



## “QUEST FOR FEMININE AND RADICAL IDENTITY” IN SELECTED POEMS OF GWENDOLYN BROOK

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### ABSTRACT

Gwendolyn Brook poetry expressed the radical injustice and the private struggles of young black women. She also dealt with ordinary experience of black women in the sub-urban places and search for oneself against racism in her first collection of poem, “A Street in Bronzoville” one of the earliest collection of poems, where she touched almost all the phases of women as a young girl, as a house wife, as an old woman and as a mother. She explained the role of women in all the stages in the society.

**Keywords:** *Radical injustice, Racism, Identity.*

### Citation:

**APA** R,P.& Tyagi,S.(2018) Quest for feminine and Radical identity in Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzoville*.*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL*, 5(1), 32-34.

**MLA** R,Preetha and Sarika Tyagi. “Quest for feminine and Radical identity in Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzoville*.”*Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature JOELL*, Vol.5, no.1, 2018, pp.32-34.

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### INTRODUCTION

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was an American poet and teacher. She was the first black person (the term she preferred over African-American) to win a Pulitzer prize. She was awarded Pulitzer prize for Poetry in 1950 for her second collection, “Annie Allen”. Throughout her career she received many more honors. She was appointed Poet Laureate of Illinois in 1968, a position held until her death and Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the

Library of Congress in 1985. Brooks' published her first book of poetry, “A Street in Bronzeville” (1945), with Harper and Row, after strong show of support to the publisher from author Richard Wright.

‘A Street in Bronzeville’ reveals a realistic portrayal of everyday life of people and scenes in Bronzeville. It contains economic drawback, domestic violence and radical prejudice faced by black women, men and children of Bronzoville. Brooks never wrote directly or explicitly white for a white audience. She



always concerned to speak to and to satisfy Black life, as she knew it. But clearly adopted that true Black writers speak as blacks, about blacks, and to blacks, she heightened awareness of her social location and political position, rhetorically situating herself and her readers in a new way.

In her poetry, she simultaneously speaks from the margins and centers of both black culture and the dominant white society, unsettling the opposition between various kinds of insiders and outsiders in the process.

### QUEST FOR FEMININE AND RACIAL IDENTITY

“To speak as a black, about blacks, to blacks”.(WGB12)

Brooks embarrassed a more radical black consciousness voicing black pride and militancy; she believed a black poet should try to reach ordinary common blacks. The concept of race is a burden to everyone in common but it is a personal burden to the negro, a burden of shame and outrage imposed on him from the earliest moment of life and never lifted till his death, all his energies, mental, emotional, spiritual, must be held in reserve for carrying it.

Brooks has suggested that the racial element is organic to a black artist's work, by which she probably means that blackness is woven into texture of a black artist's reaction even when the subject of his art is not racial. Most of the Brook's poetry has focused on the black women identity, her lost identity in her domestic life. Brook's early poems talk about the pursuit for feminine identity in her domestic life. Brook's early poems talk about the pursuit for feminine identity and much of her early and later poems also dealt with the feminine and racial identity. Her poems strive for feminine identification with the typical racial paradigms. Brook's first collection 'A Street in Bronzeville' is an accurate portrayal of the Negro life. All the poems in this collection give humanistic and compassionate glimpse of black life. Thematically, the volume is largely structured around the local and black, national and multiracial. Brooks exposes their interrelationships with personal, social and national. Brooks has dramatized everyday existence while her prosodic variation supports its diversity.

The author focuses on the black and feminine experience of the black women in the white society. Her feminine identity as well as her radical identity has molded her vision of the city. More important was Brook's objective treatment of issues such as identity Crisis and racism. In the collection of 'A Street in Bronzeville', the characters range from the death-in-life figure of a woman in Obituary for a living lady. The unnamed woman in the poem, a person Brooks knew well. As a child she was decently wild child and as a girl she was interested in a brooch and pink powder and a curl but as a young woman she was not permitted to be with the man, whom she had fallen in spirit, was symbolized by the window in a white dress. Her purity and paleness of spirit, was symbolized by the white dress. It was one of the causes for her to be rejected by him. Here Brooks has taken the conventional Scarlet woman, a figure usually associated with the corrupt, sinful city and transformed her into a positive, vital force. Brook has changed even the stereotyped and conventional aspects to the positive note. The woman in the poem did not have her own identity and was discriminated because of her color.

### DREAMS AND ASPIRATION OF THE BLACK

In 'Kitchenette Building' Brooks expressed the social consciousness in the modern tenement building where there was no space for human dreams and aspirations. It voiced the protest of Blacks. Brooks begins as:

“We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan”.(WGB 4).

The poet –narrator wonders whether aspiration can survive its fight with “Onion fumes” and “Fried potatoes” and the entire constellation of poverty. In colors of the dream one “White” and “violet”, Brooks has commented that the colors were chosen for their delicacy and although dreams can be nightmares. The dreams and aspirations of the blacks are often repeated as only nightmares. This sort poem expresses the audible black voices of America about their lost dream, lost identity.

### SEARCHING FOR SELF IDENTITY

Sadie and Maud deal with two sisters whose contrasting approaches to life. Sadie has gotten out of life all it has to offer despite her limited resources. Brooks represented this as:



"Sadie scraped life  
 With a fine –tooth comb  
 She didn't leave a tangle in.  
 Her comb found every strand  
 Sadie was one of the living chits  
 In all the land". (WGB16)

Although she bore two illegitimate daughters, she shamed her family that she had left her offspring a rich heritage and her toothcomb- so that they would undoubtedly squeeze as much joy out of life as possible. She did not have wealth to leave them, but she left them something perhaps equally valuable. Maud on the other hand who followed the more traditional path and went to college. She followed the society's rules, but her life lacked the vitality and fullness that makes one's existence meaningful. Both their lives never had any recognition and they never had their own self-identity neither in the domestic nor in their social life.

#### SELF HOOD OF BLACK WOMEN

Brooks probes deeper into the identity and selfhood of black women in the poem "The Mother", Brooks depicts a clear view of black woman's quest or feminine identity and her racial identity. The Mother is a dramatic monologue on abortion a very controversial topic. The mother begins rhetorically:

Abortion will not let you forget.(WGB 5).

Brooks explores the impact of poverty on the lives of her women characters. The mother deals with a poor woman who has had a number of abortions and who experiences anxiety and anguish as a result of these decisions. Brooks refers to her as hardly crowned and praised and customary mother, but a mother not familiar, who decides that she rather than allowing them in her world she would kill her children. She justifies herself by confessing that her crime was not deliberate. She wanted to shield them from a painful existence and harsh realities of the life they were sure to lead. Throughout the poem one has the feeling that if circumstances had been different, they would have been allowed to live, but as the mother who was on the pursuit of her own identity to get away from this racial issues, was not able to achieve it, she knew her children's fate and their quest for identity as black women in the white society. That the child lost its identity even before its birth was the stigma that black people had

particularly, the black women and their feminine identity.

#### CONCLUSION

"A Street in Bronzeville" is a work of art, a poignant social document. It was devoted to terse portraits of the Black urban poor. 'Sadie and Maud', 'The Mother' and 'Kitchenette building' are the most important poems in the collection which reveals struggle of her character to comment on important issues, such as the societal views of women, race and the poetry found in the inner city through her poetry. Brooks depicts the pathos and sufferings of black women as a mother in the discriminating white urban world, who lost her own identity and suffered with color discrimination. Brooks has presented the whole picture of the ordinary black women.

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