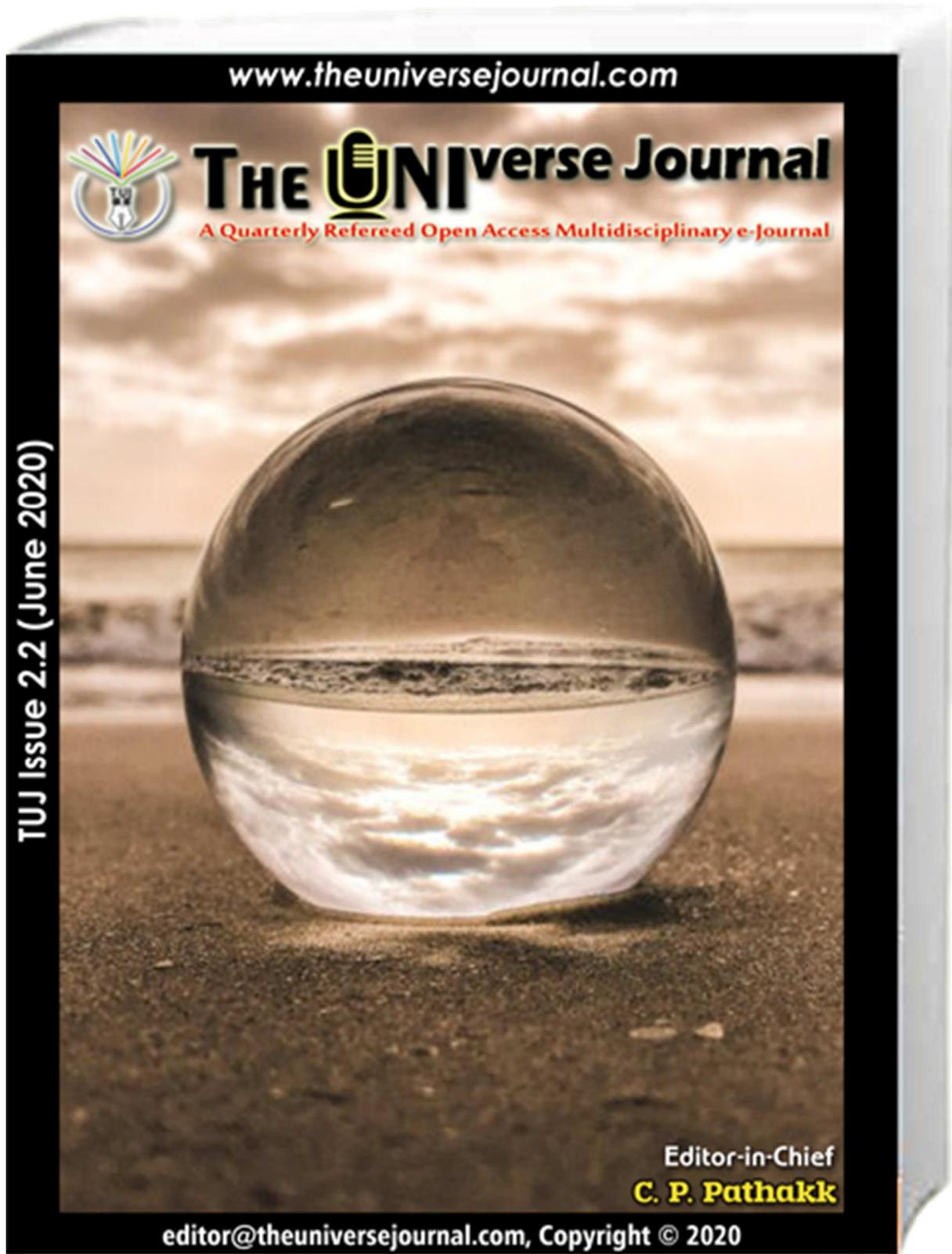


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“Female Ugliness in Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha*: An Invisibility Redefined”

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Abstract

The necessity for women to find out their voice and liberate their bodies has brought about a drastic change to the conventional female stereotypes. In a racist context, where Black American women are doubly segregated against for being a woman and black, grotesque bodies and ugly faces find their way in black American women writers to change the standards and subvert racism and patriarchy on the way to explore their self-consciousness. Seen in this light ugliness can be considered as a strategy of resisting invisibility and gaining presence and agency. This paper focuses on Maud Martha in Gwendolyn Brooks’ only novel and attempts to show how the monstrous and ugly turn invisibility into a unique experience of woman’s journey to come to age and assert her subjectivity. The celebration of the ugly face and monstrous body stands as strategy to resist male-dominant society and subvert racism. The text is also a celebration of the world of imagination and fantasy that was overshadowed in modern times by pragmatic ideologies that stiffened and darkened the human in us. It is a celebration of and a return to those invisible needs feared by patriarchy, rejected by racism, and overlooked by modernity.

Key Words: Black American women, ugliness, grotesque, subjectivity, racism, visibility, invisibility

Introduction

To deal with (in)visibility in a black American context we have to go beyond its mere dictionary definition as black American’s shadowy position is the outcome of social, historical, cultural, and economic conditions that lingered well into the second half of the twentieth century. Their invisibility is therefore due to the racial prejudices imposed on them, touching their lives and lowering their self-esteem. Hence, to tackle the issue of (in)visibility in a black American context, one has to decipher this interpellated tangle of the economic, political, social, and individual dilemmas. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on a little known side of Gwendolyn Brooks, who to many remains a visible poet, yet an invisible fiction writer and storyteller.

Like her poems, her only novel not only reflects her effort to voice the concerns of her community and dissipate the age-long gloom enshrouding their existence, but also explores the plight women like Maud Martha, the female protagonist, had to undergo, the double discrimination they had to overcome for simply being an ugly, pitch black woman. Written in a non-linear structure, based on poetically short vignettes, the novel, *Maud Martha*, is about a 7

year-old Martha who recounts her life, her hopes, and fears in a ghetto-like neighborhood in Chicago. Maud's journey into adulthood touches upon and explores a myriad of thematic concerns of grief, love, class, race, and the everyday indignities of the urban, modern life that adds to black Americans' sense of invisibility and unworthiness.

The Poetics of Visibility vs Invisibility

The text emanates from the black community of the hood, especially their daily strives. By shedding light on their concerns, the author reveals a complex world of meaning, anger, ugliness and beauty, gathered together testify of an awareness of their "literary realities as well as the writing process" (Plate 2010, 4). Such awareness offers the shame, and the beauty of the city of Chicago in a post Second World War America. The text proves to be a reading of the notion of visibility that overcomes the sharp limits of the binary dichotomy of visible vs invisible within a whole cultural and political context that further problematizes the inscription of selfhood and otherness. Visibility Vs Invisibility results in an intertwine of crucial issues related to the matters of subjectivity and objectivity in relation to otherness, blackness constructed by white men as negative becomes the very concern of proving one's presence in a black community in America and asserting one's subjectivity and agency as well as gender identity. This text offers a reading of the notion of visibility that overcome the sharp limits of the binary dichotomy of visible vs invisible within a whole cultural and political context that further problematizes the inscription of selfhood and otherness.

Departing from the dualistic conception of self and other as (in)visible, Homi Bhabha reads invisibility as a problematization of the very notions of identity and identification, as visibility becomes possible only through mimicry, reinscribing the other in a repetitive mocking impersonation, he writes that visibility finds expression in the "desire for a reformed recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (361).

From another angle, theories of gender have sought to deconstruct the essentialist definitions of masculinity and femininity and interrogated the image of invisible womanhood except as other. The plight of Maud Martha is not solely a racial one, but also a gender stereotyping of women as beautiful objects for display, and the self is driven aside to the darkness of marginalized other. This essay attempts at showing how the ugly and unconventional turn invisibility into an overwhelmingly corporeal experience of subjectivity and self-realization.

Women of color grew aware of the double segregation they had to face and the inability of mainstream feminism to engage with their realities. They thus considered the possibility of having a feminism that spoke of and sprung up from their conditions. As a response, Black Feminism emerged in 1973 to back women of color in their fight for civil rights and their vision of a sexist, racist free society (Hull et al., 1982). Black American Feminists understood black women's invisibility as the outcome of intertwined oppression of racism, sexism, and classism,

patterns echoed in Maud Martha's life (Collins 2000), which rendered her shadowiness systematic.

To expand our understanding of black American feminist understanding of black women's invisibility, we need to expand our understanding of the conditions of their life at the eve of the end of WWII. The racial disparities in living standards, housing conditions and health and education attested of the inferiority of the black community. In an important scene in the selected text, the protagonist refers to her neighborhood as:

But now part of it was going home, as she was, and its face was dull again. It had not been helped. Not truly. Not well. For a hot half hour, it had put that light gauze across its little miseries and monotones, but now here they were again, ungauzed, self-assertive, cancerous as ever. (*MM* 45).

She refers to the stifling atmosphere she and her fellow race-men live in as being cancerous, smothering man's potential as it deteriorates their self-esteem, the very instance of black human invisibility. An invisibility that grows more and more to cover female presence.

Maud Martha Resists Invisibility

Gwendolyn Brooks' celebration of Maud's ugliness is to be read as a strategy resisting invisibility in a white patriarchal society, exposing the plight of a black American woman in a racist and sexist society. The necessity for women to find their voice and liberate their bodies has been essential in the gender discourse on visibility and invisibility, bringing a drastic change to society's expected feminine stereotypes. Therefore, grotesque, ugly female characters find their way in women's writing changing the beautiful into the monstrous and the flawless and perfect into hideous and unsightly, and the invisible and unheard into the visible and voiced. Seen in this light ugliness can be considered as a strategy of resisting invisibility.

Being a site of resistance, female ugliness or unfairness is used as a strategy reversing not only women's cultural and social invisibility but also racial invisibility in a racist 1950s America. It is a means of pinpointing the social, cultural and racial illnesses harboured in the American society, allowing the hidden, the repressed, the ugly and inhuman as well as the forbidden to come to the surface and prove the dissent to which affluent America was turning a deaf ear.

Early in the text, Maud, the young dreamy girl, realizes that much of her unpopularity is due to her dark skin color and her long nappy hair. In the text, Maud feels infuriated by the way people judge her looks. Her untamed anger turns her speechless and incomprehensible. Through her short, staccato sentences, Maud tries to justify her parents' preference of her sister Helen. "They could not help it. They were enslaved, were fascinated, and they were not at all to blame" (*MM*

35). In Maud's affirmative sentence, Brooks hints to the beauty standards imposed on black American women that heightened the invisibility of blackness as a beauty standard.

Hill (2002) found that black American men and women judged black American woman's attractiveness based on how light her skin was. Hence, it becomes evident that Maud is consciously challenging white definition of beauty by amplifying her darkness and celebrating her hair. While definitions of beauty vary from one culture to another, brightness remains a determining factor in deciding a woman's beauty, resulting therefore in black American women's being negatively influenced by mainstream standards (Poran 2006) that reject dark skin and afro-textured hair. It is "a story of a woman with doubts about herself and where and how she fits into the world. Maud's concern is not so much that she is inferior but that she is perceived as being ugly," related Harry B. Shaw in *Gwendolyn Brooks*. Maud suffers prejudice not only from whites but also from blacks who have lighter skin than hers, something that mirrors Brooks's experience. .

"The book is . . . about the triumph of the lowly," commented Shaw. "Brooks shows what they go through and exposes the shallowness of the popular, beautiful white people with 'good' hair. One way of looking at the book, then, is as a war with . . . people's concepts of beauty." (as cited in Wright 2001, 125).

The task seems harder for the "ugly Maud" as when blossoming into a young woman she hears her sister Helen asserting "You'll never get a boyfriend . . . if you don't stop reading those books." (MM 165). Maud recognizes that her life won't get easier as Helen "still the pretty one, the lovely one" (MM 160). Things get even tougher for the young Maud when time comes for experiencing romance. "He wanted a dog," (MM 172) mocks her sister Helen. The animal image serves Maud's awareness of her oppression as an object that further shadows her subjectivity and self-consciousness. Her deteriorating self-esteem reaches a peak when being rejected by the man she loves.

Her constant awareness of Paul's preference for light-skinned women is a source of pain and insecurity. In one incident at the Foxy Cats Club dance, Maud Martha, pregnant with her first child, feels a hateful jealousy as Paul dances with a beautiful red-haired woman and leaves her sitting alone. Neglecting her emotional status, Paul adds to Maud's lower self-esteem by always heightening her sense of ugliness and unworthiness. The text rises the ultimate question as in judging beauty, why do people overlook the characteristics of inner beauty, such as compassion and intelligence, and focus instead on physical appearance such as the texture of hair and the creaminess of complexion.

The dichotomy of dark and light is best studied in this novel in places similar to above mentioned instances where Maud Martha compares herself to Helen, her sister whom she

considers as the embodiment of all light-skinned women in society. Whenever she faces a situation where she is treated low due to her dark skin and appearance, she starts to compare the situation as to how it would turn if Helen were in her place, by doing so she starts feeling inferior and also jealous from her own sister who is having a better complexion than her.

She also gets deeply offended in places where her husband avoids her in a social gathering and hints on light-skinned women to dance. She feels less important in her own family due to her dark skin and uneven hair. She has a feeling that people will not respect her or notice her due to her dark skin, a colour that stands as a wall that cannot be breached even by her husband Paul. She feels it will be difficult for Paul to cross over the barrier of her dark skin to see who she really is. The choice of a pitch black female protagonist leaves no doubt as to Brooks' agenda to carry the struggle for proving the beauty of blackness, a slogan raised during the heydays of the Harlem Renaissance by leaders and poets such as Marcus Garvey and Langston Hughes, both of who had a great influence on Brooks' poetry that sought to capture the essence of the black experience as a universal existence, manifestation and resistance.

It is then actually that Maud resorts to reading: "reading has opened another avenue of possibilities that she will not surrender herself without a fight"(MM 137). Fantasies, stories were her staple food that took her away from the coerciveness of her marriage. It is in these dreams that she realizes her missing, overshadowed self. Once the pre marriage dreams shattered, Maud resorts to daydream to embellish her present by constantly shifting furniture in an endless attempt to make her house look better, manifesting an ability to understand and create beauty in the least expected of places and ways, a beauty that touches the soul.

It is then that even her ugliness is redefined and becomes a desire rather than a hindrance for a strong female subjectivity that stands in the face of gender as well as racial discrimination. Ignoring the needs of men, she discovers her self and celebrates both her voice and body. It is in the delivering room that her self is better liberated with those screams of life. Maud asserts the vitality and beauty of her body that has long been stigmatized as ugly and monstrous. I could scream, Listen. I could scream. I am making a baby," (MM 200) she repeats. She actually seeks subjectivity through what is conventionally repressed and relegated to the shadowy and oblivious realm of the marginalized other. In their study of the nineteenth century fiction, Gilbert and Gubar point to the image of the ugly monstrous women who function as a subversion to the dominant prototype of the angel in the house, claiming that such an image

Helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed and loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own, inexorably female bodies. The "killing" of oneself into an art object . . . the pruning and preening, the mirror madness and concern with odours and aging, with hair which is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick . . . all this

testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying not to become female monsters (34).

Her ugliness is no longer a cultural construct, it is the creation of her own desire to be omnipotent. Her hair and body reflect the intensity of her desire, a desire for love, future and fantasy all of which manifested in her imagination.

By the end of the novel, Maud is able to touch the beauty inside that transcends the barriers of skin colour and texture and points to the actual ugliness of the world when her brother returns home after the end of the war. Brooks writes “There was no peace, [when] her brother Harry was back from the wars,” (*MM* 177) carrying images of dismembered men and lynched figures. The actual ugliness lies in the shattered dreams of black Americans who thought they would settle democracy and gain respect as American veterans at home, but instead they returned home to be “men with two arms off and two legs off, the men with parts of faces. . . . And the Negro press . . . carried out the stories of the latest of Georgia and Mississippi lynching. . .” (*MM* 178-79). It is that true ugliness and wretchedness camouflaged with a false hope of democracy that Brooks voices through her female character. She pinpoints the lies and false ideologies and perceptions that tear humanity apart for the sake of a false vanity fair.

Conclusion

Maud Martha is a text that brought the invisible out to the centre. It has shed light on Brooks as a novelist and Maud as an ugly-beautiful woman, a woman who chooses to live out what others stigmatize as ugly and monstrous. She lives her subjectivity by asserting her own definition of beauty, bringing the question to a higher level where the personal becomes political. The journey into maturity goes through the struggle of knowing and accepting the self. The path was thorny, but Maud Martha, equipped with imagination and creativity, embraces her difference and seeks beauty in the stigmatized.

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