

The Mother Figure in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*

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ABSTRACT

A reading of African American women writers reveal their persistent preoccupation with mother figures which is largely determined by their urge to refute the negative racist stereotypes of African American womanhood and motherhood and to reconstruct a standard of motherhood from the African American perspective. The present paper seeks to study in what ways Gwendolyn Brooks in *Maud Martha* rejects the stereotypes and deals with the issue of mothering and motherhood through the representation of the mother figure in the novel.

Key Words: African American, stereotypes, womanhood, mother, motherhood, resistance

The vast corpus of writings by African American women reveals their relentless preoccupation with mother figures who more often than not occupy the central position, influencing the course of action and the development of characters. Worth noting here is the fact that, the concept of the mother has been a point of debate in the context of the portrayal of the African American world, particularly by the Euro Americans, where the idea of motherhood and mothering has been distorted by the undue emphasis on negative stereotypes such as the “mammy”, the “matriarch” and the “super strong black mother” which Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” (266). Therefore, the women writers’ concern with the mother figure is determined by their urge to challenge the widespread racist and sexist assumptions of African American womanhood and motherhood and to develop “ an Afrocentric feminist analysis of Black motherhood” (Collins, 115).

Gwendolyn Brooks, the poet Laureate of Chicago in her lone novel *Maud Martha* (1953) deals with the issue of motherhood and mothering as an empowering experience for African American women living in a racist society. This novel traces the growth of the mind of the protagonist Maud Martha Brown, alongside the delineation of her journey from girlhood to womanhood, to married life and to pregnancy, child birth, and lastly motherhood in the midst of overriding ideologically rooted weights of racism and sexism endemic to her society. Brooks’s novel points to a specific revision in the portrayal of African American mother, for here we see a

woman who is not an all sacrificing 'mammy', a 'domineering matriarch' or a sexually deprived woman. On the contrary, she is an ordinary woman, a mother who not only resists and subverts the race and gender specific roles foisted on her by the white, patriarchal society but also endeavours to create her own world by 'transforming externals through her thoughts and imaginings" (Christian, 244). Herein, the author intends to show how motherhood for the female protagonist becomes a vehicle of insight into her self-worth and uniqueness and transforms her into a defiant person ready to fight for her daughter's rights and happiness.

Maud Martha Brown, a simple and unassuming African American girl, grows up largely adhering to woman's prescribed roles and to the prevailing racial norms as well. Until the point she gets married, one hardly notices any notable quality that sets her apart from other women of her racial group, neither in her behaviour nor in mental prowess aside from the fact that she loves common flowers like dandelions, and that she likes reading books more than attending parties. However, Maud Martha's compliance does not mean that she is not distressed by the colour prejudices pervasive not only in her society but also present in her family. She is often confounded by the fact that her sister Helen - blessed with a lighter skin tone and blonde hair- enjoys favours and attention of their father and brother while her own needs and desires are often overlooked. She feels deprived when her male friends at school rebuff her for her dark complexion. She is pained and annoyed at such disparity of treatment but she unable able to externalize her disappointment and anger against these prejudices. Mary Helen Washington describes Maud as a character who "has learned to conceal her feelings behind a mask of gentility, to make her hate silent and cold" (387).

However, the interior monologues and authorial comments in the novel bring to light some notable changes in Maud Martha's persona and attitude after her marriage with Paul. Maud becomes upset with the identity assigned to her by the social order and her husband, Paul. She always feels that she is not given the respect and appreciation she deserves, because of her colour and gender. She is even aware that her husband, who has a liking for light skinned women, is not capable enough to appreciate her prettiness and the finer traits of her character. However, Maud's experiences of racism and her consequent sufferings and frustration with her life do not batter and destroy her altogether. Notwithstanding the adverse circumstances and hatred in the culture, she positively looks at the offensive factors in life. As a matter of fact, this part of her life's journey which recounts her young womanhood and married life also depicts her struggle to

break away from such a repressing life and her desire to refashion her identity as against white, male constructed ones.

bell hooks, the eminent African American feminist critic is of the opinion that in order to move from the margin to the centre, African American women must “find a voice” (12). Then only they can redefine their self- image challenging the negative identity that has been foisted on them by the larger culture. And in achieving this ‘voice’, the experiences of motherhood and mothering played a very important role for African American women surviving in a racist society. African American feminists have argued that child birth celebrates female body, and motherhood becomes an empowering experience for African American women, a site for self articulation and self definition against all attempts of erasure by the racial beliefs and ideas. It is seen in the novel that Maud Martha fails to express her bottled up rage against her experiences of racism and sexism until she conceives and eventually becomes a mother. It is during maternity Maud Martha first began asserting her authority and challenging the values and culture that render women of her race invisible to the rest of society. To cite a case in point, when Maud Martha observed Maella, the blonde girl dancing intimately with her husband she is so infuriated by the scene that she felt like scratching, spitting at, and yelling at Paul’s dance partner. Maud Martha who is pregnant with Paul’s child justifies her right to attack saying “I am making baby for this man...” (Brooks 1625). The maternal identity triggers her self-respect and awareness of her rights and thus, she reacts, though internally. Again, in the vignette, “at the Burns-Coopers”, we find Maud shattering the negative stereotype of African American women as subservient maid. On being humiliated, she decides to quit her much needed job with the Burns-Cooper as she feels that she too has the right to be a human. She responds “Why, one was a human being. One wore clean nightgowns. One loved one’s baby” (Brooks 1646). She has been belittled and snubbed for much of her life, and she has finally had enough. Maud sees the world and defines her position in terms of mothering, in terms of “one loves one’s baby”. Maud’s resolve to quit her well paid job shows that she has transformed from a self-effacing and compliant African American young woman to an audacious, assertive and self-assured woman, who is all set to wage war for her rights. Gloria Thomas Pillow offers a striking explanation of Maud Martha’s changing behaviour in these words:

This defiant behavior so different from her generally compliant nature, is a mystery even to Maud Martha, who has not yet analysed the reason for altered response to external

antagonism. Her oblique reference to Paulette in her internal argument to Mrs. Burns Cooper (“one loved one’s baby”), however suggest that, at least on a subconscious level, she is beginning to derive a more resolute sense of being and a new inner strength in direct connection with her maternal self. (108)

And it is through the omniscient narrator’s revelation of the workings of Maud’s mind that the readers are able to get an insight into the evolution of her consciousness and attitude that eventually paves the way for her to attain her voice.

Worth mentioning here is the fact that until now, despite burning with anger, Maud Martha has not yet expressed her annoyance and objections in words. So far, she has registered her opposition to the discriminatory treatments through embodied voice. It is only when she becomes a mother and has to fight for her right Maud finally attains ‘voice’. Says Patricia Hills Collins, “Pregnancy and the birth of a child connect Maud to some power in herself, some power to speak, to be heard, to articulate feelings” (137). In the vignette titled “childbirth” Maud gives birth to a girl. During her delivery she asserts her voice loudly, demanding attention and care from both her husband and mother. She compellingly orders Paul to stay with her during labour saying “DON’T YOU GO OUT OF HERE AND LEAVE ME ALONE!” and tells her mother, “Listen if you’re going to make a fuss, go on out” (Brooks, 1626 - 1627). Towards the end of this vignette Maud quietly asks herself, “Had she ever in her life felt so well”? (1628). Her expression shows how mother- daughter relationship can promote reclamation of self-worth and empowerment to give a meaning to life. Her maternal self swells her with self-esteem and power and confers her voice to verbalise her demands, hopes and dream.

Shielding children from the interlocking system of race, class and gender oppression has always remained a serious concern of the African American mothers. As a typical African American mother bringing up her daughter in a racist social structure, Maud ensures that her daughter gets a secure and nourishing home life, something she pined for. While she herself was much frustrated by racist prejudices during her formative years she struggles hard to protect her daughter from all these harsh forces of her social milieu and to bring her up with all love, care and the nourishment of tradition and culture. She vehemently articulates her resistance to the discrimination and neglect that upset her daughter. This occurs in vignette 33 “trees leaves leaving trees” when Maud’s daughter Paulette tries to tell Santa Claus what gift she desires for Christmas and Santa in the denigration of her race snubs and overlooks her daughter Paulette for

her colour. When Maud finds that her daughter's interest is at stake, she no longer remains silent but speaks out. With an assertive and commanding tone Maud Martha compels the Santa to listen to her daughter's plea directly saying, "Mister, my little girl is talking to you" (Brooks 315). What is noteworthy here is that until that time, Maud Martha who has all along been struggling to verbalise her resentment, does not falter to raise her voice in an inflexible statement when she sees her daughter's pleasure in jeopardy compelling Santa to pay a heed to Paulette's request even though grudgingly. Maud's reaction to Santa's behaviour not only ridicules his racist bias but also unveils the double standards of white Santa Claus as an icon of Christmas happiness and love.

Again, this bitter experience emotionally impacted Maud Martha, making her aware that as a mother it is her duty to safeguard her daughter's childhood fantasies and dreams. She understands that for her daughter's positive development, she has to stand firm against the racist social order and see to it that her daughter's childhood world of innocence and joyfulness does not get shattered by an early awareness of racist prejudices. Therefore, with a view to pacify the insult, she very delicately responds to Paulette's practical queries about Santa's indifferent behaviour. She comforts her daughter assuring her that Santa loves her same as any other white child and will surely meet with her list of requests on Christmas morning. Maud's retaliation makes it clear that while she has remained silent to the racist and sexist prejudices all her life she will not do the same when it comes in the way of her daughter's happiness. She will stand against all the oppressive forces that could crush her daughter's childhood joy and imagination. Notable here is the fact that, the bond between the mother and daughter makes Maud Martha aware of her own being as valuable, unique and gives her the strength to refuse to be devalued. She becomes optimistic of the coming days. Her hopefulness and confidence lie in the fact that man's inanity can hardly wipe out even "the basic equanimity of the least and commonest flower; for would its kind not come up again in the spring? Come up, if necessary, among, between, or out of Beastly environment" (Brooks, 1650). Patricia Hills Collins echoes this when she observes, "Her child serves as a catalyst for her movement into self-definition, self valuation and eventual empowerment" (137).

Through the portrait of Maud Martha the author Gwendolyn Brooks deals "with issue of reproductive power in *Maud Martha*" (Collins 137). What Brooks is trying to establish here is that, though in Western context motherhood is viewed as a male-defined institution and a site of

repression but for African American women, the experiences of mothering and maternal identity can be a source of authority and liberation. Toni Morrison later expresses this generative and liberating aspect of mothering/motherhood in these words: "There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me" (270). In the novel, Maud Martha is a mother to whom motherhood offers a site where she speaks about and realises the strength of self definition, the import of adoring and valuing herself, her skin tone and appearance, the need for independence and voice. She is a mother who is primarily a human being with unique individuality, a distinct person who can have the ability to understand that motherhood and personal identity are not incompatible. It would not be wrong to say thus, in portraying Maud Martha as a mother Gwendolyn Brooks has highlighted the liberating aspect of motherhood/mothering which has served as an agency to confront and destabilize the standards and structures that malign African American womanhood. At the same time she has tried to recreate the mother of the African past rendered to a state of cultural invisibility under the pressures of slavery and racist assumptions.

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