

MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S POETRY

MUTHURAMAN KANNAYAN*

ABSTRACT. The predominant concerns of the African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks are race, sex, and aesthetics of art. A careful formalistic approach to all of Brooks's poetry on women, especially the poems dealing with man-woman relationship, reveals two predominant influences in their life, which very often determine their love or marital relationship with black men: One is intraracial discrimination and the other is racial oppression. But not all the black women's relationship with black men is affected by intraracial, racial and other influences. As there are black women whose conjugal life is ruined by their husbands or lovers as in the life of Annie Allen, Chocolate Mabbie, Pearl May Lee and Kathleen Eileen, there are also black women who are pragmatic, who, despite struggles and sufferings, manage to survive and maintain steadfast and healthy relationship with their black men. Brooks is aware of the fact that only a few black women are able to free themselves from the web of racism, intraracism, and sexism that threaten to strangle their relationship with black men. But she is not pessimistic about the present as well as the future of black women; she is indeed optimistic about the future of all black women.

KEY WORDS: Harlem Renaissance, racism, intraracism, and European myth

Introduction

Gwendolyn Brooks is the first African American poet to win the coveted Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for her second volume of poetry *Annie Allen*. Her creative output extends over a period of six decades. Her poetry is distinctive not only in her handling of innumerable poetic forms, but also in her craftsmanship. She has committed herself to cause of social justice for her race and sex as well as to the aesthetics of art. Her poetry is potent, provocative, poignant, and startling. Her poetry resists racism, asserts black consciousness and upholds black values. Racial and intraracial issues and womanhood are the central concerns of Brooks. Brooks's white critics have neglected her poetry on women with the preconceived notion that she presents only strong black women in her poetry. These white critics have ignored the sordid conditions of black women, which Brooks has explored in

* MUTHURAMAN KANNAYAN (PhD 2002, Annamalai University, India) is Professor of English and Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Annamalai University. E-mail: drkmau@gmail.com.

many of her poems. Brooks indeed has written several poems about black women's experience as mothers, daughters, wives and lovers. Many of her poems deal with black women's complex relationship with black men as wives and lovers.

Review of Literature

Brooks's critics have commented on her themes as well as her poetic style. They have either examined Brooks's exploitation of classical forms and experimentation with modern forms or social themes. Russell L. Adams comments that Brooks studied technique and milieu, and wrote "some of the finest poetry of our time" (Adams 1963: 128). Jon N. Loff (1966) observes that Brooks's poetry about black women reflects their discontent, futility, desire, fear, courage, and despair. Clenora F. Hudson (1973) comments that "Miss Brooks's poems accurately reflect what and how black felt and feel about racial issues in this country" (Hudson 1973: 16). Writing about man-woman relationship in Brooks's poetry, Hansel (1974) points out that despite racial and intraracial prejudices, lovers' "communion endures, regardless of separation" (Hansel 1974: 26). Claudia Tate (1987) states that Brooks's *Annie Allen* deals with the universal problem of the deteriorating relationship between men and women. Beverly Guy Sheftall (1987) comments that the diverse nature of Brooks's women enables her to reveal many facets, complexities, and paradoxes of the urban black experience. Emma Waters Dawson (1989) states that the image of dark-skinned women in Brooks's poetry "signifies the drastic effect racism has upon the psyche of Afro-Americans so that even young children cannot go unscathed by its brutal effects" (Dawson 1989: 3). This paper explores the multifaceted man-woman relationship in Brooks's poetry from a formalist perspective.

Though historical, biographical and cultural contexts hold relevance to the interpretation of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry, my analysis is based on the formalistic approach, wherein Brooks's poems under discussion are considered primarily as a structure of words or arrangement of language, rather than on the biographical and historical relevance of the poem in question. My intention is not to undermine the importance of history and biography in the interpretation of Brooks's works. My argument is that the very language used in her poems is sufficient to comprehend the content of her poetry. The classical forms as well as her blank verse are so simple in language and style that her readers could comprehend the subject matter of her poetry without depending on history or her own biography. My aim is not to reduce her works to nothing more than a structure of words, but to comprehend and enjoy her poems for their own innate values as a works of art.

Harlem Renaissance and Brooks

Though Gwendolyn Brooks started writing poetry when the Harlem Renaissance was at its peak, her poetry written during this period is utterly different from the writings of the Harlem Renaissance writers. During the Harlem Renaissance period, African American writers were confident and purposeful, which had never been experienced by the black writers in the history of African Americans in the US. Protest against racism, celebration of racial values, and assertion of the civil and political identity of the blacks as well as their cultural individuality are the unique characteristics of the writers of Harlem Renaissance. Writers of the period were proud of being black, their ethnic identity and cultural heritage. They believed that through writing they could define, assert and reinforce their unique racial pride. This kind of celebration could not be found in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. As observed by George E. Kent, Brooks “rejected the exotic vein of the Harlem Renaissance—the celebration of unique racial values, such as defiance of social prescription through emphasis upon joy and soul” (Kent 1989: 66). The primary concerns of Brooks are the sufferings encountered by blacks due to racial and intraracial discrimination as well as impoverished man-woman relationship. As noted by Kent, Brooks’s “black people do not live in a romantic or idealized world. They live in dreams and frustration, and suffer poverty, deprivation and oppression” (Kent 1989: 66).

Male Power and Female Victimization

Victimization of African American women is one of the dominant themes in Brooks's poetry, which is not a characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance. Due to racial and intraracial discrimination, black women's man-woman relationship has been ruined inexpressibly. As far as intraracial discrimination is concerned, we could cite Brooks's “Ballad of Chocolate Mabbie” and “Ballad of Pearl May Lee”. Chocolate Mabbie is victimized for her dark skin. She has been in love with Willie Boone, a man of her own race. Later Boone rejects Mabbie in favour of a light-complexioned girl. Mabbie is disappointed to know why Boone has preferred the lemon-hued lynx to her: her dark skin. At the age of seven, Mabbie encounters the painful experience of intraracial discrimination, which makes an indelible mark on her psyche. The irony is that “chocolate” is liked, whereas chocolate complexioned Mabbie is detested due to discrimination. The painful lesson is that colour prejudice will determine the most important human relationship for the rest of her life:

It was Mabbie alone by the grammar school gates.
 Yet chocolate companions had she.
 Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart.
 Mabbie on Mabbie to be. (Brooks 1945: 21-24)

If Mabbie is victim of romantic love and intraracial prejudice, her counterpart Pearl May Lee takes revenge upon her lover, though victimized by romantic love and dark pigmentation. The poem explores not only the betrayal of the black girl Pearl May Lee by Sammy Boy, a man of her own race, but also the betrayal of Sammy Boy by a white girl, whom he has hankered after rejecting Pearl May Lee's love: "Then a white girl passed you by one day,/ And, the vixen, she gave you the wink" (Brooks 1945: 48-49). Sammy Boy could not resist the seductive charm of the white girl, though he is well aware of the danger of yielding to her desire. Deserting the dark skinned Pearl May Lee, Sammy Boy makes love to the white girl, and in consequence, is lynched for his voluptuous desire for her. His passion for the white girl is considered to be a "crime" by the racially prejudiced white men, who lynch him. Having known the tragic end of Sammy Boy, Pearl May Lee painfully laughs:

I cut my lungs with my laughter,
 Laughter,
 Laughter.
 I cut my lungs with my laughter. (Brooks 1945: 4-7)

At the same time, she does not fail to criticize the racial violence of the whites as well the seduction of the white women. Through the imagined white Sheriff's voice, Pearl May Lee exposes the intolerable injustice done to Sammy Boy:

You son of a bitch, you're going to hell!
 'Cause you wanted white arms to enfold you,
 Enfold you,
 Enfold you. (Brooks 1945: 17-20)

The bitter experience of Pearl May Lee is due to intraracial discrimination, and the tragic end of Sammy Boy is due to racial prejudice. Being an African American, Brooks herself had the bitter experience of intraracial discrimination when she was at school at the age of five, which is the experience of all black women in the US. In her autobiography, *Report From Part One*, Brooks writes about her own experience: "A dark-complexioned girl just didn't have a chance if there was a light-skinned girl for competition. In grammar school, I got my first introduction to the fact that bias could exist among our people, too" (Brooks 1972: 172). The discrimination and the resultant suffering of black women are due to the basic myth of racism that white complexion brings with it superiority, and black complexion brings with it ugliness and uncontrolled irrational behaviour.

Impoverished Heterosexual Love Relationship

The protagonist in the poem "Obituary for a Living Lady" is a victim of the Puritan standard of life prescribed by the society. As a young woman, she has fallen in love with a man "who didn't know/That even if she wouldn't let him touch her breasts she/was still worth his hours" (Brooks 1945: 6-8). She does not permit her lover to have physical intimacy because of her shyness, which ruins her romantic love. As she does not yield to his libido, he avoids her. But when she relents, he has found a woman who yields to his desire. Unable to tolerate the betrayal of her lover, she wishes that she were dead. To terminate her suffering due to dejection, she "discovered the country of God" (Brooks 1945: 15). But the refuge in the country of God does not help her to give up worldly pleasures; rather it entraps her libido: she falls a prey to the sexual advances of the preacher, and wonders "How long it will be/ Before he can, with reasonably slight risk of rebuke, put his hand on her knee" (Brooks 1945: 21-22). Her romantic love is ruined by her shyness as well as the failure of her lover to understand her shyness, whereas her spiritual life is doomed by the sexual desire of the preacher.

As in the poem "Obituary for a Living Lady", in "Queen of the Blues" also Brooks is concerned with exposing the impoverished heterosexual love relationship between man and woman. The first five stanzas of the poem describe the Queen's background, her unknown father, and her love for her mother. The Queen indeed sings about the painful loneliness of her life: She loved a man who deserted her for another woman, and when he was with her, she worked hard as a domestic for the whites and gave him all her earnings. Now she feels that she has lost her dignity as "Queen of the Blues." She feels that if her father is with her, she will not be at the "Midnight Club":

She didn't have any
 Legal pa
 To glare at her
 To shame
 Her off the floor
 Off the Midnight Club.
 Poor Mame. (Brooks 1971: 17-23)

She is not happy about her social status as the Queen of the Blues. She has been desperately in search of a man who will love her till her last breath:

Show me a man
 What will love me
 Till I die
 Now show me a man

What will love me
Till I die. (Brooks 1971: 40-45)

The repetition in the stanza is ironical, as the lines bring to light the fact that she “can’t find no such a man/ No matter how hard/ you try” (46-48). Hence, she expresses her anger vehemently against those men who do not love and respect her:

Men are low down
Dirty and mean
Why don’t they tip
Their harts to a queen? (Brooks 1971: 89-92)

As the critic Melhem rightly observes, “The title “Queen” provides the supreme irony: trapped in dissatisfaction, the Queen is powerless on her own terrain. Ambivalence toward man, beginning with her father and reinforced in her relationship with ‘daddy,’ catches her between longing for love and esteem, and her anger with those who withhold it” (Melhem 1989: 39). The queen feels empty and abandoned as she has lost her respectability due to the inhuman treatment of men at the Midnight Club.

The conventional romantic myth requires pastoral environment for love affairs, which breaks up in the poem “A Lovely Love”. The setting of the poem is discordant as it is not pastoral: The sexual encounter of the lovers occurs in an urban valley or a hall or stairway or splinter box: “Let it be alleys. Let it be a hall.../ Let it be stairways, and a splinter box... (Brooks 1971: 1, 5). The poem consists of two encounters of lovers: the secret meeting of lovers in a sordid environment and the encounter of the lovers and the disapproving society. The poem is not about “lovely love; it is indeed motivated by lust: “Run./ People are coming. They must not catch us here/ Definitionless in this strict atmosphere” (Brooks 1971: 12-14). Such an encounter of lovers for lust emphasizes the degradation in the heterosexual love relationship: “Where you have thrown me, scraped me with your kiss,/Have honed me have released me after this/ Cavern kindness... (Brooks 1971: 6-8). Transgression of moral codes is what Brooks presents through the lustful lovers.

In “Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath”, Brooks presents the illicit sexual relation between man and woman. The lady in the poem does not attach importance to the conventional attitude towards love. Telling herself that her own behaviour is correct, she dismisses the objections of the conventional, tradition-minded people. She seems to assert that her behaviour is correct. Healthy heterosexual love-relationship is challenged by lovers, which just signifies the degradation in man-woman relationship.

Expectations versus Reality

When reality runs contradictory to expectations, people feel rejected and dejected. Brooks's women are no exception to it. One such character is represented by Kathleen Eileen in the poem "A Sunset of the City". Her expectation is contrary to reality: She expects that her love-relationship with her husband, lovers, and children must be as it was once when she was in her blossoming youth. But as she has approached middle age, she is disappointed by the way now she is treated by her husband, lovers and children:

Already I am no longer looked at with lechery or love.
 My daughters and sons have put me away with marbles and dolls,
 Are gone from the house.
 My husband and lovers are pleasant or somewhat polite
 And night is night. (Brooks 1971: 1-5)

To her "Night is Night" rather than a time for love and fun as it was used to be in her youth. But as she has approached her middle age, she is like "the sweetest flowers in drying and dying down,/ The grasses forgetting their blaze and consenting to brown" (Brooks 1971: 11-12). She is hopeless and disappointed because her desires and needs are no longer fulfilled by her husband, children and lovers. Hence, even the house in which she has been living with these people for a long period seems to be cold and empty, devoid of warmth that signifies "no life":

There is no warm house
 That is fitted with my need.
 I am cold in this cold house this house
 Whose washed echoes are tremulous down lost halls. (Brooks 1971: 15-18)

Unable to tolerate the neglect of the people whom she has trusted and valued, she seeks refuge in prayer, in God. But as she is restless, she cannot concentrate on her prayer, which could enable her to escape from the neglect of people or her feeling that she has been neglected. As prayer does not help her, she thinks of committing suicide through which she could achieve permanent escape from the people or the whole world. The poem projects the inner turbulence of a woman who approaches middle age, which is inevitable. Her feeling of loneliness, frustration, rejection and the consequent dejection is not just her experience, but the experience of all women approaching middle age, irrespective of their ethnic, racial, cultural and regional differences. But what differentiates this woman from many others is that she is not pragmatic and realistic and not able to accept transition as an unavoidable part of her life. Her problem is that she could not see old age as another phase of life with its own unique joys. Her dilemma is

“whether to dry/ In humming parlour or to leap and die” (Brooks 1971: 26-27).

Unlike Kathleen Eileen, the young woman of the poem “When You Have Forgotten Sunday: the Love Story” enjoys the memory of her youthful romantic past without mourning its loss. She escapes into the world of her past romantic love with her lover, which enables her to bear the brunt of the loss. Here her perception of her lover’s treatment which is indeed the cause of the loss is not similar to that of Kathleen Eileen, not resentful, but humorous:

When you have, I say, forgotten all that,
Then you may tell,
Then I may believe
You have forgotten me well. (Brooks 1971: 27-30)

In the poem “When I Die”, Brooks presents a disillusioned woman who has a pragmatic view of her relationship with her husband. She imagines about her death and what will happen after her death. She imagines that after her death, there will not be any fanfare, but “one lone little short man/ Dressed all shabbily” (Brooks 1971: 38-39). Her husband will offer cheap flowers, but immediately after the funeral, he will remove his mourning clothes, and wipe his tears away:

Then off he’ll take his mournin’ black,
And wipe his tears away,
And the girls, they will be waitin’.
There is nothing more to say. (Brooks 1971: 9-12)

She does not have any illusion about what her husband will do after her death. After a brief period of mourning, he will forget her and find another woman for love. So she does not have any romantic idea about her relationship with her husband. In her love-relationship with her husband, the woman of this poem is different from that of Kathleen Eileen, who makes a desperate attempt to escape from reality.

Romantic Idealism

Brooks’s *Annie Allen* is a mock epic for which Brooks received Pulitzer Prize in 1950. The primary concern of this mock epic is Annie Allen’s deteriorating relationship with her husband. Further, the poem reveals the consequences of the World War and their impact on the relationship between Annie Allen and her husband. In the first section “Notes from the Childhood and Girlhood”, Brooks describes Annie’s birth, her pragmatic and

didactic mother, her reaction to racial bias, and the consequent killing of the blacks by the whites. Also the section portrays Annie's romantic dreams.

The second section "Anniad" records Annie's anticipated courtship, her marriage, separation from her husband due to war, his return from the battlefield, his infidelity and finally his death, which shatters the romantic ideals of Annie about love and marriage. In the third section, Annie becomes a totally different woman due to her dreams and expectations and the consequent disappointment because of her realization unchangeable reality.

Annie Allen is an ordinary black girl of the urban ghettos, whose mother has suppressed Annie's desires, dreams, and longings. Her traditional mother tells Annie that she must be thankful to God for what she has and what she is, and should not long for that which is not part of her life in the racially prejudiced America:

Maxie Allen always taught her
 Stipendiary little daughter
 To thank her Lord and lucky star
 For eye that let her see so far,
 For throat enabling her to eat
 Her Quaker Oats and Cream—of—Wheat
 For tongue to tantrum for the penny,
 For ear to hear the haven't—any
 For arm to toss, for leg to chance,
 For heart to hanker for romance. (Brooks 1949: 1-10)

The outcome is that Annie is forced to repress all her desire, like, dislike, and also passion, but none on earth can stop her from expressing all these in her dreams.

As in the life of every woman of every country, Annie, as she cannot share her desires with her mother, reclines on her bed and dreams about her knight, without knowing that reality is different. She attributes all noble qualities to the knight, and sees him as a man of moral as well as physical vigour. To her he is "Ruralist and rather bad,/ Cosmopolitan and kind" (Brooks 1949: 27-28). It is also true that she is constantly preoccupied with her dark complexion and ugliness, ugliness from the perspective of the whites, which has severely damaged the mind and heart of every black woman about the notion of beauty. So Annie attempts to improve her appearance by "printing bastard roses" (Brooks 1949: 32) on her image in the mirror.

Annie describes her lover as a narrow "master". The word "master" summons the word "slave". The idea is that her relationship with her lover is similar to that of the relationship between a master and a slave. Annie is willing to be a slave, provided her man has all the virtues she has attributed

to him. It is also interesting here to note that Annie will not protest against male chauvinism, as innumerable women are even today in the twenty-first century in many countries and cultures. Annie does not rebel; she accepts subjugation. She sacrifices her desires for conjugal peace and joy. Melhem rightly comments on the implication of Annie's subjugation: "That Annie tolerates, even welcomes the subjugation, implicates her self-denigration in terms of color, her romanticism, her upbringing, and beyond these, the dominant culture contempt for women in Western Society" (Melhem 1989: 65).

After marriage and a brief union, Annie's husband leaves her for the war, and in consequence she lives alone and experiences the pain of loneliness. The impact of war is such that it makes him feeble physically as well as morally, and as a result, he has very lower regard for human life and human values. When he returns home after the war is over, he continues to entertain the false glamour of war and yearns for his power to be restored. By this time though Annie knows well that he is spoiled by tuberculosis, she does not protest and would like to have him back. But he deserts her and hankers after light-skinned women. His debauchery with several women could not continue because he becomes physically weak due to tuberculosis which has consumed his energy completely. Finally he returns to Annie only to die, not to live: He does not seem to have thought of living with Annie, and now even if he is interested in living with his wife, he cannot. But Annie forgives him, takes him back silently, and lives with him till he dies.

Death separates Annie from him again. She has lived with him for a very short period, and that brief period is also not in her memory and also not memorable. All her romantic dreams have been shattered. Unable to tolerate the tragic termination of her conjugal life, to escape from the sufferings and to forget the bitter experience with her husband, she drinks at taverns with strangers. But as she is hopeless, she is left in the kitchen with a "violet," a symbol of her loneliness. She is not able to come to terms with reality due to her romantic idealization of love and conjugal life. The most important destructive force in Annie Allen's life is her passivity, which dooms her. Romanticized conception of love contributes to the failure of her "in-correctible" romance.

The protagonist of Brooks's only novel *Maud Martha* can be seen as the counterpart of Annie Allen. But unlike Annie Allen, who is inescapably beaten by the destructive force of romantic idealism, Maud Martha evolves from her romantic dreams, and ultimately comprehends reality, and finds fulfilment and contentment in her role as wife and mother.

Rejection by the lover in preference to a light-complexioned woman is not just the experience of Annie Allen, Chocolate Mabbie, and Pearl May Lee, but also the experience of Maud Martha. Such a rejection of black

women by black women pervades all through the entire gamut of Brooks's poetry. But not all the women of Brooks have the same perspective of rejection. Unable to have a pragmatic perception of rejection, black women attempt to escape from sufferings due to rejection, but only a few succeed and emerge out of the inevitable tragedy.

Maud Martha is rejected by her husband. When she sees her husband, Paul, dance with a light-complexioned woman, she realizes that her colour will always be "like a wall" in her relationship with him. Like Annie Allen, Maud Martha also romanticizes Paul's shortcomings. But later she understands that he is crude and superficial. She is aware that Paul can never fully love her, because she is darker than he. For her husband as well as for many black men, "Pretty would be a little-colored thing with curly hair" (Brooks 1953: 51). At the Foxy Cats Club Dance, Paul leaves her to dance with "someone red-haired and curved, and white as a white" (Brooks 1953: 211). Maud knows that her dark complexion is the cause of his rejection:

What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping. (Brooks 1953: 213-14)

She does not, however, reject Paul because of his weakness. She tolerates him, and lives with a complete understanding of his weakness. Maud is well aware of the positive and negative aspects of human life; hence, she has learnt to accept human condition as it is. Patricia H. Lattin and Vernon E. Lattin have observed Brooks's positive vision of life:

It is not an overstatement to say that in *Maud Martha* Brooks suggests a positive way of life that can help one maintain one's self-respect and creativity in the face of the racism and death which surround one. One can create in spite of the deadening realities of life. (Lattin 1984: 185)

The significant virtue of Maud Martha is that she is able to maintain her humanity, grace, and dignity despite the world being absurd and violent, to which she has never been blind. Unlike Annie Allen, Maud has a positive vision of life:

On the whole she felt life was more comedy than tragedy. Nearly everything that happened had its comic element... Sooner or later one could find something to laugh at in almost every situation. That was what, in the last analysis, could keep folks from going mad. If Annie Allen is mad, it is not just because she has been betrayed by her faithless husband, but also due to her inability to maintain a positive vision of life. (Brooks 1953: 163)

Maud has been trapped by her marriage and her life in her kitchenette. In the kitchenette building, she has caught a mouse which has escaped her for many days. Having caught the mouse, she feels pity for the mouse, because it too has a family. Hence, she does not kill the mouse and lets it go off. It is Maud's positive regard for domestic life that has made her release the mouse: "Go home to your children... To your wife or husband" (Brooks 1953: 84). Maud Martha resumes her domestic tasks with "a new clearness in her" (Brooks 1953: 84). These words of Maud have racial implications also. Maud indirectly seems to tell the whites that to the blacks even the life of animals and birds is precious, but the whites do not have this attitude towards blacks, who are after all human beings in no way inferior to the whites.

The diversity among Brook's women is universal, though the blacks are forced to live in the ghettos and are considered inferior to the whites. Brooks reveals to the whole world, especially to the white world, that the life and experience of the blacks are everybody's life and experience in every country, race or culture. Brooks expresses her vision of these aspects of the urban black life in her autobiography *Report from Part One*:

I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that the grimmest of these is likely to have a streak or two streaks of sun. In the Mecca were murders, loves, loneliness, hates, jealousies. Hope occurred, and charity, sainthood, glory, shame, despair, fear, altruism. (Brooks 1972: 189-190)

Enduring Love Relationship

After reading these poems, her readers should not conclude that there are no happy lovers or couples among blacks. To comprehend her holistic representation of black women, readers must read the entire gamut of Brooks's poetry. The idea is that Brooks has not failed to portray happy lovers or couples. Mrs. Sally's oldest daughter in *In the Mecca* can be cited as an example for positive thought, romantic striving and also rationalization:

It is not necessary, says Yvonne,
 To have everyday him whom
 To the end thereof you will love.
 Because it is tasty to remember
 He is alive and laughs
 In somebody's room,
 Or is slicing a cold cucumber,
 Or is buttoning his cuffs,
 Or is signing with his pen
 And will plan
 To touch you again. (Brooks 1968: 130-140)

Here Yvonne's happiness and conjugal bliss is due to her identification with her lover. She thinks that it is not necessary to be with him always. Though they are separated physically, they are united in thoughts and feelings. His absence indeed makes her heart grow fonder, and she firmly believes that he "will plan to touch you again."

In the poem "To be in Love", the lady simply celebrates the exalted state of love resulting from the emotion: "To be in love/ Is to touch things with a lighter hand./ In yourself you stretch, you are well" (Brooks 1968: 1-3). Here the woman is caught by romantic passion. Though she prefers to live in the world of illusion, she is happy.

In the poem "An Aspect of Love", Brooks deals with the unity of lovers, and celebrates a different concept of black womanhood and manhood involved in love in a revolutionary way:

In a package of minutes there is this We.
How beautiful.
Merry foreigners in our morning,
We laugh, we touch each other,
Are responsible props and posts. (Brooks 1971: 1-5)

Here "package" symbolizes the togetherness of lovers, and the metaphor "how beautiful" reveals the black woman's celebration of their unique beauty, which need not be compared to the whites' and judged by the standard of beauty prescribed by the Europeans.

The feeling of togetherness of the lovers enables them to discover each other and respond to the world:

You rise, Although
Genial, you are in yourself again.
I observe
Your direct and responsible stride.
.....
On the street we smile.
We go
In different directions
Down the imperturbable street. (Brooks 1971: 9-24)

Even if the lovers are separated physically, they will remain united in thoughts and feelings. One important cause of the split in the relationship between black men and women is racial and intraracial prejudice. But here the lovers cannot be separated by such prejudices: "We go/ in different directions/ down the *imperturbable* street" (italics mine).

In "Women in Love", Brooks presents two women who have got an increased awareness of their deficiencies and the insatiable expectations of

their lovers. In the first poem “Estimable Mable”, Mable always thinks that “When I see you/will like me less than you expected to” (Brooks 1971: 1-2). But she is disappointed by her deficiencies or her inability to fulfil the expectations of her lover. She loves him for what he is, and she expects him to love her for what she is. But Mable does not complain about her or his deficiencies.

In the second poem “Love You Right Back”, the woman makes all attempts to fulfil all the expectations of her lover, but she is not able to quench his insatiable expectations. She gives him her body and mind, but they are not enough for him:

When all my body has
 All my mind has
 Pounded out to press
 Symbols and seals into your waitingness—
 WILL NOT BE ENOUGH! (Brooks 1971: 1-5)

She feels that neither her love nor her physical intimacy is enough for him. Even the passionate and sensual expressions of her love are not enough for him:

Love's not enough to give you.
 Any kiss
 is not enough.
 Any honey-sermons of the pulse that
 I can confer, call forth
 Through eagle-heats, through robins and vultures of giving,
 Through webs of thickened wanting in which are caught
 Love-rack and rainbow—
 WILL NOT BE ENOUGH! (Brooks 1971: 6-14)

She has given him what she has or she can. But what she has given him is not enough for him. Like Mable, she does not find fault with him or hate him. Rather she continues to give him, though whatever she may give will be insufficient to him. No one is perfect, and no one can ever be perfect. It is this understanding of human weakness that enables the woman to continue to love her husband.

To crown all these different black personalities representing varied heterosexual love relationship, in the poem “A Black Wedding Song”, Brooks wishes the couple to have continued strength for the social and personal battles ahead. She tells them that their love is a “weapon-song”, and appeals to them to keep their love strong so as to conquer the cruelties of the world. Further, she tells them the importance of mutual love, which alone will help them to withstand the assaults of the world:

This love is a rich cry over
 The deviltries and the death.
 A weapon-song. Keep it strong.
 Keep it strong.
 Keep it logic and Magic and lightening and muscle.
 Strong hand in hand, stride to
 The Assault that is promised you (knowing
 No armor assaults a pudding or a muscle). (Brooks 1971: 1-8)

The world is a great enemy to lovers. So, Brooks tells them the ways through which they can withstand the assault of the world. First of all, they should be kind towards each other, not only when they are happy, but also when they encounter trouble or suffering. Further they should forgive each other in their daily lives so that their petty quarrels will not cause any damage to their marital bond. Brooks insists that love should be the guiding principle of their marital life:

For you
 I wish the kindness that romps or sorrows along.
 Or kneels.
 I wish you the daily forgiveness of each other.
 For war comes in from the world
 And puzzles a darling duet—
 Tangles tongues,
 Tears hearts, mashes minds;
 There will be the need to forgive.
 I wish you jewels of black love. (Brooks 1971: 12-21)

Brooks's care for the enduring love-relationship of the black couples shows her increased commitment to black love and black solidarity.

Conclusions

Gwendolyn Brooks presents the multi faceted personality of black women having varied kinds of relationship with black men. A careful formalistic approach to all of Brooks's poetry on women, especially the poems dealing with man-woman relationship, reveals two predominant influences in their life, which very often determine their love relationship with black men: One is intraracial discrimination and the other is racial oppression. The European myth of beauty also exerts its powerful influence on black women, forcing them to look down upon themselves as inferior to whites. On the one hand they are not able to win white men due to racial prejudices; on the other they are deserted by blacks themselves in preference to light-complexioned women. Thus, the doubly-jeopardized black women have been subjected to physical and psychological assaults. But not all the black

women's relationship with men is affected by intraracial, racial and other influences. As there are black women whose conjugal life is ruined by their husbands or lovers as in the life of Annie Allen, Chocolate Mabbie, Pearl May Lee and Kathleen Eileen, there are also black women who are pragmatic, who, despite struggles and sufferings, manage to survive and maintain steadfast and healthy relationship with their black men. Brooks is aware of the fact that only a few black women are able to free themselves from the web of racism, intraracism, and sexism that threaten to strangle their relationship with black men. But she is not pessimistic about the present as well as the future of black women; she is indeed optimistic about the future of all black women. Brooks's poem "Weaponed Woman" exactly sums up the position of all black women: "Well, life has been a baffled vehicle/And baffling. But she fights.../ And altogether she does rather well" (Brooks 1971: 1-2, 8). Life is a "baffled vehicle and baffling." But the black woman does not retreat. She has fought, fights, and will fight the "baffled vehicle" of life, survive the onslaught of racism, intraracism and sexism, and will surely establish a dignified existence and dignified relationship with black men.

References

- Adams RL (1963) *Great Negroes Past and Present*. Chicago, IL: Afro-American.
- Brooks G (1945) *A Street in Bronzeville*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Brooks G (1949) *Annie Allen*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Brooks G (1953) *Maud Martha*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Brooks G (1960) *The Bean Eaters*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Brooks G (1968) *Selected Poems*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Brooks G (1969) *Riot*. Detroit, MI: Broadside.
- Brooks G (1971) *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*. New York, NY: Harper.
- Brooks G (1972) *Report From Part One*. Detroit, MI: Broadside.
- Dawson EW (1989) Vanishing Point: The Rejected Black Women in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. *Obsidian* II 4(1): 1-11.
- Gould J (1984) *Modern American Women Poets*. New York, NY: Mead.
- Hansell WH (1974) The Role of Violence in Recent Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks. *Studies in Black Literature* 5: 21-27.
- Hudson CF (1973) Racial Themes in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks. *College Language Association Journal* 17: 16-20.
- Kent GE (1989) *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Lattin P and Lattin E (1984) Dual Vision in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*.

Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction 25(4): 180-88.

Loff JN (1966) *To Be a Black Woman in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Dissertation from South Illinois University.

Melhem DH (1989) *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.

Ostendorf B (1982) *Black Literature in White America*. Totowa, NJ: Barnes.

Sheftall BG (1987) The Women of Bronzeville. In Mootry MK and Smith G (eds) *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Smith G (1983) Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville*, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Mythologies of Black Women. *Melus* 9: 33-46.

Tate C (1987) Anger so Flat: Gwendolyn Brooks's *Annie Allen*. In Mootry MK and Smith G (eds) *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.