

## HOUSING THE BLACK BODY: A STUDY OF RACE AND GENDER OPPRESSION IN GWENDOLYN BROOK'S *MAUD MARTHA*

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### **Abstract:**

*The unjust social structure of race and gender plummeted many African American women to denigrating stereotypes which not only stripped them of their identity but also thrashed them into the narrow corridors of cultural invisibility. Reconstructing a positive identity by subverting these images of the subaltern has been the primary issues in the writings of these African American women writers. Maud Martha surfaces as a pioneering instance of their resistance against the oppressive forces of racism and sexism prevalent in the American society*

*We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong  
Like "rent," "feeding a wife," satisfying a man."  
But could a dream send up through onion fumes  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms. (Brooks 11)*

The unjust social structure of race and gender plummeted many African American women to denigrating stereotypes which not only stripped them of their identities but also thrashed them into the narrow corridors of cultural invisibility. Reconstructing a positive identity by subverting these images of the subaltern has been the primary issues in the writings of these African American women writers. Maud Martha surfaces as a pioneering instance of their resistance against the oppressive forces of racism and sexism prevalent in the American society. Hence Maud Martha rethinks and reshapes the conventional portrayal of an African American woman named Martha who not only resists and subverts the so called "roles" coined by the patriarchal society but also boldly attempts to reconstruct her own castle by "transforming externals through her thoughts and imaginings". (Christian 244).

Gwendolyn Brook's emphasis on the 'ordinariness' of her female protagonist 'Martha' and her community is commendable as it inevitably challenges the conventional white and black male writings where in the 'woman in black' has always been portrayed either as a blessed or as a cursed portrait without any complexity of her identity. Christian applauds the publication of Maud Martha (1953) as a stupendous feat in African American women's writing as it marks the beginning of a black female author who delineates an identical 'black' character churned out of the same 'black' community and living an ordinary life as Christian elaborates, "what Brooks emphasizes in the novel is Maud Martha's awareness that she is seen as common, and that there is no much more in her 'little life' will allow her to be". (Christian 238)

Martha's metamorphosis from girlhood to womanhood is proficiently structured upon the thirty four vignettes that the novel sets out with. Her journey of struggle is later paved by the strong ideological roots of racism and sexism within the 20<sup>th</sup> century America. The novel beautifully transgresses from depicting Martha as a reticent ordinary black woman who defies the white supremacist ideologies. Brook further deconstructs the culturally composed caricatures of these African American women and plucks them from invisibility eventually tagging her as the predecessor of black feminists of 1970s and 80s who

wrangled their way out from the dingy black social hierarchies.

Her feelings of complex generate right from the childhood when her sister Helen, blessed with light skin tone and blonde hair enjoys the edge over her by receiving the pampering showered upon her by her brother and her father whereas her needs on the other hand were left unnoticed and ignored. Martha's pain burdened with the feelings of dejection are evident when she says, "Helen was still the ranking queen, not only with the Emmanuel's of the world, but even with their father-their mother-their brother". (Brooks 1611). The same feeling of despondency erupts when her husband neglects her in the ball at Foxy Cats Club and prefers dancing with a fair skinned girl. These experiences of desolation overpower her naïve psyche resulting into internal conflicts and self-hatred. She gets trapped into the "whiteness" and the so called "white" yardstick of beauty showcased by the society. She realizes that her "black" complexion will always stand tall like the wall between the two and Paul, her husband, would find it too difficult to climb up the wall and appreciate Martha's inner beauty and grace. Paul succumbs to the overriding desire to intimate a white woman. Brooks characterizes Paul as a representative of those African American men "who are yet to come to terms with the profoundest impulses concerning African American women and their Africanity". (Spillers 140)

The noteworthy part about Maud Martha's personality is that she never lets the incidents of gender prejudices demoralize or bog her spirits down as rightly put forward by Spillers, "Maud possesses highly developed powers to play well within the framework of the possibilities to which she has access". (Maud Martha 137). She understands the essence of life and without shedding a single tear she marches ahead donning the conventional role of a wife, "...she was going to keep herself to herself". (Brooks 106). On the contrary, she indulges into cooking- an art and a job assigned to women by social norms and employs this domestic work to her own advantage. In the chapter entitled "Maud Martha spares a mouse", she deliberately releases a mouse out of the trap evidently signifying and symbolizing her won "release" from the subjugation and dejection leading to the assertion of her feminine growth.

In yet another vignette entitled "millinery" she bluntly refuses to buy millinery offered at a discounted price to the "blacks" consciously declining the social value system that privileges the "whites" and trashes the "blacks". What one observes throughout the reading of Martha is the inability of using a verbal resistance to her injustice and humiliation. But we feel her vocal presence when she roared her tone to the Santa Claus who ignores her daughter Paulette under the garb of "darkness". "Mister", she says "my little daughter is talking to you". Here we witness a rather "rebellious" Martha who verbally resists all forms of oppression for her child. During her labour, she orders her husband Paul, "DON'T YOU GO OUT AND LEAVE ME ALONE" indirectly signifying the power of motherhood that pumps her with pride. This power to create life empowers her and gives her the voice to articulate her defiance, her hopes and aspirations.

Hence Maud Martha surfaces as a transformed woman who has proved her identity in society and has voiced her anger and resentment against the oppression of race and gender. She represents a new age "Negro Woman" who is aggressive and assertive in her consciousness of being a "black" woman with self-respect and individuality. Maud Martha's perceptions and ambitions herald a sea change in attitudes and values leading to the reconstruction of a social fabric- the fabric of freedom promoting equality for all- irrespective of one's race and gender.

#### **Works Cited:**

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