooks's another poem "Strong Men, Riding Horses", the title itself suggests the racial discrimination. The poet does not use her poetic gift to speak directly the experience of blacks in America. It is a poem predominantly about the mythic figure of the Westerner: the strong, male, frontiersman who headed to explore or confront whatever challenge presented it. The poet uses the combination of mythological subject matter and subtle contemporary reference.

"Strong men, riding horses, In the west

On a range five hundred miles. A thousand. Reaching

From dawn to sunset. Rested blue to orange.

From hope to crying. Except that strong men are

Desert eyed". (p.71)

The white men are reaching their point in a range of five hundred miles or a thousand miles. The poet uses the words like "dawn to dusk", "blue to orange", and "hope to crying" to express the color discrimination towards blacks. Here the color denotes the people.

"I am not like that, I pay rent, am addled

By illegible landlords, run, if robbers call. (p.71)

It refers that the strong man is not an optimistic person. He does not have any admirable qualities.

" I am not brave at all" (p.71)

The poet admits her lack of bravery in the face of a world that is threatening economically and physically. Here the poet is not writing directly of the experience of Black in America. She is a member of an oppressed race of people on the other. Over all, her poem reveals a deep love of the African-American community and an unshakable belief in humanity.

Clenora F.Hudson observes, "Miss Gwendolyn Brooks poems accurately reflect what and how Blacks felt and feel about racial issues in this country". (P.2)

Poetry and the Heroic Voice by D.H. Melham.

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 was get away from the chocolate bar and manipulated 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. She appears to be lonely. 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 rejects by the color discrimination, which results in the failure of love. She expects to be live with white people from the childhood. In her young age disillusion only leads her life. Gwendolyn Brooks empathizes with Mabbie.

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 the orphan may feel for her mother. Still she has mother but there is no affinity between them. She reciprocates not even as a third person. Jessy suffers a lot because of her mother's feeling about black. Jessy's life may be meaningless even with the presence of her mother.

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. Even the poem title subordinates her Mrs. Mitchell's remembers

"Her exquisite yellow youth". Here Gwendolyn Brooks attacked color prejudice everywhere. Brooks uses repeatedly some variant of a black-and tan symbol, often of that of a dark girl in love with a tan boy who rejects her. Moreover, a mother rejects her daughter for color discrimination. Brooks is always aware of the larger implication of the theme. Her characters, we feel, are not just poor, 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"

Brooks another poem, "Bronzeville in a Red Hat" is a different concept that the white woman who hires Mrs. Miles who belongs to the black people, 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 the description of a physical appearance of the 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 and the child gives back the colored black without any hesitation. The child may not aware of the black color and the black people. 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 to think about the color and its effects.

Lenore Bennet, noted historian stated about Gwendolyn Brooks, "She was one of the great poets and spirits of overtime.....She was a giant of American Literature and a major force for African American Writers and all other writers and poets. She was a major influence on the writers 'movement of the' 60 s, '70 s, and '80. (p.x)

Gwendolyn Brooks and working writers by Jacqueline Imani Bryant.

The theme of racism plays a vital role in Gwendolyn Brooks's poem. 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. From her poems, 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 a black poet tries to reach ordinary blacks and she

voiced her emotions of black pride and militancy. In this sense, she became a representative for the "people". Nevertheless, she never attempted to express the "people" rather than herself. Her poetry is realistic, shrewd, sensitive, empathetic and unsentimental. Through her concept of racism, she reforms the society.

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