INTRODUCTION
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We see no clue of green,
We seek a Garden: trees,
the light, the cry, the conscience of the grass.
In this most sociable of all centuries.

We seek informal sun.
A harvest of hurrah.
We seek our center and radius.
Profound redemption. And America.

- Gwendolyn Brooks,
“The Sight of the Horizon” Ebony, Sept. 1963

The transition and transformation of the American Negro from a slave, a lowly labourer, to that of a celebrated Pulitzer Prize winner, has not only been a hard and painful journey, but also a long and arduous one. It has been a journey full of pain, rejection, humiliation and scorn. Yet the Negro has held on with one main objective which is to be part of the American culture and above all to be recognized and treated as a human being.
This thesis is a study of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry with a special emphasis on themes and forms. A major poet, Gwendolyn Brooks has been acknowledged as one of America's most prominent Black voices against racism. Much has been written on her poetry. Many critics have pointed out that her poetry falls into three distinct groups. However, a keen study of the themes and forms brings out a novel approach to an understanding of her growth as a poet – a transition from integrationist to a militant poet. A focus on her biographical details throws light on the poetic development of Gwendolyn Brooks.

The purpose of this study is to trace out these two distinct phases in her poetic career and her journey from being a Negro poet to a Black poet. To appreciate Gwendolyn Brooks as a poet, to get the essence of her poetry, it is imperative to know briefly the background and history of Blacks in America, the slow yet steady awakening towards Black consciousness, and its reflection in their literature.

This chapter gives a brief history of the Black man's entry into America, and a description of his mute, animal-like existences for a long time. It highlights the slow awakening, the realisation of his self and his race. The chapter also highlights briefly the Black women's literary tradition and their contribution in awakening the Black consciousness.
This aspect will help understand Gwendolyn Brooks as a woman poet and her part in the literary world.

The change in the status of the Black man was neither sudden nor surprising. It built up gradually with the Negro trying hard to establish himself, to be recognized and respected as a human being and as an American. Even under very trying circumstances, unthinkable hardships and most afflicting conditions, the Black man would not allow himself to forget his roots or his native tradition that existed in the folklore and songs. Though at times he was completely crushed, he had within him the strong will which helped him survive. This will power also gave him the necessary force to flourish and to adapt himself and his traditions to suit the foreign culture. This strong will power, also gave him the determination to build up his self esteem in spite of the utter shame and harsh cruelty meted out to him. Equipping himself with his master's language, he tried to make the alien American culture his own, and to carve a place and an identity for himself on the foreign soil.

From the time the Black man first set foot on their soil, the whites looked down upon him and regarded him as a savage beast without culture or education, fit only for hard physical labour. He was considered incapable of understanding and learning the tenets of white culture.
Negative labels like – "heathen, savage, barbaric, black"\(^1\), were commonly used to either address or refer to him.

It was through the Spaniards that the Negro entered America. When the Spaniards could not get the local Indians to work for them on the huge plantations, they started importing Blacks from Africa as slaves. These Blacks were practically plucked from their native land, transported by sea under inhuman conditions to America and sold like animals in open markets. Once sold, these slaves worked for their masters on the plantations in South and as general domestic servants in the North, for either very little or no money at all.

Under the eighteenth century slave code, the Black man was kept under tight legal control. The slave master felt that "One had to keep his Black property in check, or the entire system might fall apart". The white man lived in constant fear that if he failed to "restrain the barbarian within their midst, then not only the plantation economy but even the moral order ... would be destroyed.\(^2\)

With this in mind, the Black man was treated worse than an animal, and made to feel that he was a mere object, a person without


\(^2\) Ibid.
character or identity of his own. He was reduced to being a human without any human feelings. Words like ‘Negro’, a Spanish word for Black; and ‘Nigger’ were used to hit home the fact that he was different. This was a deliberate strategy to negate, oppress and liquidate the individuality and culture of the Blacks. The Blacks were pained by these binary equations and hated this discrimination.

This was one of the reasons why the Blacks were, at every turn, kept away from the main stream American society, in which by now, they played a significant role. The deep seated fear that their heathen culture would contaminate the white society continued to plague the minds of the whites.

The white man had a fixed parameter when it came to judging the Blacks. Explaining this cultural assumption Booker T. Washington writes:

No white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language and professes the white man’s religion.3

To elaborate on this difference in the parameter of judgment for Blacks and whites is an old Black folk tale, “Ole Sis Goose” – which speaks for itself.

Ole Sis Goose wus er-sailin' on de late, and ole Br'er Fox hid in de weeds. By um by ole Sis Goose swum up close to der bank and ole Br'er Fox lept out an cotched her. "O yes, ole Sis Goose, I'se got yer now, you'se been er-sailin' on der lake er long time, en I'se got yer now. I'se gwine to break yer neck en pick yer bones". Hole on der', Br'er Fox, hold on, I'se got jes' as much right to swim in der lake as you has ter lie in der weeds. Hit's des' as much my lake as hit is yours, and we is gwine to take dis matter to der cotehouse and see if you has any right to break my neck and pick my bones".

And so dey went to cote, and when dey got dere, de sheriff, he wus er fox, de judge, he was er fox; and der tourneys, dey wus fox; en all de jurymen, dey was foxes too. En dey tried ole Sis Goose, en dey 'victed her and dey 'scuted her, and dey picked her bones. Now, my chilluns, listen to me, when de folks in de cotehouse is foxes, and you is des'er common goose, der ain't gwine to be much justice for you pore cullud folks.4

This folklore bears a strong resemblance to the judgment or treatment given to the powerful lion, the king of the jungle, in stories written by men who hunt it. When a precocious child questioned his father why the “king of beasts” was always the loser in jungle stories, the father sagely replied “but this will change when lions learn to write”.5

The position of the Black man would continue to remain as powerless as the lions and the ole sis geese until he made a conscious effort to learn to read and write. This task, however, was not an easy one.

The Black man was consigned to lowly tasks and every effort he made to


join the main stream was thwarted. He slowly realized his situation and looked at himself and the world in which he lived from a different perspective.

It was now the responsibility of the Black man to develop something of his own, through which he could identify himself and be distinct from the whites. This quest for self esteem led him to establish a culture of his own wherein he could tell the whites and the whole world about himself, his sufferings, his oppression and also his aspirations.

It was not that all whites were against the Black man. There were many who were sympathetic to his sad state. Many white writers dealt with the problem of Blacks in their works like Eugene O’Neil in his plays, like “The Hairy Ape”, Mrs. Beecher-Stowe’s famous Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which was supposed to have triggered off the Civil War and Sherwood Anderson to name but a few. These white writers were no doubt deeply sympathetic to the Black man’s cause and did make a conscious and genuine effort to portray his plight through their works. However, they looked at the Black man from the outside. Being mere observers, they could never fathom or even begin to understand the deep currents of pain and suffering, the shame and humiliation that ran in the minds of the Blacks. Their writings could never claim to be the
representation of the Negro voice, nor the interpretation of the Negro himself.

It became very clear that the best person to voice his thoughts, pains, feelings was the Black man himself. Under circumstances like these, was born a literature which has rightly been called the “Literature of Necessity”\textsuperscript{6}. Many Blacks of the Pre-Civil War era picked their pen to write. When these pioneers like Phyllis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Jupiter Hammon and many like them started to tell about themselves and their state, they were looked with tolerant indulgence, as displayed towards a child beginning to learn new things. They were regarded as unusual members of their race. These pioneers were writers in bondage; not free to voice thoughts that sprang from the heart. They were allowed to write, but only about such things that pleased their white masters and a curious audience.

As Langston Hughes points out, in those days, in many parts of colonial America, it was “against the law and certainly contrary to custom to teach slaves to read and write”\textsuperscript{7}. Education was denied to the Negroes and writing was not encouraged. Hence the only way the Blacks could


maintain their tradition was to continue with the spoken word, or the word of mouth, the oral tradition. This tradition lasted for quite a long time.

It was only during the mid-eighteenth century that the Black man slowly started realizing and becoming aware of his self, his being; and the fact that he too was an individual with self respect. He realized that he was no animal but a thinking, sensitive and a gifted being. This was the beginning of his consciousness about himself. This was his first step, but a giant step in the thousand mile journey of humanising the Blacks of America. This awareness of himself pushed back his mental horizon and made him accept new challenges. This he did with great courage and fortitude. He soon recognised that reading and writing were a powerful means of self realisation and self assertion. Thus began the Black man's literary struggle to express his "deep rooted feelings of bitterness and scorn".  

Much later, armed with the ability to read and write, many slaves started writing long narratives most of which were mainly records of bondage and imprisonment. They contained a mixture of hope, despair and longing. These narratives were autobiographical in nature. The first Black narrative recorded is – The Interesting Narrative of the Life of

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Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa. *The African*, written by Himself. published in 1760. This was followed by *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave* written by Himself, 1845. In simple, clear prose, Douglass wrote about what it was to be a slave in America in those days. It records his pain and humiliation, his realization that the balance always tilts towards the whites when it comes to justice and rights of the Black and the needle of suspicion always pointed towards him when deciding matters criminal or deviant. These works acted as catalysts fusing the amorphous unrest into a definite want. They stoked and fanned the nascent fire of revolt and rebellion in the hearts and minds of the Black to break away from the system. Douglass was not only a dreamer and a writer, but also a man of action. He managed to escape from his master and in the face of excruciating hardships succeeded in reaching North America. But alas by then he was not in a position to savour his freedom; he was broken both in body and spirit. He laments:

> My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered in my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute.⁹

While the massive dehumanisation of Blacks occurred all over America the whites appeared to be, or rather pretended to be ignorant of

this large scale human tragedy. In dehumanising the Blacks the whites seemed to have dehumanised themselves. The killer had killed himself. Or at least the whites allowed their Christian souls to be deadened by the Pharaoh-like arrogance that it is not for the slaves to question why but to do and die.

The legacy of Afro-American writing genre started with these narratives. They exposed the inhuman practice of slavery in America to the world. This naturally gave much publicity and awakened anti-slavery feelings which finally culminated in the Civil War.

The slave narratives of Fredrick Douglass, Henry Bibb, H. Box Brown did much to highlight the plight of the Blacks. But what took it one step forward was Linda Brent’s *Diary of a Slave Girl*. This narrative was edited by L. Maria Child, a white fighter of women’s rights. It showed how slavery was even worse for the Black woman who had not only to endure slavery but also sexual assault of the slave master.

It was about the same time various political, social, economic changes were taking place in America. These factors also helped give the Black man further impetus in the search for self. This search for self led the Blacks to launch the unique Black Movement known in history as the ‘Negro Movement’ and gave rise to the ‘New Negro’.

it came to be popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance or Black Renaissance.

It was during the Harlem Renaissance that the world saw for the first time full blossoming of the Black art and culture. Provided with an appropriate platform, the Blacks set out to show the whites and the whole world that they were in no way inferior; and if given a chance, they could contribute to the American culture from which they were segregated.

Harlem Renaissance not only gave the Black man confidence but also enlightened him with the right awareness. Thus awakened he set out to erase the misconceptions harboured so long in the minds of the whites. The Black man was now proud of himself and of his colour. As Reddings rightly points out, he was “race-conscious and race-proud; independent and defiant; conscious of his power and not ashamed of his gifts”.11

Harlem became a centre of great literary activity. There was now an on-going process of change and transformation, experimenting with the old forms, trying to find new ones, to see which medium would best help him articulate his inner self. The Black man slowly realized that his expression about his people and race had a dual impact, both on the whites and the Blacks themselves. The Black man could now at last say

without fear or favour the leanings of his heart. He had now come of age. Infact “a truly “new Negro” had been born and grown into maturity during the years since 1900”.  

While the Black man was thus involved in the quest for his self and what it meant to belong to the American society and to American mainstream literature, the Black woman was not far behind. She did not sit back waiting for someone else to help her in her search for identity. She too took up her pen to make her presence felt. For the Black man it meant a general racial identity, for the Black woman it took on a deeper meaning. In fact a double identity, primarily racial identity and most importantly gender identity was established.

When the Black woman spoke, she meant the world to hear her. When the world finally condescended to give an ear to her voice, the Black woman stood up strong and proud to equally shoulder the burden in the uplift of the Negro race, in the search of racial identity and in the full blossoming of Black Literature. It becomes imperative to trace the growth of Black women’s literary tradition. This growth eventually provided a platform for Gwendolyn Brooks’s expression. In fact the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the collective Black consciousness. All future writers tapped their ideas from this collective consciousness.

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Anna Julia Cooper, a Black Feminist, whose work – *A Voice from the South* (1892), the first text in Black feminist movement, analyses the fallacy of referring to the “Black man” when speaking of Black people and argues that just as white men cannot speak through the consciousness of Black men, neither can Black men “fully and adequately... reproduce the Voice of the Black woman”.  

The Black woman has always proved to be a mystery to the Black man. He has never been able to reach the inner depth of her self. She has always proved a sphinx, an enigma to him. It has been widely believed that the Harlem Renaissance has been solely instrumental in bringing awareness in the Black woman, an awareness of self, of her Blackness, pride in her race and her feminity. However, there have been various Black women writers who sowed the seeds of the Black women literary tradition.

In fact, the credit of the birth of the Afro-American literary tradition goes to a woman – Phyllis Wheatley, with the publication of her first book of poetry as early as 1773. To her also belongs the unique distinction of not only starting the Black American Literary tradition, but also the Black women’s literary tradition.

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All the subsequent Black writers, both men and women, have looked up to this progenitor of Black Literature. For a considerable period Phyllis Wheatley's works and Black writing and literary tradition were one and the same. In fact, the way in which her poetry was received by the English speaking world in general and the whites of America in particular heralded the Afro-American Literature and Criticism.

While Wheatley is recognized as the first Black to give birth to Black poetry genre, the credit of being the first Afro-American for having published a book of Essays in 1841, goes to Ann Plato. The first novel to be published was also by a woman, Harriet E. Wilson's, Our Nig.

Unfortunately, the contributions of these founding mothers have either been ignored, lost or sadly unrecognized. The writings of many women after Wheatley were suppressed for a long time, until the time of the Harlem Renaissance, and much later too. Even during the Harlem Renaissance, nobody was ready to accept the Black woman as an artist, let alone as a spokesperson for her race.

Most of the works by the early women writers have been ignored and left unread, and sadly not understood. Often these women writers were looked upon as curios; even Phyllis Wheatley left the world of readers wondering about her as she did way back in 1770, when her first work, "An Elegiac Poem on the Death of George Whitefield", was
published. Wheatley, a slave and barely eighteen years old became an instant curio and an object of intrigue. How on earth could a slave and a child at that, master her master’s language so well and compose poems and idioms in the style of Alexander Pope leave people wondering. The wonder soon turned into jealousy and suspicion that made Phyllis Wheatley a girl with poetic, sensitive soul go through agonizing humiliation. She was asked to undergo an oral examination before a panel of eighteen noble citizens of Boston who wanted to check whether the little girl was indeed the author of such creative work.

One can only imagine the manner in which the eighteen “noble citizens” must have grilled the little girl in the interview. But it seems that all their combined might of incredulity could not smite and smother the flame of truth. The brilliant performance of little Phyllis Wheatley made them to grudgingly acknowledge the authenticity of the works and issue an “Attestation” with an open letter “To the Publick”.\(^{14}\)

This is an instance to highlight the difficulty a Black woman had to face to make herself heard, let alone a Black man. While Wheatley had the fortune of capturing the imagination of the general reading public, Harriet Wilson was not so lucky. Her novel Our Nig, which tells of a Black woman’s awareness in the racist environment, went without notice.

It did not even credit a single review or a comment. This happened "at a time when virtually all works written by Black people was heralded by abolitionists as salient arguments against the existence of human slavery".  

However, despite the fact they were recognized or not, the Black women writers were busy in their long struggle. They strove hard to establish a tradition of their own - a feminine tradition.

To the question as to why the Black women needed to write, and more specifically why they needed to establish a feminine tradition arose, there are numerous and varied answers. The first and foremost that needs to be established is that the women writers in general had absolutely no literary tradition to refer to. This need gets amplified in the context of Black women writers.

The Black woman wrote not for any one else but for her own self. This acted as a means of understanding her self and her experiences. She was driven hard by the need to know and understand herself. It is a need that made her delve deep into her inner self to seek answers and to search out the truth of her self, her race and her culture.

Though women have, through the ages, played a significant role, have been the binding force of the society, there had been absolutely no

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writings by them. Writing, for women was not a simple task. It was a striving out of speechlessness, a deliberate effort to pave a path to strengthen their self awareness.

In front of them was an unknown path and behind them there was no tradition to fall upon. Writing for them meant a means of self assertion. This definitely called for a unique type of writing which was different from the existing male literary tradition. Women sought to exclude all the negative points of the male literary tradition and forge ahead to establish an authentic literary tradition.

The Black women writers began to notice that despite their steady contributions to the literary field they were “being relegated outside the boundary of the two literary traditions”. Writing on this issue, Tate rightly observed that the American literary tradition had been unquestionably white and the Afro-American Literary tradition which had undoubtedly been male.\(^{16}\)

Since the Black woman's writing was already branded and labeled, it hardly mattered to her whether or not her writings were accepted by the literary tradition. Therefore, she was unrestrained by caution and wariness and chose topics that were dear to her and wrote on subjects

which pleased her and not any critic. For, now she knew that she had no set standards to neither reach nor fulfill.

The advent of the Harlem Renaissance gave Black writers a platform to speak. The Black women writers realized that they had before them a vast, unexplored territory, not something beyond them, but something from within them, their very own experiences. There was now an enthusiastic reader, ready to read whatever they wrote. Black women writers found much to their pleasant surprise that major newspapers like The New York Times, were including their works in their literary sections.

Much more promising was the fact that these Black women authors found their works not only read but appreciated and rewarded. Many Black women authors were now winning prestigious awards. The Pulitzer Prize was won by Gwendolyn Brooks and the American Book Award was won by Gloria Naylor in the year 1945, for her novel The Women of Brewster Place.

This acceptance by the literary world was neither sudden nor easy. These women writers found that till then all that was written was done with certain restrictions. The fear or uncertainty regarding how much or
less of the "women's stuff" they could freely add in their works always dominated their thoughts and plagued their minds.

With her style which was now specifically authentic, the Black woman writer became more open and wrote in a unique emotional, typically feminine style. Some of the themes she chose to write on were general to all women writers. Many works tried to explore the female self. These works usually centered on autobiographical experiences, and there were others that were specific to their own Black culture. However, the common theme was, the "quest theme" where the character tried to identify and define self.

The character that the Black woman selected to write about was the Black woman herself. One could not expect any adventure in these types of work. The protagonist rather fights to establish her identity at home itself. The focus was basically on her inner self and on the external factors that acted on her and her life.

It was neither the lure of money nor the spotlight of fame and recognition that drove these Black women to write. As Tate points out, they wrote as a means of "maintaining, emotional and intellectual clarity

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of sustaining self-development and instruction". The lack of audience or publishers did not daunt them.

Many Black women writers wrote with the desire to uphold Black identity and Black dignity. Another theme favoured by Black women authors was their female character's effort to nurture her self esteem. This is important in a society where she was least respected and where more often than not, she was punished for her attempt to do so.

The Black woman's character in these works also suffers from another complexity, that is, she is not regarded feminine enough by her men. She longs to be put on a pedestal and admired. There is also the deep-rooted desire to be white. This aspect is explored by many of the prominent Black women authors, especially Gwendolyn Brooks in her novel *Maud Martha*. The heroine, Maud, is neglected by her escort after the first dance with her and is seen dancing with someone who is red-haired and curved. The same theme is treated at length in her poems, especially in "The Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie".

This is the kind of frustration faced by many Black heroines as well as the real life Black women. However, at the end of every story the Black heroine has learnt to accept, to declare and even rejoice in the fact

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that she is Black. She no longer desires to match the expectation of someone else's standard of beauty. She likes being Black, being herself and having the ability to define the course of her life.

With the arrival of these major Black women authors and their major concerns, it seemed that after a long time the suppressed inner voice had at long last found articulation. They had come to the realization that if they want their voices heard, they would have to open up and speak for themselves. Langston Hughes's verse best articulates this idea:

... Someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me.
And write about me –
Black and beautiful –
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.²⁰

The works of Gwendolyn Brooks do give a voice and an interpretation to the unvoiced feelings of both the Black woman and the Black man, especially the woman who has forever faced the challenges that are both interracial and intraracial.

This work has been divided into five chapters. The first chapter highlights the unique features of the Harlem Renaissance and its role in bringing about and building a sense of pride, solidarity and consciousness of the race among the Blacks and contextualizes it with Gwendolyn Brooks’ life and background. The other social and political events concerned with Black life are mentioned, especially the Civil Rights Act and events leading to it. It is an attempt to show Gwendolyn Brooks’s roots in the Harlem Renaissance tradition, reaching out to the Black Arts Movement, a bridge between the two major Black literary movements. The biographical detail is necessary to show how her life experiences contributed to her growth as a poet.

The second chapter traces the growth of Gwendolyn Brooks as a poet with emphasis on the two distinct phases that can be noticed in her poetic career-Gwendolyn Brooks as an integrationist, and as a militant poet. This chapter also tries to trace the growth of Gwendolyn Brooks who started writing poetry as a person to whom race was only incidental, and also attempts to show how the major changes in the Black American
society awakened her Black consciousness that made her the foremost spokesperson of her race.

A major voice for her people, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about life as she saw it through the windows of her Chicago apartment. But to analyse all the themes under one chapter was found to be a great injustice to the treatment and emphasis Gwendolyn Brooks has laid on each of them. Therefore an attempt has been made to divide her themes under two broad headings. Chapter three concentrates on major themes which are close to her heart – women and children.

The fourth chapter is devoted to minor themes in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry – youth, men and colour, the themes she handles with the same care and sensitivity as the major themes. The chapter traces the effect of the change in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetic vision, her change from an integrationist to a militant poet; her movement from a Negro poet to a Black one, and her shift from the individual to community assessment. Colour is given emphasis because it was colour which made the Black man face humiliating existence for a long time.

The fifth chapter deals with various forms employed by Gwendolyn Brooks in her poetry. Her use of form ranges from the traditional European Sonnet and Ballad to her later use of free verse, couplets, blues, jazz and spirituals to express her solidarity with the
Blacks. This chapter once again stresses the two phases in Gwendolyn Brooks's works. It shows Gwendolyn Brooks moving from a Negro poet to a Black poet, where her poetry becomes far more militant and freer in form.