

# A Women's Desire to Break Free: A Structural Study Contemplating The Double Bind Situation in Gwendolyn Brooks "Sadie and Maude"

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## Abstract

Since the poem "Sadie and Maude" was published in 1945, the final year of World War second. So, as a result, the government opened up new opportunities for women, especially American women who were not allowed to enter the work force before the war. This was only true of the white women in America, while the black women still faced various boundations.

The present research paper examines the concept of choices 'given' to women and the choices made by women themselves and its after results by taking in reference one of the most symbolic and a very "noisy" poem "Sadie and Maude". The aim of the present article is to structurally analyze the poem so as to unravel the hidden dilemma and the double bind situation provided to the women in society.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Liberty, Education, Double Bind.

### Introduction

The poem "Sadie and Maude" was written in 1945 in Gwendolyn Brooks' first poetry collection named *A street in Bronzeville*. Born in 1917, Brooks' exposure to writing began in the earlier period of her life. Brooks' learning and the shaping of ideas and thought process was very much influenced by the literature written by the white men for a particular audience. Because of the conditioning of the ideology due to reading the writings of white men, she also started writing in a manner so as to appeal the white audiences.

In her early stages of the writing carrier, she wrote according to the whites' literary culture and that is the reason that the female speakers of her earlier poems are presented in a way following the "rules" outlived by the society and yet they end up in an unhappy and unsuccessful life. But later when Brooks became part of the Black Arts Movement in 1967 and experienced a kind of freedom from the confines of an imposed white literary culture in particular, and white culture in general; the results can be seen in her later poems where the protagonists decide on their own, the path they wanted to travel upon and accordingly confront the consequences.

So, Brooks' own journey from writing according to the imposed white literary culture to writing according to her own volition without any influence from others is a typical example to cogitate upon the aspect of freedom of choices provided to women as compared to men and if, they choose to lead their life the way they want, still the consequences do not very much. This presents the double bind situation of women in society which is dealt here with taking the example of "Sadie and Maude" in this paper.

### Aims and Objectives of the study

The present study aims to reflect upon the issues of inequality present in the society through a feminist approach. The study attempts to present this idea by presenting the concept of the double- bind situation (a situation when the person cannot confront the inherent dilemma and therefore can neither resolve it nor opt out of the situation.) deeply rooted in society especially regarding the treatment women in society by taking "Sadie and Maud" as an example.

The methodology adopted for the study is qualitative in nature done using a brief survey using internet, various articles, books, and published dissertations conversing feminist issues present in contemporary times.

### Research Methodology/Literary Review

Feminism, till now has been considered a movement for equal rights to the women in society. The main concern of the movement was the suppression of women by the male centered social set up/ the patriarchal order and the particular impositions imposed upon women limiting them to only the reproductive purposes.

But a brief literary survey suggests that though the women today also is not equally treated in the society but the reason for that is not that they are dominated by the patriarchy rather the reasons are various others like: discrimination at the



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psychological level, discrimination on the basis of sexual pleasure (the feminine pleasure), materialist feminism e.g., as in the work by Brenda Bethman i.e., *Obscene Fantasies: Elfriede Jelinek's Generic Perversions*; Elfriede's Ibsen's *Nora and Women as Lovers* etc.

So, the review suggests a more extended understanding of the term 'feminism' both as a term and as a movement expanding it to a more humanistic approach like the article by Hazel T. Biana i.e., "Extending Bell Hooks' Feminist Theory" suggests.

#### **Feminism: A further extension**

Feminism, a name that perhaps might appear as repulsive to hear at first, but when is inspected with a deep and focused analysis, it can be concluded that still it carries various untouched and unsolved appalling stories that need to come at front so as to encourage the other unheard and unsaid voices yearning to be heard.

Started first as a political, cultural and economic movement during 1960s for the establishment of the equal rights and legal protection for women, feminism today has become a literary theory as well that is studied with a humanist approach.

As Bell Hooks, in her attempt to redefine feminism in her work *Feminist Theory: From margin to centre* talks about the fact that feminism as a movement is not only for providing equal rights to only one section or only one sort of group i.e., the white women or the upper-class women rather feminism is for everybody, feminism is for all. This argument is further taken to a more humanistic debate by Hazel T. Biana in her famous article "Extending Bell Hooks' Feminist" theory in which she argues that feminism is not limited to providing equal rights to females only rather to the males also. By this statement she suggests that the movement has taken a more humanistic turn and is now dealing with the issues of anyone who is oppressed and is marginalized on the basis of their sex.

So, it can be concluded that in the contemporary scenario the movement is no longer a fight or a movement for equal rights to women only rather equal rights and opportunities for the people of all genders. Thus, the movement, instead of feminist studies has become a movement and literary theory for Gender studies.

#### **The concept of choice in "Sadie and Maud"**

Since women have obtained various rights and equal opportunities in almost all the areas as men have, still women face discrimination at psychological level and on the basis of fitting into that image of "good girls" who abide by the rules imposed upon them by the society. And this particular idea is reflected by Brooks in her poem "Sadie and Maude" which was written at a time (in 1940s) when various stereotypes were attached to women, when ideals and expectations for Women were more enforced and mandatory to follow. The poem is a comparison between two sisters Sadie and Maud regarding the choices they made in their life and their ultimate consequences.

In the poem, Sadie is the first of the two sisters and is more unconventional and free-spirited girl having a mindset of living life to its fullest. On the other hand, there is Maud, the second of the two sisters, the traditional and the "good" girl in the family as she lives her life according to the norms of the society. The hidden dilemma in the poem can be presented by analyzing the poem structurally i.e., the way the poem is structured linguistically so as to bring forth various literary aspects and themes of the poem so as to present the apt meaning of the poem and render it open for further interpretations also.

The poem "Sadie and Maude" is written in five quatrains with a rhyme scheme of abcb with the second and fourth lines of each quatrain rhyming. The poem does not follow any particular meter but the element of sound is very eloquent in addition to the other multiple devices so as to structurally enhance the central idea of the poem.

#### **Structure/ Pattern of the poem**

The very beginning lines of the poem are very appealing to the reader, and this is not because of their meaning only but their sound, e. g., the first indication of alliteration is presented in these lines creating a poetic sound by the repetition of sound in consecutive words. Like: -

"Maude went to  
Sadie stayed at home.  
Sadie scraped life  
With a fine- tooth comb,"

In these lines alliteration was intended to describe Sadie. These lines also reflect upon the hidden irony that though the poem begins with introducing Maud to the readers but it describes Sadie the most. Also, the alliteration reflects Sadie's

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superabundant enjoyment of life and cheerfulness and independence. The stanza also indicates the central aspect of the poem that is, the freedom to choose. Through these lines it can be concluded that Maud is a traditional girl who abide by the rules of the society and does not deviate from the norms and conventions and the impositions placed upon her by the society, whereas Sadie can be called a somewhat untraditional girl who opts for making her own choices in her life by deciding not to go to school and by not following the predetermined and established norms of the society. The poem Juxtaposes the paths every woman takes through life depicting a contrast between Maud's attempt to expand her horizon and Sadie's decision to remain behind.

This is something that can be concluded at first glance but as the reader reaches at the conclusion of the poem, they find Maud, who initially appeared to succeed in her life, who already achieved one of her rights, the right to education which was not so much in favour of women that time; ends up living alone in an "old house". So, the beginning of the poem seems to set the readers up to view Maud as the one who will lead a more successful and fulfilling life, as she leaves Sadie behind to attain an upward mobility. This is because, in the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea that women should stay at home and should focus on their family was much more common as compared to pursuing for higher education. That's why Maud appears, at first glance, to be more successful. However, this idea is challenged as the life stories of both Saide, and Maud unfolds e.g., lines 3 and 4 carries a metaphor that presents Sadie as scrupulous and very careful:

"Sadie scraped life  
With a fine- tooth comb"

These lines examine that going over something with a "fine- tooth comb" means to analyse the thing very thoroughly and attentively. Here, it suggests that Sadie, though challenging, lived her life to the fullest. She does not stay at home due to the fact that she leads a passive life and won't be able to/ bothered to expand her horizons, rather it is because she is a free- spirited and unconventional being who squeezes everything that she can out of life to live it to the fullest.

Also, the names Sadie and Maud brings some kind of musicality in the poem and following the rhyme scheme of abcb, the speaker's language in the poem sound cohesive and song- like and is further enriched by the use of end- stops in lines 1,2, and 4, highlighting the poem's clipped tone and its rhythmic pulse. So, the rhyming and the tone, both together makes the poem sound almost like a nursery rhyme.

The lines 5- 8 of the poem highlights the symbolic aspects of the poem concluding that Sadie lived her life in its complete sense by carefully working through it and by doing whatever she thinks as necessary to make her life feel rewarding:

"She didn't leave a tangle in.  
Her comb found every strand.  
Sadie was one of the livingest chits  
In all the land."

So, this suggests that what Sadie does to her life is brushing it, scratching it so as to untangle every knot and living life to the fullest. And the comb represents Sadie's capacity to do this- the capacity that not everybody has for example, when compared to Maud, who pursued for higher education, did everything according to the norms of the society and always remained being a "good- girl" in the family, still end up living in an old house:

"Maud, who went to college,  
Is a thin brown mouse.  
She is living all alone  
In this old house."

Here, the speaker is metaphorically calling Maud as a "thin brown mouse," comparing her with a very meek and solitary animal whereas Sadie is said to be "one of the livingest chits." So, this adds to the juxtaposition between both the sisters concluding Sadie as the most intentional and forthright about grooming/ living her life, whereas Maud is shy and hesitant (despite the fact that she ambitiously went away from home as a young woman to get education).

The poet makes use of the repetition as it can be seen that the name Sadie is repeated in the poem throughout like in line 2, 3, 7, 9, 13 and 15 and since the poem begins and ends by referring to Maud but the whole poem is discussed about the life, the choices of Sadie in her life. The third stanza clearly reflects upon this idea,

"Sadie bore two babies.  
Under her maiden name.

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Maud and Ma and Papa  
 Nearly died of shame"

This particular stanza is an example of use of alliteration, assonance, hyperbole all together in one. The first line the stanza highlights the use of alliteration in the poem (repetition of sound 'b') and the next line, an example of assonance i.e., the repetition of vocal sound 'a' and then the last line "Nearly died of shame" presenting the hyperbole.

This shows that the tone in the poem is serious where the poet is ultimately trying to highlight and uncover that particular ideology in society that expect women to be like Maud, smart and living a precautionary lifestyle and shuns women like Sadie who chooses their own path in life, who do what they please at the cost of even bringing shame to themselves for their happiness. So, in a way, it is also a critique upon the standards that society holds women to and the way it is structured and the use of various poetic devices in the poem like, use of alliteration, assonance, symbolism, metaphor, repetition, juxtaposition, consonance, rhymes all together.

The poet wants to put forth the idea that choosing one's own path and living each day to the fullest, even if doing so means going against the grain, allows one to lead a happier and more successful life. The figurative language that the poet uses in the poem results in highlighting this idea more clearly. Maud representing the 'ideal' woman in society as she went to college and from there, she did everything in black, white, and everything until she ends up leaving lonely life. As compared to Maud, Sadie, in fact, represents the more realistic ideal woman who shows that women can stand on their own two feet and can lead a happy life as can be seen in:

"When Sadie said her last so- long  
 Her girls struck out from home.  
 (Sadie had left as heritage  
 Her fine- tooth comb.)

So, here Sadie becomes the ideal for her daughters, for the coming generation who can choose whatever they desire in their life to live life to the fullest and are ready to bear the consequences also. Not like Maud, who throughout her life, remained the "good- girl" in the family but ultimately end up living alone in the old house.

And this contrast is presented by the poet using special techniques for both the sisters to represent them the way they are e.g., the poet, throughout the poem, uses numerous alliterations like Sadie's name begins with sound 's' and ends with the long 'e' sound highlighting her playful and carefree nature. Contrastingly, the poet uses no alliteration in the lines related to Maud's name and contain sounds that convey a more formal and sullen personality (except for the line calling Maud a "brown mouse".) Another most important techniques used by the poet is that of framing as the poem opens and begins with Maud but despite this fact, it is entirely about Sadie.

Hence, it can be concluded that the poem is presented (structurally) in a way so as to directly point towards the seriousness of the fact and the consequences of the choices made by an individual, especially women. The poem clearly reflects upon the fact that the freedom to choose and pursuing for higher education are two different things. It is not always necessary that the person who is educated and who always do everything the way society want him to do, will lead a happy and successful life.

**Conclusion**

Since, the poem is centred around the theme that following the societal norms and conventions not always end up in leading a happy, successful and joyful life; and also, that going against the established norms not always end up in a life full of sorrows and failure.

So, it can be examined that the poem is a bittersweet representation of a life lived according to one's own desires and its aftereffects. This is exemplified from the very beginning of the poem. The opening lines entice the reader to form impressions of the two women out of which one's going to college means- a success and contentment in the future. However, because the other stayed at home, one gets the impression that her future would be bleak and destitute. But when the poem ends, it can be concluded that Sadie ends up living a spirited existence, as compared to Maud's forlorn life; but the fact that Sadie also was never accepted by the society, should also be taken into consideration from where the argument of the double bind situation or the double standards of society comes out.

The double standard in the society again justifies the fact that whatever path women opt for, in some way or the other, they have to lead a life full of dejection and despondency.

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