



RESEARCH PAPER

**Poetry as Politics of Resistance: Female Resistance in Gwendolyn
Brooks' "The Mother"**
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of black women/mothers in American South and the resistance strategies they use to overcome the challenges through the examination of Brooks' "The Mother". It provides insights into how black females have been suffering from patriarchal ideology and stereotyping, and how they are placed in an inferior position and treated as slaves and sexual machines. Gendered stereotypes show that the women of color are poor, helpless and dependent. The aim of this study is twofold. First, the goal is to explain why black women are victims of white prejudice and patriarchal practices. And second, it demonstrates how black females set themselves free from racial ideology and Western hegemony by applying resistance strategies. Applying the approach of textual analysis, this paper examines how socio-cultural values/ stereotypes make black women captive and what resistance strategies they use to avoid disparity and social injustice. The findings of this research show that resistance strategies are the means of liberation for black women. Furthermore, it contributes to knowledge about resistance strategies that women of color use to protect themselves from the pathetic effects of racism and gender oppression. Nonetheless, it is argued that owing to the power and pervasiveness of structurally-imposed values, individualized resistance strategies are limited.

KEYWORDS Gender, Oppression, Racism, Resistance, Sexism

Introduction

Brooks' "The Mother" reflects an emotional overflow of the feeling of guilt and resource by a mother, who has done one or more abortions. The poem is taken from her first collection of poems *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), and it poignantly shows the reality of oppression in the lives of urban blacks. The mother, who performs abortion, is very angry and pensive. She expresses her anger through her deeds. Though she expresses her personal feelings of guilt, it is her strategy to reflect her resistance against the system. H. Bloom, an American literary critic and professor, opines that Brooks portrays the anguish and remorse of the mother through her literary writings. In *A Comprehensive Research and Study Guide: Gwendolyn Brooks*, Bloom (2003) states, "'The Mother' (1945) originally published in Brooks's first collection of poetry *A Street in Bronzeville*, she addresses the controversial issue of abortion . . . she demonstrates the anguish and remorse the mother has for her unborn child, yet Brooks does not portray the mother expressing regret" (p. 15). Bloom believes that by addressing the controversial issue, Brooks depicts the socio-cultural values and stereotypes of the period and black women's resistance against such values. During 1940s abortion was a controversial issue and African-American women/mothers faced considerable obstacles in their everyday lives due to Jim Crow Laws and unwritten, racially biased social codes. These codes and behaviors created strictly segregated barriers for black women. As being victims of Jim Crow laws, patriarchal values and racist stereotypes black women were objectified and exploited. Within such frame, black femininity has been undervalued in all aspects.

Through her literary art, Brooks transforms the traditional image of the African-American woman from that of a sexual object to an independent and self-confident woman with individual voices. Brooks' poetic works promote the emergence of black, female subjectivity. They articulate and highlight the unarticulated and unrecognized place and role of the black woman, in the culture and society that does not recognize her identity and, sometimes, even her existence.

Brooks' poetry raises voice against inequality and injustice. It presents the women with strong wills who do not submit to the unfavorable odds in their lives and fight against exploitation and injustice of all kinds. Brooks' female characters, especially mothers, differ from traditional female characters in this respect.

Literature Review

"The Mother" is well-known for its emotional complexity and sensitivity because it captures a really difficult topic, abortion. It reveals the emotions of a woman/mother who has performed multiple abortions. She feels guilty of her deeds. The speaker first speaks to the mothers who have done abortions like herself. She makes them realize that they will never forget their killed children. She articulates, "You remember the children you got that you did not get" (Brooks, 1945, Line 2). Presenting the graphic description of the fetus (child in the womb), the speaker exposes the helplessness of the mothers. She then, turns to her own cases of abortion and tells them that she has heard the voices of her killed children in the air and seen them in her dreams. She feels herself guilty for aborting them. She reveals the fact that she has sinned against them by taking their lives but she did all that unintentionally. She admits, "Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate" (Brooks, 1945, Line 21). She ends up by only saying that she loves them all. It shows the mother's deep attachment and confession to her children.

The poem narrates an expression of female experience and female resistance against racism and patriarchal values in society. The mother aborts her children and then expresses the personal feelings of guilt. Brooks describes about abortion and impacts it makes in the lives of black women/mothers. Regarding Brooks' work, Falvey (2010), in "The Taboo in Gwendolyn Brooks' 'The Mother'", reports, "The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a Bronzeville woman who has had multiple abortions" (p. 123). Falvey's view is relevant because Brooks' speaker is a colored woman who has done multiple abortions. The subject, expression and theme of the poem show that only a woman can understand the feelings of a mother. Like a typical female, the speaker is very sensitive and kindhearted. The first stanza of the poem is in second-person voice, but the second stanza shifts to first person voice. Concerning the shift of the voice in the poem, Bolden (1999), in *Urban Rage in Bronzeville*, explains that the first stanza's "inchoate second-person voice" signifies its speaker's unwillingness to "take ownership of her own deed and pain" (p. 27). The shift to first person voice demonstrates the speaker's confession of her deeds. As an experienced woman/mother, who knows about the process of bearing and bringing up a child, she understands the typical experiences and pleasures of mother works.

Brooks' "The Mother" was first published in 1945. It was about thirty years before the court decision, which guaranteed women the right to have an abortion. Regarding the aborting rights, Hooks (2000), in *Feminism for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, describes, "In those days poor women, black women included, often sought illegal abortion" (p. 26). Hooks explains the history when abortion was illegal. Her view is relevant because it reflects mother's unusual reaction to contemporary socio-cultural values. She expresses her love to their unborn babies by committing a crime named abortion. By writing this

poem, Brooks takes some heavy-duty; a responsibility that encourages women to raise voice for liberty and civil rights. Rugoff (2010) reveals that Brooks' primary concern is to focus African American people's lives especially the lives of black women in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events. In "The Historical and Social Context of Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry" published in *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks*, she notes, "From her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), to her final publications, Brooks' primary focus was on the lives of African Americans in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events in the United States" (p. 22). Rugoff focuses on Brooks' concern, which is to bring changes in the society as well as in the lives of unprivileged group. Brooks makes constant efforts to cure the problems of African American society and through her poetry she highlights the crucial issues and their effects in the lives of black women/mothers.

Brooks establishes her authority as a reporter of urban life through the range of voices and perspectives she captures. Reflecting on Brooks' poetry, C. M. Israel and W. T. Lawlor (2010) argue that Brooks' works create a clear picture of African American community with poverty which is the sign of racism and social injustice. In "Biography of Gwendolyn Brooks" they state, "Brooks' poems about ordinary people create a vivid and complex picture of America's poor, with poverty both sign and symbol of racism and injustice" (p. 9). Israel and Lawlor opine that Brooks' representation of poor people in her works is an expression of rage against injustice and racial oppression. To defy injustice and oppression, the speaker, who is a Bronzeville woman, uses resistance strategies. Brooks concentrates her attention on the effects of the "urban experience" on both African-American men and women. She highlights the impact of urban experiences on social, moral, and emotional life of women. The mother in this poem is poor and helpless therefore, she becomes the victim of racism and sexism. To save her children from poverty stricken situation, she kills them in her womb before they come in this earth.

Each poem in *A Street in Bronzeville* is differently voiced from the one that immediately precedes it. Some narrate social issues while some others are on political issues. The poem "The Mother" moves through pregnancy, childbirth, and the lives and deaths of the speaker's imagined children, capturing the unrest of the street life in Chicago's Bronzeville where aborted life is ineffectually mourned. The mother of the poem is pensive, self-serving, and harshly insistent on her sacrificial love. Accepting the fact that Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville* is based on urban life which captures the voices and perspectives of poor people, Hedley (2009), in "Race and Rhetoric in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks", expresses:

In the original "Street in Bronzeville" series, Brooks establishes her authority as a chronicler of urban life through the range of voices and perspectives she captures and the ironies she builds into these poems by various means. Each poem is differently voiced from the one that immediately precedes it: some go inside a particular neighborhood resident's house and head, while others have the impersonal stance of a ballad or an epigram. (p. 110)

According to Hedley in *Street in Bronzeville* series, Brooks narrates an account of urban life. The poems are differently voiced and have impersonal themes. Like a historian, she captures the realistic picture of village dwellers.

Brooks has addressed the serious issues of life such as abortion, color discrimination, domestic abuse, alienation, and poverty. She manages to convey the force of desire, regret, and affirmation. M. K. Mootry believes that Brooks' characters are taken from urban ghettos who demonstrate the surroundings of black urban life. Reflecting on

Brooks' characters, Mootry (1987), in "Down the Worlwind of Good Rage: An Introduction to Gwendolyn Brooks", explains:

Brooks' characters are largely taken from the dispossessed, the unheroic residents of America's urban ghettos (named by custom, "Bronzeville"). These characters dramatize a microcosm of black urban life- its struggle, its small triumph, its survival. By focusing on them, Brooks has been able to engage, often indirectly, some of the major social issues of her time including war and peace, racial injustice, and plight of women. (p. 3)

Mootry observes that Brooks' characters are poor creatures, who live in American ghettos. Reflecting their condition, she indirectly exposes the contemporary social issues such as social conflict, racial disparity, and gender oppression. Mootry's words are relevant for this study because in the poem "The Mother" Brooks exposes the condition of marginalized and unprivileged group and their resistance strategies. Brooks shows how socio-cultural circumstances define and limit black women's boundary.

The poem, "The Mother," was controversial at the time of its composition. Due to its non-poetic subject matter, Harper and Brothers' chief editor Richard Wright suggested to exclude the poem from the collection *A Street in Bronzeville*. Regarding Wright's view about the publication of the poem "The Mother", Falvey (2010) discloses, "Richard Wright, who was asked to review *A Street in Bronzeville* for Harper and Brothers, praised the collection, but recommended leaving out "The Mother" because of its non-poetic subject matter" (p. 124-125). Later, Brooks insisted on its inclusion in her 1945 collection, *A Street in Bronzeville*, over the objections of her literary advocate, Richard Wright and it was published in the same anthology.

By using simple language and spontaneous expressions, the poet exposes a realistic picture of African American society. Relating the issues expressed in Brooks' works, Bolden (1999), in *Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945-1960*, writes that the book *A Street in Bronzeville* comprises "a collage of racism, sexism, and classism of America in its illumination of the people who strive to survive Bronzeville" (p. 13). Bolden exposes that besides the sentiment in the first and second part and the confusion in the third part, the poem is strikingly realistic and it reflects the problem of racism, sexism, and classism in America.

Material and Methods

Applying qualitative methodology, this paper uses the technique of textual analysis to explore the gendered dynamics of stereotyping in the lives of women of color. The study makes in-depth, analysis of Brooks' "The Mother" from socio-cultural, racial and feminist perspectives. The data is collected from the books, research papers, journal articles, thesis, and internet sources.

This study begins with the premise of exploring socio-cultural stereotypes. It reflects the various aspects of the black women's lives. By following the core principles of feminist research, it includes its underpinning aim to expose and challenge gendered inequalities by keeping black women's experiences in center.

Results and Discussion

The poem "The Mother" explores the impacts of socio-cultural values and poverty stricken situation on the life of a black mother. Encapsulating the theme of female resistance as its central aspect, the poem expresses the emotions of a Bronzeville woman

who has done multiple abortions. Relating to Brooks' work Evans (2011), in "Abortions Will not Let you Forget": A Close Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Mother" writes, "One of most anthologized texts of all the poems written by Gwendolyn Brooks is her 33-line lyric titled "the mother," . . . haunting and powerful work- a dramatic monologue in which a woman discusses and reacts to her numerous abortions" (p. 223). Evans clarifies that the poem "The Mother" is Brooks' one of the powerful works. It is a dramatic monologue, in which a woman/mother reveals about her numerous abortions. The mother has anxiety and anguish due to her difficult decisions of aborting her babies. The very first line of the first stanza, "Abortions will not let you forget," (Brooks, 1945, Line 1), immediately draws attention to the title, "The Mother" and to the importance of the word love. The poem exposes the mother's deep attachment to her children that compels the mother narrator to express extreme response and ultimate self-victimization.

Addressing the mothers who have done abortions like herself, the narrator declares that they will never forget their 'killed' children. Though the poem talks about an illegitimate subject 'abortion', mother-love and mother's resistance to socio-cultural values lie in its heart. The narrator gives a graphic description of the fetus (child in the womb) that is forced to be born dead by the mothers. As she expresses, "You remember the children you got that you did not get, / The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair," (Brooks, 1945, Lines 2-3). By presenting a graphic description, she reminds the mothers that they have missed the pleasures of bringing up their children. The speaker expresses very sensitive and sentimental emotions. Like an experienced mother, she knows very well the typical experiences and pleasures of having and bringing up a child. The phrases like 'winding the sucking-thumb' or 'scuttling off the ghost' (Brooks, 1945, Lines 7-8), strikingly suggest that she at least knows every typical experience of a mother with a child.

The speaker then turns to her own situation and accepts the fact that she has aborted her babies to defy the system and to save her children from poverty stricken situation. By envisioning the maternal role of a woman which includes giving birth, suckling babies at her breast, hearing them cry and playing games, she even thinks of the love and marriages of her children and feels herself guilty of destroying their lives. Regretting her own action of doing abortion, she admits:

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized

Your luck

And your lives from your unfinished reach,

If I stole your births and your names,

Your straight baby tears and your games,

Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,

(Brooks, 1945, Lines 14-19)

The speaker finally takes the responsibility of her deeds. She makes excuses and she, then, ends up by only saying that she loves them all from the core of her heart. Though she feels herself responsible for having these abortions, she does all this against her will. As she speaks, "If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths, / Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate" (Brooks, 1945, Lines 20-21). The mother knows

that she has stolen her unborn children's lives, which was rightfully theirs. She emphatically declares that she kills her children because she wants to break the social stereotypes and protect them from the hopeless poverty. The mother's act of abortion demonstrates her deepest emotions and exceptional courage. Regarding mother's unique way of expressing love, Rich (1976), in *Of Woman Born*, states, "Throughout history numberless women have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally . . ." (p. 258). Rich opines that when women feel themselves unable to provide proper care to their children, in most cases they kill them. Her idea helps to realize the situation of the mother who has done multiple abortions. The mother in this poem feels herself helpless to provide any care and protection to her children so she kills them. This heinous act of abortion or infanticide demonstrates the mother's deep attachment to her children. In the poem "The Mother", the mother cannot get rid of her guilt. She can only confess and express her love for her killed children, for partial relief.

The mother keeps on repeating her declarations of love for her unborn children as she continues to speak of her uncertainty. She aborts them; even then, she claims that she loves them all. She declares, "Believe me, I loved you all" (Brooks, 1945, Line 31). The final line, consisting of only one word, "All" (Brooks, 1945, Line 33), is particularly effective. It stands in stark contrast to the apparent harshness of both her decision and her own attitude toward that decision. She has convinced herself that she did those abortions out of love and she did the right thing to break racist and sexist values. As a sensitive mother she pleads for the reader's sympathy. The mother shows courage to abort them due to her inability to protect them. Reflecting the mother's circumstances, Falvey (2010), in "The Taboo in Gwendolyn Brooks' 'The Mother'", asserts:

The mother of the poem is wistful, appropriately self-recriminatory, perhaps self-serving, and jarringly insistent on her sacrificial love. In the contemporary wake of Toni Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning horror story, *Beloved*, a backward glance at Brooks' Bronzeville mother gives evidence of a woman who has been forced (as she suggests when she asks herself: "Though why should I whine, / Whine that the crime was other than mine?" (23-24), to abort her children, perhaps to save them from a life of grinding poverty and despair. (p. 126)

Falvey describes the fact that the mother kills her children because she wants to save them from difficulties of life. Mother's concern for her children and her own circumstances make her decide to have the abortions. Falvey shows similarity between the mother in this poem and the mother character named Sethe, in *Beloved*. Both express their deep love by killing their children. The voice of the mother resonates with the voice of all motherhood, sounding the primal chords of hope and insistent love even in the face of ceaseless losses. Both cases also reflect the mothers' resistance to the contemporary socio-cultural values.

Taken from Brooks' *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), the poem depicts the condition of women of color, who are the victims of racist, sexist, and classicist oppression in American society. During the 1940's, when mechanization made agricultural jobs scarce, Bronzeville, a black neighborhood located on Chicago's South Side, was a place of shelter for Southern blacks. Brooks' works, including "The Mother", reflect women inhabiting Bronzeville, which expose the painful experiences of black women. Regarding Brooks' creative art, Merrill (2005), in the Introduction of *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, argues, "Brooks took especially seriously the inner lives of young black women: their hopes, dreams, aspirations, disappointments" (p. xvii). Merrill views that Brooks' works depict

aspirations and disappointments of young black women. Unwanted socio-cultural practices and norms make black women take many harsh unexpected decisions.

Brooks, through her work, expresses the tragic and dehumanizing aspects of the ghetto experience. Falvey (2010) supports this idea and explains, "Brooks lived in Bronzeville and gave poetic voice to the experience of marginalized blacks whose chances and choices were limited by poverty and racism" (p. 124). Falvey's words are relevant to understand the limited choice and boundary of the poor black women/mothers, who prefer to abort their children. Brooks moves deep beneath the surface of the ghetto experience to uncover areas of a poor person's life that frequently go unnoticed. She focuses on the effects of poverty on black mothers and their children.

The poem reveals female experience by expressing mother's emotional outpour of the sense of guilt. Falvey (2010) further writes, "'The Mother' exposes the hard reality of many women's lives by breaking the silence and making the private, often shameful act of abortion dramatically public, while confronting the taboo subject of women's sexuality and lack of reproductive control" (p. 124). The speaker has aborted her children, partly deliberately, and remembers the fetus. The poem is typically female in its subject, expression, and theme.

Brooks reflects an exact representation of a mother who loses her child. She is sad about the beautiful future, which will never come into existence because the child will not come into the world. In the line "You will never wind up the sucking-thumb or scuttle off the ghosts that come" (Brooks, 1945, Line 7), she clearly explains that the beautiful future is lost. She reveals the roles and images of African American women. Their primary role is that of the makers, who are struggling to reconfigure a social, political, and moral system in which their social and economic mobility is possible.

Brooks depicts the socio-cultural norms that demoralize women of color. Breaking the ideals of a good mother, the protagonist shows courage to have abortion to resist socio-cultural values and norms. The title, "The Mother" is ironic, for this mother, who has lost her children because of very difficult and painful decisions, that she believes the best. Regarding the mother's decision, Collins (2000) argues that black women use different strategies to resist the system and protect themselves and their children from oppression. In her work *Black Feminist Thought*, she explains, "Depending on historical time and place, African American women employed the range of strategies in challenging the rules governing our subordination. In many cases Black women practiced individual protest against unfair rules and practices" (p. 216). Collins' view is relevant because she talks about the strategies that black women apply to combat against unfair practices. To challenge the rules that govern her subordination, this mother uses the strategy of aborting her children.

The poet uses simple language and spontaneous expression to express her feelings, which make readers hopeful to find the theme of female resistance. In this context Brooks optimistically upholds both the title and the theme. She praises the mother who takes unexpected decision to oppose socio-cultural values and save her young ones. Concerning the circumstances of the mother, Gery (1999), in "Subversive Parody in the Early Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks", asserts that Brooks' title "demonstrates both the importance and impotence of conventional motherhood for a woman in the ghetto" (p. 51). Describing the strength and weaknesses of conventional motherhood, Gery explains how Brooks reflects the helplessness of black women/mothers in the ghetto. Another important unifying device in the poem is memory. The narrator remembers the past and her decisions of abortion, which have

drastically affected her present. She feels that past decisions keep her intruding into the present. The remembrance moves between her dreams of what might have been and the harshness of her memory of what caused her to decide as she did.

Brooks deals with the basic problem being faced by poor and deprived. She employs a housewife, probably a mother, to voice the unfulfilled aspirations, unaccomplished ambitions, unrealized imaginations, and dream deferred. She presents them without judgment. Her characters enable the readers understand the plights, deprivations and injustice they face. The poem "The Mother" brings out the plight of the black mothers with great intensity of feeling of love, which only a woman would feel, understand, and convey. Brooks is able to touch the socio-cultural norms of her period, which limit the boundary of black women/mothers and prohibit them from aborting their children. The poet presents the mother as an assertive woman, who defies the contemporary socio-cultural values and stereotypes. To protect her children from the obstacles of life, she takes a bold decision, which was beyond imagination for women of color at the time.

Conclusion

Brooks' "The Mother" speaks about the abortions in a reflective manner. She attempts to gain sympathy from the readers through her argument that she committed the abortions not out of malice but for love of her children. As a bold mother she aborts her children to protect them from poverty stricken situation and to resist the socio-cultural values of the time, which were unfavorable for black women, then. The poem shows that a mother loves her children either they are alive or dead. Through the poem Brooks reflects the softness of a mother's heart and proves that a mother is the living Goddess on earth.

The writer uses black women/mothers to expose the diverse problems being faced by urban slum dwellers. Through their utterances she points out sources and causes of their appalling conditions. She attempts to bring consciousness in the society of prevailing inequalities and injustices. The subject matters are universal and they deal with basic human problems. The women characters are neither heroic nor god-like in attributes or figure. They are simple human beings with virtues and weaknesses, who fight against their fate courageously. They struggle to make a new space within an old environment that will be conducive for their survival. Through her poetry, Brooks destabilizes the preexisting identity of women of color. She establishes her mother characters as sources of inspiration and guidance for not only for African Americans, but also for marginalized community all around the world. She advocates against inequalities and injustice by presenting her characters as a defensive device to protect oneself from oppression and injustice. Her emphasis is to subvert the system which creates discrimination among human beings.

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