

***THE STREET* BY ANN PETRY: A QUAGMIRE OF ENVIRONMENTAL
AND ECONOMIC OPPRESSION**

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Abstract

The Street (1946) by Ann Petry relates the story of a black female protagonist, Lutie Johnson, caught between the yearning to elevate her standard of living and the hindrances in her way due to her race, class and above all gender. In fact, the work seems to unfold a labyrinth of identity politics and racial discrimination. The location is Harlem, 116th street. The very name “Harlem” strikes in mind a special spirit, race capital, a racial focal point for knowledgeable black men the world over. Lutie is a good looking brown skinned girl brought up by her grandmother and a depressed father, she has come to believe fervently that if you are a good girl, and if you work hard and live right, you can make it- the very essence of the American Dream. Raised by her tale telling puritan minded Grandmother, she is a respectable married woman, driven by hunger for the material trappings of middle class success for herself and her family; she longs for a better life and a place to be somebody. She seeks to satisfy this hunger by naively subscribing to the protestant ethic and the American Dream as expressed by the Chandlers, the wealthy white New England family for whom she worked for two years as a live-in maid and as embodied in Benjamin Franklin with whom she compares herself. Lutie is determined that none of the impediments of the politics of race, class and gender, obstruct her vision of a free world. She thinks she will fight back and never stop fighting back. But her will to succeed is ineffectual against the relentless economic and racist forces that Ann Petry saw as the direct cause of the streets like the one in which the protagonist lived.

Key words: environmental determinism, race, class and gender, oppression, urban realism, economic oppression, familial commitment, inter-racial and intra-racial conflict, self reliance.

Half of the human race comprises women. Obviously, half of the black race also comprises the black women, and half of the Black history is occupied by them, as well. The US which declared itself a free nation in 1776, very humanely, also had declared that every citizen is free in America, has a right to life; liberty, equality as well as the pursuit of happiness. But ironically, they had continued the institution of slavery, though in a sophisticated manner. While glancing over the literature of African American women, one comes across the fact that intellectuals ranging from the first black woman poet Phyllis Wheatly , who like male intellectuals, couldn't desist from mentioning the conflict of slavery in her writing. *Iola le Roy*, *Shadows Uplifted* by Frances Ellen W. Harper was the first novel by an Afro-American woman to be published, appeared in 1882. America, by that time, had experienced historic traumas. The Civil War and Reconstruction periods had badly affected the nature of life of the black people in general and the black women in particular. Frances Harper as an abolitionist and as a black feminist has played a leading role in the national struggle to free the blacks from the slavery. It is not only, the physical rape, of which the black women became the victim but also the emotional rape, when the jealous mistress instead of consoling and sympathizing the victim, taunts and rebukes her. The manner of controlling and exploiting the black women by the white man is what Angela Davis calls “an institutionalized pattern of rape” (qtd. in Marjorie Pryse 40).

The conjure women, along with mulatta figure were other stereotypes generated of the black women by the South intentionally to exploit her. The negative images of Mammy, Aunt Jemima, and Sapphire were already running in their prejudiced minds. Black women were believed to be the source and cause of sin (a religious misnomer).The mulatta, according to literary conventions of the 19th century as well as half of the twentieth century could be the only type of black women beautiful enough to be popular heroine. Consequently from 1861, when *Clotel* was published, until the publication of Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), most of the black novels adhered to the literary conventions.

Throughout the history of women's movement in America, working women of all the races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of class system. As white women didn't face racial and class discrimination, they were unwilling to give up the benefits which they enjoy by virtue of their class. Ann Petry's *The Street* amply reveal this systematic exploitation. Amiri Baraka treats the black female predicament from an economic , racial and social viewpoint: “third world women in this country suffer a triple oppression ; if they are working women, as workers under capitalism, class oppression, national oppression, and oppression because of their sex.”(qtd .in Chikwenye Ogyuemini 69).

An important Myth that has become , the part and parcel of American consciousness is the Franklin Myth. According to the Franklin Myth, anybody could become rich, if he worked hard enough, an strives for this richness; he is bound to achieve success. The novel encompasses the survey of the hard route taken by the heroine Lutie, who strives for economic independence and a home for herself and her eight year old son-Bub. The novel exposes the rot beneath the American ghetto of Harlem. It also exposes the deep racist and sexist ideologies which hamper the economic, social and psychological flight of the black characters at every possible corner. The novelist presents the view that the black people themselves are also responsible for their agonies. They face identity crisis because of the lack of pride for their own race. Her attempts to protect her sanctity and self – assurance are delineated very impressively in the novel. *The Street* portrays, in extant, the dilemma of double consciousness within the African – American culture. The setting and themes of Ann Petry's novels are a natural outgrowth of her intimacy with the black inner –city life of New York and the white small-town life of New England. The impact of

the hostile urban environment, where one felt dislocated and cut off and the inevitability of resorting to crime as the black person's only release from fear and alienation were two elements that Ann Petry used in her novels, *The Street*.

The Street is a conventional novel of economic determinism in which the environment is the dominant force against which the characters must struggle to survive. The novel opens symbolically with the November wind and the cold, dirt and filth of 116th street overpowering the hurrying Harlem pedestrians, including the apartment – hunting protagonist, Lutie Johnson, and closes with the snowfall, “gently obscuring the grime and garbage and the ugliness” of the street and Lutie leaving the city by train after killing the man who assaults her. It presents Harlem as a jail where the people are locked in and are only allowed to come out when they go to work. In this novel, Harlem does not emerge as a community because everyone is competing with everyone else for whatever each can get. Cut off from each other, the people merely pass one another, touching only when they must or when it is to their advantage. It presents a harsh and cruel environment where there is no escape from dim hallways, rancid smells and horrid congestion. The competition for survival (in the novel) is fierce and Petry paints a picture of alienated and disturbed people. She was determined to let the world know how urban blacks suffered at the hands of social and economic racism.

In *The Street* , environment is constituted by economic pressure, familial commitment and the failure of society to provide institutional ladders up from poverty. Petry's heroine, Lutie Johnson, has integrity and potential; but the forces opposing her are relentless and unstoppable. The title “*The Street*”, stands for all those anonymous forces of urban corruption that face American blacks. Lutie tries repeatedly to raise herself and her son up from poverty, but her diligent attendance at evening school undermined by the need to make money quickly ;she begins singing in a night club, a job that brings her unwelcome and eventually threatening attention. *The Street*, thus , becomes a kind of “Anti- dream” fiction, a harsh denunciation of the U.S. constrictions and depredations..Petry's depiction of a sinister , tentacular, societal repression is grounded in a very specific and explicit account of the economic dilemmas that black women find themselves in:

Yes, the women work and the kids go to reform school. Why do the Women work? It's such a simple, reasonable reason. And just thinking about it will make your legs stop trembling like the legs of a winded, blown, spent horse. The women work because the white folks give them jobs-washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white folks haven't liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. And finally it gets to be too late for some of them. Even wars don't change it. The men get out of the habit of working and the houses are old amid gloomy and the walls press in. The men go off, move on, Slip away, find new women. Find younger women. (TS 278)

Petry has this talent of making the common place seem cosmic. Her novels expose the malevolent ways in which the daily newspapers, police, and other democratic institutions work together to exploit the black people, which is most ironic. The forefathers of America had not dreamt about such a dream because the people are not yet the ideal people which they had conceived of.

The irony is that Lutie sees, yet fails to act on, the price that the Chandlers pay in spiritual and personal alienation from their material success . In blind pursuit of the American dream,

Lutie loses her family and her hope for happiness, but not her self-respect. When she fails to get the signing job she had counted on to move off 116th street and up the ladder of success, social reality begins to displace her dream world. She reaches the conclusion:

The trouble was with her. She had built up a fantastic structure made from the soft, nebulous, cloudy stuff of dream. There had not been a solid, practical brick in it, not even a foundation. She had built it up of air and vapour and moved right in. So of course, it collapsed. It had never existed anywhere but in her mind. (TS191)

The novel's strength lies in Petry's narrative control, for even though we know much more than Lutie does, the effect here is to place every reader, white or black, in the position of white society looking in on the world of the street; and even though we are not surprised when Lutie fails to raise herself and her son, we are still surprised, even shocked, at the extent of her fall by the end of the novel. Ann Petry has projected Lutie Johnson as the mouthpiece of all the exploited fellow women in Harlem, trapped in the quagmire of difficulties, oppression and insecurities.

Lutie joins the Chandlers' house but returns to see her husband deceiving her. She leaves home because of her Pop's indecent lifestyle and comes to 117th street, works as a clerk and continues her studies even after this for some higher post. This section of the novel is particularly effective, for Petry combines the theme of cultural transference along with an analysis of why so many black marriages breakup. Petry clearly indicts white society for the failure of many black marriages and implies that it is consciously seeks fragmentation of the black family. The cry of Lutie's jobless husband Jim forces one to ponder over the economic dependence of blacks on whites. Friction between such couples arises, when the woman works to support the family and the husband escapes into some other cheap lady's arms to regain his self-respect and to escape isolation:

So day by day, month by month, big broad shouldered Jim Johnson went to pieces because there was not any work for him and he could not earn anything at all. He got used to facing the fact that he could not support his wife and child. It ate into him. Slowly, bit by bit, it undermined his belief in himself until he could no longer bear it. And he got himself a woman so that in those moments when he clutched her clothes to him in bed, he could prove that he was still needed, wanted. His self-respect was momentarily restored through the woman's desire for him. Thus, too, he escaped from the dreary monotony of his existence. (TS 168)

In her picaresque journey towards self-realization, Petry invokes a developing stereotype that of the black woman singer. But she draws back when she finds that talent is not enough and that her only saleable commodity is sex. Although she is courageous and full of the American spirit, yet there is within her a void based on discrimination. Fitting into the stereotype of the tragic mulatto, she seems to be cut off from any community and although she is beautiful woman, she refuses to use her charms to further her advancement.

In *The Street*, Ann Petry has presented the widest view of the American life in Harlem. 116th street and its atmosphere is the epitome of American Negro life. The reflection of inter-racial prejudice- Black against Black is also seen. It is a black who forces Bub's life into a criminal's life. It is a black Boots Smith against black Lutie Johnson.

Lutie ends up both a victim and a tool of prejudice, hatred; and disgraces herself as a servile endorser of an ugly system of prejudice and discrimination. She can be anybody yearning

for self- identity but ending up in self- effacement. Her killing of Boots Smith is no doubt not only defense but the outburst of her hate for the system, the circumstances and the environment which she and her son are forced to live in, just because they are black. In an interview in **Crisis** , Petry confirmed this environmental determinism: “In *The Street* my aim is to show how simply and easily the environment can change the course of a person’s life”(Reynolds,151).

It seems as if Petry’s use of symbols of confinement and contrasting images of the white world and black world try to give structural and thematic coherence to the novel. Although the story is told by a disembodied third person, omniscient narrator, Petry allows Lutie’s consciousness to dominate the narrative and scrupulously avoids moralizing. The action and setting are subordinated to Lutie’s impression of their impact on black women and the black family, thus encouraging our sympathy for her and other black women, who incredulously have no contact with the black Church.

The cause of these social problems is not black men like her alcoholic father and her adulterous husband, nor black women like Mrs. Hedges, the whorehouse madam, but white people like Junto and the Chandlers, whose prosperity is based on the economic exploitation of blacks. If it is equally impossible to escape the corruption and despair of the black inner city, it is equally impossible, as the Chandlers reveal, to escape the degeneration and despair of small white towns.

The sympathetic message is clear in *The Street*: a black woman, for all her decency, stamina, and drive, will lose her bid to succeed in the ghetto. David Littlejohn , one of black fiction’s harshest critics, was moved by Petry’s empathy with Lutie Johnson and other characters in *The Street*: “It is the author’s reaching, selfless sympathy that makes the case, a sympathy that allows her to become each character, however vile, each object, in turn”. (Littlejohn 148)

Petry is more concerned with proving her thesis that no matter how conventional and no matter how American a poor black person may be, he or she will be defeated by his/her environment . Her novel poses a perennial question of contemporary black literature: given the harshness of hostile racial environment, to what extent can each individual control his or her fate? She prizes open the overwhelming question: what course to adopt? What next for survival?

The remedial measure of self reliance is underlined in the novel at hand. No doubt, the first reading of the Street entraps us into the gnawing ghetto environment, yet the core of Petry’s work is self- empowerment in terms of self- reliance. Although Lutie Johnson in *The Street* has to leave the street and her son in the end, yet she achieves a certain stature within herself when she becomes contented after murdering Boots Smith. The initial attack is in self defense, but the manner in which Petry describes the act of murdering as an outlet for pent up emotions, spurs one to believe that the act of murdering does provide self-empowerment. The very image of Lutie enacting a lioness in the end of the novel reminds one of Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” from Breast Stories where the female protagonist ‘Dopdi’ after her gang-rape, gets enraged as well as enlightened about the potential within herself and explores her inherent, latent powers.

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