CHAPTER – III

MAJOR THEMES IN THE POETRY OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS: WOMEN AND CHILDREN
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To the question by Paul M. Angle, as to how she happened to become a writer, Gwendolyn Brooks, in a quick and straightforward manner, said that “I always enjoyed reading when I was a child. Pretty soon, I suppose, it occurred to me that it might be wonderful if I could create something too. I began putting rhymes together when I was seven so I'm told by my mother. And continued. I was encouraged by both my mother and my father”.1

Brooks writes of the life she sees and experiences around her. For Brooks, her religion is “PEOPLE. LIV-ING” and she sees herself as being a “very open writer” which she claims to be the “very essence of writing”. She points out that many of her poems are autobiographical, and adds that “You speak of things you know, things you feel, things you have personally observed. You'll find my personal interpretation of hundred of things that are life things”.2 She culls her material from people who inhabit the world around her.


Gwendolyn Brooks has been a prolific writer, writing on themes that are close to her heart. As one studies Gwendolyn Brooks at length, one can unearth a mine of characters that she has invested with life and feelings. The themes of Gwendolyn Brooks span over a large spectrum which includes every facet of living and loving. To analyse these themes under one heading would be doing a great injustice to the depth of her work. Therefore, this study has made an attempt to analyse her themes under two broad headings – major and minor themes. Women and children are the major concerns of Gwendolyn Brooks and a large part of her work has been devoted to these issues. However, she also focuses on the themes concerning men, youth and colour. This will be dealt with in the next chapter.

Inspite of this break-up, a definite delineation in her poems cannot be categorized. Many a times, a single poem is abounding with the entire gamut of themes. In such cases, it becomes imperative to analyse that single poem from different perspectives and interpretations. For instance, "The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie" can be studied on three levels – as a colour poem, children’s poem and as a ballad. The same holds true of "The Ballad of Pearl May Lee", where Pearl May Lee can be studied as a prominent woman character of Gwendolyn Brooks. Annie Allen, a long
poem tracing the growth of Annie from childhood through youth to adulthood, has a range of themes to study.

With the awareness of Black pride and solidarity dawning upon Gwendolyn Brooks, we notice the themes she presents evolving in her poems. With Gwendolyn Brooks’s movement from an integrationist poet to a militant one, the themes have also undergone a transformation under her poetic vision. This growth can be traced alongside the evolution of Gwendolyn Brooks from a Negro poet to a Black one. One notices her focus shifting from the individual to the community. Another very important fact noticed during the study was that Gwendolyn Brooks’s movement from an observer to a doer. While in the first phase Gwendolyn Brooks presented her characters as they are, in the second phase we see her donning the mantle of a prophet, showing the path her people should take to gain their due place under the sun.

Gwendolyn Brooks presented life as she saw it from the windows of her house in Chicago. She writes that one had to only look out of the window and there was raw material just without. She saw life straight and steadily. Therefore, her characters are invested with feelings and emotions.

One gets to know about Gwendolyn Brooks’s early life from her autobiography Report from Part One and her biography by George Kent.
Through them, we understand the circumstances that created and nurtured the young budding poet. When Gwendolyn Brooks was very small, the Brookses purchased a house at 4332, South Champlain, Chicago. This home, with a short street, was cut off from the main traffic and had many family homes, trees and clean streets. The Brookses two-storyed house had a well kept lawn with a front yard and a back yard. Gwendolyn Brooks loved this home dearly.

Brooks and her brother, Raymond, were well cared for and looked after with a lot of tenderness by their mother who was very particular about how they dressed and combed their hair. They were not allowed to play games of the "dirtying" kind. Their favourite games were mostly "hide and seek" and "tags", while indoor games meant "checkers", "dominoes", "jigsaw puzzles" and "whist". Kent notes that what late Lorriane Williams, Head of the Art Department at Hampton Institute and a childhood friend of Gwendolyn Brooks, stated, that child rearing in those days was exactly like the one followed by Brookses family. The result of strict rules against disorderly play and over-inquisitiveness encouraged more inwardness and dependence on imaginative source. Thereby children spent more time reading or drawing and honed their artistic skills and talents. Likewise, this kind of upbringing gave ample time and rich opportunity for Gwendolyn Brooks to turn her talent to
"putting rhymes together."³ Thus began the long saga that took her from being an amateur poet to an established institution and a force to reckon with.

With the publication of her first collection of poems, *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks intended to show the suffering and pain in the lives of poor Black women. Plenty of women characters populate her poetry. These women, though poor and steeped in misery are strong enough to stand out as major characters worth notice. In the first phase of her career, Gwendolyn Brooks has presented the women as mere shadows, each involved in her own world of misery and pain that poverty brings. But with the growing racial awareness, the women characters in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry seem to be growing too. They emerge as leaders in the second phase of her poetry. This study traces the transition of Gwendolyn Brooks and her characters too. With her deft handling, the real person hidden under layers of poverty, squalor, racism, rejection comes through very vividly.

The glimpse at Gwendolyn Brooks’s life reveals that women played a dominant role in her life. They included her numerous aunts – sisters of her mother, to that of her mother herself. Her aunts, each of them talented in their own way, helped shape her character and

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influenced her way of thinking. There was Aunt Eppie Wims Small, with three adopted children, Aunt Gertrude Robinson, taught Gwendolyn Brooks to dance the Charleston. Aunt Ella, though poor, made a happy couple with her jolly husband Earnest. Aunt Beulah, whom Gwendolyn Brooks calls “Queen of my family”, was very talented when it came to sewing. This Aunt rose up in this profession to head the sewing department at Tulsa’s Booker Washington High School.

Gwendolyn Brooks shared a close relationship with all her aunts, who in turn were her guides and mentors providing her strength, inspiration and motivation. However, the most influential woman in Gwendolyn Brooks’s life was her mother Keziah Wims Brooks, who towered over all other people that were associated with Gwendolyn Brooks’s life. For Gwendolyn Brooks home meant a “… Duty-Loving mother, who played the piano, made fudge ... helped the children with arithmetic homework and who sang in a high soprano: “Brighten the corner where you are!”4 Her mother who was a trained teacher had worked before marriage, loved music and played piano. Gwendolyn Brooks inherited and incorporated this rhythm and beat into her poems. Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems, as she claims, are meant to be read aloud for their inherent musical quality.

It was her mother who discovered her talent for rhyming words and gave all encouragement that Gwendolyn Brooks needed as a poet. She even went to the extent of doing most of the household chores, so that Gwendolyn Brooks would have time to write. Gwendolyn Brooks writes thus of her mother’s faith in her ability to write, ""you”, my mother had early announced, “are going to be the Lady Paul Laurence Dunbar.”

Her mother saw to it that her faith in her daughter bore fruit.

A strict disciplinarian, her mother was not one to sit down when she saw injustice around her and especially when her child was at the receiving end. George Kent, highlights one such instance where Keziah displeased with the really low grade given to Gwendolyn Brooks’s paper, which though well written had ink smudges on it, affronted, marched straight to the Forrestville School and insisted that the teacher read the paper for she knew that the teacher was carried away by the smudges and had not gone through the paper. So strong was Keziah’s insistence that the teacher re-read the paper and awarded “Good” instead of the earlier “Pass”. “Excellent” was not given due to the smudges.

Keziah took Gwendolyn Brooks to meet James Weldon Johnson to whom the young poet had earlier sent poems for evaluation. Though he

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had seemed very approachable and friendly in the letter, when she met him at the Carter Temple Church in Chicago where he had arrived to speak, he seemed forbidding and aloof. Though Gwendolyn Brooks held back, Keziah spoke to him but he was not too friendly. Another great poet that Keziah took her daughter to meet was Langston Hughes, who was very friendly when he came to give a reading at Metropolitan Church in Chicago. Gwendolyn Brooks hesitated approaching such a great person, with whom she had not corresponded. But her mother, blessed with forethought, had brought “a little bunch” of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poems. These he read on the spot and told her that she was “talented and must go on writing”. Such was her mother’s positive approach that she remained till her death, a strong guiding force in Gwendolyn Brooks’s life.

These women who played such a key role in Gwendolyn Brooks’s life made her want to present her women characters in a positive light. As a woman, she took it upon herself to give voice to the experiences of the Black women through her verse.

In this respect Gwendolyn Brooks is different from the Black men writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Although these writers wrote about and on women, they relegated them to the background with

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their voices faintly heard, if at all. All along, Black women were presented in American Literature in a stereotype fashion, either as domineering mammies, like Beulah in Gone with the Wind; or as Sapphire, the "shrill voiced, dialect-speaking nigger", from Amos 'n Andy, a radio program of the late 1940s and 1950s, or as "red-hot street mamas" like Dorothy Dandridge in Carmen.

Brooks's main intention was to break these typesets and present the real Black woman, who has had to fight a double battle of the gender and race, on one hand and cope with poverty, poor housing and desertion on the other. Added to this, the Black woman was always made to feel inferior because of the colour of her skin and her kinky hair. She was measured by the rod of the American standard of beauty which always favours white skin. She was left wanting to be white. It was Gwendolyn Brooks's ardent desire to set this imbalance right through her poetry.

Gwendolyn Brooks takes utmost care while presenting the Black woman, who is in no way inferior to anybody, be it the Black men or whites. The women presented by Gwendolyn Brooks, though appearing simple, are basically very complex. She cares for her characters

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intensely, yet she is detached from them. She is a mere observer as can
be seen in the poem “Mrs. Small”.

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 ... 9.

In *A Street in Bronzeville*, the reader meets a whole galaxy of
women, who though belonging to a common place, “Bronzeville”, and
sharing similar economic and social background, are as myriad and
multihued as the rainbow. In this collection, we meet many women
whom Gwendolyn Brooks portrays with compassion and understanding.
Most of the women in this series are caught in the vice-like grip of
poverty from which they have no hopes of escaping. As Gary Smith
points out, “victimization of poor Black Women becomes not simply a
minor chord but a predominant theme”10 for Gwendolyn Brooks.

Poverty, the merciless culprit, claims many women from *A Street
in Bronzeville*, especially the mother in “The Mother” who is forced to

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10 Gary Smith, “Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville*, The Harlem
Renaissance and the Mythologies of Black Women” *MELUS*, Vol. 10, No.3, (Fall
take many a hard, unwanted decision. She has no peace and suffers great
anxiety over her decisions of having a number of abortions due to
poverty.

A very controversial poem, “The Mother”, makes a reader turn to it
with the hope of finding a theme on maternal love, but is shocked by the
theme of the poem, abortion. In this context Gwendolyn Brooks
undauntedly upholds both the title and the theme and gives an
explanation in the appendix to her autobiography, “hardly your crowned
and praised and ‘customary’ Mother; but a Mother not unfamiliar, who
decides that She rather than the world, will kill her children”.11

The mother knows that she has stolen from her unborn children life
that was rightfully theirs. She says:

... 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,

Belief that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.¹²

The plight of the mother is brought out with great intensity of feeling which only a woman would feel, understand and convey. Gwendolyn Brooks is able to touch the right spot and strike the right chord as possible only for a woman. In the sonnet sequence “The Children of the Poor” from *Annie Allen*, Gwendolyn Brooks presents a mother, who in the face of poverty is helpless as the other mother, with regard to the upbringing of her children. Her miserable condition, that she cannot provide adequately for them, is brought out with great sensitivity and understanding.

These poems record Brooks's view of the post-war society as seen through the eyes of a mother, who is poor and whose children are, as Melhem notes, “the offspring – and orphans – of war”.¹³ Brooks focuses on the effect of poverty on children.

Gwendolyn Brooks writes about the lives of the childless people in “People who have no Children”, and contrasts them with that of the poor mother.

People who have no children can be hard:

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Attain a mail of ice and insolence.\textsuperscript{14}

They are not burdened with the added responsibility of having to provide for their children and so can go through life without much care. While the mother is weighed down with questions as to how to provide for her children and help them lead comfortable lives.

The second sonnet, “What shall I give my children? Who are poor”, is the bewildered cry of a poverty stricken mother:

\begin{quote}
What shall I give my children? Who are poor,
Who are adjudged the leastwise of the land.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

In the next sonnet, once again the mother wonders:

\begin{quote}
And shall I prime my children, pray, to pray?
\end{quote}

These three sonnets tell of a mother’s helplessness in the face of utter poverty. She yearns to provide the best, but she is incapable. In such a circumstance, the fourth sonnet is an advice of a mother to her children to:

\begin{quote}
First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
with feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
... ... .... ....
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
\end{quote}


In front of you and harmony behind.
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, may be not too late
For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with grace.\textsuperscript{16}

The mother wants her children to first "civilize a space", for which they have to fight and only then they can have their rightful place. Having achieved this, they can turn to the beauty that life has to offer them.

Another facet of a mother is presented in "Big Bessie Throws her Son into the Street". Here, one can perceive the change in Gwendolyn Brooks' presentation of her women. Big Bessie, who belongs to the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetic career, is a stronger woman, who is ready to face challenges. She wants her son to learn the ways of the world. Her advice:

Be Precise.

With something better than candles in the eyes.
(Candles are not enough.)

at the root of the will, a wild in flammable staff.

Though the boy is "lame", Bessie has to throw him out on the street for she wants him to search his own way. She does not want him to

be like her searching for the way with only candles in her eyes. As a mother she aspires more for him. Big Bessie is no longer afraid, like the mother from “The Mother”, to face whatever life has in store.

In “When Mrs. Martin’s Booker T” is a woman who, though poor, has a deep sense of respectability which she loses when her son “ruins” Rosa Brown. Mrs. Martin is engulfed by a deep feeling of shame and disgrace as she moves from her well settled neighbourhood to “the low west side of town”. She is very firm on certain issues and one of them is that until her son marries Rosa Brown whom he has “impregnated” she will have nothing to do with him. About the shame he has brought her, she says: “He wrung my heart like chicken neck”. Mrs. Booker T, very disappointed when the son refuses to marry the girl, rejects him and moves away. Though she loves him deeply, she has now attained “a mail of steel”. She says, “Don’t come to tell me he’s dying” and “Don’t come to tell me he’s dead”.

Gwendolyn Brooks presents another aspect of a mother in the poem “The Murder”, a mother who has to come to terms with the death of her one-year-old son, whom his brother “with a grin,/ Burned him up for fun”. She will also have to lead her whole life steeped in guilt that it need not have happened had she been there instead of standing outside gossiping.
No doubt, poor Percy looked around
And wondered at the heat,
Was worried, wanted Mother
Who gossiped down the street.17

Through these poems, Gwendolyn Brooks presents the Black woman as a mother, a mother coping with different situations that life throws at her. The next poem "Sadie and Maud" is a study in contrast on the effect of the poverty. Maud is a quiet girl who took the conventional rough road and went to college; Sadie enfolded with open arms all the life that life had to offer.

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.18

When Sadie died, after having shamed her family, with two illegitimate daughters, she left her children a valuable legacy, her “fine-

tooth comb”. Though the quicksand of poverty and despair is ready to suck its victim, Sadie puts up a fight trying to squeeze out as much joy and happiness as possible and living life to the hilt. Optimistic outlook in the face of gloom and poverty is highlighted here.

In “Obituary for a Living Lady” is a lady similar to Maud. This woman was a “decently wild child” and was “interested in a brooch and pink powder and a curl” as a young girl, has now grown up would not permit sexual contact between the man she loves and herself. The man, losing interest, stops calling on her. By the time she is ready to say “yes”, he has found “a woman who dressed in red”. The woman “wishing she were dead” turns to wearing white and to religion and moves away from the world of flesh.

In the next part of *A Street in Bronzeville*, there is a sequence of vignettes from the life of a Black domestic worker, supposedly “Hattie Scott”, who is pictured by Gwendolyn Brooks as a very normal person with normal reactions to life. The graphic description of Hattie’s daily itinerary can easily belong to a white woman’s day. Here, we see Gwendolyn Brooks’s desire to make known the responses of women not withstanding the difference in colour. This sequence definitely belongs to the first phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career.
Gwendolyn Brooks presents Hattie in “At the Hairdresser”, wanting to “show them girls” her glamorous self. She goes to the hairdressers, very happy that the long hair vogue is history. Now she need not envy girls with long hair.

Gimme an upsweep, Minnie,

With humpteen baby curls

'Bout time I got some glamour

I'll show them girls.¹⁹

Here Hattie is shown displaying a façade of fitting into the fashionable society, wherein in the following sequence “When I Die”, Hattie’s feelings of insecurity are displayed. She is ready to accept facts about herself. She has no fanciful dreams, she knows that when she dies there will be no long line of mourners, instead there will be “one lone little short man/Dressed all shabbily”, who would arrive at the funeral with cheap flowers “a buck-a-dozen”, most probably wipe a tear or two and continue where “… the girls, they will be waitin’/there’s nothin’ more to say”.

One is left wondering whether this feeling of insecurity, of not being wanted is universal to women or is it restricted to the Black women alone. A reading of this sequence presents a roller-coaster of emotions,

ranging from deep insecurity to high confidence. Keeping in tune with this sudden change in tone, the next poem "The Battle" shows Hattie's desire to assert herself.

In "The Battle", Hattie hears about Moe Belle Jackson being beaten by her husband the night before. Hattie knows that unlike Moe Belle, her reaction would be:

I like to think  
Of how I'd of took a knife  
And slashed all of the quicknin'  
Out of his lowly life.

But if I know Moe Belle,  
Most like, she shed a tear,  
And this mornin' it was probably,  
"More grits, dear?"20

Apart from "Hattie Scott" poems, Gwendolyn Brooks gives some fine pen portraits of the rejected and lonesome Black woman. In the poem "The Queen of the Blues", Mame has no family and misses her "daddy". The men whom she entertains are those who pinch her arms and slap her thighs and have no respect for her. She yearns for love and respect but

knows that men are "low down dirty and mean". She longs to be treated as a human being and not just as an entertainer.

"The Ballad of Pearl May Lee", is the story of a Black woman rejected by her lover for a white woman. Pearl May Lee symbolizes the rejection and the isolation felt by most Black women. Her lament over her lover is "you paid with your hide and my heart, Sammy boy, for your taste of pink and white honey". Conflicting emotions of pity and rage race through her mind. She is shown as a helpless woman who can do nothing to change her situation. Through her Brooks expresses her rage over Black men who prefer white women. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Brooks asserted:

The speaker is a very enraged person. I know because I consulted myself on how I have felt. For instance, why in the world has it been that our men have preferred either white or that pigmentation which is as close to white as possible? That's all political.21

It is interesting to note that there is a change in Gwendolyn Brooks's attitude and interpretation of this poem. This poem written during the integrationist phase was just meant to portray the feelings of a rejected Black woman. With Gwendolyn Brooks's transition to a Black poet, her interpretation of the same poem seems to have undergone a considerable change. Gwendolyn Brooks represents Pearl May Lee as an

enraged woman who has been wronged by a white-centric society. This pain is doubled because it is meted out by one of her own kind.

There are not just women who are poor in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. There are some who are rich like “The Madam” in “Southeast Corner”, of “The School of Beauty” who wishes to exhibit her wealth even in death. The “Madam”, now dead lies in her grave “out at Lincoln” buried in a fine “right red”, velvet-lines steel casket dressed in a beautiful gown that would have cost her, her entire fortune.

Her own grave is early found

Where the thickest tallest monument

Cuts grandly into the air.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus, in the \textit{A Street in Bronzeville} we come across a variety of women, each with a battle to fight, basically based on the colour of her skin, her kinky hair, sometimes it is want of respectability or mostly the fight against poverty. Yet the women that Gwendolyn Brooks presents are not ones that are daunted or brow-beaten. They might accept defeat but not until they have put up a fight. Gwendolyn Brooks has been successful in bringing to the fore the real Black woman who has lost her identity down the ages in the works of other writers, mainly male.

Gwendolyn Brooks's Black woman wants to strike a balance and seek out an identity of her own.

Brooks's next work, Annie Allen, is a long poem on young Black woman that traces Annie's life from the time of her birth, through her childhood, girlhood, into youni with her inumerable dreams, then into womanhood, face to face with reality, the melting away of her dreams under the heat of day-to-day life. D.H. Melhem points out that this is an "antiromantic poem sequence about a young Black woman's pre war illusions and post war realities". The poet very finely brings out through the development of Annie, her emotional responses to the various events that occur in her life.

If one wishes for a glimpse of a Black young girl's life in the urban ghetto, one has to meet Annie of Annie Allen. Gwendolyn Brooks studies the mother-daughter relationship at detail in this poem and in a few more poems that follow. Unlike in "Jessie Mitchell's Mother" where there is more hate and loathing than loving in the mother-daughter relationship, here with Annie it is entirely different. Annie's mother is a strict disciplinarian, one in control. Gwendolyn Brooks writes about Maxie Allen:

Maxie Allen always taught her

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Stipendiary little daughter
To thank her Lord and lucky star
For eye that let her see so far,
For throat enabling her to eat
Her Quaker Oats and Cream-of-wheat
For tongue to tantrum for the penny
For ear to hear the haven’t – any
For arm to toss, for leg to chance
For heart to hanker for romance.²⁴

Under the ministration of such a domineering mother, Annie has learnt to suppress all her emotions and has learnt to keep them under tight control lest she invokes the wrath of her mother. These repressed emotions fight for an outlet, which they get through the daydreams of Annie.

In “Jessie Mitchell’s Mother”, Jessie hates her mother because she is dark of skin while her mother has the much appreciated light-skin (yellow). It is because of the prized yellow skin which drew a lot of male attention, the mother is now lying in her bed pregnant and her daughter comes “Into her mother’s bedroom to wash the ballooning body”. She looks at her mother now a “stretched yellow rag”, thinking:

My mother is jelly-hearted and she has a brain of jelly:

Only a habit would cry if she should die.25

Jessie Mitchell is scornful of her mother, a fact her mother is aware of. The mother knows that possessing dark skin will make the “way” harder for her daughter. Her way of protecting herself from her daughter’s scornful look is to recall her own “exquisite yellow youth”. Though each addresses the other cordially, there is no deep love between the two. The standards of beauty that society has erected make mother and daughter rivals. The mother envies the daughter her youth, while the daughter envies her mother’s light skin.

Gwendolyn Brooks in her Report from Part Two with an account of her daughter Nora Brooks Blakely, giving a brief glimpse of Nora’s life, her youth and the mother-daughter relationship they shared, more of friends than mother-daughter. The autobiography closes with Gwendolyn Brooks writing thus:

Today’s media narratives, featuring woeful relations between mothers and daughters, alarm us. They make us proud to call attention to a very different kind of story.26


The next section of *Annie Allen* is, "The Anniad", which Brooks pointed out "deliberately alludes to Homer's Iliad".\(^{27}\) Commenting on this Claudia Tate writes:

Although "The Anniad" does not have a setting that is removed in time and place, the major characters do not possess heroic stature, it has other epic conventions. The poem highlights a universal problem, the deteriorating relationship between men and women; the consequences of the intervention of fate, in the form of World War, on these relationships.\(^{28}\)

"The Anniad" opens with the picture of Annie, reclining on her bed, day dreaming about her knight. This knight for Annie is also a symbol of freedom from her strict parents. She dreams of him as bold and handsome, the epitome of all virtues and characters that a girl would desire in her man. She is described thus:

Think of ripe and romp about,

All her harvest buttoned in,

All her ornaments untried;

Waiting for the paladin.

Prosperous and ocean-eyed

Who shall rub her secret out

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And behold the hinted bride. 29

Day dreaming and dreams help the women of Gwendolyn Brooks’s world escape from reality into the world of fantasy, where for some time at least the cares of the world fall away.

When Annie finds her man, “man of tan” she is charmed by him. But war takes him from her for some time. By the time he returns he is a changed man. War has transformed him, he finds Annie too sweet and tame. He wants a woman who is worldlier. When he finds her, he rejects Annie after having fathered her children. Annie’s world is shattered. When the man returns to her sick, she takes him in. The ever so sweet and self sacrificing Annie looks after him till he dies and with his death, some part of Annie dies too. From then on, Annie tries to find happiness in other ways; she becomes a prostitute and lives one day at a time. She is now left all alone with only her memories.

Through Annie, Brooks has been able to show how a Black woman’s life is not allowed to blossom fully and that there are many things which force her to the background where her voice becomes a mere whisper. Of the various things that come in her way of attaining her place under the sun are, her colour, the innumerable sacrifices she has to

make to attain peace in her domestic life. She has no scope to fulfill her ambitions which must be scarified at the household altar.

Annie becomes Brooks's spokesperson to address the women of the world. The call goes out:

... Rise

Let us combine. There are no magics or elves

Or timely godmother to guide us. We are lost, must

Wizard a track through our own screaming weeds.\(^{30}\)

This, Tate points out, is a call to Annie’s sisters to “locate the untrodden course, which leads to discovering and learning how to nurture themselves”.\(^{31}\)

*The Bean Eaters* too has many poems that have a Black woman as the main character. While presenting Black women, Gwendolyn Brooks at times has stepped sideways and presented the white women too. This acts as a foil to the portrayal of the Black woman. As in, “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon”, we see two mothers, one Black another white, where the white mother is made to view the Black mother’s pain and anguish at having lost her little boy.

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The poem portrays the growing sense of despair of a white mother whose husband killed a young Negro boy, for having made advances at her. The romantic concept where she imagines herself “maid milk” insulted by a “Dark Villain”, and a “Fine Prince” arriving to avenge that insult, is shattered. As the poem progresses, the white woman realizes that the Dark Villain of whom she had read in high school as evil, was here but a very young boy, hardly fourteen.

The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified
When the Dark villain was a Blackish child
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder
Of its infant softness.32

The white mother, observing the behaviour of her “Fine Prince”, begins to rethink her idea and definition of villainy, and slowly comes to the realization that her prince is not after all the story book hero she imagined him to be. With this realization the pleasure of imagining and picturing herself as the princess of a fairy tale begins to fade. She now begins to fear the prince when he slaps one of their children for bad table manners. The woman sees him rapidly losing all the knightly qualities she

had endowed to him and showing himself guilty of murder. He no longer is a hero in her eyes.

Her pain intensifies when she hears her child cry, she compares the cries to the Child-villian’s cry while he was being hacked to death. She begins to imagine the agony of the dead boy’s mother, who:

Emmett’s mother is a pretty-faced thing;
the tint of pulled taffy
She sits in a red room,
drinking Black coffee.
She kissed her killed boy
And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.³³

Though the Black mother is in a frozen state of mind carrying on with activities like “drinking Black coffee”, inside her mind is ‘chaos’, confusion, bewilderment, anger, hatred and suffering.

When the “Prince” places his hand on the shoulder of his wife and kisses her, the white woman hears “no hoof-beats of the horse ... no flash of the shining steel”, instead what flashes before her eye is the “decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman’s / eyes”. The

white woman is awakened to the suffering of the Black mother; there is an emotional bonding between them. The white woman at the end of the poem regards the Black woman with some sympathy.

However, in the next poem "Bronzivelle Woman in a Red Hat", Mrs. Miles, a white woman hires a Black woman to look after the baby. Mrs. Miles is a person who can neither understand nor respect the poor. She has already lost her Irish maid whom she offended and treated as slave. To her the Black woman is no better than an animal. Here, Gwendolyn Brooks brings out the preconceived ideas whites have regarding Blacks.

They never had one in the house before
The strangeness of it all. Like unleashing
A Lion, really, Poised
To Pounce. A puma. A panther, A black Bear
There it stood in the door,
Under a red hat that was rush, but refreshing –
In a tasteless way, of course – across the dull dare
The semi-assault of that extraordinary blackness …

... ... ... ... ...
There it stood
In the door. They had never had
One in the house before.\textsuperscript{34}

The white woman is repulsed when the Black woman kisses the
baby on the mouth and the baby kisses her back. Through this poem
Gwendolyn Brooks conveys the fact that children have no concept of the
colour-caste system, it is instilled in their mind by the grownups.

It is not only the young woman who inhabit Gwendolyn Brooks’s
world. The older women too are afforded the same sensitivity. In “A
Sunset of the City”, the persona of an aging woman who is all alone is
portrayed. She is left to face the fact she is now no longer young.

\begin{verse}
I am not deceived, I do not think it is still summer
Because sun stays and birds continue to sing
\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots
I am a woman, and dusty, standing among new affairs
I am a woman who hurries through her prayers.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{verse}

Of her children she says that, “My daughters and son have put me
away with marbles and dolls”, suggesting now that she is old, she is of no
much use to them.


Apart from these major women characters who people the poetry of
Gwendolyn Brooks, there are many smaller, simple Black women.
Brooks presents all these women, in a very realistic manner as they live
life each day, facing challenges as they come. They are varied, they are
multifaceted, they are kaleidoscopic, yet each one of them is handled by
Brooks with care and sensitivity which opens up their world to the
readers.

In Selected Poems, the reader can see the changing stance in
Brooks's presentation of her women characters. They are no longer
weak, but ready to face life's challenges. For instance, the "Weaponed
Woman", is strong and ready to chart her own course.

Well, life has been a baffled vehicle.
And baffling. But she fights, and
Has fought, according to her lights and
The lenience of her whirling-place.

She fights with semi-folded arms,
Her strong bags, and the stiff
Frost of her face (that challenged "when" and "if").
And Altogether she does Rather well.36

The Black woman portrayed in Brooks’s poems is now stronger. She is prepared to fight for her space and place. Her weapons are “semi-folded arms”, implying patience and the “stiff/frost of her face” shows her strong will and determination.

While Brooks’s own ideas were evolving, or in other words, while she was spiritually being reborn into a new world of Blackness, her idea of the Black woman evolved too. Though the earlier Black women she wrote about had “pride in womanhood”, the Black woman in the second phase of Brooks’s poetic career was busy reaffirming that pride. Not just pride in womanhood, but also pride in her race, its varied culture, its rich history and pride in the colour of her skin. No longer was the skin colour and kinky hair the bane of her existence. Instead, she celebrated in being Black. Black woman forsook the hot combs, a desperate attempt in straightening hair to meet the American standard of beauty, and they went natural. Her inner strength and conviction helped her believe in her hidden beauty. No longer was the Black woman a mere “shadow”. She had finally emerged as a strong woman, knowing where her strength lay.

The Black woman we see in Books’ poetry of the second phase is a transformed woman.

In her next major work *In the Mecca* we come across many women characters. The central figure of the poem is Mrs. Sallie Smith, a mother of nine children around whom the story is built. Mrs. Smith comes home after a long, weary day at work. Hoping to rest her weary legs for a little while, she climbs the steps of Mecca, only to find her youngest daughter Pepita missing. Forgetting all her weariness, she is filled with anxiety and runs around the whole building searching for her lost one. While Mrs. Sallie goes through the Mecca, frantic with fright, searching for her lost one, the readers meet many women characters along the way. Each of these women, great-great Gram, Boontsie De Broe, Aunt Dill, Hyena, Wezlyn - “the wandering woman” and Insane Sophie are presented as being seeped in their own lives with more pains than joys. They cannot help Mrs. Sallie.

Thus, Mrs. Sallie is another of Brooks’s character through whom we see the state of poverty stricken Black woman that inhabit the Black belt of Chicago. Mrs. Sallie represents both the hopes and sorrows of Black women.

Of the many poems in *After Mecca* one is of Merdice from “To a Winter Squirrel”, a young woman, in “a poor shabby kitchen” who envies the squirrel outside her window, “the enjoyment of his gypsy life”. The
longing to be free, to fly away from the world of care haunt the poor women of Gwendolyn Brooks's world.

"Big Bessie", in "The Second Sermon on the Warpland", is a "woman of the people".\textsuperscript{38} This character of Gwendolyn Brooks is that of a stronger woman, a character that definitely belongs to the second phase of her poetic career. This woman is no longer meek or weak, but ready to strike a path for herself. The other women characters that appear, following that of Big Bessie's are sure of themselves, are stronger, more confident, and ready to lead rather than be led. We see Big Bessie thus:

Big Bessie's feet hurt like nobody's business,
but she stands-bigly-under the unruly scrutiny, stands in the wild weed.
In the wild weed
She is a citizen
And is a moment of highest quality; admirable.\textsuperscript{39}

Big Bessie is representative of the Black man/woman ready to face the world, prepared to demand their rights; lay claim to what is rightfully theirs.

\textsuperscript{38} Juhasz, Naked and Fiery Forms, Op. Cit., p. 152.

Very much involved in and influenced by the Black Arts Movement, Brooks in an interview with Ida Lewis in 1971 had some strong statements to make. She felt that while money was not everything, earning and controlling it was symbolic of independence for a Black woman. She felt even more strongly when questioned about her feelings on Women's Lib. She said "I think Women's Lib is not for Black women for the time being because Black men need their women beside them, supporting them in these very tempestuous days".40

Brooks in her Report from Part One reaffirms her faith in the transformed Black woman and tells:

Black Woman must remember, through all the prattle about walking or not walking three or twelve steps behind or ahead of "her" man, that her personhood precedes her femalehood: and ... that she cannot endlessly brood on Black Man's blondes, blues, blunders. She is a person in the world, with wrongs to right, stupidities to outwit, with her man when possible, on her own when not. And she is also here to enjoy. She will be here, like any other, once only. Therefore she must in one midst of tragedy and hatred and neglect, in the midst of her own efforts to purify, mightily enjoy the readily available.41

A very interesting revelation occurred during an interview with Gloria T. Hull and Posey Gallagher, when Hull questioned Gwendolyn


Brooks as to why more of her earlier poems dealt with female characters and the relative absence of women-centered poems in her later works. This question left Gwendolyn Brooks very surprised, for it never once crossed her mind that her recent poems were more men-centered.

Gwendolyn Brooks said that she didn’t "know how to account for that". She then concluded that because of her close association with men like Haki Madhubuti and Walter Bradford, whom she considered “like sons to me than my own son because they have ideas that are like my own ... and we have a sharing of ideas”, she felt it was but natural that she wrote about them. It was young men like them who influenced her during the late sixties. This could possibly be one of the reasons why men and not women figure more prominently in her works during the second phase of her career.

Brooks added that women then were doing nothing more than “amening what others did”. The women did do their part “to lift the men up, to heroize them. ... on account of everything that has been done to smash our men down”. This is probably what Gwendolyn Brooks meant when she said that the Black man wants his woman beside him to help him by being there, by encouraging, by giving moral support and


sustenance in their fight for rights. This unwitting absence of women protagonists in Gwendolyn Brooks's poems is symbolic of lack of participation of Black woman in the struggle for Black representation.

In her more recent poems, we see Brooks once again bringing in the Black woman. This Black woman is a stronger person who knows her worth. She is confident, ready to face whatever comes her way. In her "To Black Women" Brooks urges Black women to strive for their goals despite the many challenges that are bound to occur. Her advice to them is "Sisters, ... Prevail". Interestingly, Brooks speaks not only of the Black woman of America but also of Africa, the land of her forebears, the land of her roots.

In 1988 was published Gwendolyn Brooks's "Winnie". In Winnie, Brooks finds the perfect leader figure for Black women. Through the portrait of Winnie Mandela, Gwendolyn Brooks sends out a call to all people Black to unite and have pride in their selves and their colour and their race.

When the poem opens Winnie is seen as "the non-fiction statement, the flight into resolving fiction,/ vivid over the landscape, a sumptuous sun". With the burden of leadership, Winnie sometimes would "like to be a little girl again". With her fine ability, Gwendolyn Brooks is able to
enter into the person of the real Winnie, lost or hidden under the public image. The poem closes with Nelson Mandela’s words:

Listen my Sisters, Brothers, all ye
that dance on the brink of Blackness,
ever falling in:
Your vision your code your Winnie is woman grown.

I Nelson the Mandela tell you so.

The second part of the poem is titled “Song of Winnie”, where Brooks takes on Winnie’s persona and speaks in an easy, conversational tone addressing “Black Americans, you/wear all the names of the world!” She speaks of her childhood which though had its share of games and fun, meant duty and responsibility too. “Childhood had a skippingtime but mostly/ ... my father, wise-warmful: “Get you back The Land!” ” Winnie has learnt very young that self-sacrifice, denying of self brings happiness to others and does much good. Therefore she strives hard to go good. People say of her “ “Hers/is a large hard beauty”:”

In an interview with Melhem, Brooks gives a clear idea as to what she wants the poem Winnie to convey to the readers.

In Winnie I display Winnie Mandela talking more or less to America – talking to Outside. I say more or less because she is also talking to herself, she is also “talking” to her husband Nelson Mandela, she is talking to Her
People in South Africa (and, to some extent, to Black People everywhere); she is also “talking” to Botha-and-such. I have tried to paint a picture of what the Woman must be like. The picture is “built” out of nuance and supposition and empathy. I figure she is composed of womanly beauty, of strengths female and male; of whimsy, willfulness, arrogance and humility, tenderness, rawness, power, fallibility, finesse, a “sweet” semi-coarseness which is the heavy fruit of daily oppression/fury/pain. And gloriousness! – glory. She is a glory. Her resolution in the last few pages is what it should be. Interestingly enough although certainly essentially hers, this Resolution is not alien to the impatience, now-shaplier roar and beautiful self-respect of Today’s Woman wherever she may live and under whatever stress she may be striving.44

What we notice in the women that Gwendolyn Brooks has been writing about is that they have come a long way from being a “shadow”, a “rejected person”, a woman intimidated by the colour of her skin and her kinky hair, the concept of the American standard of beauty, to being a leader as seen in the presentation of Winnie from whom Black women the world over have drawn inspiration.

The pride in the beauty of Blackness that was felt by Brooks after 1967 is reflected in her women character too. No longer is the Black woman bowing down to the despairing concepts of beauty. The Black standard of beauty concept has undergone a radical change

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While in the Hattie Scott sequence “At the Hairdressers” Hattie laid much emphasis on looking good, looking glamorous, went to the parlour because

Think they so fly a-struttin’

with they wool a-blowin’ ’round.

wait’ll they see my upsweep.

That’ll jop ’em back on the ground.

Now in the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career, she addresses a poem “To those of My Sisters Who Kept their Naturals” – with the subtitle “Never To Look a Hot Comb in the Teeth”, where after extolling the positive qualities of the Black woman, Gwendolyn Brooks closes the poem with “the natural Respect of Self and Seal. / Sisters/ Your hair is Celebration in the World”. The Black woman now knows and believes that “Black is beautiful” and rejoices in her womanhood.

The Black woman definitely finds a voice in the sympathetic and considerate portrayal in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry. She is sensitive to their faults, their circumstances and never pokes fun at them. They are presented the way she sees herself, with respect and self-pride, happy to be alive, to contribute and to be a part of the huge Black family.

Besides women, children form the next major concern of Brooks. Children especially have a special place in the heart of Gwendolyn
Brooks. She not only shows maternal concern but presents them in an affectionate manner. Brooks has not only written poems about children but also for children. She regards them as the inheritors.

Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville*, has many poems on children. The problems and pain that hound the adults are experienced by the children in Bronzeville too. They long to escape from them. There is a yearning for more, for a better life, for simple joys. Most of all they desire to break free from the shackles of poverty and suffering that bind them to this bleak world. They long to get away into the world of fantasy, and despair at the problems that clip their wings and thwart their desire to fly into the world of imagination. *A Street in Bronzeville* which belongs to the first phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career tells about ordinary Black children who live in ghettos and live life as it comes their way.

The children long for freedom and hate confinement and enclosed spaces. In “A Song in the Front Yard”, a little girl longs to go and play in the backyard. She revolts when her mother insists that she obey her order and stay in the front yard. The girl feels:

I’ve stayed in the front yard all my life
I want a peek at the back

Where it’s rough and untended and hungry weed grows.
A girl gets sick of a rose.

I want to go in the back yard now
And may be down the alley,
To where the charity children play,
I want a good time today.

The backyard for the girl represents forbidden pleasure; it is where "hungry weeds grow". But her mother, with her experience of life, puts an end to her desire for freedom with her very practical reasons. For the girl the backyard holds adventure too:

They do so wonderful things.
They have some wonderful fun,
My mother sneers, but I say it's fine
How they don't have to go in at quarter to nine
My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae
Will grow up to be a bad woman.
That George'll be taken to Jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).\footnote{Brooks, \textit{The World of Gwendolyn Brooks}, Op. Cit., p. 12.}

Despite her mother's counseling, the girl aches for a jaunt in the backyard. It is not only an embodiment of adventure but the fact it is
forbidden makes it more alluring to her. The psychological insight into
the children's mind has universal appeal. One almost forgets that the
venue of the poem is the ghetto.

However, in the next poem it is found that children are faced with
the same racial discrimination as the adults. Their youth and innocence do
not protect them from the venomous racial discrimination. Even little
Black girls have to face the judgment of the American standard of beauty.
Age does not shield them from this measuring yard stick. The Black
children, both boys and especially girls, learn that to be Black means
prejudices, both interracial and intraracial. They learn to face and cope
with many humiliating experiences all because of the colour of their skin.
We see little Mabbie who is only seven years old, in “The Ballad of
Chocolate Mabbie”, but learns from experience that racial discrimination
exists within her own society. That makes it all the more painful for her.
Little Mabbie is “cut from a chocolate bar”, and has to face humiliating
rejection from the boy she loves. She waits a very long time for Willie
Boone, outside the grammar school gate. It is more than half an hour
after the school bell, yet she stands outside waiting for him patiently.
Then:

Out came the saucily bold Willie Boone.

It was woe for our Mabbie now.
He wore like a jewel a lemon-hued lynx

With sand-waves loving her brow.⁴⁶

Mabbie now left alone by the school gate is left to comfort herself with “chocolate companions” like herself. She has learnt to accept the situation and goes on with life.

The poem *Annie Allen* has already been analysed from the point of view of women. The same poem throws light on the childhood of Annie. Brooks traces the growth of Annie from birth to adulthood, with poems on Annie as little girl and as an adolescent. Annie is a little, ordinary Black girl, as a child she is quite and well-behaved. Annie always looks up to her mother. Her complete dependence on her mother makes her mother, Maxie, mould Annie the way she wants her to be. The result is Annie, who is schooled not to be disobedient, learns to suppress her longings and to be thankful for what she has got rather than yearn for what she has not.

Annie has learnt very well to repress her emotions, not to give vent to them and thereby leading to anger and resentment, which again are suppressed. The only way for these repressed emotions to find utterance is through daydreams. Her inner being is subdued to a mere whisper. She knows, there is more to life at times, yet she has no means of expressions.

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Sweet Annie tried to teach her mother
There was somewhat of something other...

... .... .... ....

She did not know, but tried to tell.\textsuperscript{47}

Unable to explain to her mother the realm of her vast imagination, Annie pushes her desires to the back of her mind. The more she tries to mute her imaginary world, the more it forces itself out, especially when she has to face the realities of life.

This duality in Annie, her outward appearance of calm and complacency and her inward mind seething with ideas are always at war. She longs to reveal, but she cannot. The only time she expresses her feelings openly at the funeral of a relative, but that too when no one is observing:

She went in there to muse on being rid
Of relative beneath the coffin lid.
No one was by: she stuck her tongue out; slid.

Since for a week she must not play “charmaine”
Or “Honey Bunch”, or “Singing in the Rain”.\textsuperscript{48}


This duality is carried forward and Annie is afraid to say “No”. Rather than saying “no”, she smiles sweetly or sighs, hoping that the person involved would know or understand that her desire to maintain silence means a “no”. She dreams of a knight, who will rescue her from her parents’ home and who will love her and understand her. Her knight is a strong person and can say “Yes” and “No” with ease. Brooks brings out the inner life of Annie which is suppressed with an analogy to Annie’s hair which is unruly:

Then emotionally aware

of the Black and boisterous hair,

Taming all that anger down.\(^49\)

So everything about Annie is flattened, composed and calm. This is what she carries with her into her adulthood.

The other children based poems in \textit{Annie Allen} are “Life for My Child is Simple and is Good”, where the child is presented as fearless and who, like his mother, enjoys life despite his injuries “his lesions are legion” and he can go on. “The Ballad of the Light-eyed Little Girl”, tells about a little girl Sally who does not mean to kill “passive pigeon poor” but which died because she “could not find the time” to feed the bird.

\(^{49}\) Brooks, \textit{The World of Gwendolyn Brooks}, Op. Cit. p. 84
Brooks always had a burning desire to write poem “for” children, and coincidently, the Harper’s had a juvenile department headed by Ursala Nordstrom who received with much enthusiasm the poems on children that Gwendolyn Brooks sent her. She responded favourably and asked Gwendolyn Brooks to send more. Thus was published *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* in 1956, with which began Gwendolyn Brooks’s long association with children.

In *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* Gwendolyn Brooks portrays children inhabiting the world of adults, a world that is plagued with much violence, hatred, poverty, pain and bondage. This world is unlike the world that children with all their innocence inhabit a world of adventure, nature, beauty, fun and frolic. Instead it is a world which forces them into adulthood much before their time. Yet they are not defeated. The spirit of liveliness, of imagination makes the real world more bearable. They try to make their lives as beautiful as possible.

Gwendolyn Brooks pictures them as the most vulnerable members of the society, the easiest targets and worst affected by violence, both social and personal. Gary Smith points out that there are two dominant themes that occur in the poetic world of Gwendolyn Brooks’s children-
“entrapment” and the “desire to escape”.\textsuperscript{50} These children are caught in the quick sand of poverty and their main desire is to escape into a world far removed from their own squalid lives. The desire to free themselves, and fly into another world without adults governing, regulating and cramping their style is very strong in them.

Brooks’s \textit{Bronzeville Boys and Girls} renders a world as seen through the eyes of a child. A world that is beautiful and innocent. Like the adults, in her poem, the children too want to know the meaning of life. Brooks avoids donning the garb of a moral teacher. Instead, she pictures their lives as they are lived in the society with its innumerable shades.

However, what is obvious in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry on children is that there is no open countryside. Mountains, hills, valleys, flowers, birds, rivers do not figure in her poetry. She knows that she is writing of the urban society where life is bereft of most of these things. Instead of open space, there is as Gary Smith points out “enclosed space: alleyways, front and back yards, vacant lots, and back rooms”. Carrying this idea of enclosed space forward, Smith explains that “On a symbolic level these marginal spaces represent the social restrictions that prevent the mental and physical growth of children, they indicate the margin in

which children are expected to live their lives”. The “glimpse of green” that one gets to see in the concrete jungle is but a reminiscence of Eden lost. Those of the nature that are present like the “elm trees and dandelions become exotic life forms, objective correlatives for the children’s imaginary flights” opine Gary Smith.

The children want to be rid of the environment they live in and take flight through the world of fantasy. Like the two girls in “Mexie and Bridie” who can transform their drab environment into one which is more colourful and carefree through their imagination. They decide to have a tea-party:

A tiny tea-Party
Is happening today,
Pink cakes, and nuts and bon-bons on
A tiny, shiny tray.

It’s out within the weather,
Beneath the clouds and sun,
And pausing ants have pecked upon

52 Ibid.
As birds and God have done.\textsuperscript{53}

For Luther and Breck in “Luther and Breck”, respite from the actual world is escape into an imaginary world of medieval England where knights, steeds, castles, Queen and Dragons abound. They assume the identities of brave knights out to slay dragons. But here they have “To chop, in dreadful grottoes, / Dragons never seen”.

The girl Narcissa in the poem “Narcissa”, lives in the world of fantasy and imagines herself to be an ancient queen, a singing wind and a nightingale, with whom she identifies herself. The poem ends with:

\begin{quote}
How fine to be Narcissa,
A – changing like all that!
While sitting still, as still, as still
As anyone ever sat!\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

In “Timmy and Tawanda”, instead of taking flight on the wings of fantasy, the children cross from their childhood roles and assume the role of their parents. They explore the adult world.

\begin{quote}
It is a marvelous thing and all
When aunts and uncles come to call.
\end{quote}


For when out kin arrive (all dressed,
On Sunday, in their Sunday – best)
We two are almost quite forgot!
We two are free to plan and plot.

Free to raid Mom’s powder jar;
Free to tackle Dad’s cigar
And scatter ashes near and far.\(^{55}\)

In the other poems, Mirthine is envied by other girls in the party, but is no prettier than others without her giggles, beads and bangles. Elnora, is very rich and has the desire for jolly companionship and play. Rudolph, tiring of city life wishes to run away into the country. Michael is afraid of storms. He feels “Lightning is angry in the night / Thunder spanks our house./ Rain is hating our old elms - / It punishes the boughs”. Beulah is described attending church. Robert learns that one may look into a mirror and discover a stranger there. Lyle wishes to be as permanent as a tree to escape moving from house to house. Dekoven loves the “ungraspable stars”. If there is wonder there is poverty too. Otto does not want his father to know of his disappointment with his Christmas present. Poor John is so hungry all the time and who lives “so

lone and alone” and does not want to be bothered with question concerning the beginning or ending of his hunger. Thus Gwendolyn Brooks uses all her skills to bring out accurately the world of young children and tries her best to capture their experiences with words that are simple and childlike. In “Cynthia in the Snow”, where the snow is described:

It SUSHES,

It hushes –
the loudness in the road.

It flitter-titters,
And laughs away from me.

It laughs a lovely whiteness
And whitely whirs away,

To be
Some other where
Still white as mild or shirt
So beautiful it hurts.56

The other children are Gertrude, Marie, Lucille, Cheryl, Jim, Eunice, and Vern. This collection has a dog, Rover and a cat, Mootsie to complete the world of children.

Bronzeville Boys and Girls received wide acclamation. This collection of Gwendolyn Brooks was published before her awakening to the Black consciousness. The poems give no indication of the author’s race. There is no mention of race and the poems recorded are responses of children, of universal responses that contain no hint of race whatsoever.

Of the many reviews that followed the publication of Bronzeville Boys and Girls, one by the New York Herald Tribune said:

Because Miss Brooks is a Negro Poet she has called these Bronzeville Boys and Girls, but they are universal and will make friends anywhere, among grown-ups or among children from eight to ten.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s desire to achieve universality is reflected through her poems. This collection definitely belongs to the first phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s career. This collection was accompanied by illustrations by Ronni Solbert. Even though the illustrations were lively and gave more substance to Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem, they were however illustrations of children with white faces. This fact greatly disturbed Gwendolyn Brooks but she made no protest, nor did she raise any objection.57

The children poems in The Bean Eaters, include “Pete at Zoo”, where she highlights a child’s need for security, and of a child’s imagination and ability to identify with animals at the zoo.

In Brooks's next major work *In the Mecca* is a little girl Pepita, the pivot round whom the poem revolves. Pepita is lost. Her mother with her other children search for Pepita throughout the whole building of the Mecca, frantic with fright. The readers never get to meet Pepita, but only "meet" her through the description of her given by the other characters in the poem. One such character is the door itself which becomes the speaker, and asks: "what are you doing here? And where is Pepita the puny – the halted, glad-sad child!" Another description of Pepita is:

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.  

As the poem progresses, Mrs. Sallie's other children are presented to the readers in the most unusual manner. They are described by things that they do not like:

Melodie Mary hates everything pretty and plump
And Melodie, Cap and Casey
And Thomas Earl, Tennesse, Emmett and Briggs
hate Sewn Suburbs.

---

hate everything combed and strong, hate people who 
have balls, dolls, mittens and dimity frocks and trains, 
and boring gloves, picture books, bonnets for Easter 
Lace handkerchief owners are enemies of Smithkind. 59

This negative description of the things they dislike or hate are the 
very things that they would love to have but being poor cannot afford 
them.

After a long search, the police finally find Pepita, murdered. The 
following lines tell us about Pepita’s thoughts

She never learned that black is not beloved

Was royalty when poised,

Sly, at the A and P’s fly open door.

Will be royalty no more.

“I touch” – she said once – “petals of a rose,

A silky feeling through me goes!”

Her mother will try for rose. 60

In Family Pictures one notices the Black awareness slowly 
dawning in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks. One such poem where she 
uses the ballad form to bring out the feeling of a small, seven year old


boy is "The Life of Lincoln West". The readers meet Lincoln West, known as the "ugliest boy that everyone ever saw". The boy is so ugly that he cannot form a meaningful relationship with any one. This boy is rejected even by his family members because of his looks. His very appearance seems an affront to everybody. Even his father "could not bear the sight of him". His school teacher had to make an effort "to be as pleasant with him as with others". Despite his looks Lincoln is very resourceful and children enjoy him for he "made up/games, told stories", but they leave him "when / their Most Acceptable friends came".

Just as in the adults there is the need to be accepted, the need to belong, the same also runs deep in little Black children.

Following Family Pictures, appeared Aloneness, a children's book. This poem, just fifty one lines long, tells of a child's experience of aloneness and solitude and is meditative in tone. The idea for this poem was taken from an old experience of her daughter Nora who, though little, was able to differentiate between loneliness and aloneness of which Gwendolyn Books mentions in the epigraph. This little poem has pen-and-ink drawings of a little Black boy by Leroy Foster.

As Melhem points out, in this poem Gwendolyn Books delicately brings out the child's sense of solitude and as "...posit loneliness as progressive, delicious as first, then decreasingly so, like a small red apple
The poem begins with the child standing alone then the meaning of “loneliness” is given with a list of “negative impressions, social and physical, the latter of colour, sound and taste”. The positive connotation of Aloneness is given with taste, the small apple, “sweet and round and cold and for just you”.

After the image of the apple, she uses the image of a pond where aloneness is “like loving a pond in summer” where the water is “a little silver-dark and kind”. The child can love people just as he can love a “kind” pond. The poem closes on the note that aloneness is that “whose other name is Love”. This poem, like the earlier ones, conveys Brooks’s maternal concern for her people. Despite her age, experience and maturity, she had not lost the ability to enter into the mind of a child and view the world with his eyes, a world despite so much turmoil, hatred, pain and suffering, still looks adventurous, offers hope and promise of fulfillment of dreams.

Her next work for children was published by Haki Madhubuti’s Third World Press entitled “The Tiger who Wore White Gloves or What you are you are”, and is dedicated to her daughter Nora and son Henry Jr. Nora, whom Gwendolyn Books refers to as “THE FIRST TIGER” and

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62 Ibid.
Henry Jr. as “THE DELINEATOR”. This poem like *Aloneness* is a single poem.

The “Tiger .....” is based on the age old genre of story telling, the fable with its universal appeal to the young and the old. Brooks’s tiger is pictured as wearing gloves, white gloves in order to prove that he is fashionable. The only misgiving is that his toenails extend through the gloves. The other tigers shame this behaviour of his. The theme of the poem according to Melhem is “Self-acceptance and Pride”.63 Though the tiger wants to follow a strange style that is basically impractical, he is pressured by his companions to follow his own natural style.

Brooks writes thus: “IT’S NATURE’S / NICE DECREE/ THAT TIGER FOLK/ SHOULD BE/ NOT DAINTY;/ BUT DARING;/ AND WISELY WEARING/ WHAT’S FIERCE AS THE FACE;/ NOT WHITENESS AND LACE”.

Through this poem which is meant for children, using the metaphor of the “glove”, Brooks is addressing her people, especially the women who turned back to hair straightening after a period of pride in blackness and other racial feelings. Brooks had observed with shock and disbelief this change in the women and strongly believed that Blacks were once again bowing down to the pressure of white standards of beauty. In the

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poem, glove is representative of white culture. This poem is a lesson to the Black children, to remind them that with their long background of pain, suffering, repression, they should not follow the white culture, but strike out a new way and accept their own rich cultural heritage.

In the second phase of her poetic career one observe Gwendolyn Books’ unshakable commitment to the Blacks solidarity. These poems are meant for Black children. No doubt white children can read and enjoy them, but Gwendolyn Books means to reach out to the Blacks exclusively. The maternal role can be seen fusing/blending with the role of the mentor.

Critics could no longer say that her poems gave no hint whatsoever about the race of the writer. Gwendolyn Brooks’s themes and style announced in a full throated voice that she was a Black, she would write about Blacks and for Blacks.

Her Black consciousness was now no longer confined to America alone. She was keenly aware of the political and social events abroad, especially the upheavals in South Africa. In 1986, she wrote *The Near – Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems*. The poem is her dedication conveying her African identity. The first poem begins with an epigraph which tells that Black Children are often detained in South Africa. In this
poem the Black boy’s family is not allowed to live in the city of Johannesburg because of apartheid.

The poet takes on the persona of the boy, uses the form of a dramatic monologue: “My way is from woe to wonder./ A Black boy near Johannesburg hot/ in the Hot Time”. The boy addresses the whites as “They” and to him “Their bleach is puckered and cruel”. The child is overcome with grief when he speaks of his father’s death. He says: “It is work to speak of my Father. My Father./ His body was whole till they Stopped it”. His brave father was killed in an uprising and of his mother he says “… Oh a strong eye is my Mother”. To which Gwendolyn Brooks in a commentary adds, “But she ‘slumps’ when nobody is looking”. The boy will sit still no longer. He knows it is time for action, for retribution. He moves “like a clean spear of fire”, where the spear recalls his heritage.

In the last stanza, the little boy says:

Tonight I walk with
a hundred of playmates to where
the hurt Black of our skin is forbidden.
There, in the dark that is our dark, there,
a-pulse across earth that is our earth, there,
there exulting, there Exactly, there redeeming, there Roaring Up.
(Oh my Father)
We shall forge with the Fist-and-the-Fury:
We shall flail in the Hot Time:
We shall
We shall

Melhem points out that iterated four times “We shall”, acquires an increasingly imperative edge. The lack of final punctuation indicates a continuing conflict, to this Gwendolyn Brooks adds that it indicates “and determination and uncertainty”.  

Unlike the children presented in the first phase, the children in the second phase of Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic career, like the little boy from Johannesburg, do not wish to escape from the world of reality into a world of fantasy. They want to take active part in nation building. They know their duty to, and their place in the society. They try to strengthen their commitment through action. There is no more the childlike innocence here, that marked Gwendolyn Brooks’s earlier children poems. Instead, we see a maturity among the children that goes beyond their age.

The militant voice of Gwendolyn Brooks is heard loud and clear in the later poems. This voice, strong and loud has been the hallmark of Gwendolyn Brooks in the second phase of her poetic career. Always one

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with her fingers on the nerve-centre of contemporary society. Gwendolyn Brooks records the most happening things in her poetry as she views them.

Her latest collection _Children Coming Home_, speaks on contemporary issues like incest in “Merle”, of Tinsel Marie who learns of the _Coora_ flower that “grows high in the mountains of Itty-go-luba Bësa./Province Meechee”. There is James, who shares of his experience on a train when he was five. Novelle knows that her grand mother is waiting for her to come home. But one voice that resonates with racial pride is that of “Kojo” with an epigraph I am a Black. He says:

According to my Teachers,

I am now an African American

They call me out of my name.

BLACK is an open umbrella.

I am Black and A Black forever.

I am one of The Blacks.

... ... ...

I am other than Hyphenation.
I say, proudly, MY PEOPLE!

I say, proudly, OUR PEOPLE!

I am Kojo. In West Africa Kojo means Unconquerable. My parents named me the seventh day from my birth in Black spirit, Black faith, Black communion.

I am Kojo. I am A Black.

And I Capitalize my name.

Do no call me out of my name.\(^66\)

For one so young, Kojo is sure of his racial identity and of his place under the sun.

Gwendolyn Brooks is successful in portraying children and their world with delicate care and immense understanding. As Smith notes, with Gwendolyn Brooks, children are an "Organic part of the poetic vision ... and are at the center of the poetic vision; they are the

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barometers by which we are compelled to judge a world to be human is achieved by the fullest exercise of the imagination". 67

Through her poems ‘on’ and ‘for’ children, Brooks projects to the world that there is still hope. She uses hope, innocence and imagination of the children to let the world know that despite its bitterness, ugliness, pain, turmoil and hatred, there still exists much beauty which can be enjoyed.

If the first phase of her poetic career Gwendolyn Brooks has pictured children the most defenseless members of the society, caught in the web of poverty, trying to make their life bearable by taking off on the wings of fantasy, the second phase addresses realistic issues, issues that affect society. In a very down to earth attitude, Gwendolyn Brooks chronicles the good and the bad in society.

Thus, we see in this chapter, the women and children character evolving as Gwendolyn Brooks moved from being an integrationist to a militant poet. With her becoming a Black poet, her voice has definitely become more louder and resonates with the purpose of a prophet. We also observe Gwendolyn Brooks moving from her position of a mere observer to that of a leader.

Where, in the first phase, as already mentioned earlier, she was a mere observer recording the lives of the Blacks without offering a solution, in the second phase, she emerges as a prophet. Her focus shifts from the individual concern to the concern of her community, inspiring in her characters as well as the people a sense of solidarity and Black pride.

The next chapter deals with minor themes in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. They include Youth, Men and Colour, themes that Gwendolyn Brooks handles with equal sensitivity, care and understanding.