

“A STUDY OF STRUGGLE AND DEFEAT OF WOMEN IN ANN PETRY’S *THE STREET*”

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ABSTRACT

Ann Lane Petry was a prolific African American writer. Female protagonists and their issues are major in her writing. *The Street* was an outstanding achievement of Ann Lane Petry in African American literature that published in 1946. This novel explores the African-American woman’s struggle for find a place in their society. It also explores different aspects of urban life. This novel set in Harlem in the 1940s. It discussed the difficulties of a single woman and mother. Ann Lane Petry very beautifully described the black and white American experience in her novels. *The Street* was a strong social commentary on disappoint of black urban life in the 1940s. It was well appreciated and successful novel by Ann Lane Petry. *The Street* particularly explored the black female struggle in African American women creative efforts. Ann Lane Petry’s main purpose was to interpret this struggle from a feminist perspective. *The Street* was a masterwork that revealed urban black life as African American fiction.

KEYWORDS: Ann Lane Petry, African American Literature, Women Struggle, Color Line

INTRODUCTION

The Street was a masterwork of Ann Lane Petry in African American Literature. It was a story of a young black woman, Lutie Johnson and her struggle to raise her son in Harlem. That was the period of poverty and racial imbalance of Harlem in the late 1940s. It was Ann Petry's first novel. She was born in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and rural community on October 12, 1908. Ann was the second daughter of Peter Clark Lane and Bertha James Lane. They belonged to the black middle class of the small town. Her father was a pharmacist, and her mother was a shop owner, chiropodist, and entrepreneur. Ann Petry began writing short stories and plays while she was still in high school. She graduated from Connecticut College of Pharmacy in the 1930s. Then she worked in the family drugstore for several years. She was married George D. Petry, a New York mystery writer, in 1938 and moved to New York City. After marriage course of her life was changed. In New York, she worked as reporter for the *Amsterdam News* and *The People’s Voice*, newspapers of Harlem. In 1939, she published her first short story, *Marie of the Cabin Culb*. In 1945, Petry won the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship for the beginning chapters of her first novel, *The Street*.

Besides the literary career, she worked on a sociological study of the effect of segregation on ghetto children. She was teaching a course at National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as well as serving as a recreational specialist at a Harlem elementary school. Ann Petry’s works were heavily influenced by the inner city life she witnessed as a reporter, social worker, and involved community member. She died April 28, 1997, near her home in Old Saybrook, after a brief illness. Her fiction explored ordinary, law-abiding, working-class African-American protagonists. They devoted to hard work, and they were middle-class aspirant with a strong belief in the American Dream.

STRUGGLE AND DEFEAT OF WOMEN IN ANN PETRY'S *THE STREET*

The Street was the first novel by a black American woman, and it widely reviewed. It translated into French, Spanish, Japanese, and Portuguese. The novel set in 1940s at Harlem. It opens in New York City on November of 1944.

The story starts with the main protagonist of the novel, Lutie Johnson. She was searching an apartment available for rent. Lutie was a black woman. Petry described that how women's past experiences and current circumstances made them strong to fight for managed to achieve. Lutie and Bub had been living with her father and his girlfriend, Lil. Lil was a not good woman. Lutie wanted to get Bub away from Lil. Bub was very small. He was only eight years old, and Lil had him lighting her cigarettes for her and she was giving him sips of gin. Lutie was very much worried about Bub that he would develop a taste for cigarettes and gin. That was very much harmful to his future. Lutie was also worried about Lil intention towards Bub and Lil might teach the young boy whatever else. Through this novel, Petry was very aptly demonstrated that the breakup of the home leads to a generation of lost children. As Lutie was working the entire day, her son, Bub, remain alone in a home to an empty apartment. He was engaged himself with the wrong crowds. Bub was only eight-year-old. She had moved to Harlem for secure life but the apartment's harsh reality attack on her dream. Lutie Johnson was pushed by the wind on 116th street as,

"The wind lifted Lutie Johnson's hair away from the back of her neck so that she felt suddenly naked and bald."
(Petry 2)

This struggle against environment was a major theme of the novel. Lutie Johnson was a fight against the obstacles that were set by society in regards to race, class, and gender. She was a struggle for getting a secure a safe future for her and her son, Bub. As an African American woman, she faced many visible and invisible difficulties. Her idea of the American Dream of a safe environment for her son and his bright future was not fulfill due to the problems of race, class, and gender. The description of the wind attacking her explores the situation of an African American woman who always traps in the public space by white people. The description of the harsh environment of the 116th street also introduced the theme of sexualizing.

It was a very big obstacle for her in her struggle. By society, she was always pressurized to perform like a sexual object. The worse thing was these pressures come from both the male and female characters in her life. Mrs. Hedges, her owner of the apartment, was told to compromise her ideals and come to work for her as a prostitute. Junto was a white man who also desires Lutie for himself. He was exercised his power for willing Lutie. He did not give salary to Lutie for this purpose. They treat her as if she was by default sexually available when he declares,

"let him get his afterward. I'll have mine first." (Petry 428)

This incident was an attack on Lutie's space. It was the most personal to her. She was always under the stigma of racial and gender discrimination. Lutie come to Harlem found own private space for herself. The apartment house on the 116th street becomes a restrictive place for her. She faced many difficulties in the apartment house. Mrs. Hedges was always sited in her window and watching the residents all day and night. She always forced to Lutie for becoming the prostitute. Though she was a woman, she did not understand the other woman problem. Jones was a superintendent of that apartment. When Lutie first encounters with him, she was restricted by her fear of him

Jones was painted her apartment many different colors in an attempt to please her. Through the plain white color of a wall, Petry describes the feeling of helplessness of Lutie to control her privacy. Jones was repeatedly attacks on Lutie's private space. She observed now that the young girls walking the streets have,

“Faces that contained no hope, no life” (Petry 188)

Before the Harlem Lutie and Bub had been living at Chandler's home in Connecticut with Jim, his husband. There were also Lutie was working hard for the Chandler family. Jim felt emasculated when, she went for long periods of time for work, and he was unable to provide for his family. He took up help of another woman to rebuild his ego. Lutie was works hard. She was trying to pass a civil servant test that gives her a white-collar job. Now the income of her was still low in which she and Bub are just only able to survive. Lutie was trying to find a better job for getting a good and safe home for them. She was wanted to raise the Bub properly and gives better future to him. She was ignoring battles because of her skin color and her gender.

Lutie was a struggle with the basic needs was food, shelter, and the safety, but she was not satisfied with her improved life. She was now aware of the fact that this was a very critical conditions of poverty and hopelessness in which they were living. For the better future of the Bub, she was decided that Bub could not grow up in this place. The constant pressures that Lutie was felt to achieve her American Dream were dashed by discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation. Lutie's struggle was an emotionally, financially, and physically. The pressure leads her towards the murdered of Boots Jones. He was going to rape her. Through this novel, Petry was explained the conditions surrounded by hopelessness, depression and cramped spaces clearly affects African American females.

Lutie's struggle to obtain financial stability ultimately defeated in the final chapter. In this novel, the Lutie was very much disappointed with the urban life. At the end of the novel Lutie was left the Harlem and move to Chicago. The Novel begins with the Lutie's struggle to stabilize in Harlem, but she continuously disappointed with the pressure of social, physical and economical. She was trying to achieve her success with hard work. Her intention was clear. She was wanted to secure future of her and her son, Bub. In the new society, she was ready to struggle for stabilize her son. But the society pressurizes her to hate the environment and moved to Chicago living her son Bub. She lost her self-confidence and her belief on her faith. She became one of them of other women who finally defeated and resign their struggle. But she was very much strong as,

"Would never permit herself to become resigned to living here" (p. 324).

Lutie was still hopeful, but the fact the she was helpless and needs money to ransom her son Bub. Lutie was struggling with her condition as,

So it was a circle, and she could keep on going around it forever, and keep on ending up in the same place, because if you were black, and you lived in New York and you could only pay so much rent, why, you had to live in a house like this one. (p. 407)

Lutie and her son Bub were the same condition, and Bub wanted to help his mother financially. He was thinking to help her mother.

.....and Mom ought to be pleased by that" (p. 341).

He was willing to take risks and trouble for him and help to the mother. But he trapped in Boot Jones's mind game. He was arrested by police. Lutie wanted to rescue Bub and need the money. When Boot Jones tried to rape her; she murdered him and kept his pocket for money. But unfortunately not able to rescue her son and she moved to Chicago. Lutie Johnson believed that hard work was way to succeed. She was faced so many obstacles as a working-class black woman. She steps up herself and her son an apartment in Harlem for better future. Petry very beautifully illustrated that though Lutie ignored her dad's gin-drinking girlfriend, Lil, and all rumors, her hard work did not break the street and the walls. The street and walls made by white people that build around the colored people, brick by brick and that were very strong.

Petry's characters represent the African American society. In this novel, only two characters were achieved satisfactory growth and emotional resolution in the street. They were Min and Mrs. Hedges. They were learned to manipulate their surroundings in order to remain above and ahead in society. But Lutie became a murderer and abandoned her young son. Petry here wanted to show that though she defeated her sense of moral was superior to Min and Mrs. Hedges. Through this novel, we understand that the dream of Lutie was unsuccessful because of racial, gender and class problem. Many people are come America for bright future, but they are faced many obstacles in their way. It was a story about one black woman's plight for her bright future.

CONCLUSIONS

Ann Lane Petry was a one of the most distinguished authors of African American Literature and her *The Street* novel was profoundly affecting. The concept of Struggle and defeat of a woman had been central importance in this novel. The Street was Petry's best-known work that explored a portrayal of the economic plight of African Americans. Lutie was a black female protagonist of the novel that was unique and significant. Petry was a very prominent author in African American Literature who focusing on some contemporary social issues like a female struggle, single parenting, and politics of sex. The Street examines the unique role of the African American woman in maintaining her position in the classism, sexism, and racism. Ann Petry was explored the black woman through the novel as the center of the family as well as community. Lutie had a moral and ethical responsibility to race.

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