CHAPTER – II

THE TWO PHASES OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S POETRY
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When one takes a bird's eye view of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry, there is a clear indication that her poetic career, spanning more than fifty years, can be distinctly divided into two phases. The pre 1967 era and post 1967 era, or in more specific terms, Gwendolyn Brooks as an Integrationist poet and Gwendolyn Brooks as a Militant poet.

Gwendolyn Brooks, in an interview at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, in 1976, said that her work falls into three periods that correspond to “changes” in her perspective. Critic William H. Hansell, seems to agree with Gwendolyn Brooks’s statement and divides her work accordingly, works of the first period as, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); *Annie Allen* (1949) and *The Bean Eaters* (1960). The second period is represented by the “New Poems” section of *Selected Poems* (1963), and by two uncollected poems “The Sight of the Horizon” (1963) and “In the Time of Detachment, in the Time of Cold” (1965). The third
phase in her development is marked by her collection *In the Mecca* (1969); *Riot* (1969); *Family Pictures* (1970) and *Beckonings* (1975).¹

For this study, however, it was found more convenient to divide her poetic works into two larger and more inclusive phases, guided by what two critics have remarked about Gwendolyn Brooks's works. Norris B. Clark puts the evolution of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry as that which "has been from an egocentric orientation to an ethnocentric one".² And as D.H. Melhem points out in her essay "Gwendolyn Brooks, Humanism and Heroism" that a study of her art shows "two essential features; a humane vision and heroic voice".³ And also what Gwendolyn Brooks herself admitted in a much later interview with Claudia Tate that her work can be categorised into the pre-1967 era and the post-1967 era.

This chapter is a study of Gwendolyn Brooks's, both as an integrationist and as a militant poet. It analyzes the growth, evolution and change in these two phases and traces the causes for this transition. The first part of the chapter concentrates on the events leading to this change from an integrationist to a militant one emphasizing mainly on the 1967

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Fisk University Conference, while the latter part sheds light on how she evolved from being a Negro poet to a Black poet, how her work has unfolded and the important changes in her poetry.

The only information that one has about Gwendolyn Brooks's ancestry is that her paternal grandfather Lucas Brooks was a runaway slave. With her father, David, being the only one educated amongst his eleven siblings, Gwendolyn Brooks was fortunate to grow up in a house where education, values and culture were given much importance. Her mother, Keziah was a teacher before marriage.

Growing up with the white culture all around her, Gwendolyn Brooks had imbibed the Americaness of the day. Though the Africaness was not completely lost, it lay hidden beneath layers of white culture acquired through books, friends, schools and neighbourhood. It was a neighbourhood, though Black, trying to forget its Blackness and soaking in as much of the white culture as possible. It was but natural for this Americaness to appear in her poetry. How she was hit by her Africaness and how she slowly yet clearly discovered her identity as an African and celebrated this discovery, and she voiced her Africaness in her poetry, makes an interesting study.

Gwendolyn Brooks recalls how her family celebrated all the important holidays, Christmas, Halloween, Thanksgiving Day, Easter
Sunday- each time the dinning table filled with appropriate, variety of goodies. In her Report from Part One, giving a detailed account of these festive celebrations, she closes these recollections on a very serious and thoughtful note. She writes:

Are you aware of a fact-that-should-be startling about the High Days of my youth? All were Europe-rooted or America-rooted. Not one celebration in Black household or in any Black household that I knew feature any Black glory or greatness or grandeur.4

Such issues as this kept gnawing at the back of her mind. Yet it took her the “awakening” of 1960’s to give voice to her innermost feelings of indignation and pain.

The years leading from her first writing and publication of her early poems from 1945 till the late 1960’s, show Brooks as an integrationist, as a poet striving to find a place in the American literary mainstream. Then, her primary aim was to attain universality in her poetry, as well as a need to be accepted and appreciated. This quality to be approved by white audience was one that she had inherited from the Harlem Renaissance. All this and more was gained when Gwendolyn Brooks became the first Black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize for her collection Annie Allen (1949).

Gwendolyn Brooks was fortunate to be born in a family, which, though not materially rich, was rich in love, warmth and generosity. Growing up in this secure blanket of parental love and kinship, Gwendolyn Brooks felt all along that the world outside was but a reflection of the one she grew up in. That she had a rude awakening to the stark realities in her nursery school days is putting it very mildly. Yet her belief that people are basically good and that there is some innate goodness even in the most evil person persisted. This feeling led her to pen poems that were "conditioned", to use Furman's words, towards bringing out the goodness in people. She strongly felt and believed that the society was good and could not be one with double standards.

This belief combined with the one she shared with her partying crowd, a group that was made up of famous painters, poets, pianists, dancers, actors, photographers. These people met at parties and "philosophized into the dawn", had many a great, long winding talks over several social views and were of the opinion that if they talked long and intelligently and discussed deeply enough, the problems would be solved,

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“society could be prettied, quieted, cradled, sweetened, if only people talked enough, glared at each other yearningly enough, waited enough”.  

Gwendolyn Brooks was jerked awake from this stupor of this make-believe world and made to face reality in 1967 at Fisk University. The poetry of the first phase deals with the belief that some day, soon, things were going to change. She felt that some day, soon the white man would change, realize the injustice he had meted out to his Black brother. And some day soon, the world would be a pleasanter place for the Black man in America.

The dreams that Gwendolyn Brooks had about America were shattered when she encountered the literary manifestation of the ongoing civil rights movement, the Black Arts Movement in 1967 at Fisk University. She realized that white America did have double standards. It had hardly made any move towards desegregation; neither did it have any intention of bridging the wide gulf that separated the Blacks from the whites. This gap was a reality and there was no sense in wishing it away. Nor could one look the other way any longer. Something had to be done about it. That something had already taken shape and was discovered by Gwendolyn Brooks quite late.

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It took her a long time to awaken to the fact that the society in which she lived, about which she had so much confidence, about which she believed in was not what it really was. And that it would remain so until the Black man sought to change the situation himself. That the Black man could not wait forever for the society to correct itself.

Gwendolyn Brooks in an interview with Hull and Gallagher sums up how one had to equip oneself to help oneself. She says that the social world is a whirlwind. So what does one do then?

Do we tell ourselves that we’ll wait until it’s all over and everything is peaceful and loving? We might be waiting in vain. We don’t know when things are going to “get better” – and we don’t seem inclined to force them to get better. So we see to it that we bloom, that we attend to our growth in spite of the awful things that are happening.7

Every experience that Gwendolyn Brooks had, translated itself into poetry and this helped her grow as a poet. It was the 1967 Fisk University experience that brought about a sudden, drastic change. She became more conscious of her race and her duty towards it. This however does not mean that Gwendolyn Brooks was unconscious to the suffering of the Blacks prior to the late 60’s experience. She did write about them. Many of her early poems contain the pain, suffering and injustice that she herself underwent and saw among her people. But until 1960’s she was

yet to comprehend the impact and the depth of this injustice. It was during the 40’s and the 50’s that Gwendolyn Brooks saw “integration” as the only and the proper answer to Blacks’ prayers and suffering. She felt that she had to keep on appealing to the finer sensibilities of the whites and therefore wrote poems that were “conditioned”.

Gwendolyn Brooks admits that she was naïve, and as mentioned earlier believed in the inner goodness of man. It was only much later that Gwendolyn Brooks realized that she had missed out the most important and significant books that portrayed Black life and conditions in America. She was, no doubt, an avid reader but she had not read The Souls of the Black Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois. She readily confesses that had she read those books earlier, she would have been a better informed person and would have penned poems that might have been totally different. She writes in her Report from Part One that the most philosophical book she read in those formative years was that of Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” (and “Compensation”: if you lost something here you got in some form over there. “That thought made me happy”).\(^8\) With this background, combined with inspiration drawn from the Harlem Renaissance tradition, it was but natural that the poems were much milder in tone.

The poems that Gwendolyn Brooks wrote before the awakening

\(^8\) Brooks, Report from Part One, Op. Cit., p.175
document the nature and sufferings of the Blacks. They not only give a
detailed expression to the sufferings of the Blacks in racist America, but
are a record of the change in behaviour and attitudes of Blacks, over a
period. Clenora F. Hudson points out that Gwendolyn Brooks’s work can
also serve as “excellent resource material for a historical or sociological
study of Blacks in America”9. Gwendolyn Brooks, herself a Black in
racist society, a victim, gives a clear, first-hand account. Most of her
themes stem from her own experiences.

The Fisk University experience of 1967 awoke the slumbering
giant in Gwendolyn Brooks. And once stirred, no forces could stop her
from surging ahead. It was by chance that she attended the Second Black
Writers’ Conference at the Fisk University, Nashville. She had just
finished a lecture and reading tour at South Dakota and being very tired,
was wanting to get back home. At South Dakota, she was well received,
loved and applauded and was given a standing ovation at this all white
college. Still riding high on the wave of popularity, she attended the Fisk
Conference as an obligation and compulsion, hoping to make her visit a
short one and to read a few of her poems. What awaited her was
something she had hardly expected. She met the New Blacks. She could
sense and feel the electric atmosphere that pervaded the auditorium even

9 Clenora F. Hudson, “Racial Themes in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks”, CLA
as she entered it. When she read the audience listened to her, but with cold respect, which was so unlike the reception she got at South Dakota.

She no longer was the centre of attraction, the sun in the constellation. The heroes here were younger Black writers like the novelist-director, John Oliver Killens; editors David Llorens and Hoyt Fuller; playwright Ron Milner, and the favourite of the crowd Le Roi Jones, known for his striking plays and poems and considered the master mind of the Black Arts Movements. Jones made an entrance when Gwendolyn Brooks was reading and she stopped mid way to announce — “Ah, here’s Le Roi Jones”. What happened next was an eye-opener and left Gwendolyn Brooks dazed. The crowd which until then was calm, silent — went wild, cheering clapping, stomping and whistling. Then for the rest of the Conference, Gwendolyn Brooks with Margaret Danner — “another Old Girl also coldly Respected” 10 sat amazed, dazed wondering at the things they saw and heard.

What Gwendolyn Brooks noticed among these youngsters was that they were keenly aware of the world around them. For the first time in her life she had seen important proponents of the Black revolution. She could feel and see the fervour among these new Blacks. She saw them as “tail-walkers” who sang, spoke, and read about Black nationhood,

revolution, without caring for convention. All this, writes Gwendolyn Brooks left her with a feeling of “agapeness”, “almost hysterical” and “blood-boiling surprise”.¹¹

The vigour and spirit of the young Blacks provided Brooks with a new stimulus. They seemed to her stronger and taller, ready to face the world head on, take on any challenge that came their way. Brooks was so amazed at what she saw and heard, that she sat back to watch the life and activity bursting around her, all the while wondering when had all this happened, and when had life passed her by.

In her Report from Part One writing of this unique experience she says, she felt like the cartoon she kept in her cartoon basket, the cartoon of a stout, dowager-hatted, dowager-furred, Helen Hokinson woman. She is on parade in the world. She is a sign-carrier in the wild world. Her sign says, “Will someone please tell me what is going on”. Brooks felt she was in some “inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland” not knowing what to make of the things happening around her. What attracted her was a sense of “live firmness, confident vigor, such determination to mold or carve something DEFINITE”¹² in the attitude of the young Blacks.

¹² Ibid.
The atmosphere at the Fisk Conference, especially when Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka) read the poem “Up against the wall, white man!” was very volatile and palpable. Jones so charged the audience that they all joined him in chanting “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah”. It was during this reading Gwendolyn Brooks writes that “a pensive (until that moment) white man of thirty or thirty three abruptly shot himself into the heavy air, screaming “Yeah! Yeah! Up against the wall, Brother! KILL’EM ALL! KILL’EM ALL!” 13

Gwendolyn Brooks was a witness to resurgence of the Black Art Movement where Black artists in every sphere of creative art – had turned into themselves, ‘cleaned their house’ and moulded their craft into what they wanted in to be, not to please some one, not to please any critic, Black or white, but to please themselves, to better their community. Their very walk and talk was proud and angry. They showed her that they were aware of the world around them and more specifically the part they intended to play therein.

Taking in everything that was happening around her, almost lapping it up with utmost curiosity and interest, Gwendolyn Brooks experienced a new Black man then.

He is different from any the world has Known. He's a tail-walker. Almost firm. By many of his own brothers he is not understood. And he is understood by no white. Not the wise white; not the Schooled white; not the Kind white.14

This new Black is understood only by those who have suffered and undergone the kind of humiliation that he has. They “spoke, sang, read poetry about Black power, Black revolution, Black nationhood with... unwavering self-righteous zeal and utter disdain for conventional decorum and thought”.15

This Conference proved a catalyst in Gwendolyn Brooks’s life. It was an eye-opener that changed her life completely. She could never reject this experience. She felt she had entered a new world and had gained a “queenhood in the new Black sun” and had “qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of a new consciousness”.16 This new consciousness, she was sure, would lead her to progress.

The change was not only mental and cultural, but also physical. Gwendolyn Brooks was filled with a new enthusiasm, new life, a new vitality. On her return to Chicago, Nora, her daughter, found her a changed personality. To her, Gwendolyn Brooks was a “bundle of

energy, walking 'three feet in the air' and looking for ways to express her new consciousness”. 17

At the heel of this experience followed another when she saw the preview of Oscar Brown Jr’s “Opportunity, Please Knock”, a show he had developed using the talent of the Blackstone Rangers, a teenage gang in Chicago. She set up a writing workshop for them with a deep yearning to do her bit for them. With the help of Walter Bradford, a teen organizer, she started the workshop at the First Presbyterian Church, the place of the Rangers’ headquarters. The experience she gathered from channelising these young minds into the creative field was intoxicating and fulfilling. Gwendolyn Brooks ‘learnt’ while she taught the Rangers.

The dedication of the Wall of Respect was another eye-opener for Gwendolyn Brooks. This brought her into a closer contact with the young Blacks. This wall on Forty-third and Langley was by the side of a tavern. The dedication was on 27 August 1967, organised by Artists Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBACC). The wall had murals of outstanding Blacks from Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglass, Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks to Bessie Smith, Marian Anderson and Le Roi Jones, whom the community wished to honour. Apart from portraits, The Wall had Le Roi

Jones's poem "S.O.S" a call to all Blacks to come in and help form a Black solidarity. It was a great day of celebration. There was a huge crowd on that day. It was something new and strange for Gwendolyn Brooks to see so many Black people out on the street, together, loving each other. Phil Cohran's group, the Artistic Heritage Ensemble, played music while the poets read. Gwendolyn Brooks read her poems too. She was ecstatic; the experience was new and thrilling.

Gwendolyn Brooks was taken by the poets to the bar at the Playboy Lounge, to read poetry there. One of the groups walking to the front of the tavern announced "Say folks, we are going to lay some poetry on you". Gwendolyn Brooks was very hesitant wondering how people enjoying drinks would respond to poetry forced on them. Here too, she was in for surprise. When they read, "people turned around on their bar stools, with their drinks behind them, and were listening. Then they applauded" writes Gwendolyn Brooks. To her surprise Gwendolyn Brooks enjoyed this totally new experience and the audience did too. This experience gave her inspiration to pen such poems that they would understand.

The experience at Fisk University etched itself deeply into her mind and she never ever approached art with the same frame of mind. It

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was not that before the Fisk University experience, Gwendolyn Brooks was not committed to the cause of her people. She was very concerned about her people. This is well documented in her Report from Part One that she thought herself as a “Negro” and not as a “Black”. She herself had had humiliating experiences of rejection because of the colour of her skin. She knew first hand the experiences of her people. She knew how they were bolted to trees and sliced, burned or shredded, always pushed back; she knew of the segregation they faced, forced to use separate toilets, schools, neighbourhoods. She knew how they always were denied rights, hounded, hooted at, or shunned, or patronizingly patted – after which the hand was surreptitiously wiped, to avoid unspeakable contamination. She knew that the American Social climate was trying to tell her that she was inferior. She held the secret belief that it is good to be Black.\footnote{Brooks, Report from Part One, Op. Cit., pp 83-84.}

What she came to realize after 1967 was that there were many Blacks who shared the same views but the difference was these Blacks were not hesitant in making their view public. The experience at Fisk University and her consequent association with the young Black writers made her more conscious of her people and in turn she appealed to them for understanding. She now no longer appealed to the white people.
And her hope for integration was shattered. She was quick to explain that "Blacks must be for Blacks and not against whites".\textsuperscript{20}

Gwendolyn Brooks experiences and association with these young Blacks altered her neatly-paced life with almost a jerk. They did not have to tell her anything, yet, through their walk, talk and mannerism she grew to admire them. She now began to look around herself eyes wide open. She saw these people make roads where none existed. They cared nothing about established standards, least of all about making mistakes. The first thing they did was to "blacken" English. Which Gwendolyn Brooks admitted was "though an exciting work, yet a challenging one".\textsuperscript{21}

Although an establish writer, Gwendolyn Brooks did not hesitate to learn from these young writers. She learnt and she grew. In an interview with Ida Lewis, she states thus:

You can’t stop growing – I’m growing now. I have certainly changed from where I was back in only 1967. I know there were injustices, and I wrote about them, but I didn’t know what was behind them. I didn’t know what kind of society we live in. I didn’t know it was all organized.\textsuperscript{22}


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

She now resolved that the poetry she would write would not “be Ezra Pound” kind of poetry, but poetry that would be exciting to the people in the taverns. And this she claims can any time definitely be “good” poetry.\(^{23}\) She had come to realize that white critics lacked the ability to understand and evaluate the Black poetry because the experiences were foreign to them.

Charged as she was with new intent, Gwendolyn Brooks burned with the desire to write about her people, to reach out to them and to speak to them. By now she had learnt that “true Black writers speak as Blacks, about Blacks, to Blacks”\(^ {24}\)

What she learnt from these young Blacks was they no longer resigned to their fate. They intended to assert their presence. They celebrated their existence, they rejoiced, they exalted. For Brooks these riots and revolutions organised by the Blacks were the right ingredients for a new creation. She realized that “these Black writers do not care if you call their products, Art or Peanuts. Artistic survival, appointment to Glory among the anointed elders, is neither their crevice nor creed. They give to the ghetto gut. Ghetto gut receives. Ghetto givers gone”\(^ {25}\)


\(^{25}\) Ibid.
The sixties and seventies gave birth to many such radical Black writers who daringly, innovatively went to bars and cabarets, to places where Blacks lived and played, and read their poetry to awaken Black consciousness and to prove that Black poetry belonged to Black people.

The new association with the militant Black writers resulted in her publishing *In the Mecca* (1968), which brought forth various responses. Many reviewers felt that Gwendolyn Brooks was now speaking with a new voice and in a new manner. Not only were some of the poems in this collection, revolutionary, they were addressed with messages exclusively for Blacks. Critics were quick to point this out and accused her poetry of having abandoned its lyrical simplicity for an angrier, more polemical public voice.

In an interview with George Stavros, she dismissed the claims that her poetry was no longer lyrical or simple. She however, stressed the fact that she had not “abandoned beauty or lyricism”, and she definitely did not consider herself a “polemical poet”. Rather she claimed:

> I am a Black Poet, and I write about what I see, what interests me, and I’m seeing new things. Many things that I’m seeing now I was blind to before... I just continue to write about what confronts me.\(^{26}\)

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Addressing the subject of wanting to reach out to Black people, Gwendolyn Brooks declared that she means to “write poems that will be non-compromising”, poems that will not only “touch” Black people but “poems that will be meaningful to them”.

Gwendolyn Brooks showed her commitment to Black sensibility through a number of other activities. She began helping publish young Black poets, sponsoring writing contests, helping Black publishing firms, providing needy Black writers with financial aid. She was giving away money as fast as she was making it, which became a major concern for her mother. But Gwendolyn Brooks was satisfied. She sent two young writers in the summer of 1969, at the cost of $4000, to Africa and was immensely thrilled that the trip had changed their lives.

Gwendolyn Brooks once again stressed her desire to reach common Black people in all walks of life, saying:

My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully ‘call’ all Black people: Black people in taverns, Black people in alleys, Black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach Black people in pulpits, Black people in mines, on farms, on thrones; not always to ‘teach’ – I shall wish often to entertain, to illuminine. My newish voice will not be an imitation of the contemporary young Black voice, which I do so admire,

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but an extending adaptation of today’s Gwendolyn Brooks’s voice.28

Black audiences were mixed in their reception of this new voice of Gwendolyn Brooks’s. For the very young, she was the prodigal daughter who had finally returned home. They felt that she had understood and begun to view things from their point of view. The young Black radicals were very impressed by Gwendolyn Brooks’s deep sense of humanity, her skillful craftsmanship and of her faithful presentation of Black life in America.

Gwendolyn Brooks with her newfound awareness and freedom slowly lost her concern about poetic forms and began to write mainly in free verse. She felt that it would be silly writing about trees and something like that when there were other burning issues connected to human life. She points out that, even when a Black poet may write about trees, he is looking at the tree from a totally different perspective, for to him a tree may not be just a tree, but a painful reminder of his ancestors lynched on the trees.

The Blacks may look at the same things as the whites do, but from different perspectives. The Black writer would very definitely see more because more has happened to him. “He has the American experience,

and he also has the Black experience, so he's very rich". The newer Gwendolyn Brooks was most comfortable when she wrote about what she knew, experienced and saw all around her, from the windows of her apartment, of life that passed by. The days when she took pains to follows the poetic models of Eliot and Pound were a thing of the past; free verse had come to stay.

The 1967 experience not only brought a new awareness to Gwendolyn Brooks but seemed to add new vigour and vitality, and give a new direction to her life and art. Apart from this, her outlook on and views about civil rights and race relations underwent a change.

There was yet another factor that strengthened this change in Gwendolyn Brooks. In 1971, she went to East Africa. There she felt she had come home. Though some native Africans were wary of her at first – 'yet another Afro-American', she was thrilled to see her people. She was enthralled with grace of their walk, their tall figures and especially the warmth of their greeting – the firm, strong hand shake, a symbol of love and support of one another.

Another major alteration in her life was her breaking off with her publishers Harper and Row, who had published all her works since 1945. The strength of her commitment to Blackness and its cause was witnessed

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when she moved to Detroit’s Broadside Press under the leadership of Dudley Randall. This move, she explained was for a poet to identify with her people. For, “Art”, she felt, “should be used for liberation not decoration”.

Where once Gwendolyn Brooks had been shy and withdrawn in public, her active participation in the Black Arts Movement and the newly reawakened Black pride, brought not only a freshness to her work, but one could clearly note the blossoming of her personality too. D.H. Melhem recalls her entering the classroom of the city college of New York where she was appointed Distinguished Professor in Arts, “alert, elegant, slim, her lustrous skin a deep brown, expressive eyes and hands like those in a painting by El Greco, a woman charged with enormous vitality”. She now seemed warm and self-assured.

Gwendolyn Brooks was not the same person that she was before the late 1960’s. She says, “It frightens me to realize that, if I had died before the age of fifty, I would have died a ‘Negro’ fraction”. Gwendolyn Brooks was aware of her race and her culture from the beginning. But the power which comes from the awareness of one’s own

cultural strength and abundant capacity to empathise with and care for and love one’s brother and sister was reaffirmed and strengthened, was redoubled with her alliance with the new Blacks.

An indepth study of Gwendolyn Brooks shows that her newer expression of Black solidarity was but a natural organic progression. The newer Gwendolyn Brooks of the later 60’s was a poet who had gained inspiration from the young Black which provided her with a further extension of her self and thought.

Now that Gwendolyn Brooks was totally committed to the cause of her race and in bringing about a sense of awareness among all Black people, she watched with bewilderment and utter confusion young Black writers going back to big white publishing firms. She was also greatly worried over the rapidly ebbing spirit of solidarity that rode so high earlier. All around her she saw Black women once more going back to straighten their hair. To Gwendolyn Brooks this “seemed a deliberate self slap in the face. They all look ... UN-NATURAL to me” 33 she said in the interview will Hull and Gallagher.

Whatever steps others took, though many Blacks did a lot of back sliding, Gwendolyn Brooks remained dedicated to the Black cause. Her stand was “I believe that Blacks should care for each other, nourish each

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other and communicate with each other". So ingrained was this sense of loyalty to the Black solidarity that she did not have to make a conscious effort to make her poetry Black. She says that she does not sit down and say, "I am now going to write a poem by, about and to Blacks." I am myself and I am consumed with the passion of ideas that I came to believe in in the late 1960's. They are now built into myself. I am THAT — so anything that I write is going to issue from a concern with and interest in Blackness and its progress.

At an interview in 1994 with B. Denise Hawkins, Brooks was asked to substantiate the view held by literary critics who felt that when Black poets do not confine writing about Black experience they cannot be categorized as "legitimate" Black poets. Gwendolyn Brooks's answer though simple, speaks volumes. She said:

A Black poet can only write from the Black experience. What else can they write from? They are Black. Whatever they write, whether it's exclusively about the beauty of the flowers or horrors of war or the deliciousness of a piece of chocolate cake, it's still an expression by a Black ... and if they try to avoid putting any Blackness in there, it also says something.

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35 Ibid.

Gwendolyn Brooks was convinced that a Black writer could never escape from Black experience; he sees things and feels things differently from a white writer. The Black experience is inborn in him and he can never be rid of it. If he tries to rid himself of this Black experience it only shows the commitment to and intensity of his racial pride.

Elaborating on this Black experience, Gwendolyn Brooks threw more light on it during an interview with Hull and Gallagher. She quotes from an experience she had had with her husband on her visit to Ghana. Seeing a boy running, Gwendolyn Brooks’s husband commented that if he were to write a poem on that boy it would be about a happy boy running or a running happy boy, and he would not see him as a Black boy but basically as a youth. But to Gwendolyn Brooks it was a totally different concept. For her it’s not just a “celebration of blissful youth” but it had to go much deeper especially if she saw that it was a Black boy. What one would have to consider then was where was this Black boy running, whether in Ghana or in Chicago Southside. Looking at the running boy she is reminded of a friend of her daughter’s in high school, a brilliant boy with a lot of promise. This boy when he was running down the alley with a friend of his, just running, a policeman had called out “Halt!” and the boy before he could even think of stopping or “slow up his steps”, was shot. Gwendolyn Brooks points out that this happens
all the time in Chicago. For her a running boy would mean more than a happy youth. The memory of that boy, "that promise in a little crumpled heap"\textsuperscript{37} would definitely invade her poem. She cannot be divorced from her Black experience.

With this background study as a foundation, an attempt is being made to map the changes in Gwendolyn Brooks’s stance. The above elucidation of her life experiences will facilitate to demarcate the differences in the poems written under two distinct phases.

Before Gwendolyn Brooks donned the mantle of a militant poet, the earlier period of her poetic career can be labeled as the integrationist period or the academic period. The works of this period published by Harper and Row include: \textit{A Street in Bronzeville} (1945); \textit{Annie Allen} (1949) and \textit{The Bean Eaters} (1960). The poems in these works highlight the Black people caught in the strife of life on one hand and the tension, mostly psychological, of living in America on the other.

Brooks’s first collection, \textit{A Street in Bronzeville} contains a series of vignettes of Black life. “Bronzeville”, Gwendolyn Brooks admits in her \textit{Report from Part One}, was a name “invented by Chicago Defender. Long long ago to refer to the then Black area”,\textsuperscript{38} and not her own coinage. \textit{A}


Street in Bronzeville, contains such poems as the “Negro Hero”; “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith”; “Hattie Scott”; “Queen of the Blues”; “Ballad of Pearl May Lee”.

This collection of poems reflects how Gwendolyn Brooks was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance writers and their themes. It also shows her experiment with reading of modern poets and her use of white forms like ballad and sonnet combined with Black form like the blues. It contains as most critics point out and which Houston Baker suggests, as having “a white style and Black content”.39

In this collection, one can view the residents of Bronzeville from the old to the young, the middle-aged, the married and definitely the poor. It appears that, in Bronzeville there is no hope for dreams which gets stifled by the pressing necessities of life.

But could a dream send up through onion fumes

Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes

And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,

Flutter or sing an aria down these rooms.40


"The Mother" is a most controversial poem, a dramatic monologue on abortion, followed by "the Madam", of "The School of Beauty", who has died and now lies in her grave "Out at Lincoln", beneath the grandest movement in the cemetery, buried in fine "right red". Apart from these poems there are many other interesting ones that talk of Black people in different aspects trying to get on with life despite the many miseries that surround and engulf them.

The second section has one of Brooks's most anthologized poem "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" a long poem of one hundred and fifty-nine lines. It gives the picture of a dandy, a Ladies' man, his closet, toiletries and his desire to have fun. The other poems "Negro Hero" tells of Dorie Miller, his heroic act in the World War II; "Hattie Scott", "Queen of the Blues" and the "Ballad of Pearl May Lee", are individual portraits of Blacks who inhabit Bronzeville. The third section is a sonnet sequence, of twelve sonnets, on war. This collection of poem talks about Blacks in the ghetto and tells about their personal misery. They are so involved in making ends meet that they are oblivious to or have no time to dwell, as Hansell points out, "on their relationship to the larger society or even their immediate community".41 Gwendolyn Brooks with very deft strokes paints their lives and their dreams, if they dared to have any, as

having to fight for survival amidst "onion fumes" and "yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall...".

Despite the fact Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about Blacks in the ghetto, they were not written for them though they were written about them. The language and style she used was beyond the comprehension of those ordinary Blacks for whom art was but a luxury. Paul Engle's review emphasizes this written in the Sunday edition of the Chicago Tribune, Aug. 26, 1945. He writes:

... Miss Brooks is the first Negro poet to write wholly out of a deep, imaginative talent, without relying on the fact of color to draw sympathy and interest. Her poems would be finely lyrical and delightfully witty without the fact of race ever being mentioned. This is a remarkable thing and must be praised.

For Engle, her poetry was not "Negro Poetry" any more than Frost's was "White Poetry". He called them "genuine poems by a civilized American Citizen".\(^{42}\) So watered down was the essence of Blackness in her poetry that Gwendolyn Brooks could almost pass off for a white writer.

This collection was well received and established Gwendolyn Brooks's reputation as a poet worthy of notice. It showed her technical skills combined with social awareness and commitment. The poems from this collection bring out the integrationist attitude of Gwendolyn Brooks.

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The next volume to appear was *Annie Allen* (1949) which bagged the Pulitzer Prize in 1950. This poem is about a young Black woman, her dreams, her transition to adulthood and coming face to face with reality. The book is divided into three parts, where the first part contains eleven poems, “Notes from Childhood and Girlhood”; “The Anniad” comprised of forty-three stanzas and three “Appendix” poems, the third section has fifteen poems under the title “The Womanhood”. The reader can get a picture of Annie’s birth, her practical yet didactic mother, her parents and also her reactions to racism, death and killing. The next section, “The Anniad” tells of Annie’s adult life.

A reading of *Annie Allen* leaves a reader wondering whether a white woman would suffer the same fate as Black Annie. It must be noted that although these are illustrative poems, there is definitely an underlying message – a message which brings home the sad state of inequal social justice.

The poem chalks out Annie’s move from happiness to misery. The opening lines of the poem describe her thus:

Think of sweet and chocolate,
Left to folly or to fate,
Whom the higher gods forgot,
Whom the lower gods berate;
Physical and underfed
Fancying on the featherbed
What was never and is not.

One gets a glimpse of Annie's innocence in these lines. When much later her man has rejected her for a "slit-eyed gypsy", Annie is described:

Think of sweet and chocolate
Minus passing-magistrate,
Minus passing-lofty light,
Minus passing-stars for night,

Mirages, all things suave and bright.

When at last she has lost her man, this time to death, she is left with her "profession" and her memories:

Think of tweaked and twenty-four,
Fuchsias gone or gripped or gray,
All hay-colored that was green,
Soft aesthetic looted, lean,
Crouching low, behind a screen,
Pock-marked, eye-light, and the sore
Eaglets of old pride and prey.
... ... ... ... ...

Think of almost thoroughly
Derelict and dim and done.
Stroking swallows from the sweat
Fingering faint violet.
Hugging old and Sunday sun.
Kissing in her kitchenette
The minutes of memory. 43

The third section “The Womanhood” contains “The Children of the Poor” sequence. Here, we get to see the humane side of Gwendolyn Brooks where the maternal concern can be discerned in these poems on children of the war, the orphans of the war. The poem themselves are from the point of view of a mother, a mother who is poor and left alone to bring up her children.

The last poem “Men of Careful Turns, Haters of Forks in the Road”, begins thus:

Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road,
The strain at the eye, that puzzlement, that awe
Grant me that I am human, that I hurt.
That I cry.

The plea in the poem is for integration, an appeal to the whites, for the Blacks to be recognized and viewed as humans.

Evaluating Gwendolyn Brooks as a poet, Don L. Lee writes that her work “touched some level on the problem of Blacks in America”\(^4\) but it was not deep enough. With *Annie Allen* bringing the Pulitzer Prize for Gwendolyn Brooks, it made her not just a Black poet, but everybody’s poet. The Blacks now looked up to her for she now had the seal of approval by whites. In the eyes of the whites, she was as Don Lee points out, “a poet who happens to be Black” which translates to “we can’t completely forget her “Negroness”, so let us make it secondary”\(^5\). She was now the American poet who happened to be a Negro. Her popularity with *Annie Allen* grew to great heights, but it came with a price of not being able to communicate to her own people. *Annie Allen* showed the readers how best Brooks could make language work for her.

Following *Annie Allen* was Brooks’s autobiographical novel *Maud Martha*, (1953). This novel tells of a Black woman who suffers because of the colour of her skin.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s “Bronzeville Boys and Girls”, was published in 1956, a poetry book for children. It contains thirty four poems and is

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\(^5\) Ibid.
dedicated to her children - Henry and Nora. This book is peopled by lovely children. In this we see an attempt to show that the childhood of the blacks is as akin to the childhood of the whites.

*The Bean Eaters* published in 1960, was Brooks's next major work. The poems chronicle her growing awareness of the events happening all around her, like the lynching in Mississippi, school integration in Little Rock; housing integration and the rising tempo of the Civil Rights Movement. In this collection, not only is Brooks's more aware of the political activity, but also an awareness of freedom when it comes to the form is noticeable. There is a shift from the sonnet to the ballad. Structurally, also there is no sequence. The poems are on various topics, many of which have distinct political colouring. There are poems that tell about class consciousness, racism and black-and-tan motif and show Gwendolyn Brooks's awareness and concern for the Blacks.

The next section highlights the Black-white conflict. The poems include "The Lovers of the Poor"; "A Man of the Middle Class"; "The Ghost at the Quincy Club"; "Leftist Orator in Washington Park Pleasantly Punishes the Gropers" and "Bronzeville Man with Belt in the Back". The remaining poems are on women. Brooks's examines the black-and-tan dilemma in "Jessie Mitchell's Mother". Other poems include "In
Immanuel's Nightmare, Another Coming of Christ”, a dramatic monologue, a religious antiwar poem.

The next collection to be published in 1963 was *Selected Poems*. They are poems collected from previous volumes with some very important new poems like “Riders to the Blood-red Wrath”, her tribute to the Freedom Riders, and as Brooks notes in her stanza-by-stanza commentary to “their fellows the sit-ins, the wade-ins, read-ins, pray-ins, vote-ins, and all related struggle for what is reliably right”. The Freedom Riders came after the 1960’s movements to fight for integration and civil rights. This poem brings out Gwendolyn Brooks’s growing racial pride.

In the *Selected Poems*, one can witness the changes occurring in Brooks’s thought and style. She was now aware of all the political activities happening around her. One can gauge the transformation from being a Negro poet to a Black one slowly, yet surely. This awareness is portrayed in her “Riders to the Blood-red Wrath”. According to D.H. Melhem, the “title invokes the vision of St. John the Divine, the Second Coming in which the Lord, “Faithful and True”, is clothed with “a vesture

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dipped in blood" (Rev. 19:11-13), seated upon a white horse, “in righteousness he doth judge and make war”.

The poem according to Harry B. Shaw “depicts a Black man commenting on his present state of dilemma and paradox between restraint and militant and contemplating the glory of rebirth”. It is a poem in twelve stanzas where she uses diction that brings forth the theme of necessary struggle. The poem tells of the Black man’s tolerance and endurance and how the white man has been blind, till now, to his suffering.

The fourth section shows the Black man speak with pride about his ability to endure and how this has escaped the blind eyes and deaf ears of the white man:

They do not see how deftly I endure.

Deep down the whirlwind of good rage I store

Commemorations in an utter thrall.

The Black man says, he is proud of his racial memories of Black experiences. The next stanza tells of his freedom he enjoyed in Africa, the experiences of slave trade, the horror of being thrown like “Black Pudding” into the ship’s hold; of the slavery and its hardships.


Despite all this, the memories of the past pains have helped him improve his own perspectives and sensitivities. He says:

But my detention and my massive stain,
And my distortion and my calvary
I grind into a little light lorgnette
Most sly: to read man’s inhumanity,
And I remark my Matter is not all.
Man chopped in China, in India indented.
From Israel what’s Arab is resented
Europe candies custody and war.

The concluding line while referring to survival suggests that “militant struggle may be necessary to bring it about”.49

And I ride ride I ride on to the end-
Where glowers my continuing Calvary.
I,
My fellows, and those canny consorts of
Our spread hands in this contretemps – for – love
Ride into wrath, wraith and menagerie

To fail, to flourish, to wither or to win.

We lurch, distribute, we extend, begin.50

The rider continues to restrain himself, until he moves on to “wrath, wraith and menagerie”. Though strong in religious faith, Brooks knew that at times things had to be achieved through struggle and violence.

“A Catch of Shy Fish”, is a group of eight poems, where fish denotes Black people who are powerless. They are not easily understood, and because of their innocence are preys to the crafty fishermen of the world. Except for one poem on Big Bessie, all the other people in this group, according to Melhem, are “small, like most of their poems. More acquainted with losses than with gains, they typify humanity”.51 These poems addressed to the youths are considered to be some of her most remarkable works. Selected Poems, with its combination of earlier poems and new poems anticipates the “change” that was to be the hallmark of Brooks’s poetry.

These collection of poems mark the first phase of Brooks’s poetic career. We see Gwendolyn Brooks as a poet who shows her love for lyricism and language. We see her presenting ever so sensitively the ordinary Black men and women who, inspite of their poverty and life in a


racist society, try to live their life with dignity. Despite deep concern for her people, the earlier poems have no overt statements regarding social injustice. In fact many of her poems don't give any hint regarding her race. In sonnet sequence of "Children of the Poor", there is no indication to her race whatsoever. Though her treatment of her people is most sympathetic and compassionate, it fails to delve deep into their hidden selves or psyche. Little wonder then as to her being labeled as a poet with "universal import".

Inspite of the gradual change in attitude and tone these collections of poems are included in the first phase. This inclusion is justified because militant attitude of Gwendolyn Brooks is not fully expressed in her poems.

The 1967 Fisk University experience saw a completely changed Gwendolyn Brooks who now viewed her world, her art and her role as a poet in an entirely new light. The new young Black writers filled with a hope for a better America for Blacks gave her much matter and inspiration. It was from them that she saw and learnt of the new Black man who was a "tall-walker". From them she gleaned energy vitality and new art, made it her own, and presented her vision to the world. She was now very confident of herself and new stand saying, "today I am
conscious of the fact that — my people are Black people; it is to them that I appeal for understanding”.

The main intention of these Black writers was, as Norris B. Clark puts it, “to establish a positive Black identity and to reorder racial consciousness through serious exploration and rediscovery of the Black community’s unique cultural heritage: its own particular beauty and its rich and varied oral tradition, its private joys and agonies, as well as its communal “trial and tribulations”. Their main desire was not to create art that is peculiarly Black, instead they wanted, that art which was “particularly related to an existence in a multi-colored world and exhorts others to share in the exhalations of the beauty of Blackness”.

Under the influence of the Black artists, Brooks’s began to write such poems that were meaningful to Black people, poems that they could bond with. Poems that were not only artistic but also told of the Black life in all its myriad forms — the sad, the glad, the suffering, pain, agony, rejection and also its joys. Her poetry underwent a metamorphosis where her focus shifted from a “private, internal and exclusive assessment ... to

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54 Ibid.
a communal, external and inclusive assessment of the Black communal experience".\textsuperscript{55}

In the first phase of her career, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poetry for self-satisfaction. It was a vent to her creative energy. But her growing awareness brought in by Black social responsibility saw a movement from personal satisfaction to social obligation. This movement is the crux of her growth and development.

Her next collection, \textit{In the Mecca}, is a truly transitional work where one can witness the drastic change in Gwendolyn Brooks's theme and style. In fact, one can consider \textit{In the Mecca} the bridge between the two phases in her poetic style and content. Brooks now shifted from the "ego-centric" to "ethno-centric", concerned more with her people and their place in the society. A sense of urgency, commitment and need to do "something" gripped her being and this can be clearly discerned in the period following \textit{In the Mecca}.

Earlier, much inspired by the Harlem Renaissance poets like Paul Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poems that followed them both in style and theme. She consciously followed, what Johnson said about Black art it must raise "above mere race" and to reach "the universal in truth and

beauty". Now she wrote poems which speaks of Black people but aimed more towards telling universal truths.

With the publication of *In the Mecca* (1968), Gwendolyn Brooks shifted her focus in almost the opposite direction. The integrationist spirit that marked her earlier work was absent, now militant spirit had come to stay. Her next works show the progress of her awareness of the Black Arts Movement and the assertiveness of the Blacks towards civil rights. There was no longer the desire to "keep on appealing to the whites to help", as was her creed earlier. Now with a new found confidence, she believed in self help or rather in picking up arms to help her people. She now championed the cause of Blacks in search for a positive identity.

Gwendolyn Brooks's association with the Black Arts Movement, was now marked with its complete absence themes on intraracial conflict, that was one of her most favoured themes in her earlier works. She felt that there was no use for such themes now because all Blacks were united under one common cause. Instead, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote on themes like racial discrimination, poverty, and struggle for betterment, with its ensuing frustration, pain and despair.

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What Gwendolyn Brooks strongly believed in was that “the poet, first and foremost an individual with a personal vision, is also a member of society. What affects society affects a poet”. Observing the rapid changes in the Black society all around her, Brooks took on her responsibility of a poet with all earnestness. As she was one of the foremost spokesperson of her race, she had not just responsibility but accountability too. She now picked up her pen with vengeance. Her poetry did not any longer contain elements that tried to put racial themes and oppression in a mild easy to swallow doses. The whites had to be told in no uncertain terms how they had been and were treating Black people. The Blacks were now fully aware of themselves and were no longer ready to take things lying down. The days of passive submission were over; the days of action had arrived.

*In the Mecca* is an account of black people living in this overcrowded apartment. The people of this building are poverty stricken, yet have developed means of making their miserable lives more bearable. The threads of the poem are woven around Mrs. Sallie, a mother of nine children, who works as a domestic and who on her return home, from church, discovers her little girl missing. The search for Pepita takes Mrs. Sallie through the whole of the Mecca, visiting each apartment.

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Brooks, with the help of this story line, is able to trace the tenants of each apartment, their lives, and their miseries and through them is able to “address a broad range of contemporary and philosophical subjects”.

There is Alfred, whom Brooks uses as “a chorus does in the tragedy by foreshadowing, summarizing and interpreting the action as the characters pursue their separate wants and needs”. It is through him that the poem gets a unity. It’s also through Alfred that Brooks gives the readers a glimpse of Africa.

Alfred can tell of

Poet, and muller, and president of Senegal, who

in voice and body.

loves sun,

listens

to the rich pound in and beneath the black feet of

Africa.

Through Alfred, Brooks points out what the Black Americans are missing of the rich heritage that Africa has to offer. Harry B. Shaw points


out that Alfred expresses “that he “might have been an architect” or “a poet-king” like Leopold Sedar Senghor, coiner of the term “negritude””.  

In the next section titled “After Mecca” Brooks has eight poems. The poems that follow explore the spirit of revolution of the 60’s and the 70’s. Gwendolyn Brooks is not the old Gwendolyn Brooks, speaking to people in general. Rather this new Gwendolyn Brooks is one who intends to speak to Blacks about Blacks. She wrote on two men who loomed large over the Black movement, Medgar Evers and Malcom X.

The second poem is on Malcolm X, Black Muslim leader who was assassinated. Gwendolyn Brooks writes thus:

Original.
Ragged-round.
Rich-robust.

He had hawk-man’s eyes.

We gasped. We saw the maleness.
The maleness raking out and making guttural the air.
and pushing us to walls.

He opened us –

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Who was a key,

Who was a man.\textsuperscript{63}

The militant attitude in Brooks is easily detected in these lines where she shows an affinity to the Black militant heroes, here was a call for Blacks to be inspired by these slain leaders and to act.

The next two poems are “The Chicago Picasso”, on the unveiling of the steel sculpture at the civic centre; and “The Wall”, which evokes “The Wall of Respect” and eulogizes it. The wall, part of a slum building had murals with Black heroes from contemporary life and the past pictured there that communicated Black dignity. Many Blacks gathered there whom Brooks describes as “black furnaces”.

On Forty-third and Langley

black furnaces resent ancient

legislatures

of poly and scruple and practical gelatin

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

All worship the wall.\textsuperscript{64}

Brooks herself appears as one of the group. She writes:


I mount the rattling wood. Walter [Bradford]

Says, “She is good”. Says, “She
our Sister is”. In front of me

hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory

Yield me hot trust, their yea and their Announcement

that they are ready to rile the high flung ground.

We see Brooks drawing sustenance from the young Black militant artists and contributing to them too. When George Stavros referring to these two poems said that they were almost “apocalyptic or prophetic”, Gwendolyn Brooks declining the role claimed that “They are little addresses to Black people, that’s all”. 65 Declining the role of a prophet she said that she meant to write such poems that would be meaningful to Blacks in general.

“After the Mecca” comes to an end with the first and second “Sermon[s] on the Warpland”. This once again is a call from Brooks to all Black people. The word “warpland” is interpreted by Harry B. Shaw as “Brooks is concerned not only with the use of Christianity as a symbol of Black rebirth but also with the similar use of the concept of war… “warpland” as also meaning “planned war”.66 “The poem like Jesus’


sermons are for the well-being of the people, both are antimaterialistic”, says Melhem.67 “The Sermon on the Warland” has an epigraph from Ron Karenga, Black Nationalist Organizer:

The fact that we are Black

is our ultimate reality.

The need of the hour was for the Blacks to work together to achieve their freedom. The call is for the Black people to be prepared. After calling for readiness, the poem, the sermon ends:

Build now your Church, my brothers, sisters. Build
never with brick nor Corten nor with granite.
Build with lilthe love. With love like lion-eyes.
With love like morningrise.
With love like black, our black –
luminously indiscreet;
complete; continuous.68

Brooks believes and insists that things can be built; wars can be won only if the Blacks are united. Very often, Gwendolyn Brooks stresses on the need for unity among Black.

"The Second Sermon on the Warpland", is in four sections and addresses the youths. It's a spiritual call for battle. The Black man is advised to carry on despite the fear of death. He is reminded that his path is full of troubles and struggles yet, he has to face the whirlwind and is told to have his "blooming in the noise of the whirlwind".

The sermons are first in the series of poems that Brooks calls "Preachments" that adapt the chanted sermon as an art form. Brooks now has, "the prophetic voice and her poem evokes the Bible in its figurative language",^69 points out D.H. Melhem.

Don L. Lee writing of the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks before 1967 says that she is no doubt a Black poet but "a Black poet ... still actively searching for her own definition of Blackness."^70 Gwendolyn Brooks herself was the first to admit and describe her poetry of that period as "work that was conditioned to the times and people".^71

Since then, Gwendolyn Brooks has surely come a long way. This change in Gwendolyn Brooks is most graphically described by Don Lee "her post 1967 poetry is fat-less. Her new work resembles a man getting off meat, turning to a vegetarian diet. What one immediately notices that

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^71 Ibid.
all the excess weight is quickly lost. Her work becomes extremely streamlined and to the point.”72

*In the Mecca,* was the last book published by Harper and Row. From then on, Gwendolyn Brooks turned to Black press, the Broadside Press of Dudley Randall, thereby reinforcing her commitment to the Black Arts Movement through action.

The next book published in 1969, now by Broadside Press was *Riot.* The riots following the murder of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee, gave Brooks not only the title for her collection but also material. *Riot* is described in the contents as “A Poem in Three Parts”. The three parts are *Riot,* “The Third Sermon on the Warpland” and “An Aspect of Love”.

The first section *Riot* has an epigraph from Dr. King who said “A riot is the language of the unheard”. The picture of the riot is presented through the eyes of an upper-class white man John Cabot. Through him we realize the thoughts a white man has regarding the Black man. Riots, we come to understand, are the Black man’s only means of communicating his outrage. John Cabot is rich and from the upper class and is therefore deaf to the cries of the Blacks. Caught in the riot, he

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whispered a prayer “Don’t let it touch me! the Blackness! Lord!” But he
is maligned and mocked by the rioters and they cried

Cabot! John! you are a desperate man

and the desperate die expensively today.

When John Cabot dies among

the smoke and the fire and broken glass

and blood, he calls out

Lord!

Forgive these niggus that know not what they do.73

The language that the rioters speak is very different from the one
spoken by John Cabot. Malcolm X commenting on the white man not
being able to understand the Black man’s language said “The language
that you and I have been speaking to this man in the past hasn’t reached
him. ... Let’s learn his language. If his language is with a shotgun, get a
shotgun”.74

As Martin Luther King pointed out riots were at times necessary
for the voice of the unheard to be heard. Now the time had come for


74 Malcom X Speak, “with Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer”, (New York: Grove Press. Inc.,
repayment and retribution of the Black man. One can see Brooks using the language of the Bible to put forth her ideas.

"The Third Sermon on Warland" once again presents riots in the ghetto. There is the "Black philosopher" who speaks of heritage of slavery. The rioters loot, burn and there are deaths. Traditional standards are routed. As Harry Shaw points out, there is inverted interpretation of a quotation by a white philosopher which says "It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness".75

The Black philosopher tells them:

I tell you, exhaustive, black integrity

would assure a blackless America........

By now even the whites have realized that they have for too long turned deaf ears to the cries of the Blacks, for now the terrible noise of the whirlwind has been heard by them and the white man now says:

It's time

It's time to help

These people.

Unlike the “phoenix, the Black man rises up reborn and renewed from the ashes of a self consuming fire”. The words of the Black philosopher summaries the sermon:

There they came to life and exulted,
the hurt mute
Then it was over.

The dust, as they say, settled

The poems in *Riot*, Dr. William H. Hansell says “seems express Brooks’s sense that violence against a system which tolerates injustice while comfortably preoccupied with materialistic abundance is inevitable”. It is he maintains, “the necessary step towards informing white America that the old ways must end. ..... The violence is intended not to destroy the system but to restore it or bring it closer to the realization of its ideals”.

For Brooks a militant response was the last resort, but she knew and believed that out of these militant activity, despite destruction, there was always rebirth.

The next collection published in 1970 was *Family Pictures*. There are eight poems in this collection and as indicated by the title, these are poems on family life and values.

The poem “Young Heroes” is the portrait of three men and their contribution to the Black Arts Movement. Of them, the first is addressed “To Keorapetse Kgotsiile” (Willie), a South African poet. The second is addressed “To Don at Salaam” and the third to “Walter Bradford”, a youth worker among the Blackstone Rangers. The other heroes are “Young Africans”

of the furious

who take Today and jerk it out of joint

have made new underpinnings and a Head.79

Brooks continues her militant stand:

If there are flowers, flowers

must come out to the road. Rowdy! –

knowing where wheels and people are,

knowing where whips and screams are,

knowing where deaths are, where the kind kills are.80


80 Ibid.
The next poem "Paul Robeson" is in honour of the bass-baritone who died after a fruitful career in 1976. He had to face extreme professional hardships. Brooks sees him as a hero. His message is of Black unity is:

Warning, in music-words
devote and large,
that we are each other's
harvest:
we are each other's
business:
we are each other's
magnitude and bond.81

The volume ends with "Speech to the Young./ Speech to the Progress-Toward", which stresses upon character that is defined by struggle.

Brooks's emphasises on unity within the community, and makes it clear that an offensive stance without mutual trust and understanding would lead no where. Brooks was very happy to see a sense of brotherhood and love that was growing within the Black community. It is

from this inner strength that the Blacks must draw from and survive as they have done in the past. As Melhem points out, *Family Pictures* "articulates Black consciousness as a family unit".82 *Riot* and *Family Pictures* contain poems that highlight the general mood of the Civil Rights Movement.

In 1971, Brooks was commissioned by the Ebony magazine to document the contemporary Black life in Montgomery, Alabama. The scene of the bus boycott started in 1955-56, with Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat in the bus for a white. Much had happened since the time Martin Luther King Jr. led this town in the boycott which lasted the whole year.

The work of 677 lines which Brooks calls verse-journalism, is accompanied with photographs by Moneta Sleet Jr., a prominent Black photographer. As Melhem points out, after the Vietnam, "the nation's weariness with politics, coupled with satisfaction over modest gains in civil rights, would result in a concentration upon such daily exigencies as jobs.... The national mood was changing and would register in Black life."83 Using biblical imagery and allusions, Brooks begins with her first person account of her impressions of this town.


The first thing I saw at court square corner
was black men, lifting that bale...

Brooks went there with lot of expectation but she is disappointed:

I came expecting
the strong young –
up of head, severe,
not drowsy, not in-bitten, not
outwitted by the wiles of history.

Brooks makes use of irony too:

My work: to cite in semi-song the
meaning of confederacy’s cradle.
Well, it means to be rocking gently, rocking gently!
In Montgomery is no Race Problem.
There is the white decision, the white and pleasant
Vow
that the white foot shall not release the black neck.

Using Biblical references, she continues to tell of the Black experiences:

Blackness is what stood up
and clawed the oppressive ceiling
till, behold, there was light,
and clawed the oppressive walls,
till, behold, there was room to extend!
Blackness remembered the Bible.
It was Blackness that re-said:
How forcible are right words!
and: set thine house in order;
and: They have sown the wind, and they shall reap
the whirlwind;
and: A new commandment I give unto you, That ye
love one another;
and: weeping may endure for a night, but joy
cometh in the morning.
And Blackness stretched forth the rough hand
to the white hand,
and cherished it into the clearing.
This Blackness forgave what it would not forget:
And marched on remarkable feet. 84

The upbringing of Brooks included meticulous church-going.
Brooks now no longer was as religious. But the childhood memories
continued to surface in her poems as beautiful references to the Bible.

The lines “Blackness forgave what it would not forget”, implies the forgiveness in the Blacks, the hands of friendship ready to extend. Her prophetic voice is grand and heroic. She was by now what she had claimed for herself on the book jacket of *In the Mecca*, “I was to be a Watchful Eye; a Tuned Ear; a Super-Reporter”. In “In Montgomery” she had as Melhem points out succeeded in becoming a “Watchful Eye, a Tuned Ear and a Super-Reporter and playing the role of a quasi-divine reportage”. 85

*Beckonings*, was published in 1975, following the death of her brother Raymond, she dedicated the book to him. Here too, Brooks continues to be the prophetic voice, especially in the last poem “Boys, Black”, a preachment.

Brooks was committed to the Black cause. She was however shocked at the new turn the events were taking. She looked with wonder at Black women beginning to straighten their hair once more. Gwendolyn Brooks had given up hair straightening and gone natural; this looked very unnatural to her. Another thing that concerned Brooks was young Black writers moving from Black publishers to bigger white firms, the suspension of Broadside press, and the Black disunity. Despairing over this, Brooks said “That nice togetherness that was developing, a lot

of us are losing. Once again we’re emphasizing the individual loving self above the group".86

Brooks knew that Blacks would not go all the way back to the “utter slavery” mentality,87 yet out of pride for her race and to keep that pride burning she published “Premier For Blacks” in 1980, which contains three preachments for Blacks. The first poem begins:

Blackness
is a title
is a preoccupation,
is a commitment Blacks are to comprehend -
and in which you are
to perceive your Glory.

The poem ends with a call for all the defecting Blacks to come back and reaffirm Black unity:

ALL of you –
you proper Blacks,
you half – Blacks
you wish – I – weren’t Blacks.


Niggeroes and Niggereness.

You.

The next poem is “To Those of My Sisters who kept Their Naturals” with the subtitle: “Never to look a hot comb in the teeth”. The poems celebrate the attractive qualities of Black womanhood, praises the women for not hankering after whiteness and also celebrate hair as:

The natural Respect of self and seal!

Sisters!

Your hair is celebration in the world.

The last poem “Requiem Before Revival”, upbraids the Blacks for back tracking, yet the poem has hope for the future when the Blacks will “awaken” for even the blighted ones possess a “yearning towards Black validation”. It also contains an essay addressed to the Blacks.

The next anthology To Disembark brings together her works from earlier period, Riot, Family Pictures, Beckonings, combined with a new set of poems under the title To the Diaspora with many important revisions.
In the poem “To the Diaspora” Brooks takes on the role of a “nurturer” and a “prophet”. The speaker of the poem tells a friend about the “achievement of Africa within the self”.

In 1986 she published “The Near-Johannesburg Boy and other Poems” following the upheavals in South Africa. The title poem, a dramatic monologue, is about a little boy who is not allowed within the city of Johannesburg because of apartheid.

In “Early Death” and “To the Young Who want to Die”, Brooks dons the maternal mantle, encouraging and urging the youth to look forward to tomorrow. The other poems include on two Black heroes “Whitney Young”, a civil right leader and president of Urban League, who drowned in 1971 and “The Good Man”, on Haki Madhubuthi, whom Brooks looked on as her “spiritual son”.

Brooks’s next work Winnie, on Winnie Mandela, portrays Winnie as a leader of Blacks. This poem with 377 lines was published in 1988. Her next work was “Gottschalk and the Grande Tarantelle”, which expresses Black rage that was evident in Riot. But Gwendolyn Brooks is sure that “there will be betterment when (again) Blacks stop up-staging each other, shrinking away from each other, selling each other”.  

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Gwendolyn Brooks was like a social barometer chronicling the change that occurred in the society around her. One can never picture her as the isolated, withdrawn genius far removed from society living on an isolated island or somewhere far away high in an “ivory tower”. This can be witnessed in her most recent book of poetry “Children Coming Home” published in 1991. She records contemporary topics like incest, problems in interracial families and drugs.

Change has been the key word and hallmark of Brooks’s poetry. The change in her style and subject matter was witnessed in the second phase of her poetic career starting from the late 1960’s. The change is from covert protest to overt protest, to writing about Black race, Black people, Black colour, Black themes and everything Black. Brooks acknowledged this change when she said “I really do believe that I have been changing all along. None of my book is exactly like the other”.89 Being “a Watchful Eye, a Tuned Ear, a Super-Reporter”,90 she says that she still is “interested in what goes on in the street....”91

Mild as Gwendolyn Brooks appears, she is very firm over some issues, and one of them is the preference for the term “Black” over


90 Gwendolyn Brooks, on the book jacket of In the Mecca.

“African-American”. Gwendolyn Brooks says she doesn’t like the term African-American for “it is very excluding. I like to think of Blacks as family, the part of that family that lives in Brazil or Haiti or France or England are not going to allow you to call them African American because they are not. I would like to read to you my poem that speaks to this. [Gwendolyn Brooks reading excerpts from “I Am A Black”]:

According to my teachers,
I am now an African – American.
They call me out of my name.
BLACK is an open umbrella
I am a Black and A Black forever....

Highlighting the need for capitalization of the term Black to emphasis their “essence”, Gwendolyn Brooks says that “The capitalized names Black and Blacks were appointed to compromise an open, wide-stretching, unifying, empowering umbrella”. Reaffirming her allegiance to the Black cause Gwendolyn Brooks very confidently announced that “I share Family hood with Blacks wherever they may be. I am a Black. And I capitalize my name”.  

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This chapter has chalked the emergence of a Black artist through her early days of having “whitewashed” her Black themes to suit a white audience, to having awakened to the Black cause and ending up as being the foremost champion of the cause. In this chapter we have also seen the two distinct phases that have characterized Gwendolyn Brooks’s poetry and her commitment to the Black cause, Black people, Black race and Black solidarity. Gwendolyn Brooks would never give up or forget the culture of her people, or its history but aimed to exalt and celebrate the richness of Black heritage, always interested in “Blacks being treated justly”. Thus we see Gwendolyn Brooks’s movement from being an integrationist to a militant poet.

In the ensuing chapter, an attempt is made to trace her thematic growth based on the two phases in her poetic career and analyse the main concerns expressed in her poetry. The chapter will deal with major concerns of Gwendolyn Brooks i.e., women and children and attempt to trace the development of her themes along with the evolution of Gwendolyn Brooks from a Negro to a Black poet.

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