CHAPTER ONE

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Not that success, for him, is sure, infallible
But never has he been afraid to reach.
His lesions are legion.
But reaching is his rule....

Reach up your hand, dark boy, and take a star.
Out of the little breath of oblivion
That is night,
Take just
One star....

Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes are the outstanding Black poets of the twentieth century American literature. They are at once representatives of their race and America. They admirably bring into sharp focus the problems and predicaments faced by the Black race. Moreover, with the help of their writing capacities, equipment and clarity of vision they give definitions to Black Consciousness, Black Identity and Negritude. Yet again, they immortalize America as the land of freedom. They glorify America because it is she that has inspired and encouraged them to voice their feelings, thoughts and experiences with candour. The stereotypes of the Blacks are decreated and exploded precisely because it is America that has offered them the scope and freedom to do so.

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   * Hereafter referred to as WGB.

   ** Hereafter referred to as SPLH.
But then the perceptive and critically-oriented reader fails not to detect variables as far as the perspectives on the problems, predicaments and issues of life of these two representative Black writers are concerned. The male perspectives are not the same as that of the female. Mental complexes, physiognomical determinants, educational levels, social and historical background, approaches and attitudes concerning domination or submission, independence or dependence, permissiveness or otherwise and the question of accepting Western cultural imperialism or not are some of the several factors that have a controlling factor on the mind and art of these two male and female artists. As such, there is necessarily a close analysis of the life-situations confronted by the Blacks and an examination of how Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes view the same.

It is an acknowledged fact that Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes are the two celebrated American creationists. They have earned literary pre-eminence and enjoy distinguished places on the first shelf of American literature. America has ensured for them the artistic freedom to express freely and frankly whatever they wish to project. It must be noted that they are particularly marked by the American ingenuity which enables them to think and express innovatively, poignantly and creatively as revealed in the form and content of their oeuvres. Both have enriched American literature by concentrating fully on themes which are exclusively American: love, loss of identity and the search for identity, liberty and freedom of expression, movement and thought. These themes receive added focus in the hands of these American creationists. They identify themselves totally with America. Gwendolyn Brooks' rootedness to Chicago, the microcosm of America, is deep seated. On this point Margaret Walker observes thus in her
poem "For Gwen - 1969": "Chicago is her (Gwendolyn Brooks') city / Her heart flowers with its flame." Though her characters are confined to Chicago, it should be noted that "the city conditions, but never controls, her vision." Her works transcend both region and race, and as Kenny J. Williams observes:

In rising above the specificity of locale and through her examination of the inner recesses of some tortured human souls she demonstrates the universality that we have to expect of great writers....

Hughes feels that America is a "land created in common / Dream nourished in common" and asserts his unshaken faith when he proclaims, "I too am America."

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in 1917 in Topeka, Kansas as the first child of David and Keziah Brooks. At a very early stage, Brooks showed an inclination to write. She enjoyed a home of love, warmth and security. Her mother

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* Hereafter referred to as LD.

5 Ibid., p.69.


** Hereafter referred to as Hughes.

7 Hughes, "I, Too," in SPLH, p.275.
encouraged her in her intellectual pursuits and did her best to make her daughter "lady Paul Laurence Dunbar." She helped Gwendolyn Brooks to meet poets like James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, of whom the latter's influence on Brooks is subtle. Till his death in 1967, he had been her encourager and mentor. Brooks was fascinated by his celebration of racial survival methods and techniques. Like him, she found Black to be beautiful.

Like her mother, her father David Brooks greatly influenced her. She drew inspiration from his strong and assertive character. Brooks was obviously influenced by her maternal aunts with whose "ordinary aspects of life" she was impressed. Her aunts were strong women and "models of female power." From these aunts, Brooks gained "an enlarged sense of feminine power." Gladys Williams detects multiple literary influences flowing through her poetry:

The metaphysical wit and irony of Eliot, Pound, Frost and the younger Robert Lowell have exerted a significant influence on the poet. The basic and central free-verse tradition that comes to Brooks through Walt Whitman, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown, William Carlos Williams, and her beloved Langston Hughes is especially strong. Certain features of her art originate in the black folk art forms -- the blues, the ballads, the folk tales, the sermons Brooks grew up with -- as well as in the works of Shakespeare, Frost, Dickinson, et al. 

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10 *Idem*.

In her teenage, Brooks became self-conscious due to her dark complexion, though she really felt that Black was beautiful. She graduated from Wilson Junior College in 1934. Through the years, she gave many readings of her poetry and had conducted workshops on creative writing. In 1950, she was awarded the most coveted Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen*. In the late sixties, she got inspired to write in the trend of the younger Black poets. Since then, she has committed herself to advocate Black solidarity and write for and speak to the majority of Black people. True to Don L. Lee's observation, her poetry after 1967, is "fatless" and is "extremely streamlined and to the point."\textsuperscript{12}

James Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902. His father was James Nathaniel Hughes and his mother was Carrie Mercer Langston. His parents separated shortly after his birth. His father, with the dollar-spinning motive, left for Mexico. Consequently, Hughes had to be with his mother and spend a lonesome childhood. Unlike Brooks, who lived in the warm cocoon of her home and with not much financial difficulty, Hughes grew up in dire poverty. This early exposure to poverty and want conditioned his mind to introduce the blues in his poetry. Because his mother kept moving from place to place in search of a job, Hughes had to spend most of his time with his grandmother and after her death, with the Reeds where he had enough to eat for the first time. His grandmother played a definitive and vital role in shaping his character and attitudes, as every Black grandmother is a source of inspiration, succour, comfort and hope.


* Hereafter referred to as RPO.
Hughes wrote his first poem at school and was elected as class-poet. One of his teachers, Miss Ethel Weimer, played a significant role in Hughes' life by opening the world of Shakespeare to him and she also introduced him to the works of Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters and most important of all, Carl Sandburg, who had been described by Hughes himself as his guiding star. Sandburg's rhymeless vers libre instilled in Hughes a love of life and imagination. The poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar had its impact on Hughes and the Movement of Du Bois also inspired him.

Hughes lived for sometime with his father in Mexico, spent a year of study at Columbia and then settled in Harlem, looking for work. He took up various odd jobs. He went on a trip to Africa in 1923. It was when he was a busboy, that he had "a publicity break" through Lindsay who appreciated his poems. Through Lindsay's introduction to the world of letters, Hughes began to draw the attention of the Whites of America to his poetry. In 1929, thanks to the help of Mrs. Amy Spingarn, he emerged with a degree from the Lincoln University. In 1932, he undertook a world tour and visited Russia, China and Japan. He was influenced by the Marxist theories for a short span, which ended in 1937. It should be noted that like E.E. Cummings, John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway, to quote a few, Langston Hughes was also initially infatuated with communism. And like them, he too grew disillusioned with communism. His communist-inspired poems are full of revolutionary ideas. Hughes made a signal contribution to the world of poetry in the literary climate of Harlem Renaissance. He employed the blues as vehicles to carry Black sentiments and feelings of gaiety and sorrow. He
earned and established a name for himself through the Simple sketches and *The Weary Blues*. Till his death in 1967, he performed his duty to his Black brethren through his novels, short stories, and poems as a "cultural ambassador." In short, his aim was "to change the image of the Negro in his own eyes" and also to "change the prevailing attitudes of the general society towards Negroes."

Brooks and Hughes are contemporaries but belong to different decades. Being at once Americans and Blacks, endows these artists with the unique double advantage. They couple their American ingenuity and creativity with their Black experience and are thus able to evolve as powerful creationists. Whatever they observe, they are able to give a touch of reality and relate it to Black life-situations. They are able to think creatively of things which are quite commonplace and ordinary. Moreover, they endow them with Christian connotations. For instance, the "sun" is what they have prayed for and have wept for all through the "night-years." "Night" and "darkness" remind Brooks of the silver streak of hope which the stars symbolize for a better tomorrow:

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* Hereafter referred to as *FBW*.

15 Idem.

16 Gwendolyn Brooks, "*truth,*" in *WGB*, p. 114.

** Hereafter referred to as Brooks.
True, there is silver under
The veils of the darkness
But few care to dig in the night
For the possible treasure of stars....

In a similar view, the sunrise is a symbol of hope and anticipation for Hughes. The migrant in Hughes' poem "Migrant," "Grabs a load of sunrise / As he rides out on the prairie." In the following lines of "Black Maria," the sunrise represents a promising new day:

Babe, did you ever
See the sun
Rise at dawnin' full of fun?
Says, did you ever see the sun rise
Full of fun, full of fun?
Then you know a new day's
Done begun....

The sunrise further impels Hughes "to whirl and to dance" and teaches him to take life easy. It is on that tomorrow he expects to gain recognition on a par with his White brothers:

Tomorrow
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then....

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17 Brooks, "intermission," in WGB, p.121.
18 Hughes, "Migrant," in SPLH, p.178.
19 Hughes, "Black Maria," in SPLH, p.118.
In the poetic hands of Hughes the term "tomorrow" serves as a loaded term of significance, relevance and consequence to the Black psyche.

Thus, Brooks and Hughes relate everything, namely, from roses to locomotives to project the aspirations and sentiments of their race. They employ Christian concepts and myths quite poetically and imaginatively and relate them to Black life-situations. For instance, they bear the "cross" of suffering, undergo humiliation and forgive their oppressors. They expect good to evolve without taking a militant posture like Christ. With Christian faith they long for a day when all discriminations existing in mankind will be erased. Again, like Christ, they are against the Western society and systems which perpetrate and perpetuate the same, and not against the people. In other words, they advocate their Black brethren to rise for Blacks and not against Whites.

As American geniuses, Brooks and Hughes excel in artistically creating simple and short lyrics marked by musicality and sense purpose. For instance, Brooks' "We Real Cool" bears ample testimony to this:

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon....

Brooks, "We Real Cool," in WGB, p. 315.
The poem entitled "Motto" is one among the scores of short poems written by Hughes:

I play it cool  
And dig all jive.

That's the reason  
I stay alive

My motto,  
As I live and learn,  
is:  
Dig And Be Dug  
In Return....23

Apart from being American literators and creationists, Brooks and Hughes are essentially Black artists, whose sole purpose is to assert themselves as Black writers and thus create a right kind of awareness about the Blacks. Brooks and Hughes are essentially conscious of their Black race and its present condition in America. As such, they are fully qualified to define Black Consciousness which is multifaceted in character.

In the first place, Brooks and Hughes know that the Blacks are torn between their rich and glorious past in Africa and their decadent present in America. They suffer from cultural divide as a result of the diaspora, disorientation and reorientation. Their slave-past sticks deep in them as a stigma. They have to live by the standards of an alien race. This plight of the Blacks is pointedly captured in the observation of Wilfred Cartey:

And the black man's rhythm became the cry of his blood and the pounding of his oppressed heart. His song became a wailing on the wind; his body an object of scorn and laughter. His language was lost and stifled, his feelings repressed, his strength sapped and sucked, his woman prostituted, his land, Africa, made a harlot....

Secondly, Brooks and Hughes are aware that their cultural divide has resulted in a longing and yearning for Africa and its rich and varied culture. They remember their African heritage. They love its sunny and hot climate, and rhythms, customs, traditions and rites. They are unable to overcome the nostalgia for that distant land with its tom-toms, drum-beats, music, rituals and natural carefree environment of dense forests and freely roaming animals.

Brooks, in her "Old laughter" remembers sunny Africa where "bells of merriment richly rang" and "spices flew from tree to tree." Her "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath" shows how she luxuriates in recalling the splendour and glory of Africa:

I remember kings.
A blossoming palace. Silver. Ivory.
The conventional wealth of stalking Africa.
All bright,...

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26 Idem.

* Hereafter referred to as SP.
Hughes, in his "Danse Africaine" paints the picture of a night veiled girl "who whirls softly into a circle of light"\(^{28}\) to the low and slow beatings of the tom-toms. Again, in his "Sun Song," Hughes presents the beauty of the songs of the dark people of Africa:

Sun and softness,
Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth,
Sun and the song of all the sun-stars
Gathered together -- stars
Dark ones of Africa,
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads....\(^{29}\)

Furthermore, Hughes captures the nostalgic mood in "Dream Variations":

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
   Dark like me --
That is my dream!... \(^{30}\)

The dance, day, tree etc. are symbols of the "freedom" which he longs for but is deprived of.

The Blacks are ever conscious of their cultural heritage. They are aware of their ancestral religion, rituals, ceremonies, kinship ties, marriage customs and social behaviour. They are suffused with every aspect of the Black culture.

\(^{28}\) Hughes, "Danse Africaine," in SPLH, p.7.

\(^{29}\) Hughes, "Sun Song," in SPLH, p. 5.

Sophisticated education and the imposition of Western culture do not perceptibly alter their exclusive racial and Black cultural orientation. That is precisely why the Black Christians still adopt the tribal form of worship in the Christian Church. The Westerner finds it queer and surprising. But one who is aware of the fact that the Blacks are governed by their Black culture understands their behaviour as quite normal.

The mother of a Black is as important as his father, though the tribal family is governed by the patriarchal system. It is the mother who exerts more influence upon her children and guides and directs their life, warns them against the undesirables and motivates them. It is in the sense that the Black mother guides her children to advance materially and experience soul uplifts. The observation of Andrea Rushing is relevant in this context:

Afro-American attitudes toward mother are extremely complex, but in almost all the mother poems, mother is above criticism, the almost perfect symbol of Black struggle, suffering, and endurance...31

The mother in Brooks' "Life for my child is simple" stands by her child in his attempts to "reach out":

Life for my child is simple, and is good.
He knows his wish. Yes, but that is not all.
Because I know mine too.
And we both want joy of undeep and unabiding things....32


32 Brooks, "Life for my child is simple," in WGB, p.104.
Mrs. Sallie, the mother of nine children in "In the Mecca" is resolved not to stop, though all her "lights are little!".\(^{33}\)

You must keep going.  
You can't stop there: World will  
waive; will be  
facetious, angry. You can't stop there.  
You have to keep on going\(\ldots^{34}\).

The classic examples of a Negro mother's telling influence on her children can be had from Hughes' poems, "Mother to Son," and "The Negro Mother." The mother wishes to realize her dreams through her children. She plays a vital role in instilling hope, courage and optimism in her children in their march forward. Like Brooks' mother, Hughes' mother is determined to extend her support to her children:

"...I will be with you till no white brother  
Dares keep down the children of the Negro mother\(\ldots^{35}\).

Her own life had "ain't been no crystal stair"\(^{36}\) but still she keeps on climbing. She advises her son not to lose hope and turn back:

Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now --

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\(^{33}\) Brooks, "In the Mecca," in WGB, p.380.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p.381.

\(^{35}\) Hughes, "The Negro Mother," in SPLH, p.289.

\(^{36}\) Hughes, "Mother to Son," in SPLH, p.187.
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair... .

The Black mother receives the cultural patterns and tribal religious ways from her ancestors and on her part she becomes the transmitter and interpreter of the same to her children.

Therefore, the Blacks still suffused with Black culture, find in their new environment, such as America, the pains of the cultural divide. The cultural chasm is further widened when they are forced to follow the Western culture. Hughes laments for the dark people when he observes:

They drove me out of the forest.
They took me away from the jungles.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons.

Now they've caged me
In the circus of civilization.
Now I herd with the many --
Caged in the circus of civilization
[My emphasis]....

Thirdly, Brooks and Hughes are aware of the Blacks' exploitation, deprivation and denial in America. Inspite of enfranchisement, the Blacks are kept in a state of dependence and poverty and denied a social status. While their White

37 Hughes, "Mother to Son," in SPLH, p.187.
counterparts wallow in wealth, they have to look upon them for their basic needs and education. They cannot scale their heights being kept in a constant state of poverty and ignorance. Thus, they are reduced to the level of animal existence. Brooks' "pygmies are pygmies still though percht on Alps" is certainly a "sad poem about European strength and African weakness." The poem captures the plight of the Blacks in America. Again, the man of the middle class in Brooks' "A Man of the Middle Class" who had loved to be directed and ordered by the Whites confesses his present lot in the American society, though he has "risen" socially:

[My] hands are papers now,  
Fit only for tossing in this outrageous air....

Hughes, in "Uncle Tom," draws the attention of the perceptive readers to the state of servility to which the Whites have reduced the Blacks:

The low, obsequious,  
Double bow,  
The sly and servile grace  
Of one the white folks  
Long ago  
Taught well  
To know his [Black's]  
Place....

Yet again, in "Porter," Hughes substantiates his argument that the Blacks have been doctrinated to adopt a slavish dependent life-style always:

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39 Harry B. Shaw, Gwendolyn Brooks, p. 64.  
41 Hughes, "Uncle Tom," in SPLH, p. 168.
Lastly, the Black literators Brooks and Hughes understand that the Blacks live in a state of angst and insecurity. The Black males and females suffer from colour consciousness, which makes them get attracted towards their White male and female counterparts respectively. In her "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," Brooks portrays Sammy boy who preferred to taste "pink and white honey" to "dark meat" and "wanted white arms to enfold" him. The inexpressible mental tension is depicted in the ballad of chocolate Mabbie, when Mabbie stands alone by the grammar school gates waiting for Willie Boone who ditches her for a lemon-hued lynx.

Apart from their knowledge of Black Consciousness, Brooks and Hughes are aware of what Black Identity is. One detects in their poems an urge to redefine the Black man's present identity in the society. The colour "Black" is usually identified with evil, sin, dirt, darkness and wickedness and consequently, the jet black colour makes a Black feel inferior. By their physiognomy, wiry short hair,

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43 Brooks, "Ballad of Pearl May Lee," in WGB, p.44.
44 Ibid., p.45.
45 Ibid., p.44.
and thick lips, they are different from the Whites. They are highly self-conscious of the fact that the Whites and the Blacks are different. The present generation of enlightened and sophisticated Blacks are convinced that they and the Whites are different but the Whites are not superior to them. Their phenomenal physical strength gives them a unique identity. A Black male is indeed virile and strong. He is a boxer, a fast runner, and a capable mountaineer. He can endure more, surmount difficulties easily, and excel in anything he endeavours. He is a gifted singer, a talented musician and a born poet. Music is ingrained in him. Rhythm keeps time with his pulse beat. That is why, he loves to dance with gay abandon. All these put together, definitely project him as a unique human being. The Black woman is no exception. She is equally courageous, strong and firm and possesses Dutch obduracy. Having understood the innate power of the Blacks, Brooks and Hughes try to tap the same and to harness them and bring forth the beauty of their colour, the richness of their heritage and the worth of their contribution to the culture of their nation and to the world at large. The observation of Norris B. Clark points to the fact that Black artists such as Brooks and Hughes glorify their race, colour and culture:

[They] sought to establish a positive black identity and to reorder racial consciousness through serious exploration and rediscovery of the Black community's unique cultural heritage: its own particular beauty, its rich and varied oral tradition, its private joys and agonies as well as its communal 'trials and tribulations'....

Hughes has written many poems celebrating the Blacks' rich heritage with a deep sense of involvement. "The Negro Mother," "Mother to Son," and "The Negro

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47 Norris. B.Clark, "Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic," in LD, p.82.
Speaks of Rivers" are classic examples. He writes in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" thus:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the flow of human blood in human veins

My soul has grown deep like the rivers....

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Arna Bontemps' observation testifies to the fact that Hughes takes pride in being a Black: "Few people have enjoyed being a Negro as much as Langston Hughes."49

Brooks and Hughes, apart from their perception of Black Consciousness and Black Identity, comprehend fully the concept of Negritude, which is an effort at self definition as discovering a distinctive identity common to the Blacks. Though the term Negritude defies definition, many have attempted to explore the meaning of the term. It was invented and coined by Leopold Sedar Senghor. "If Senghor is its [Negritude's] founding father and apostle, Cesaire is its high priest. The other member of the Trinity is Leon Damas."50 The main figure among the American Blacks who advocates Negritude, and one of the founders of the American stream of Negritude who served as "compiler, translator, and

49 Hereafter referred to as CELH.
interpreter"\textsuperscript{51} is Langston Hughes. Brooks is influenced by the movement of Negritude which is obvious especially in her works after 1967.

Senghor defines Negritude as the sum total of Black cultural values which is as much a reaction against the imposition of European culture as a celebration of African civilization. It is through Negritude the Black gains self-awareness and appreciates the riches of his own heritage. Senghor feels that when one proclaims Negritude he reclaims his humanity. He admires the Harlem Renaissance writers and particularly Langston Hughes whom he met in 1959. He says that Hughes is the greatest African American poet who best fulfilled the notions he had of Black cultural values, and of Negritude. Once, when Senghor was asked in which poem of American literature he found evidence of Negritude, he answered spontaneously:

"Ah, in Langston Hughes; Langston Hughes is the most spontaneous as a poet and the blackest in expression. For me, it is Langston Hughes and also the popular poems of Sterling Brown. You see? It appears to me that Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown are the most Negro. I do not say that theirs are best poems on an artistic level. Take for instance, Countee Cullen ... He has beauty, but the songs of Langston Hughes are pure, spontaneous and simple."\textsuperscript{52}

It follows that Brooks, who was closely influenced by Hughes reflected the same cultural values in her works.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Irene Dobbs Jackson, "Negritude in Full Bloom," \textit{CLAJ}, VII, no.1 (Sept. 1963), p.79.
\end{itemize}
Negritude accepts the European premise that the Blacks are different from the Whites but it rejects the corollary assumption that they are inferior to the Whites. Brooks asserts this when "oaken" Rudolph Reed rents a house in "a street of bitter white" and finally dies a brave death leaving his "oak-eyed" wife to meet the challenge. Hughes accepts that he is different and Black:

I am a Negro:
    Black as the night is black,
    Black like the depths of my Africa....

But he claims his right, simultaneously, as the brother -- "the darker brother" -- of the Whites in "I, Too."

Negritude celebrates the humanism of the Blacks and contrasts it with the cold impersonality of the Whites. It argues that if Europe is reason, Africa is emotion. In other words, if the White race is by nature analytical, objective, detached and cerebral, the Black race is inherently intuitive, subjective, involved, and censured. Brooks talks of the African colour, loud mouthed nature and "profound and frequent shaking of hands in warmth strength and union." Hughes' "High to Low," which is quoted in full, presents a list of the habits of the low-class Blacks as opposed to the middle-class Blacks:

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God knows
We have our troubles, too --
One trouble is you:
you talk too loud,
cuss too loud,
look too black,
don't get anywhere,
and sometimes it seems
you don't even care.
The way you send your kids to school
stockings down,
(not Ethical Culture)
the way you shout out loud in church,
(not St. Phillips)
and the way you lounge on doorsteps
just as if you were down South,
(not at 409)
the way you clown --
the way, in other words,
you let me down --
me, trying to uphold the race
and you --
well, you can see,
we have our problems,
too, with you....

It is to be noted that Hughes is not ashamed of the characteristics and
idiosyncrasies of his race.

Negritude advocates that "Black is beautiful" and recommends that the educated
Black should not be ashamed of his biological heritage. Harry B. Shaw holds the
view that "Gwendolyn always felt that black was beautiful. She thought her arms
for instance, were a beautiful colour -- "charming" -- and it hid mud." She
finds the "daughter of the dusk" charming, with hidden potentialities. Hughes,
on his part, likes to "wear" his colour:

57 Hughes, "High to Low," in SLPH, p.250.
58 Harry B. Shaw, Gwendolyn Brooks, p.20.
59 Brooks, "intermission," in WGB, p.121.
Wear it
Like a banner
For the proud --
Not like a shroud.
Wear it :
Like a song
Soaring high --
Not moan or cry....

Hughes voices the Black artists' intention in definitive terms: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." Moreover, he advises the Black artist "to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be White? I am a Negro -- and beautiful!"

Negritude emphasizes the rule of Africa by Africans and it calls for an African personality and an end to colonialism. Moreover, it accepts the Black man's dignity as a human being. Brooks' human cry deserves to be noted here:

Grant me that I am human, that I hurt,
That I can cry....

   * Hereafter referred to as P and L.

   ** Hereafter referred to as "The Racial Mountain."

62 Ibid., p.228.

Hughes' Madam Alberta K. Johnson asserts her dignity as a human being when she walks out of her employer's house who was trying to overwork her. She wants to be called "Madam" by everyone. She is glad when the man who printed her calling cards says, "Your name looks good / Madam'd that way."64

Negritude portrays Africans as healthier and happier in an indigenous environment unpolluted by Western influences. Brooks equates the West side of Chicago to West Africa and describes it as follows:

free of the fibreless fury --
free of the
plastic platitudes --
free of the
strange stress, ordained ordure and high hell....65

In such an atmosphere, the persona Sammy Chester is portrayed as "Afrika laughing through clean teeth, / through open sun, through fruit-flavored music."66

Hughes presents the "darker brother" in "I, Too," laughing and growing strong, though compelled to eat in the kitchen. In his biography of Hughes, Milton Meltzer quotes Hughes as having remarked thus:

I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes very much .... I never tired of hearing them talk, listening to the thunderclaps of their laughter, to their troubles, to their discussions.... They seemed to me like the gayest and the bravest people

64 Hughes, "Madam's Calling Cards," in SPLH, p.203.
66 Idem.
possible... facing tremendous odds, working and laughing and trying to get somewhere in the world....

At this point, it is interesting to make a note of the candid observation of Bruce Mc M.Wright on Sartre's viewpoint on Negritude: "He [Sartre] says it [Negritude] is a 'dialectical progression,' a rhetorical spear flung in the face of white supremacy and exists only to destroy itself." For Sartre, "Negritude is ... a 'crossing to' and not 'an arrival at,' a means and not an end."

With an acute awareness of Negritude, Brooks and Hughes are able to awaken the common man from his dormant stupor. The knowledge of Negritude, coupled with that of Black Consciousness and Black Identity equip Brooks and Hughes to be the right spokespersons of the Blacks.

Brooks and Hughes, as Black writers and creationists create a right image of the Blacks and explode the ageold stereotypes. There are several stereotypes created by the Whites which have got firmly rooted in the minds of the readers.

The White man has scarcely penetrated the dense forests of the dark continent. He has conducted slave trade remaining mainly on the shores of Africa due to his

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fear of the venomous reptiles and anopheles mosquitoes. No wonder, his knowledge of Africa and Africans is minimal and marginal. The primary aim of writers like Brooks and Hughes is to explode and decreate the stereotypes, emancipate the literature on Africa from its literary stereotypes and also to vitalize and animate Black literature and bring it on a par with White literature.

Both Brooks and Hughes strongly react to the pictures which depict the Blacks as ugly, dishonest, brutal, mean, violent and highly passionate. According to Jemie, the works of the Whites are replete with one-sided pictures of Blacks where the film-goers "find in the fantasies, caricatures, distortions, and lopsided portrayals of blacks a confirmation of their inherited prejudices and further reason to continue supporting (or ignoring) the oppression of blacks."70 Again, Jemie voices Hughes' regret over the unfair deal meted out to the Blacks:

> If Hollywood were fair to Negroes, he [Hughes] argues, it would present a rounded realistic picture of black life in which "educated, well-groomed, self respecting" blacks appear at least as regularly as loose women and comic servants…71

Brooks and Hughes present Blacks as human beings as opposed to the projection of the White artists of the Black as a human turned inhuman. They endow the Blacks with ideal human virtues. The Black man is simply portrayed by the Whites as a conglomeration of limbs, arms, body and head. He is depicted as meaningless as the forests, rivers and the silence of Africa. This view is refuted

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71 Ibid., p.18.
by Brooks and Hughes by presenting meaningful lives of the Blacks. Again, they present them throbbing with life and vigour, possessing a soul which has grown as deep as the rivers as opposed to the picture of them being devoid of sentiments like love, joy, hate, grief, fear, guilt, anger and pain. Brooks' "The Bronzeville Woman in Red Hat" sketches the woman who has come to work for Mrs. Miles -- the "dusky duffer"\(^{72}\) of "extraordinary Blackness"\(^{73}\) who has captivated the innocent White child which responds only to "Love." Brooks and Hughes record that underneath their seeming happiness, the Blacks experience angst. Though the Bronzeville woman in red hat looked refreshing, one could read her misery in her looks:

The slackness
Of that light pink mouth told little. The
eyes told of heavy
care....\(^{74}\)

Quite often, the Blacks try to swallow their pain into a smile. In Hughes' "Movies," the speaker laughs away his pain:

(Hollywood
laughs at me,
black --
so I laugh
back)....\(^{75}\)


\(^{73}\) Ibid., p.351.

\(^{74}\) Idem.

\(^{75}\) Hughes, "Movies," in SPLH, p.230.
Thus they serve as typologies of black humour which is "ironic laughter mixed with tears."76

Stereotyped presentations of Africa are also disproved in every way by Brooks and Hughes. Africa, to the Whites is the heart of darkness with no meaning, shape or coherence, noisy with threats and loud with tom-toms; it is a land of impenetrable forests, labyrinthine rivers, misleading waterways, shoals, quicksands, green hills, alligators, crocodiles, hippopotamuses, throbbing drums, frenzied dances and primitive customs; it is a desert of gloom and stillness, with the brilliant sun burning down. Brooks presents Africa as "sunny" and full of laughter:

The men and women long ago
In Africa, In Africa,
Knew all there was of joy to know…77

Hughes, according to Jemie, pictures Africa as "a distant ideal, foil and backdrop for his portrait of the present reality that is America. America to him is a cold, joyless wilderness, Africa a carefree tropical paradise."78 Both artists assert their rich contribution to Western culture by way of music, and dance characterized by vibrant rhythms and sprightly steps, which they had inherited from their homeland, Africa. Thus, these poets have glorified Africa and gloried in its strengths.

77 Brooks, "Old laughter," in WGB, p.108.
78 Onwuchekwa Jemie, Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry, p.98.
Apart from exploding the stereotypes and vitalizing their literature, these artists go one step further. They make clear to the Blacks their strengths and weaknesses, the strengths in which they can take pride and exult and which they can develop further, and the weaknesses which they should overcome and shed. They bring to light the Black man's undeniable contribution to Western civilization and culture and also present their drawbacks and inferiority complex which impede their progress. In "I love those little booths at Benvenuti's," Brooks' Annie asserts that the coloured people will not "clown" but behave "firmly" and decently in the presence of the White visitors. Hughes reminds the Blacks of their rich contribution to the world of music and dance and asks them to take heart. However, he never hesitates to underline the Blacks' weaknesses. As Onwuchekwa Jemie points out, "Hughes' theory and practice was to portray the ugliness as readily as the beauty of Black life, the unsavoury as readily as the admirable." Thus, Brooks and Hughes plant the seeds of self-esteem and dislodge weeds of dependency and servility through their poems. Their creative imagination enables them to present a comprehensive overview of the life conditions of the Blacks. In her poems, Brooks focusses mainly on woman and her problems in the society and this gives a universal touch to her poems. The critic Blyden Jackson notes thus:

> Miss Brooks is one of the artists of whom it can truthfully be said that things like sex and race, important as they are, in the ultimate of ultimates, appear in her work only to be sublimated into insights and revelations of universal application....


80 Blyden Jackson, quoted in Kenny J. Williams, "Restricted Chicago of Gwendolyn Brooks," in *LD*, pp.67-68.
Hughes himself acknowledges Brooks' artistic greatness:

Miss Brooks is a very accomplished poet indeed, often boiling her lines down to the sparsest expression of the greatest meaning, sometimes almost to a kind of word-short hand that defies immediate grasp....

Hughes' poems, on the other hand, are much more simple, casual, submissive in tone and lighthearted in spirit, filled with laughter and humour, with a fervent interest in living "today" and an ardent hope for a better "tomorrow." Nevertheless, Hughes has enjoyed a very honourable place among the Harlem Renaissance poets. To quote the poet Sarah Webster Fabio, Hughes "was for fifty years the spiritual leader of the Black race." 

Under the broad category of Black artists, both Brooks and Hughes have many things in common. As Baxter Miller observes:

Hughes and Brooks shared common virtues ... Both spoke so truly about the paradox of Black religion and the irony of American life that they made these themes universal. Their motives emerged not from self denial but through self fulfillment. For Hughes and Brooks art did more than resist social injustice: it reaffirmed a higher moral principle. Both writers withstood social pressures that tested their creative imaginations....

81 Hughes, quoted in Modern Black Writers, Ed. Michael Popkin, p.97.


Both Brooks and Hughes consider Black to be beautiful and both are highly optimistic in their vision and its treatment. Their poetry is marked by subtle humour.

It is an accepted fact that Brooks and Hughes invite a comparative study because they are both from the same racial origin and are governed by Black Consciousness and Negritude and their individual Black Identity. They are the representative poets of the Blacks. Moreover, one detects running parallels on thematic and personal levels. But one fails not to detect marked dissimilarities. And in a comparative study one can never ignore the variables and differences.

In this context, Brooks' subjects, though seemingly simple, are endowed with complex meanings and yield a variety of interpretations. Houston A. Baker argues to the point:

> Brooks' protoganists, personae and speakers in short, capture all of life's complexities, particularly the complexity of an industrialized age characterized by swift change, depersonalization, and war....

Gary Smith expresses his opinion that Brooks' best poetry is not written at a casual level like Hughes and Sandburg but are "in line with the elliptical, allusive and imagistic verse of modernist poetry." He further points out to the metaphysical touch in her poetry:

> Like John Donne, the seventeenth century metaphysical poet, Brooks creates a depth and range of feeling in her poetry that often overshadows her commonplace subject matter; she also displays a metaphysical wit that features startling and


incongruent figures of speech; and she uses poetic diction that is a mixture of formal and colloquial speech....

Brooks takes recourse to compression in expression. To her, the Jamesian less is more. Yet again, like Emily Dickinson, Brooks has the poetic ability to employ apt words. Blyden Jackson comments on her craftsmanship thus:

Miss Brooks belongs to the school of writers who do not believe in wasting a single word. Selection and significance -- one can divine in her diction how she has brooded over them, how every word has been chosen with due regard for the several functions it may be called upon to perform in the dispensation of a poem.... And the principle of dire economy which governs her choice of diction disciplines severely all of her poetic maneuvers....

Hughes' subjects, on the other hand, are much more simple, casual and light veined. His personae and protagonist are usually the victims of poverty and exploitation.

In treating the colour issue, Brooks and Hughes differ only in degree. Many of Brooks' earlier poems "present characters who are distinguished merely by their plainness who are not endowed with the majesty that some poets have ascribed to blackness." As Kenny J. Williams further points out, Brooks' poems do not have "the pride of Harlem Renaissance." Her characters, like chocolate Mabbie and Jessie Mitchell, are ordinary plain girls who "never rise above being the

87 Blyden Jackson, quoted in Modern Black Writers, Ed. Michael Popkin, p.102.
89 Idem.
ordinary figures that they are."\(^{90}\) This is quite unlike Hughes, whose characters, though ordinary, never succumb to inferior feelings but take pride in being Black:

> Besides,
> They'll see how beautiful I am
> And be ashamed.... \(^{91}\)

It ought to be noted that Brooks' poems written after her confrontation with the "new Black" in the Spring of 1967, resemble Hughes' poems in their open acclamation of Blackness and its richness.

Though Brooks' aim is all encompassing, in reality, she succeeds in appealing only to the educated people "who go to college"\(^{92}\) who will be able to appreciate, interpret, understand and analyse her multilayered meanings and complexities. It is apt to quote Norris B. Clark's observation at this juncture:

> [Brooks] As a spokesperson of the Black masses ... is literally different from those for whom she writes; consequently, she is the "seer and the sayer" ... who articulates the needs, ideas and aspirations of others.... \(^{93}\)

On the other hand, Brooks expresses her latest wish thus:

> I want to write poetry that will appeal to many, many blacks; not just the blacks who go to college but also those

\(^{90}\) Kenny J. Williams, "Restricted Chicago of Gwendolyn Brooks," in LD, p.66.

\(^{91}\) Hughes, "I, Too," in SPLH, p.275.


\(^{93}\) Norris B.Clarke, "Gwendolyn Brooks and a Black Aesthetic," in LD, p.96.
who have their customary habitat in taverns and the street....

Hughes is unquestionably a spokesman of the Black masses. With his variety of experiences as a seaman, cook, busboy, doorman, writer, unemployed wanderer and so on, he is able to write on people from all walks of life, mingle and mix with them as one among them. In this way he is able to appeal to a larger section of the Black society. As Brooks herself acknowledges:

Mightily did he [Langston Hughes] use the street. He found its multiple heart, its tastes, smells, alarms, formulas, flowers, garbage and convulsions. He brought them all to his table-top. He crushed them to a writing paste. The pen that was himself went in....

As a female writer, Brooks writes many poems abounding with domestic details and minute observations pertaining specially to a woman's eye. She amalgamates colour, design and shape as she pictures things:

... linoleum squares
Of dusty rose and brown with little white splashes,
White curls;...

In such a description, one detects feminine aesthetics.


* Hereafter referred to as UPO.


96 Brooks, "I love those little booths at Benvenuti's," in WGB, pp.110-111.
Brooks' knowledge of female psyche is a commendable feature in her poems. "A Sunset of the City" depicts and fathoms the innermost feelings of a middle aged woman, who feels lonely and neglected. Brooks' Bronzeville women find happiness in small things and satisfy themselves with whatever is available, in spite of disappointments and frustrations in life. The woman in "patent leather" is more than satisfied with her man with "pretty patent-leather hair" (as opposed to her short, wiry and wooly hair) which makes him "man enough for her," though he is quite unmanly with his pitiful muscle and shrill voice:

Us other guys don't think he's such
A much.
His voice is shrill.
His muscle is pitiful.
That cool chick down on Calumet,
Though, says he's really "it."
And strokes the patent-leather hair
That makes him man enough for her….98

Quite typical of women, Brooks' characters dwell in a world of fantasies, dreams and hopeful anticipations. The heroine of "The Anniad" is a good example. She steals into a world of imagination and dream, with her imaginary man with his "bejewelled diadem."99 Again, Jessie Mitchell's mother, when she almost hates her daughter for being black, remembers her own youth with pleasure. She

98 Idem.
"Forced perfume into old petals,"100 and "Refueled / Triumphant long exhaled breaths / Her exquisite yellow youth...."101 These testify to the truth of Houston A.Baker's assertion:

All of her [Brooks'] characters have both ratiocinative and imaginative capabilities; they have the ability to reason, dream, muse and remember....102

Brooks is well able to focus on the inner turmoils of a girl's heart: her looks and colour consciousness, her inferiority complex over her "black and boisterous hair,"103 her "hush in the heart"104 due to the neglect of her lover and her unsuccessful waitings for her man when she "worried the windows."105 Brooks touches daintily on subjects which are of special female interest. The poem "at the hairdresser's" is a typical example, where a Black girl is very happy over the fact that she no longer has to feel inferior to the girls with long hair, now that the "upsweep" is fashion:

Long hair's out of style anyhow, ain't it?
Now it's tie it up high with curls.
So gimme an upsweep, Minnie.
I’ll show them girls....106

101 Idem.
103 Brooks, "The Anniad," in WGB, p.84.
106 Brooks, "at the hairdresser's," in WGB, p.37.
While Brooks is able to view Black experience through the eyes of a woman, Hughes does the same with a male-perspective. His dealings with women are broad and general in their approach. He gives a broad sweep over the women's heartaches and frustrations. His poems on women are comparatively less. His writings are more about the Black man in general: his oppressions, his racial pride, his rich colour, his glorious past, his innate potentialities, his constant struggle for freedom and continued fight against poverty and joblessness. Both appreciate the fact that the greatest artist is man-womanly or woman-manly. Calvin C. Hernton's view that "Hughes possessed an abiding identification with the females of the race" holds true in Hughes' portrayal of model mothers, who are the source of inspiration and symbols of endurance and survival and transmitters and interpreters of their culture. Besides this, his women also suffer from an unrequited love, desertion, exploitation or neglect and voice their troubles through the blues. Woman as a victim of the usual three factors -- race, sex and money -- is mainly focussed by Hughes. Brooks also explores the multilayered oppression of woman from the points of being "poor, black and female." But, according to Beverly Guy Sheftall, Brooks presents "a more realistic view of the diversity and complexity of Black women than the stereotypes.... The major portion of Gwendolyn Brooks' work does indeed reflect, among other things, an intense awareness of Black women's identities and an unusual insight into the problems that they face."  

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109 Ibid., p.163.
Beverly Guy Sheftall makes yet another pointed observation in this regard:

She [Brooks] treats the relationships between males and females and the joys and frustrations that women experience in a way that is different from her male counterparts. The female images she creates reflect her personal experiences with black women, her observations of them in the community, and her general knowledge of their history in this country. These images are as varied as the human types present in any community...¹¹⁰

"Her work," as Maria K. Mootry comments, "for all its 'women-identified' quality is replete with many sympathetic portraits of black men in their quest for a masculine identity."¹¹¹

Brooks has written quite a number of poems on children. On this aspect, Gary Smith remarks thus:

... one of the few modern poets who has made children an organic part of her poetic vision. Her children do not exist in a pastoral world apart from the socio-economic and psychological problems that beset her adult characters. As the most vulnerable members of society, her children are at the center of her poetic vision....¹¹²

Brooks captures her children's lives in real life situations: how they suffer under the perils of their environment, and how they are the victims of poverty, insecurity, neglect, rejection and alienation. Lincoln West, for example, with his pendulous lip, the branching ears and the great head is rejected and ignored by

his own father who "could not bear the sight of him"\textsuperscript{113} and by his relatives who were "indignant about him."\textsuperscript{114} Though recognized for his talents and resourcefulness, his playmates reject him and prefer "more acceptable friends"\textsuperscript{115} to him. Brooks never allows her characters to wallow in the mire of despair and hopelessness but helps them transcend all circumstances. Here, Lincoln West finds self-acceptance and satisfaction when he is called "the real thing"\textsuperscript{116} by a White man. Brooks subjects the problems of adolescents to poetic treatment quite admirably.

The familial relationships of the children with their parents or relatives, as sons, daughters, nephews or nieces receive poetic treatment at the hands of Hughes. The children inherit their mother's firm strength of purpose, and endurance and get encouraged by Aunt Sue's stories of their African past. Hughes has written a few poems on the dreams and hopes of little boys and girls. The Black child looking for a place in the Jim Crow section of the Merry-go-round and the elevator boy trying to "quit now"\textsuperscript{117} are a few examples of Hughes' boys and girls.

Both Hughes and Brooks view the Black's suffering and experience in the light of Christian endurance and faith. The Black's identification with Christ is more


' Hereafter referred to as \textit{FP}.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p.10.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p.11.


\textsuperscript{117} Hughes, "Elevator Boy," in \textit{SPLH}, p.195.
apparent in Hughes than in Brooks. Both acknowledge the value of the Bible and its basic truths. Both these Christian poets are balanced souls. Their poetic concerns are not only to change the image of the Black in his own eyes but also to create a right awareness of the Blacks in the minds of the perceptive readers, rouse the humanity in them and make them understand the problems and predicaments of the Blacks. They are undeniably committed Black artists whose sole purpose is to write "by, about and to blacks," and Brooks' declaration sums up their chief concern in life:

...anything that I [Brooks] write is going to issue from a concern with and an interest in blackness and its progress....

Similar is the considered viewpoint of Hughes:

The major aims of my work have been to interpret and comment upon Negro life, and its relations to the problems of Democracy....

Thus, it is seen that Brooks and Hughes employ their creativity, imagination, word power, streamlined scholarship, American ingenuity, their ability to fuse subjectivism with objectivism, their craftsmanship, inventive skill, and writing capacities to decrease the images of the Blacks created by the White writers. Their poetry gives the right definition for Negritude. They present the right perspectives related to Black Consciousness. They thus project themselves as the perfect representative artists of the Black race. All the same, their sophisticated poetry gains lasting value because of its universal implications and emphases and because they underscore their humanistic concerns.

118 Gloria T.Hull, UPO, p.25.
119 Brooks, UPO, p.25.
120 Hughes, quoted in Onwuchekwa Jemie, Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry, p.15.