

# Issues of Race and Gender in Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*: A Study

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## **Abstract:**

Gwendolyn Brooks's novel, *Maud Martha* presents a nuanced and introspective portrayal of a young black girl's transition to womanhood, set within the intimate confines of a close-knit family. Through Maud Martha's experiences with marriage, motherhood, and the intersecting complexities of racial and gender identity, Brooks crafts a lyrical and semi-autobiographical narrative that probes the intricacies of being a dark-skinned black woman. As Maud Martha navigates the vicissitudes of her daily life, she confronts prejudice from both within and outside her community, including the elitism of upper-class African Americans and the racism of white employers. Nevertheless, Maud Martha emerges as a richly textured and relatable character, eschewing stereotypes and rejecting the notion of an "upper-class heroine." Instead, Brooks illuminates the quotidian experiences of black women, creating a fresh and authentic representation of black femininity that celebrates the beauty of the ordinary.

**Keywords:** Race, gender

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most consistent and prolific novelists of her generation. Brooks is impressive because of her dynamic personality and her ability to write "intellectual" fiction, for she brings the facts down home to everyone. She came closest to expressing the essential spirit of the decade. Brooks's career has been characterized by a commitment to and celebration of the black community - its ordinary lives, and the realities of oppression. Her early writing, while appealing to a mostly white audience trained in the tenets of modernism and New Criticism, contains a carefully crafted but powerfully resistant voice that scrutinizes and challenges existing racial and sexual oppression.

*Maud Martha*\* stands out for its explicit exploration of the protagonist's experiences as a black woman, delving into the complexities of her identity and the challenges she faces in navigating a society marked by racism and sexism. The novel poignantly portrays the emotional scars inflicted by racism on a black woman's psyche. Through Maud Martha's story, the author sheds light on the struggles of an ordinary black woman's journey to self-discovery, as she grapples with the triple burdens of color prejudice, a patriarchal marriage, and societal beauty standards. At the heart of Maud Martha's narrative is her deep-seated desire to be loved and valued by those around her, particularly her husband, whose insensitivity to her needs and desires serves as a catalyst for her growth and self-awareness.

Maud Martha's story serves as a powerful examination of the psychological impact of internalized racism on a black woman's self-perception. She experiences rejection and marginalization not only from outside her community, but also from within, where lighter-skinned individuals wield greater social status. Having been socialized to equate whiteness with superiority, Maud Martha struggles with

feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, perpetually comparing herself unfavourably to an unattainable white ideal. As the darkest-skinned member of her community, she feels isolated and disconnected from others, illustrating the devastating consequences of colorism and internalized racism. This self-negation is particularly damaging, as Maud Martha comes to view herself as inferior, even among those who share her racial identity. Psychologists William Grier and Price M. Cobbs offer valuable insight into this phenomenon, highlighting the profound emotional toll of such self-denial on an individual's mental health and well-being:

“In this country, the standard is the blond, blue-eyed, white skinned girl with regular features. The girl who is black has no option in the matter of how much she will change herself. Her blackness is the antithesis of a creamy white skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is, in fact, the antithesis of American beauty. However, beautiful she might be in different standards, in this country she is ugly.”<sup>1</sup>

Maud Martha defies traditional heroine archetypes, instead embodying the beauty of ordinariness. Through Brooks's masterful characterization, Maud Martha emerges as a unique and relatable individual, celebrating the extraordinary within the everyday. Unlike conventional heroines, such as Lola LeRoy or Jessie Fauset's characters, Maud Martha is unapologetically ordinary, yet rich in complexity. She values intangible qualities and rejects upper-class pretensions, refusing to be reduced to simplistic stereotypes. By portraying Maud Martha as a multidimensional, everyday woman, Brooks challenges the notion of heroism and instead highlights the quiet strength and resilience of ordinary individuals. In doing so, Brooks creates a new paradigm for black female characters, one that emphasizes the beauty of the mundane and the power of everyday experiences.

The novel is set in Chicago's Southside, where it vividly portrays life in small kitchenettes during the 1930s and 1940s through the eyes of Maud Martha. She grows up in a close-knit urban community, sharing everyday spaces with her family and neighbors. Maud Martha's inner world is a warm and nurturing place, where she finds comfort and protection. Through her thoughts and experiences, we gain insight into the sounds, voices, and rhythms of her family, community, and the wider world beyond, including the unfamiliar and often intimidating world of white society. This intimate portrayal creates a sense of Maud Martha's inner sanctuary, where she can explore her identity and find herself. Maud Martha finds beauty and pleasure in "candy buttons, and books, and painted music... and dandelions" (p.5).

She would have liked a lotus, or china asters or the Japanese iris, or meadow lilies - yes, she would have like meadow lilies, because the very word meadow made her breathe more deeply, and either fling her arms or want to fling her arms, depending on who was by, rapturously, upto whatever was watching in the sky. But dandelions was what she chiefly saw (p.5).

Maud Martha's life is not without its challenges. She struggles with feelings of inadequacy, particularly in comparison to her older sister Helen, whom she perceives as the epitome of traditional femininity. Maud Martha aspires to emulate the societal ideals of beauty and elegance, as portrayed in the media and embodied by her sister's refined features and mannerisms. However, Brooks uses the imagery of dandelions to convey Maud Martha's growing self-acceptance and appreciation for her own ordinary beauty. Unlike exotic flowers, dandelions are humble and unassuming, yet still possess a quiet charm. Maud Martha identifies with their "demure prettiness" and "everydayness", recognizing that even the most common things can have beauty and value. This realization helps her to reframe her own self-image and find confidence in her uniqueness.

Maud Martha's perception of her own ugliness is deeply ingrained, partly due to the rejection she faces from her own family members. In her eyes, beauty is associated with light-skinned black women, known as "high-yellow", who have straight or curly hair. This ideal is rooted in the black community's internalization of white beauty standards, which can be damaging to the self-esteem of darker-skinned women. The pain of intra-racial color prejudice is particularly acute, as it involves being devalued by one's own community. Brooks poignantly captures the hurt and vulnerability Maud Martha feels as a result of being darker than her sister Helen, which leads to teasing from her peers and disregard from her father. This experience of color-based rejection cuts deeply, leaving emotional scars that affect Maud Martha's sense of self-worth.

When someone is constantly reminded of their perceived flaws, they can become increasingly self-conscious and isolated, feeling inferior in social situations. This is evident in Maud's experience when her white classmate, Charles, visits her at home. As a teenager, Maud is mortified by the shabbiness of her surroundings and worries that her house will be perceived as smelling "typical" of a black person's home. This encounter fills her with dread, as she feels like she's representing her entire race and being judged by Charles who embodies the white community. Maud's behavior in this situation is marked by intense anxiety. Throughout her life, Maud faces rejection and disappointment, as those around her, including her family members and Helen's boyfriend, Emmanuel, seem to prefer her sister. However, her relationship with Paul, who later becomes her husband, is different. Maud is grateful for Paul's love and promises to make up for her perceived lack of beauty with devotion and understanding. As Maud matures, she must come to terms with the fact that her dark skin and unruly hair are not valued in her own community, leading to a deeper exploration of her self-worth and identity.

Since a man wants more than "everydayness" in his woman, Maud Martha is convinced that....even with all this hair.... even with whatever I have that puts a dimple in his heart, even with these nice ears, I am still definitely not what he can call pretty if he remains true to what his idea of pretty has always been. Pretty would be a little curly-haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it. Whereas, I am the color of cocoa straight, if you can be even that kind to me (p.41)

Despite being aware of her perceived unattractiveness, Maud Martha leads a rich and fulfilling life as an ordinary black woman. She is deeply rooted in her family and cultural heritage, but also faces the challenges of prejudice from both the black and white communities. Maud encounters snobbery from upper-class black society and experiences racism firsthand when her husband struggles to find employment and she is hired as a maid by a condescending white woman, Mrs. Burns-Cooper. However, Maud's awareness of her own perceived limitations and the societal constraints placed upon her as a black woman does not diminish her appreciation for the simple joys in life. She takes pride in the unique cultural heritage of her community, exemplified in the vibrant kitchenette culture of black people. When she becomes a mother, Maud's response is one of warmth, enthusiasm, and joy, and she finds a new sense of empowerment and self-awareness. Through motherhood, Maud discovers her own strength and agency, and this newfound understanding of herself is a powerful and transformative experience.

As a black mother, Maud Martha faces the dual challenge of navigating a racist world while also guiding and empowering her daughter. Her daily experiences are marked by encounters with racism, particularly when she ventures out into the predominantly white world to work. However, the novel concludes on a hopeful note, with Maud Martha reflecting on the impending end of World War II and her own pregnancy. As she looks forward to the return of U.S. soldiers and the arrival of her new baby, Maud Martha's optimism and sense of fulfillment are palpable. Throughout the novel, Maud Martha emerges as

a resilient and remarkable individual, much like the humble yet vibrant dandelion. She finds contentment in her role as a mother and experiences a deep sense of wholeness, embracing her identity and the beauty of her ordinary life.

In this novel, Brooks highlights the universal struggle of women like Maud Martha, who feel the pain of not meeting societal beauty standards rooted in whiteness. Despite the pervasive racism that affects all black people, Maud Martha finds a way to live life on her own terms. Brooks celebrates Maud Martha's ordinary yet extraordinary existence, showing how she and many others like her navigate the limitations of everyday life while striving to create their own sense of identity and beauty. The novel is both a reflection of the times in which it was written and a precursor to future conversations about identity, beauty, and the human experience. In essence, Maud Martha is not just a response to the racist stereotypes of the 1950s, but also a manifestation of Brooks's own philosophical perspective on the interconnectedness of life and art.

### **Reference:**

1. Brooks, Gwendolyn. Maud Martha, New York: Harper and Row, 1953.
2. Grier, William H and Cobbs, Price M., *Black Rage*, 1968, Basic Books Publishers, Pg 40-41.