

Caressing the White Body: A Bleak Hope in Ann Petry's *The Narrows*

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Racism and sexism are inseparable part of Afro-American women's fiction. Right from the first black woman poet Phyllis Wheatly to Alice Walker, racism and sexism have been the unavoidable themes. *Iola LeRoy*, *Shadows Uplifted* by Frances Ellen W. Harper was the first novel by an Afro-American woman to be published, appeared in 1892. 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. Whence Toni Morrison received Noble Prize in literature in 1975 and Alice walker Pulitzer Prize in 1982, since then African-American women's fiction has become a matter of keen scholarly attention.

Recourse to pornographic details, lesbianism; glorification of motherhood, female bonding; and role reversals, emancipation of exploited female protagonists etc. at the end of the novel, are some of the most often used thematic weapons in the arsenal of black women novelists, and this sometimes even result in branding them as sheer protest writers. Unfortunately, due to hijacking of the literary canons by the whites, some of the black female writers like Ann Petry, Jessie Faust etc. have not come into much lime light, which is obvious racial politics and nothing more.

Ann Pet was born on 12th October 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. She died on 28th April, 1997. From 1938-1941, she worked as a reporter for *New York's Amsterdam News*. Her debut short story *Marie of the Cabin Club* a suspense-romance that is set in a Harlem night club was published in 1939 in the Baltimore newspaper *Afro-American*. *On Saturday Night the Sirens Sound* (1943), appeared in *The Crisis*. This Story allured an editor at Houghton Mifflin, who encouraged, her to apply for Houghton's Fellowship in fiction. In 1945, Petry won the same and in 1946, Houghton Mifflin Published *The Street*, a piercing account of a black mother, who tries her best to provide a home for herself and her son in an urban environment that, foreshadows failure. *Country Place* (1947), explores the cross currents of gender and class within a white New England Community. *Harriet Tubeman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964), juvenile works with convincingly human depictions of well-known slaves Harriet Tubeman and Tituban Indian. *The Moses Project* (1988), a short story about house arrest in modern times. Petry has often said that she wants to be remembered for not only *The Street*, her most celebrated work, but for everything she has written.

Ann Petry's literary arena is encased with her first hand experiences. Multiple layers of meaning are interwoven very intricately in her works. Petry's third novel, *The Narrows* (1953), explores the repercussions of an interracial love affair, when the cloud of racism was hovering over the America of 1950s. Petry in this haunting tale has employed the Bakhtinian term of "dialogic criticism" to its maximum potential and has been able to put her views in an objective manner.

Petry is an artist with a rational racial cause. She is not a mere entertainer or a vociferous propagandist. The thematic issues and the innovative novelistic techniques that she has inoculated in her works, without exaggeration, are incredible. In the very first page of this novel, Link Williams (the protagonist) dives deep into the river, and on coming out of the river Bill Hod

(the surrogate father figure for Link) slaps him. It foreshadows the deep plunge which he takes by falling in love with Camilla Sheffield (the white heiress of Treadways Hall) in the racist 1950s America. As his name alludes to Abraham Lincoln, to one's mind comes Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation of 1863". He (Link) seems to practically emancipate the Negro race.

Petry has skillfully illuminated the inner psychological impressions of a white lady in the novel, especially when she is surrounded by the colored people. Camilla feels ashamed of herself that she had imagined Link Williams to be one like the other Negroes. Petry is able to vividly portray the conditions prevalent at those times, when it was inconceivable that a white female can embrace a black man, let alone sleeping with her.

The relationship of Link Williams and Camilla Sheffield is a perfect communion of the two members belonging to two adverse groups. Though the fate has provided them a chance of racial unity, yet the deeply ingrained racism in the society makes even him suspicious of any place and any people, wherever he would go with her. The most heart-gripping racial encounter takes place, when he takes Camilla to his home and their love gets consummated there. Franz Omar Fanon echoes Link's irreparable situation when he writes in *Black Skin and White Masks* that "to caress white breasts is to hold white civilization in the palms of (black) hands". The racism is deeply entwined within the American consciousness irrespective of whether one is white or black. As soon as Abbie comes to know of the scandalous communion of Link and Camilla, she couldn't tolerate the sight of Link caressing the white breasts of Camilla. She impetuously threw her (Camilla's) clothes out on the street. Later in the novel, Camilla rewards Link with the racial epithet "the black bastard" that adds fuel to the already burning fire of anger in him. It explodes the volcanic rage inside him. He couldn't control the storm and slapped her, thus echoing the age old war between the black race and the white race.

Petry certainly can be called the spiritual foremother of the black women novelists' like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, as the core themes that she has dealt have just been further explored by them. Her aura of writing is full of glimpses from her personal observations as a journalist. There is nothing that seems to be sheer propaganda. Her description of events is probable and convincing. She could easily visualize what Link might be thinking after receiving the racial epithet of "black bastard". Later on the dock, Link recalls his personal racial encounters in particular and comes to the conclusion that the romantic journey ended where it had begun. Thus, implying that in the racist world it is not easy to escape from the racist forces and the deeply ingrained racism within the two antagonistic races is not going to vanish so quickly and easily; it will not allow anybody to make a mask of his/her imaginary race-free world.

The scope of this novel is such that Petry's main focus of attention is no doubt Link-Camilla relation, but the manner in which she incorporates other stories side by side into Link-Camilla affair, is amazing. It does not dilute the tension and suspense of the drama, but adds different spices to it that makes it tastier and moves it closer to the reality. The novel seems to be a piece of magic realism where the borders of fiction and truth are blurred. Link-Camilla love affair is just fantasy but the attendant details are basically realistic. Vernon E. Lattin describes Petry as rebelling "against the falsification of life, the dreams, rationalizations, and illusions that distort one's grasp of reality; she rebels especially against the American Dream and its attendant illusions" (69).

Environmental determinism has been a key concern of Petry. She has quite artistically illustrated how racial environment moulds the personality of an individual. Abbie Crunch, who

with her husband (Major) has adopted Link Williams, is an extremely class-conscious old-fashioned lady. She constantly reprimands herself for the neglect of him at the time of her husband's death that ultimately changed the entire course of his life. Link becomes a complete opposite of what she had imagined for him. He had landed into the mysterious lap of Bill Hod, a father figure for him and the company of his expert cook Weak-Knees, because of this crucial neglect. Petry seems to have caricatured Abbie's character in consonance with Du Bois's philosophy and this seems to be dictating the rhythm of her life. She faces in Du Bois's terms "double-consciousness," i.e. being a black and an American. Her philosophy in life is that the group attained greater importance than the individual which is exactly what Du Bois had said. Her wish that Link must study hard and make the black race feel proud of his achievement is shattered, as he develops love affair with Camilla Sheffield about which neither Link, Bill Hod nor Abbie, had conceived of. He is hypnotized by the shimmering beauty of Camilla and he becomes blind in the love of Camilla. He forgets that he lives in a racist world that doesn't allow such miracles to happen.

Petry is such a writer who can see the illusion that the American Dream is. Virtually it crushes those individuals who refuse to bow down before the racist, sexist and capitalist forces. As a rebel, she seeks to bring down the walls (that are physically not visible; mentally felt but are very strong) that trap the people (the whites and the blacks) into a meaningless existence.

She exposes the American dream as a nightmare which is fatal for those who refuse to accept their assigned role in the system. A Black mustn't think of a 'Utopia' and forget the reality. The moment when Link drinks beer with Bill Hod, he starts unconsciously disclosing his thoughts about Camilla as "How beauteous mankind is! O' brave new world that has such people in't" (*The Narrows* 97). Their romantic journey reminds us of Ferdinand and Miranda of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Both the couples are ready to land into an unknown landscape. This seems to be in Bakhtinian terms "dialogic" in nature where a continual dialogue is carried forward, affects the discourse of the writer and in turn gets modified. Link compares Camilla to 'Helen of Troy' which also justifies its dialogic nature. This novel was written around a time when the public psyche was shattered and disillusioned by the nuclear holocaust, and as such everyone was dreaming of a 'Utopia'. Petry has catered to the demands of the romantic and ideal people who wanted a happy and secure world for all.

Petry simultaneously throws ample light on the identity crisis of the denizens of America of 1950s irrespective of color, status and gender. The photograph of Camilla that appeared in the *Monmouth Chronicle* is deliberately maneuvered by Bill Hod to make Link believe that he was used just as a muscle boy (a plaything) by Camilla:

Story on American heiresses. One of a series of stories about young women, who owned, controlled, were heir to the great American fortunes-vast unspendable fortunes . . . Picture of Camilla Williams, laughing. Only that wasn't her name. Her name was Camilla Treadway Sheffield. Internationally known heiress. The Treadway fortune was described as being like that of Krupp or Vickers. Young wife of Captain Bunny Sheffield. (*TN* 270)

Link's whole identity is shattered. Was he her lover or the muscle boy? This gothic truth bewilders him. He starts introspecting and the only question that echoes in his mind is why hadn't she told him about her real identity? Camilla's love, however, seems genuine as she says, "I am really and truly in love with you. I always will be. What's changed? Oh, Link, Let's not"-- (*TN* 289). The ensuing inevitability was that she charged him of rape and got him arrested. Link becomes thus the mythical black rapist of the white woman. He phones Bill Hod and says, "A

white lady says I tried to rape her..." (TN 321). Bill Hod got him released, and started to re-educate him on "The Race" and power of the money.

There are ample evidences in the novel which shows that there is enough corruption in the basic democratic institutions like the press as symbolized by The Monmouth Chronicle, and educational institutions where racism still continues, and the most potent and effective institution that can prevent crimes and protect the vulnerable, i.e. the police. Right from The Treadways' illegal enterprise, The MoonBeam bar and The Last Chance bar, all are in full public gaze operating under the illicit and immoral Bill Hod's ownership. In the small room where Link was taken after being kidnapped by Mr. Bunny Sheffield and his friends, Link realizes that he can't escape now and will meet his doom for crossing the racial limits. After all: "An old black ram has been tugging her white ewe" (TN 401). On being asked about their relation, he brought the entire Negro history before them. Thus gives his personal tragedy a cosmic sweep. He could easily recognize the tremor running through Mrs. Sheffield, which is the age-old hatred against the opposite race that makes her body shiver with fear as he himself had earlier experienced such tremor. So, he made them wait and wait till finally when he confessed: "We were in love" (TN 406). As soon as he had finished, the Captain in a fit of rage instantly shot him dead. Mrs. Treadway hadn't meant the murder of Link but just a confession, yet after Link's murder, her more active interest in saving Captain Bunny from the clutches of police and saving the honor of Camilla by black-mailing Peter Bullock, the editor of The Monmouth Chronicle, makes her an unforgettable and unforgivable figure of corrupt capitalistic system of the 1950s America. Her name will be remembered along with Mrs. Hedges in dark figures in the Afro-American fiction. It will always invite the lash and abuse of any conscious reader on them, whosoever comes to know about them.

The remark: "The Negro confessed--and Bunny shot him" (TN 408), hardly affected the stone-hearted Mrs. Treadway, who said to Bunny, "Everything will be all right," (TN 408). This episode is so well described that the whole scene gets telecast before the readers' imaginative eye. The Lamb (Link) has been slaughtered for encroaching the territorial domains of the racist boundary, and his blood got spread wherever his body was taken. Petry in an interview with Mark Wilson said, "truth' as she described it--and 'actual events from your own life, . . . they have to be worked into and a part of whole. . . . They have to be mixed in'" (Wilson 76).

The Treadways' have become corrupt to the very core of their hearts and devoid of any rationale. They looked at everything in terms of money. The cool and detached reaction of Treadways' after Link's murder shows how hard they were emotionally. Earlier, Malcolm had accompanied them to help them in locating Link, and Malcolm did so out of loyalty towards Treadways'. They, however, weren't concerned about Malcolm. Their prime target was to kidnap Link and get a confession from him for his alleged assault on Camilla. Malcolm like Link hardly matters to them.

Petry has the knack of narrating even the minutest details in such a way that nobody is left with the option of raising eyebrows towards her narrative power. The moral bankruptcy and skepticism in the married couples, irrespective of any race, is quite obvious in the novel. Money is the basis of relations rather than love in the Harlem ghetto of 1950s as highlighted in this novel of Petry. The bleak hope of the communion of the two races via Link--Camilla relation is intentionally proved to end with tragic implications. As Petry in an interview herself reveals that she had trouble writing Link's death, after all: "here was this man who in so many ways had to battle to survive; and he had survived . . . fairly whole as a person . . . there was no way, logically that he would not have been killed" (Wilson 79).

Abbie's introspection close to the end of the novel reveals that it was not any one person responsible for the tragedy of Link. Michael Barry holds a similar view as he says, "All humans in Petry's world are prone to imperfection, not one individual has full responsibility for Link's death" (150). This also gets confirmed, when Miss Dorris gives vent to her views:

It were purely like a snow ball and everybody gave it a push, that two cent newspaper give it the last big push. The morning I seen that picture, with half his face gone from a razor, just a long hole where one side of his face should have, were all strew across the front page, I said to Sugar, Sugar that picture were pure murder and this white folks two cent newspaper ought to be took out and burned. (TN 415)

The bleak hope of the communion of the two races has vanished with Link's death and the question is still lingering in the readers' minds why: "that girl with pale blond hair be left alive?" (TN 419). But Abbie's decision to protect Camilla by informing police that Camilla's life is in danger, and this time taking J.C. Powther with her, not neglecting him, despite knowing that his parents are responsible for Link's death, still keeps the hope of communion of the two races alive.

Thus it can be said that the blacks in America still are not assimilated in that way, as envisaged by the founding fathers of America. In 1992 Petry told Streitfield, the journalist of the Washington Post: "where ghetto life and race relations in the United States are concerned, 'everything is worse' than it has been" (McDowell 2). Further analysis of Petry's works is definitely going to through more light on the panorama of 1950s ghetto life in America. The researcher is going to feel the pangs of horror and dilemmas of the black people in general and women in particular.

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