

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

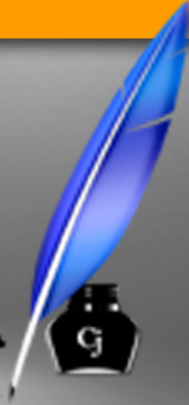
An International Journal in English

Since 2010

Vol. 5, Issue-I

February 2014

The Criterion



5th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

www.the-criterion.com

Bi-monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

Book Review: Ann Petry's Novel *The Street*

Reviewed By:
Nirjharini Tripathy
Assistant Professor in English
Teresian College, Mysore
Karnataka.

Landscape and the aura accompanying it has always been a subject of literature whether it is fictional or nonfictional genre. The case with poetry is similar too. While describing landscape, native land or the place of birth burg, one always gets nostalgic. Most writers have indulged in this art while describing various landscapes and the aura of the environment around. Weaving the plot that mesmerizes the reader with its description of the topography, geography, flora and fauna and people is one of the niceties of a writer that holds the attention of the reader. The following book review tries to depict how the description of 116th Street in Ann Petry's novel *The Street*, doesn't become a road to salvation for its protagonist but the protagonist is mired in a web of racial anarchy and its vices.

The Street, is counted as a novel belonging to the genre of naturalism written by Ann Petry and was published in the year 1946. It was one of the pioneering novels penned down by an Afro American woman that met a critical appreciation. In *The Street*, Lutie Johnson, the protagonist is a black single mother, who still retains the youthful suppleness, attraction, and has a son to raise. As a native American she feels part of the mainstream, but her skin color makes her confront obstacles, hostilities and resentment at every stage of her life. The novel's plot is set in Long Island, New York and revolves around the story of intelligent but ambitious Lutie Johnson, who alongwith her son wants to live a dignified life but on every step is confronted with the disease of racial hatred and sexual sadism.

Ralph Ellison writing in 1949 tried to assert the state of affairs in Harlem. She says that living in Harlem is to "dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay. Harlem is a ruin...Overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the sense and the symbol of the Negro perpetual alienation in the land of his birth."¹

What Ralph Ellison described in a paragraph Ann Petry turned the same in a full fledged novel that describes the life in Harlem to its minutest details. *The Street*, despite being an Urban novel where life of the protagonist is described as well as those with whom she has close encounters, but still at times it seems that *The Street* passes in the background and becomes oblivious at other times, while the novelist is entangling with the life of the protagonist. Lutie has been abandoned by her husband and has to take care of her eight year old son whom she wants to protect from the influence of the Harlem environment but racism and its accompanying contours doom her plans to failure.

Harlem as a main plot of the novel is mired with various problems but it also has its own positives too, that are articulated from time to time in the novel. Harlem and Lutie at times

¹ Ralph Ellison "Shadow and Act" New York: Vintage Books, 1972. pp295-96

appear to be contradictory towards each other and other times they are synonymous. This dichotomy excites as well as interests the reader.

The author Ann Petry was a multi talented personality. She was a journalist, a pharmacist, feminist, lecturer, novelist and a humanist born on 12th October, 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. Receiving her primary education from public schools of Old Saybrook, the author did her PhD at the University of Connecticut, and worked as a pharmacist in the family-owned drugstore for almost nine years.

After getting married to George D. Petry in 1938, she moves to Harlem and starts her career as a writer. She worked as a reporter for New York's Amsterdam News and was also a reporter-editor of the Woman's Page for The People's Voice. The author is also known for her writings of Harlem middle-class in the weekly column *The Lighter Side*. The striking feature of her writing is that the stories and characters are derived from real world experiences. She incorporates lust, love, environment, human relations, erotica and other such human tendencies that give the reader an idea of life in the post second world war America. Her writings are full of multi layered meanings and characters. Houghton Mifflin Published *The Street* as an alluring account and ordeal of a black mother who struggles to provide sustenance and decent dignified living for her son, in a hostile racist environment but she meets failure at every step of her struggle against this environment.

Petry's characters are full of life and ready for adventures. *The Street*, as a novel is universally praised for being a ground-breaking piece of urban realism. Her other novel *Country Place* (1947), explores relationship between gender and class within England's white Community. *The Narrows* (1953), as a novel deals with the complex subject of psychological realism. *Legends of the Saints* (1970), is her juvenile work that documents lives of Afro-American saints; *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (1971), is her collection of short stories that deals with the life in urban and rural areas of America drawing its contrasts and other works like *Harriet Tubeman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964) depicts convincingly sub human conditions in which slaves of Harriet Tubeman and Tituban Indian exist.

The Street initiates with a complete description of the scene where a tragedy has stuck the protagonist. The readers are caught unaware about her identity but they certainly get an idea and chill of the November night on 116th street in Central Harlem. In the rough weather conditions Lutie Johnson, is desperately looking for an apartment to accommodate herself and her son. The reader can visualize Mrs. Hedges eyes "still and malignant as the eyes of a snake" and one can comprehend the fear she experienced after her encounter with the superintendent of the building who later tried to outrage her modesty and succeed in incarcerating her son on frivolous grounds. The reader comes across such lines "tales about things that people sensed before they actually happened". Instead of such an intimidating environment Lutie is still optimistic about her newly acquired home.

Harlem is defined and identified through its differences that can be interpreted as both its symbol of material prosperity or form of neo-colonization. On the one hand Harlem offers Lutie and many of its inhabitants the avenues for fulfilling their hopes, live up to their expectations and start a new life. To some others it represents the opposite. The people of all statures and belonging to any class find something to cling on to in Harlem. These optimistic sources represent mirages too but "courteous friendliness...helped rebuild egos battered and bruised during the course of the day's work". People like Boots Smith act as a great motivating factor

who waded their way out of poverty, Mrs. Hedges and her brothel, the inspirations that contribute to feed Lutie's hope for a better life, and reinforce the myth.

But Harlem represents a city within a city as an invisible border segregates it from the larger White American neighborhood. Harlem is the American way of keeping out the Afro-Americans. An invisible apartheid exists and Harlem is a living testimony of the same. "It wasn't just this city. It was any city where they can set up a line and say white folks stay on this side, so that black folks are crammed on top of each other – jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air." (206) Lack of opportunities and racism compel, black men, like Lutie's father, to kill their time through drinking and in slumber. Other indulges in extra marital affairs or find a concubine who can help them reinforce their manhood as they have failed to find a job. In most cases the women work in the white man's house while their men indulge in all sorts of vice. "The same combination of circumstances had evidently made Mrs. Hedges...turn to running a fairly well kept whore house....; and the superintendent of the building – well the street and pushed him into basements away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession; and still other streets had turned Min, the woman who lived with him, into drag drudge so spineless she was like a soggy dishrag." (57)

The whole novel is full of symbolic and physical traps that depict the black particularly the men existing in the ghettos away from the sight of the White men. The dingy apartments where they exist, the menial jobs that they undertake and the rent they pay to the white landlords all makes their lives miserable. Even the so called dignified job of Luttie carries the dark intention of making her the mistress of the boss.

The ghetto life conditions the Blacks and they get drawn in a vicious circle. They fail to secure a dignified life and carve out an independent identity for themselves, hence the failure retrogrades them to inferiority complex. The Harlem and its inhabitants depict the other for The White community. They symbolize everything that is sub human, in human and uncivilized.

Racism is deep rooted and multi dimensional. From white adults to small children, the indoctrination is all-pervading. "She thought of every person she passed as a threat to her safety". Her students frighten her, their stink is unpleasant "bold, strong, lusty and frightening." In the white man's eyes the "negro was never an individual. He was a threat, animal, curse, blight whose identity they wanted to make non-existent. Hardworking women like Min are ridiculed by their White madams as if they were "a deaf, dumb, blind thing completely devoid of understanding." In the lack of an existent position within such a racist system, the lives of the black people become hollow. Indistinguishable in the white world, these hostile situations turn Afro Americans into living dead, and Harlem represents their grave - symbolically and literally.

The ambivalent plot of the black city comes to fore time and again, as Petry makes the dwellings of the living dead coexist alongside the Harlem. Harlem is distinct because the Blacks try to assert their identity and culture there, though the streets of Harlem are witness to premature deaths of blacks too. With no hope for an improvement in their condition, they continue to exist with a dispassionate lack of interest. Dragging themselves into another day. Mrs. Hedges and The Super are virtually obscured alive, cut off from the external world and his life is enclosed by silence living in "the darkest apartment, the smallest, most unrentable apartment. No pictures, no rugs, no newspapers, no magazines, nothing to suggest anyone had ever tried to make it look homelike." (7)

Mrs. Hedges is determined "never to expose herself to the prying, curious eyes of the world." (257), this is because her body and soul is scarred. The abysmal conditions of the Harlem

apartments, the small, dark and dingy rooms, may be interpreted as dweller's symbolic graves, whose walls suffocate them, "the three rooms with the silence and the walls pressing in" which becomes a place to lay to rest any anticipation of transcendence.

Despite all these pathetic conditions inside Harlem, 'humanity survives', which makes the Blacks forget the brutalities and discrimination that exist in the outside world. Harlem protects the Blacks from the hostilities of outside till they exist in the cozy cocoon. Once coming out of the subway, Lutie thinks that "she never felt really human till she reached Harlem, and got away from the hostilities in the eyes of the white women who stared at her in the downtown streets and in the subway." (57). "Up here they are no longer creatures, labeled, colored and therefore all alike. The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform suddenly grew so large they could hardly get up the stairs to the street together". (57-58).

Petry's compassion for the downtrodden and her portrayal of Lutie, with her harsh humor, courage and tragic grief makes this novel worth a thousand statistical surveys on inner-city crime, 1940 or 1990.

Marriage is a dream of every girl and Lutie is no exception to the same but her marriage falls apart after she takes a job as a live-in nanny and maid in Connecticut, leaving her husband, Jim, and her son behind. When Lutie finds out that Jim "has taken up with another woman," she moves out of the home after packing her bags and takes her baby boy along with her. She eventually ends up on 116th Street, signing the lease on the only apartment she can afford: three rooms in a building with narrow dark halls and prying, noisy neighbors. Often being compared to Richard Wright's book *Native Son* for its stark gloom, *The Street* was the first book by an Afro American female writer which sold over 1 million copies.

Lutie is eager to get her son, Bub, away from the sway of her careless father and his girlfriend. She occupies the only room she can afford, with the dreams of a day when she can save enough money to provide Bub with a proper life. She now sees her success in her son, from whom she expects to fulfil her broken dreams. Lutie tries to live a dignified life without bruising or killing her conscience, in an environment where hostilities meet her at every step. These brutal encounters transmute Lutie into an aggressive and enraged person. The factual real events shatter her world of illusions that transforms her into a murderer who kills Boots Smith as he disappointed her the most and whose figure is changed into "everything she had hated, everything she had ever fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her." (429) By attacking him, "she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from where there was no escape." (430) Although Lutie manages to get away, nothing in the novel may lead to our thinking that her escape is not a temporary one in another big city, Chicago, that would "swallow her up." (434)

"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. But, unfortunately, Petry's works are not yet known to the general readers as those of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. There is much in her fiction which is mind-taxing, and not just a racial protest. Petry, like a true psychologist, has been able to diagnose the mental working of her characters. She has graphically drawn the psychic disturbances of her characters along with effective prescription of its treatment. One prime prescription is suggested towards the close of *The Narrows*, as Abbie Crunch seems to hold herself responsible for Link's tragedy because she had hated Camilla due to her white race. Now, her decision to protect Camilla seems to be a compensatory and a prescriptive act on her part. This time she is going to set an example of an ideal American who thinks above the

reigning racist social protocols of the times.”² There is also a visible influence of Freud's theory on Petry's writings.

Clare Virginia Eby says, “While increasingly Petry's protest is understood as against not only socio-economic but also the ideological environment—especially the ideology of the American Dream as personified in the novel's allusion to Benjamin Franklin—most commentators like Marjorie Pryse, Amanda J. Davis, and Keith Clark etc. emphasize how the environment deforms individual subjectivity” (34). What become of Jones as a person can be described as a product of bad environment. He was in dire need of human sympathy as can be gauged from the fact that he nursed a deep longing for Lutie and looked forward to be loved by a desirable lady especially a young and beautiful one. Petry's works do have a scope of further analysis which can definitely throw enough light on the vista of the deeply colored world of America. But a keen, sustained and objective eye is the requirement which must peep into the layers of the American Dream to have a better view of it.³

The Street, revolves around the life of Lutie and her growing son, but it also depicts the life as it goes on in the neighborhood. The building's superintendent, Jones, has a sexual penchant for Lutie, although he has a quiet partner Min. There's a chapter through which readers finally can read the mind and character of Jones' and witness how he frames Lutie – how he imagines everything that she does as if being done for him which he takes as a sign that she also wants to have sex with him—is honestly repulsive. The Black women are thought to be sexually and morally lax ready to part legs for every white male. Lutie while working as a maid in Connecticut confronted the repulsive thinking of her employers who assumed that she was wild about white men.

Lutie's character is referred to by the critics as “negative education”. The sexual harassment and racism Lutie faces at every turn of her life, shakes the reader to his core. The Blacks and their lives dominate the novel though Petry only gives a bird's eye view of the white characters twice in the form of Mr. Junto, a local businessman whose optimistic views on race are nonetheless tainted by the fact he's fine with using his influence to persuade Lutie into sex, and secondly Bub's schoolteacher, Miss Rinner. Lutie does not often encounter hostile situations that explicitly discriminate against her, but she is aware of the institutionalized and veiled subjugation that is present everywhere in the society though she sometimes thinks she can get out of it with a little hard work, that is a part of the larger American dream.

The Street is not a goody ending happy novel. How can it be, and how can it be now, more than fifty years after its publication date, when the same institutionalized and systemic oppression still continues? Petry had a very specific message here, and one that she gets across beautifully and brutally.⁴

Readers are mesmerized with the structure of each chapter. Petry's discreet style is capable of keeping the readers hooked on to the novel, “Someone had told Granny once that the butchers in Harlem used embalming fluid on the beef they sold in order to give it a nice fresh color. Lutie didn't believe it, but like a lot of things she didn't believe, it cropped up suddenly out of nowhere to leave her wondering and staring at the brilliant scarlet color of the meat” (61).

² William Dubois “The Souls of Black Folks” in *Three Negro Classics*. Pp 25-26 New York, Avon Books, 1965.

³ Gates, Louis, Jr., ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist -A Critical Anthology*. New York: Meridian, 1990. Print.

⁴ Elaine, Showalter. “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.” *Critical Inquiry* 8. 2: Writing and Sexual Difference (1981): 179-205. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 April. 2011.

Though America has emerged as “a melting-pot” of cultures but Afro-American literature throws entirely different light on the American history. It highlights the traumas of sexism, slavery, racism and classism. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are considered to be the representative figures of Afro-American women’s fiction, but Ann Petry’s role is neglected till date due to lack of attention.

While analyzing the literature of Afro-American women, one comes across the fact that intellectuals ranging from Phyllis Wheatly to Gates, no one could desist from mentioning the conflict of slavery in his or her writing. 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.⁵

With Gwendolyn Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* (1953) there is an apparent shift towards self definition in American-African fiction. Black feminists integrated the feminist theory racist bias and the phallogocentric bias in the black thought. “The central thematic concern of black female novelists is to actually deconstruct the stereotypical representation of the black women in their literature, as the black male novelists as well as the white novelists had entirely depicted them in negative terms, and never respected their sentiments. Rather, they had deserted them. So, they have shouldered the responsibility and decided to present the reality.”⁶

The effects of class system have been experienced throughout the history of women's working movement in America across different ethnic backgrounds and races. Faraway from class and racial discrimination, white women were reluctant to leave the benefits they enjoyed on account of their class. Ann Petry's *The Street* and *The Narrows* clearly portray this systematic exploitation.

In Barbara Christian’s *Black Woman: the Development of a Tradition*, she displays her view and offers a unique point of view from a black 'Womanist' perspective bringing to fore the works of Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall and Ann Petry. Alice Walker's term “Womanism” has been the topic of many recent critical debates.⁷

An interesting myth that has been ingrained in American awareness is the Franklin Myth. According to this myth, anybody has the ability to become rich, if he or she works hard enough, and strives for the same. The enticing ability of this myth is instantaneously seen in Petry's works. The novel is a survey of the hard route taken by the protagonist Lutie, who makes every effort for her economic independence so that she can buy a home for herself and her eight year old son—Bub. The novelist is of the belief that black people themselves are also responsible for their agonies because of the lack of pride in 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 Narrows* (1953) deals with the dynamics of race, class, and identity that result in the shattering of the hope---the hope of the American dream which appears to come true, when Link Williams and white Camilla fall in love, despite being the members of two different races. But, it eventually proves to be a bleak hope, when Camilla in a fit of rage pretends that Link has raped her and has him arrested. From then on, racially prejudiced forces start to work, resulting in Camilla’s breakdown and

⁵ Gates, Louis, Jr., ed. *Reading Black, Reading Feminist -A Critical Anthology*. New York: Meridian, 1900. Print.

⁶ Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I A Woman? Black Woman and Feminism*. Boston: South End Press, 1981.pp58-59

⁷ Lattin, Vernon E. “Ann Petry and the American Dream.” *Black American Literature Forum* 12.2 (1978): 69-72. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Oct. 2010.

murder of Link by her husband.”⁸ Petry’s portrayal of American society expresses the ways in which police, daily newspapers and other democratic institutions work in tandem to take advantage of the black people.

The city in *The Street* or for that matter any other would have been the same for Lutie and placed limitations on her. Surrounded by such gloomy circumstances, Lutie is unable rather unwilling to delve deep into the signs that results in her becoming a tragic character. The failure is precipitated when Harlem loses the position as a place of transcendence in Lutie’s eyes and makes the mistake of looking at north as, “the apparent peace of a distant mountain, made some fatal error of judgment and fell into the great chasm of maze like passages that promise ever to lead to the mountain but lead ever against the wall”.⁹ There is a veil of prejudice and discrimination that has been built up intelligently and cleverly through which the oppression of black people is institutionalized and approved by popular consent in America.

⁸ Lattin, Vernon E. “Ann Petry and the American Dream.” *Black American Literature Forum* 12.2 (1978): 75. *JSTOR*. Web. 15 Oct. 2010.

⁹ Ralph Ellison “Shadow and Act” New York: Vintage Books, 1972. p 298