

A Quest in Vain: Salvaging Hope in Gwendolyn Brooks' *In The Mecca* (1968)

Abstract:

In her quest to engage with and resist the label of marginal outsider, African-American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) reveals a minimum degree of restraint in her poetry when confronting issues of ethnicity and womanhood. Brooks is persistent in calling attention to the miserable conditions of blacks, especially black women, in her race-conscious black Chicago community. Her 1968 poetry volume, *In the Mecca* represents the dramatic quest of a poverty-stricken black woman in search for a lost child who is eventually discovered dead at the hands of Jamaican Edward; a male resident of the dilapidated Chicago Mecca building. The woman's frantic pilgrimage to retrieve her lost daughter, "Pepita" is infused with anger, compassion and hope. Economic struggle, resulting from racial discrimination, undoubtedly determines the poor woman's life while survival and conflict rudely foreground the tragedy. As such, Gwendolyn Brooks endeavours in *In the Mecca* to re-map the identity of her female compatriots – women trapped within adverse social and racial circumstances and, thus, bearing the brunt of discrimination. Together with her protagonist, Brooks willingly embarks upon a journey to disclose and subvert the plight of womanhood in her community. Gwendolyn Brooks situates a new territory on the literary map: the oppression and exclusion of African-American women, and the accompanying representative images of wounding and scarring. A race-conscious American culture reveals these women as paying the heavier price by discriminating racial and gender codes. Yet, it is in the poetic endeavours of women like Brooks; in her search to embody the homeless and placeless women of her black community - to give voice to their real sufferings - that she must open old wounds and point to the scars. This paper is an investigation of this quest.

Key Words: African-American Womanhood – race – discrimination – *In The Mecca*

الملخص:

الشاعرة الأمريكية، ذات الأصول الأفريقية، جويندلين بروكس (1917 – 2000) اشتبكت طوال رحلتها الأدبية بشكل ايجابي مع القضايا العرقية والنسائية لمجتمعها ذات الأصول الأفريقية بمدينة شيكاغو الأمريكية. فهي دائمة الاهتمام بالظروف التعيسة الذي يعيشها هذا المجتمع المهمش وخاصة المرأة التي تواجه أضعاف ما يواجهه الرجال من فقر وقهر. ففي ديوانها الشعري "في مأوى مكة" (1968) ترصد الشاعرة رحلة امرأة سوداء فقيرة بحثاً عن ابنة صغيرة مفقودة تجدها في النهاية مقتولة على يد رجل أسود من سكان مبنى إيواء للسود الفقراء في شيكاغو الأمريكية يدعى "مكة" وهو المبنى الذي تدور بداخله الأحداث

الدرامية للديوان. وتمتزج الرحلة المريرة للأُم بحثًا عن الابنة المفقودة بالغضب والعطف والأمل، وهي رحلة تلقى بظلالها الكثيفة على المعاناة الاقتصادية والنفسية لهذه الفئة من النساء والناجمة عن العنصرية العرقية داخل المجتمع الأمريكي. فالمرأة ذات الأصول الأفريقية، كما ترى بروكس، تعاني أضعاف ما يعانيه أقرانها من الرجال ليس فقط لكونها سوداء ولكن لكونها امرأة أيضا. فهي تارة تواجه عنصرية المجتمع الأمريكي الأبيض وتارة أخرى تتعرض لقهر الرجال السود في محيطها البائس. وباكتشاف مقتل الابنة لا يبدو في الأفق سبيل لخلاص هذه المرأة وغيرها من سكان هذا المأوى. وتحاول بروكس من خلال هذا الديوان أن تستهل رحلة لكشف مأساة المرأة السوداء في مجتمعها عسى أن تمنحهم صوتا يجهرون به ضد هذا القهر المزدوج الذي يعانيه. فهي تفتح جروحا قديمة لم تلتئم وتشير إليها بإصبعها عسى أن تجد من يداويها.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

المرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي – العرق – التمييز – ديوان "في مأوى مكة"

"What else is there to say but everything?"

G. Brooks, *In the Mecca*

In the endeavour to combat the inhumane reality of a marginalized black community, African-American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) boldly confronts issues of womanhood in relation to ethnicity. Brooks is persistent in calling attention to the miserable conditions of blacks, especially black women, in her race-conscious black Chicago community. Her 1968 poetry volume, *In the Mecca* represents the dramatic quest of a poverty-stricken black woman in search for a lost child who is eventually discovered dead at the hands of Jamaican Edward; a male resident of the dilapidated Chicago Mecca building.¹ The woman's frantic *pilgrimage* to retrieve her lost daughter, "Pepita" is infused with anger, compassion and hope. Economic struggle, resulting from racial discrimination, undoubtedly determines the poor woman's life while survival and conflict flagrantly foreground the tragedy.

As such, Gwendolyn Brooks endeavours in *In the Mecca* to re-map the

1. There is no explicit reference in the volume to the relationship of the name of this shelter, "The Mecca" to the sacred Islamic Site. Implicitly, the mother's restless search for her lost daughter throughout the shelter building – circular in design – is a form of pilgrimage to salvage the *soul* of her daughter; a journey reminiscent of the Muslim Pilgrim's rotation around the "Kaaba" in Mecca in search of repentance.

identity of her female compatriots – women trapped within adverse racial circumstances and, thus, bearing the brunt of discrimination. Together with her protagonist, Brooks willingly embarks upon a journey to disclose the plight of womanhood in her community. This paper is an exploration of this quest.

In the Mecca was initially conceived as a teen-age novel in 1954. It drew upon the poet's firsthand experience as a secretary to "a patent medicine purveyor" (Melhem "In the Mecca" 153) in the Mecca building in Chicago during the 1940s. But her editors were apathetic about the manuscript and advised that her training in poetry had ill-prepared her for the "freer area of prose" (Melhem "In the Mecca" 153). Brooks revised and eventually submitted her longest single poem, 807 lines, divided into fifty-six stanzas of uneven length, ranging from one to fifty-three lines. "Random, slant, and internal rhyme and varied metrical patterns," as Melhem notes, "enhance a formal freedom with counterparts in African polyrhythm" ("In the Mecca" 157). The poem exposes the accumulation of an intricate system with its price of success and failure. Brooks' black world mirrors the psychic isolation of its white environment in which the embattled Mecca residents, especially the women, arm themselves with indifference.

"In the Mecca" marks Brooks' rejection of a secure position within the American literary canon. Her entire oeuvre before this collection had been studies of "black subjectivity, of African-American oral and written traditions, sources of knowledge and faith systems; of the psychic and physical effects of racism on the lives of black and white people; and of the richness of the lyric" (Clarke 137). "In the Mecca" treads new ground. It does not attempt to historicize the action within the 1940s or 1950s, nor endeavour to carve within the narratives the true history of the 1960s. The volume depicts the spiritual and psychic condition of urban black people, especially women, in post-modernity. In her notes, "Work Proposed for 'In the Mecca'," She remarks: "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" (*Report* 189).

The critical debate surrounding Brooks's work has focused on the tension between the particular and the universal, the localized and the transcendent. Brooks's attention to the particulars of black life seems to render her poetry less accessible to whites and, therefore, fall short of a "universal" appeal and a "transcendent" value. Brooks' political shift of the late 1960s is a necessary turn inward, to her own community. There is a definite sense of place and position in her work and obviously no attempt to appeal to a broader - i.e. white readership. Brooks exhibits, in fact, the very kind of "both/and conceptual orientation" that Patricia Hill Collins identifies as essential to Black feminist thought. Black women have developed this mode of consciousness, Collins argues, to "negotiate [the] contradictions" inherent in "being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it" (207). In contrast to standard Western "either/or dichotomous thinking" - an approach that relies on binary oppositions, which inevitably revert to hierarchies - Black feminist thought examines a "matrix of domination ... structured along [multiple]" axes (230). Brooks' poetry speaks from the "matrix," and her voice reverberates in both directions along the "axes" of race, class, and gender.

The setting of the poem is the "great gray hulk of brick four stories high," as described by a journalist, John Bartlow Martin (86). Built in 1891, the Mecca was an elite housing complex with carpeted stairs and other embellishments. By 1912, it housed the black elite. But the Depression of the Thirties hastened its decline into a slum building with fire escapes cluttering the façade. "The once elaborate showplace and tourist attraction," as Cheryl Clarke notes, "had become a crowded slum for poor black people and a symbol of encroaching urban blight – a great hulk of modernity confining thousands of expendable people to the bowels of the city" (1).² After the depression, there are no specific estimates of

2. *Life* Magazine, at the time, attributes the decline of the building to the arrival of black tenants:

It was a Mecca for Chicago's rising rich until the South Side became less stylish. By 1912, the first negro tenants had moved in. The building's noisy

how many people lived there at one given time. From three thousand to nine thousand are believed to have lived there (Clarke 1). "You'll find them sleeping in the kitchen under the sink, anywhere they can sleep," one tenant is quoted as revealing to Martin. (91) who categorically labels the building as "one of the most remarkable Negro slum exhibits in the world" (87).³ As Sheila Hughes aptly remarks: "As an abandoned project of modernity, the Mecca stood as a crumbling tower of Babel - a failed attempt at transcendence. As Mecca, it marked the ruin of faith in postmodern times" (15). In 1941, the Illinois Institute of Technology bought the building and tore it down to extend facilities on the site. So, the Mecca building was cleared as a slum in 1952.

"In the Mecca" is a long narrative poem, planned and drafted in the 1950s, but not completed until 1968; sixteen years after the building had been razed. It registers Brooks' growing commitment to a more politically engaged cultural nationalist position in Chicago's black community. Her commiserative narrative contrasts sharply with the more detached mass media representations that commemorate the building's decline before it was demolished. It is the more tempting to view the volume as a narrative of counter memory that employs the formal and rhetorical approach defined by George Lipsitz in "History, Myth, and Counter Memory":

jazz activities gave a name to the Mecca Flat Blues and the apartment complex steadily trumpeted its way downhill. I.I.T (Illinois Institute of Technology) bought it in 1941 but could not wreck it until the 700 occupants could find homes in Chicago's crowded Negro area. Since September I.I.T. had collected no rent from the 51 remaining tenants and hopes to have them all moved out by year's end. (133)

3. John Bartlow Martin wrote about the Mecca for *Harper's Magazine* in 1950, as part of a series on American architectural wonders. In fact, the following excerpt from Martin's lengthy article prefaces "In the Mecca":

... a great gray hulk of brick, four stories high, topped by an ungainly smokestack, ancient and enormous, filling half the block north of Thirty-fourth Street between State and Dearborn.... The Mecca building is U-shaped. The dirt courtyard is littered with newspapers and tin cans, milk cans and broken glass.... Iron fire escapes run up the building's face and ladders reach from them to the roof. There are four main entrances, two on Dearborn and two on State Street. At each is a grey stone threshold and over each is carved, 'The Mecca'....

"Counter-memory forces revision of existing Histories by supplying new perspectives about the past.... Counter-Memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience." (213)

With its emphasis on the local and the personal, with the multiple tales that redefine the collective memory of the Mecca, Brooks foregrounds oral forms of memory that are often erased from dominant historical narratives.

The narrative framework of the poem is simple: Mrs. Sallie Smith goes home to the Mecca building. A poor, black woman, and mother of nine children, she works as a domestic servant. Filled with fantasies of reversing roles, "And that would be my baby ... I my lady;" she "loves and loathes" her employer's pink "toy-child," (9) who is indulged with the material possessions denied her children. Hardworking, yet underpaid, she can afford only ham-hocks, "six ruddy yams" and "cornbread made with water" (11) to feed her family. Mrs. Sallie's reverie ends with the narrator's comment; quite suggestive: "What else is there to say but everything?" (11) When she cannot find Pepita, her youngest daughter, the two sentences in bold capitals are set off as a stanza: "SUDDENLY, COUNTING NOSES, MRS. SALLIE SEES NO PEPITA. WHERE PEPITA BE?"⁴ (13). Her frantic pilgrimage through the Mecca building forms the action. The eventual discovery of the child's body under the cot of Jamaican Edward, one of the dwellers of the Mecca, seems only secondary to the poet's major purpose: the looking into the lives and thoughts of the several types who live in this decayed slum apartment house:

Through the search for Pepita, Miss Brooks presents a number of fascinating characters, all of them somehow the victims of the Mecca. She also brings to the reader some sense of the vibrancy, the drama, and that peculiar tenseness which seems to stay with black ghettos.... Its blight [the Mecca's] never stated but implied, is the blight that comes from being black and poor. (Davis 101)

The reader is, thus, confronted with a relentless narrator who compels the reader to hear the stories of characters speaking their own failings contextualized by a fictional Mecca, infusing the poem with gothic dread.

The construction of the poem mirrors the monumental architecture of its setting. "In the Mecca" appears on the page in blunt, long columns of irregular

verse. Individual characters and their unique "places" are crowded in. This multitude of voices and places is punctuated with stark expressions that struggle

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4. Here, typography stresses both grammar and emotion. Also, a common Black English construction makes its first appearance in Brooks' work: "invariant *be*."

to emerge from the depth of confusion - the most notable being Mrs. Sallie's cry in the Black vernacular, "WHERE PEPITA BE?" Offset by uppercase letters, this singular and panicked call is soon submerged in crowded multiplicity:

... Cap, where Pepita? Casey, where
Pepita?
Emmett and Melodie Mary, where
Pepita?
Briggs, Tennessee, Yvonne, and
Thomas Earl,
where may our Pepita be? (13)

The mother, thus, questions her older children by name, striving to preserve each one's unique place. But they reply in an anonymous chant of ignorance: "Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er/ Ain seen er I ain seen er I ain seen er" (14). Word slides into word, voice blends into voice, face blurs into face in the Mecca's cramped quarters, against a mother's cry and vision that insist on the particularity of a singular loss.

The movement of the poem's 807 lines is encountered as a text of texts; a "speakerly text," (22) or a "narrative-within-a-narrative," (209) as Gates notes, in which race, sexuality, and gender are deeply implicated. The modes of narration split sharply between its "showing" of Mrs. Sallie's desperate search for her missing child, Pepita, and the frenzied deployment of multi-discourse. In each mode of narration, the narrator causes in the reader a crises of witness" (Felman 47-48), an anxiety of fragmentation"(49), an isolation which in the poem is enhanced by the indifference of the other characters to the fate of the missing child and the elevated rhetoric of the narrator, who knows, instinctively the outcome of the search for her daughter.

The poem is mythical and biblical not only in its style but also in its sources: "It draws together," as Sheila Hughes notes, "remnants of Dante's descent into hell, the pastoral ideal of the twenty-third psalm and the American-Johnny-Appleseed-Dream, and the parables of the lost coin and sheep ... to fashion a loosely narrative quest" (17). A little girl has gone missing, and the entire, massive building must be searched to find her. Apartment by apartment, floor by floor, the Mecca is combed, and its inhabitants questioned. What emerges in the poem is not only the loss and containment of the little girl - who has been murdered and stuffed under a bed - but the multitudinous losses, women in particular, that comprise the lives of those who are trapped in the building. The Mecca, despite its expansiveness, provides little space for the exercise of freedom, and so is experienced primarily as a place of confinement. The walls of the building itself might be seen as constructed from the cramped lives and constricted voices of its inhabitants. They have become immobile bricks in their own prison-house.

The poem is also both telescopic and documentary, with the narrator assuming the guise of a film director, commanding attention to her epic production with its apt epigraph of biblical revision: "Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise" (4). The reader is directed to "Sit where the light corrupts your face" (5) and to follow the poem's restricted sphere down the corridors of the immense building to capture a glimpse of a perverse "social panorama" (Melhem, "In the Mecca" 158). A mediating, but unconscious subject led by the narrator, Mrs. Sallie leads the reader through a desolate space ringing with diverse languages (Jones 195): first as she, home from work, "ascends the sick and influential stair" (5) to her fourth-floor apartment, and then as she winds back through the place in search of Pepita.

In the Mecca portrays the everyday struggles of the Mecca inhabitants in an array of voices and styles. "These voices," as Lowney notes, "mix colloquial urban diction with more formal African American traditions of oratory, sermon, and proverb" (4). Brooks' poem is, therefore, paradoxically both elevated and

intimate in its localized form of address. The narrator combines the lofty vision of the epic poet with the more provisional, vernacular voice of the oral storyteller. This narrative stance corresponds with the "dialogic interplay of speech acts that convey the social complexity of the Mecca world" (Lowney 4). Moreover, there is no linguistic hierarchy of speech acts that organizes the narrative; as Jones remarks: "In Brooks' poetry, there is no such hierarchy because any kind of language may occupy any space" (195). Brooks, as such, does not sharply differentiate the "distinguishable" utterance from the "indistinguishable." Instead, she foregrounds how each character – as well as the narrator – is constructed by conflicting discourses.

The poem begins with a single line on a page by itself: "Now the way of the Mecca was on this wise" (4). The sentence sounds authoritative, even prophetic, with the allusive resonance of the holy site of Islam underscoring the narrator's ironic stance towards the Chicago Mecca. It remains for the poem to unfold the wrathful irony in this echo of Mathew in the *New Testament*: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise" (*Holy Bible*, Matthew 1:18, 836). The location and temporality of the narrator are unspecified, while this sentence points to a specific location with its religious indicators. Brooks, as such, makes her reader conscious of his/her involvement in constructing a narrative that can contain the heterogeneous voices of the Mecca.

The introduction to the narrative's protagonist demonstrates the demoralizing poverty which characterizes the residents of Brooks' Mecca; mostly black, underprivileged women:

S. Smith is Mrs. Sallie. Mrs. Sallie
hies home to Mecca, hies to marvelous rest
ascends the sick and influential stair.
The eye unrinsed, the mouth absurd
with the last sourings of the master's feast.
she plans
to set severity apart,
to unclench the heavy folly of the fist. (7)

The story of Mrs. Sallie is immediately situated in the context of racial and class inequality: "In contrast to the humiliation of her job as a domestic

worker, of preparing ‘the master’s feast,’ Mrs. Sallie’s Mecca apartment is a ‘marvelous’ refuge. But this refuge is also defined by the ‘sick and influential stair’ she must climb, with ‘influential’ suggesting how the physiological and psychological effects of poverty are interwoven” (Lowney 10). Being black and a woman accentuates the limitations of her impoverished social class. Mrs. Sallie’s response to her social position, and to the racism that defines this position, is deliberate: she “plans / to set severity apart, / to unclench the heavy folly of the fist.”

This perseverance of Mrs. Sallie in the face of adverse social and economic inequality extends to her children, especially the girls who have their distinct ways of trying to defend themselves against the reality of their lives. As Cheryl Clarke notes: “Each child’s world is as restricted and dangerous as their names are ambitious and imaginative.”⁵ Explanatory narratives of impoverishment, sexual exploitation, potential crime and violence, hunger, and isolation interpret each child’s psychic and physical space” (142). It is characteristically the girls who mostly bear the brunt of the delusive life they have created for themselves. Yvonne, the oldest for example, offers an extended lyric moment as she “prepares for her lover,” pondering and planning a subversive sexuality:

It is not necessary
to have every day him whom
to the end thereof you will love. (9)

Then, There is melodic Mary who “likes roaches, / and pities the grey rat” (10), and whose sympathy with such unacknowledged everyday victims identifies her vision quite closely with the narrator’s.

As distinct as each of their characters are, Mrs. Sallie’s children are united in their hatred of what their poverty denies them:

[They] hate sewn suburbs;
hate everything combed and strong; hate people who
have balls, dolls, mittens and dimity frocks and trains
and boxing gloves, picture books, bonnets for Easter.
Lace handkerchief owners are enemies of smithkind. (10)

When they are summoned to look for their sister, the children likewise react to

her disappearance with visions typical of their characters, but they share a sense of deprivation, of feeling:

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5. The names of Mrs. Sallie Smith's nine children are: Yvonne, Melodic Mary, Cap, Casey, Thomas Earl, Tennessee, Emmett, Briggs and finally Pepita, the missing child.

... constrained. All are constrained
And there are no thinking of grapes or gold
or of any wicked sweetness and they ride

upon fright and remorse and their stomachs
are rags or grit. (14)

Mrs. Sallie's quest for her lost Pepita becomes a journey through degrees of alarm. Her reflection in stanza 18 (after noting the absence of her daughter), "I fear the end of peace" (14) merges with the poet-narrator in harsh irony. Sallie Smith, embattled and harried, has known little peace from the beginning. Particularly shocking at this point comes the reality of Pepita: an undernourished, lame little girl. "The question of brute survival of the 'fittest,' " as Melhem remarks, "Subtly yet unmistakably raised, extends the urgency into an awesome, pernicious dimension. Suddenly the world seems threatening and cruel to the family" (171).

The neighbours that Mrs. Sallie and her children ask for help, likewise, are instantly transformed by the news of the child's disappearance. The descriptions of Pepita, their speculations of what happened, and their evasions of questions tell us more about their characteristic modes of dealing with fear than they tell us about the lost child. As Gayl Jones states, the question " 'Where is Pepita?' often becomes 'Where am I ?' " (200). Pepita is not the only tragedy here:

In twos!
In threes! Knock-knocking down the martyred halls
at doors behind whose yelling oak or pine
many flowers start, choke, reach up,
want help, get it, do not get it,
rally, bloom, or die on the wasting vine. (22)

In a series of subtle yet striking portraits, Brooks "catches and crystallizes the

peculiarity, the misery, the ambition, the desire, the frustrations, and all of the other dominant weaknesses and strengths of her many subjects” (Davis 101).

The tales of the residents, especially the women’s, are self-revealing. Sallie’s first encounter is with “Great-great Gram” as she “hobbles, fumbles at the knob, / mumbles” (23) her testimony: a slave narrative. From her slave past, she remembers best the mud floor of the family cabin and “Something creebled in that dirt” that the children could “pop” and ‘squash” with their bare heels (23). The decisive quality of Great-great Gram’s announcement is actually quite unsettling. As Clarke notes, “conveying Great-great Gram’s nostalgic yet realistic recollections of slavery through direct address, Brooks parodies our notion of the conventional, mediated slave narrative” (142). The missing Pepita does not concern Great-great gram as much as it stirs a childhood memory of her younger sister, “Pernie May,” who was the “best popper” of that “something that creebled” in the dirt:

... some slaves had beds of hay
or straw, with cover-cloth. We six-uns curled
in corners of the dirt, and closed our eyes,
and went to sleep-or listened to the rain
fall inside, felt the drop
big on our noses, bummies and tum-tums.... (20)

It is interesting how Brooks, here, “collapses historical and present time as Great-great Gram’s story of Pernie refers the reader to Mrs. Sallie’s younger daughter, Melodic Mary, who smashes roaches, “in the grind of her rapid heel” (Clarke 142).

The reader’s hope is not recuperated either as s/he witnesses Mrs. Sallie’s encounter with “The Law,” to whom a missing “female of the Negro Race” is of less concern than a “paper doll” or a “southern belle” (19). They constrain Mrs. Sallie with “a lariat of questions” (19). They do so “primarily to contain black crime within the color line and to pronounce sentence upon it. They show no interest in the distraught black mother or show an ability to follow her lead. Their form of rescue merely effects another trespass” (Hughes 19). And as they leave, Aunt Dill, a sinister witness, forecasts the calamity, the murder of Pepita,

as she arrives to give false comfort to the Smiths: “Little gal got / raped and choked to death last week”(19). As such, “Aunt Dill, reveling in her report of a child’s rape and murder the previous week, is a gruesome parody of unfeeling self-satisfaction” (Taylor 128). There is also Eddie Barrow, the young black woman betrayed by a rich white man, “a Gentile boy” (20). The tale illustrates white betrayal especially towards the most vulnerable of the wretched: black women. The exploitation of blacks - and of women generally (the lover also manipulates his future bride) - by white society is emphasized here.

In the midst of such chaos, Amos, another resident, sends out a prayer for the purgation of a feminized America:

“Bath her in her beautiful blood.
A long blood bath will wash her pure....
Slap the false sweetness from that face.
Great-nailed boots
Must kick her prostrate, heel-grind that soft breast,
outrage that saucy pride ...
Let her lie there, panting and wild, her pain
red...
with nothing to do but think, think
of how she was so grand,
flogging her dark one with her one hand,
watching in meek amusement while he bled.
Then shall she rise, recover.
Never to forget.” (23)

America, as such, must be slapped, kicked prostrate, heeled aground into “that soft breast” so she can rise, recover, “Never to forget.” It is now pressing for Amos that “America must be gendered female and therefore rehabilitated, ‘recover[ed]’” (Clarke 143). Brooks, here, using Amos as mouthpiece, crystallizes the plight of black womanhood in her community through the image of a sinful, feminized America that must be abused to purge her of pride and prejudice. It is interesting how Brooks presents Edie’s ballad, which is a “surface divergence” (Jones 200), as a counterpoint to Amos’s prayer, and inverts it: “Edie’s metonymic lament that her situation as compromised woman will be as a 'hungry tooth in my breast' (23) is juxtaposed to Amos’s vengeful prayer that ‘Great-nailed boots... heel-grind that soft breast’ of America, the metaphorical woman” (Clarke 143). Edie, as one of several abused black

females, illuminates how the feminine is constructed and degraded in the Mecca building.

Another female causality of the Mecca is Hyena, the "striking debutante" or prostitute (Greasley 14), who is lost in a white-identified racism. "A fancier of firsts," she is "One of the first, and to the tune of hate, / in all of the Mecca to paint her hair sun-gold" (6). The sun - emblem of Africa - ironically images Hyena's bleached-blond hair, symbol of black self-hate. Philip Greasley argues that since Hyena's name refers to one of the "ignoble African animals," she serves a deromanticizing function in the poem (14). But Hyena does not know she is an emblem of Africa. When she leaves the Mecca, oiled and perfumed, she is "off to the Ball" - a euphemism laden with white fantasy. Her imagination does not stretch far, and it does not enable her to see or value Pepita: "'a puny and a putrid little child'" (21). Jamaican Edward is, of course, the male counterpoint. He, in fact, is the more violent "hyena" - preying on the small and helpless wanderer in the Mecca.

Just as Hyena's hopes are pinned on "the Ball," so a multitude of women in the building seeks identification with alternative spaces as refuge from their despair: St. Julia has prayer pastures (5), Melodie Mary compares her home to China (9), Loam Norton recalls Belsen and Dachau – the official film record of the Nazi death camps as photographed by Allied forces advancing into Germany (15), and Mrs. Sallie typically imagines trading places with the white mother in whose home she labors (15). Each struggles to envision an alternative space, but none ultimately succeeds in escaping or transcending the tragedy of the Mecca (16). We see them, finally, in its dim doorways and hallways. Even Pepita, who liked to play in the "fly-open door" of the building, and who might have gone to kindergarten, is confined in death to lie "in the dust with roaches" under Jamaican Edward's cot (31). Yet, these women "must be shown as constrained but not dehumanized, oppressed but not obliterated, or the call for their liberation would be hopeless and meaningless" (Hughes 17).

As the search for Pepita gains momentum, new degraded characters,

mostly black women residents of the Mecca, appear and disappear signifying their insubstantial existence as human beings. Over fifty people are mentioned by name or characteristic label; more than half of them appear in the last 200 lines, sometimes at the rate of four people per line. Two new characters at the end reinforce the balanced vision of the poem: Way-Out Morgan is collecting guns, imagining “Death-to-the-Hordes-of-the-White-Men!” (24) and Marian is ironing, wishing for some disaster to befall her so she may be noticeable like Pepita. Absorbed in their vision, they ironically have no time to wonder where Pepita is. Aunt Dill reappears in a cloud of self-satisfaction; the narrator calling her: “the kind of woman you peak at in passing and thank your God or zodiac you may never have to know” (24). This flurry of selfishness is the breed of utter degradation. As such, the narrator, for the first time, addresses the missing girl, Pepita directly: “How many care Pepita?” Certainly not Stanley and Lara, Simpson, Bixby and June, “these three Maries,” Great-uncle Beer, Wezlyn, Insane Sophie (25-26). “How many care, Pepita? ... these little care, Pepita, what befalls a / nullified saint or forfeiture (or child)” (27). Each of these people’s tales, “whether of incidental violence, sensational crime, religious passion, isolation, retribution, or drunken delusion - evokes the fears, desires, and dreams of its teller” (Lowney 13) and stand parallel with the miserable fate of Pepita.

The apocalyptic vision of *In the Mecca* is ultimately tempered with the innocent voice of the murdered child Pepita, who is finally discovered “beneath the cot” of Jamaican Edward, one of the Mecca residents, “in dust with roaches” (26); the victim of hateful, purposeless violence. Her murderer, as he sits questioned by the police, is a man who “looks at the law unlovably,” (26) but whose hatred is murderous and lethal.

That he, St. Peter-like, 'denies and thrice denies a dealing / of any dimension' with her confirms that this act of violence upon another Meccan is not only a crime but also a betrayal - of communal, political, and spiritual proportions. What exactly Edward has done to his little neighbor is not clear, but there are ample clues to suggest sexual violation, thus complicating any easy identification of the Mecca, or of a male-identified cultural nationalism, as a singularly 'safe space.' (Hughes 20)

Reading a transcendent sense of "rapture" (as ecstasy or spiritual transport) into Pepita's death is severely complicated by the reality of rapture as sexual ecstasy. Rape is prevalent in the poem itself, and it is primarily black female bodies that are in real danger of exploitation. If, as Betsy Erkkila summarizes, the black woman appears in African American women's literature as "the site of social rupture, the place where the contradictions of American culture are located and exposed" (199), then we must read the transgression of Pepita's body as double: She is ruptured, broken, and violated, and she is also raptured, removed, and carried across the *Mecca's* borders in the realm of heaven. As Sheila Hughes aptly remarks, "she is a ruptured site, and her rapture ruptures the communal site" (20). Her loss is, thus, both a radical dismemberment of the Meccan "community" and the sign of a needed remembering and re-imagining of a more powerfully self-identified black community.

Capturing a rhyme, the child once made with "rose," her mother decides to "try for roses." Invoking the voice of murdered Pepita, the narrator "convey[s] the urgent need to listen closely to the dispossessed" (Lowney 14). While sounding the alarm for action, Brooks ultimately speaks for all the black women of her society; the voiceless; the child who:

... never went to kindergarten.
 she never learned that black is not beloved.
 was royalty when poised,
 sly, at the A and P fly-open door.
 will be royalty no more.
 "I touch"-she said once-"petals of a rose."

A silky feeling through me goes!"
 Her mother will try for roses. (28)

As the poem draws to a close, Brooks affirms the need for active transformation, both of self and society, even if it seems too late, even if it is provoked by tragic loss. Mrs. Sallie may not be able to save her daughter's life, but the "try for roses" is an act that "validates her own life as it commemorates her daughters (Jones 203)."

So, what can eventually be reclaimed or recuperated? Certainly not Pepita - and perhaps not anyone else in the Mecca building. Irrevocable damage has been perpetrated here, especially when the narrator takes the reader closer to the reality of the “accident” (30). However, the final depiction of Alfred, the voice of wisdom in the Mecca, “lean at the balcony leaning” (31) posits sacrifice and offers hope, perhaps resurrection:

Something, something in Mecca
continues to call!...

an essential sanity, black and electric,
builds to a reportage and redemption
A hot estrangement.
A material collapse that is construction. (31)

The reader here, like Alfred, is expected to see construction from material collapse; should, in seeking reality, “explore the injury inflicted by it” (Felman 28); should find the language (“reportage”) to re-emerge from the paralysis induced by it; and eventually must “move on.” But it is uncertain whether the reader can quite move on:

The modes of narration remain split, which signify the impossibility of reconciliation. There is a possibility of renascence - outside the Mecca - the possibility of something “black and electric” rising out of the rubble, perhaps out of the dead Pepita’s “chopped chirpings oddly rising” (28). (Clarke 136)

But hope seems a distant flicker. The final four lines of the poem revert to what only Jamaican Edward could have seen; a powerful heart-rending image of horror portrayed in a style that can only be the narrator’s:

she whose little stomach fought the world had
wriggled, like a robin! odd were the little
wrigglings and the chopped chirpings oddly
rising. (32)

Reconciliation is irrevocably thwarted and Pepita, a symbol of defeated hope, stands as a reminder to her black community of failed prospects; of a future that can be just as bleak as the little girl’s miserable fate. As Melhem remarks: “The woman’s [Mr. Sallie’s] frantic pilgrimage through the building reveals a failed socio-economic system, a failed art, a failed religion, and their spawn of isolation and rage”("Gwendolyn Brooks " 7).

Brooks' *In the Mecca*, while revealing the Mecca building as a microcosm of social and economic injustice inflicted upon blacks, portrays women as bearing the full brunt of this injustice. Women, here, suffer both internally and externally, whether it is Sallie Smith roaming wildly in search of her missing daughter, or Great-great Gram's reflections on her past slave experience, or Eddie Barrow's recollections of her betrayal at the hands of her white suitor, or even Marian who has been rendered unnoticeable by her senseless neighbours. Men react as passive commentators on the plight of these women or, worse, as inflictors of pain as in the case of Jamaican Edward. But ironically, if there is any flicker of hope detectable in the poem, it emanates from the women who are twice oppressed in an oppressive society.⁶ In her autobiography, *Report from Part One*, Brooks gives the following comment on the characters, mostly female, of *In the Mecca*:

I wish to present a large variety of personalities against a mosaic of daily affairs, recognizing that the *grimmiest* 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. (189-90)

Hope and altruism in the volume are, thus, repeatedly thwarted for women not only because of adverse socio-economic circumstances and prejudice on the part of a mainstream white society, but also because of a male-oriented black community that only adds to the pain and oppression of these women. In this, Brooks is re-mapping the identity of black women in her community, taking their plight into another level of intensity. It is insufficient for her to look upon women as merely part of a black community facing socio and economic degradation. Their situation is, moreover, of physical and psychological oppression more intertwined than many care to believe. Speaking on the part of her female compatriots, Brooks once remarked in an interview with Haki Madhubuti that they have been constantly "looked upon as curios, something to be looked at and be amazed by - something other than ordinarily human. And of course, I can't accept that. I happen to know myself and I know that inside myself, I am not a curio. I am perfectly human and certainly capable of at least

as much warmth as any white that was ever created" (3).

6. On the one hand, women in the Mecca are either deserted by their husbands like Sallie Smith, or betrayed by suitors like Eddie Barrow, or neglected by men to a life of Spinsterhood like Aunt Dill, or even heartlessly raped and murdered like Pepita. On the other hand, women, along with their male compatriots, constitute a black community which suffers from the prejudice of the larger white society.

Brooks's message was, therefore, heard as a prophetic call by those both "inside" and "outside" her black community. In her poem, "Our MZ Brooks: Clearing Space at the LOC," Eleanor Traylor represents the collective response to *In the Mecca*:

Querying her glance calls loudly, yet
unperturbed,
"Pepita, Pepita, where is Pepita?
"Pepita, Pepita, where is Pepita?
"Pepita, Pepita, where is Pepita?"
... Answers "hoodo holler" through
the white washed room
gathering like some gentle
cloud
raining on the memory
of our dreams:
Pepita here! Pepita here! Pepita, here is
Pepita!
Pepita here! Pepita here! Pepita, hear
Pepita.
We are all, Pepita, here. (59-60)

Without definitively speaking for women with experiences other than her own, Gwendolyn Brooks has at least put a new territory on the literary map: the oppression and exclusion of African-American women, and the accompanying representative images of wounding and scarring. A race-conscious American culture reveals these women as paying the heavier price by discriminating racial and gender codes. It has been revealed that the end result of such discrimination, be it physical or emotional, is a marginalized and oppressed womanhood. Yet, it is in the poetic endeavours of women like Brooks; in her search to embody the homeless and placeless women of her black community - to give voice to their real sufferings - that she must open old wounds and point to the scars. She must expose the limits of her cultural parameters by pointing to the map and

endeavour to re-chart its contours. The quest may be in vain, but she is commended for her effort to salvage hope by giving voice to the voiceless.

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