

HARLEM AS A METAPHOR IN ANN PETRY'S 'THE STREET'

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ABSTRACT

The Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement which brought out the literary interest of many black American writers is the theme behind many novels written in the period 1920-1935. This study aims at bringing out the allegory of Harlem in Ann Petry's novel *The Street*. It also aims at highlighting the author's views on Harlem and how the author has used her proficiencies in the novel to convey her views on life in Harlem. Petry uses a powerful story line to put in her views about Harlem and the story line clearly explains the fate of people living in Harlem due to social and cultural issues of the place.

Ann Petry is the first ever African woman writer for crossing the book sales over a million for her novel *The Street*. Her father was a pharmacist and her mother an entrepreneur. In her novel, *The Street* she elaborates her views on the ordeal for day to day survival of a black woman on the streets of Harlem. Harlem is the northern part of America which served as a major black residential and community center. The name Harlem is derived from the Dutch city of Netherlands 'Haarlem'. It suffered a great deal of cultural and social damages after the Second World War and the Great Depression. Poverty and Crimes increased during this tenure with less significant development.

The author in her novel, *The Street*, highlights the jeopardy faced by a single black woman in the struggle to survive along with her son. The story line is drawn around the cultural and ethical issues in Harlem which clearly states the life of black people living there and how the white population exploit and use them for their benefits. Adding up to the issues like racism and sexual exploitation of black women, the great depression upsurges the crime rate in areas like Harlem, where black men engage in lot of crimes and anti-social activities. The novel is not only about the struggle of a single black mother but it also aims to highlight the darker sides of the society where social issues are shaking people's lives. The author is very sincere and honest in her attempt to highlight the social issues prevailing in the streets of Harlem.

KEYWORDS: Race, Social Realism, Haarlem, Ann Petry's, *The Street* and *The Narrows*

INTRODUCTION

The plot is set on the streets of Harlem and revolves around a single black mother who struggles to lead her life with her little son. Lutie Johnson, the protagonist is seen battling for her survival against racism, the monstrous attitude of men and petty crimes along the streets of Harlem. She also strives to improve her financial position by hard work and determination. The jeopardy experienced by the protagonist is well described by Ann Petry in this novel. The novel also highlights the social dilapidation in Harlem which causes day to day life for a single woman extremely difficult. The status quo turns out to be like a double edged knife, where black women get subjected to troubles from both the whites and black men who are erratic due to unemployment and broken marriages.

Ann Petry, having grown in an environment where she was shielded by her family from the racial discrimination, found it difficult to understand the way blacks were being treated in America. The characterization in the novel is remarkable where every character interlaces with others to portray the demoralizing effect of racism, poverty and

gender. The characters other than the protagonist who are of prime importance in the novel are Bub Lutie's son, Mrs. Hedges who lives in the same apartment as Lutie, Jones the superintendent of the apartment. The day to day issues and survival of the protagonist amidst these people and their effects on her life is detailed in the novel.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ann Petry, born among two sisters enjoyed the liberty of the younger most in the family. She grew up completely sheltered from the oppressions faced by black people, her environment was healthy and motivating. She grew up seeing her mother, an entrepreneur and father, a pharmacist establishing themselves very well in their respective fields amidst the racial discrimination which is the main source of motivation for Petry to be a strong, self-dependent individual with her own identity.

Petry received her graduation in pharmacy as per the views of her family members and stepped into the family business. She began writing from the days when she was working in the pharmacy. After her marriage, Petry moved to New York along with her husband George D. Petry. Traversing the streets of Harlem she experienced the miserable state of numerous black people striving hard for their survival. This made a definite impact on the author and combined with her creative skills, is well described in her novel.

A lot of reviews were cast on the novel by various sources. The novel is set up during the Renaissance of Harlem and it clearly depicts the ordeals of black people in New York. The entire story line circulates within the street where all the main characters live and struggle for their survival from the clutches of poverty and racism. The Los Angeles Times opines that the novel is 'A major literary invention. A truly great book'. It is truly a great book considering the facts that it has brought out the struggle for survival in an era where the black community has risen from the state of slaves to people of equal status and citizens of America. It is an uncompromising work from the author who clearly elaborates the impact of racism, sexism and gender inequality on the life of her protagonist and her little son.

As per The New York Times, the novel 'overflows with the classic pity and terror of good imaginative writing'. The imaginative skills of the author is being highlighted in areas where the protagonist feels that her son will get influenced by the habits of her father's girlfriend Lil. The anxiety of the protagonist as a mother is clearly visualized by the author. It also brings out the strength of a mother who dares to fight the society against racism, poverty and gender inequality for her son's sake. Despite the efforts of the protagonist to shield her son, he gets into the wrong hands of the superintendent Jones who asks Bub to pursue mail theft.

The novel is commented upon as 'A powerful uncompromising work of social criticism. To this day, few works of fiction have so clearly illuminated the devastating impact of racial injustice' by Coretta Scott King. The author makes a mistake in narrating the events of Harlem and the ordeal of black people in Harlem due to racial discrimination.

Most writers have narrated the struggles of African people in the clutches of slavery, but this novel has clearly brought out the actual struggle faced by black people even after their freedom and even after they being accepted as citizens of America. The era of Renaissance has seen the rise of a black community in many fields, but their struggle overcoming racism and poverty is clearly dealt with in the novel. Newsday mentions the novel as 'A classic of American realism. The street rushes towards its fatalistic climax like a train toward a washed out bridge'. The realistic experiences of a single woman trying to defend her son against the law for stealing mail are depicted clearly in the climax. The street and its people who have been giving her a lot of trouble since the day she landed, only wanted to pledge herself to the lust of men to save her son. The resentment in her gets vented when she stabs Boots Smith and leaves for Chicago.

DISCUSSIONS

The novel starts from the streets of Harlem, when the protagonist Lutie Johnson is searching for an accommodation for her son and herself. She takes up an apartment despite its short comings such as poor ventilation, smaller size and the super Jones whom she dislikes starting from the beginning. The desperateness of Lutie to get a cheaper accommodation urged her to settle in this place and her struggle for survival starts here.

Lutie is being targeted right from the moment she enters the block by Jones for his personal use and Mrs. Hedges for her business of running a whore house bribing the police. Despite the bad environment, Lutie feels that she can overcome her poverty and struggle in life. She clearly remembers the advice of her whiter masters that *'anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough'* (Petry, 41). The street of Harlem gives her a different experience and highlights the fallacy of the idea to become rich or even survive with a decent living in a community with so much of inequality.

Social issues prevailing in Harlem is described stunningly by the author. Corruption and exploitation are very common in the streets of Harlem and people like Mrs. Hedges make use of it for their living. Mrs. Hedges even instigates conversation with Lutie stating she knows a rich white man who could give money for Lutie in case she is need of it. The return gift favouring the white man is better understood without explanation. Lutie felt trapped in her little apartment, she could not think of divorce as it is not financially affordable for her and without divorce, she cannot think about remarriage. The society of blacks struggle hard in the capitalist system of America and resents to wrong ways of survival such as corruption, theft and exploitation.

The self-esteem of the protagonist is dealt with perfectly in places where she goes to the verge of losing her confidence but later overcomes it. The line like *'I'm young and strong, there isn't anything I can't do'* highlights the stubborn mindset of the protagonist to fight the battle of survival without fear. During the renaissance, black men had little chances of getting job compared to black women and this becomes the main reason for lot of marriages to break in the black community. Few men who were lucky to be employed were mostly used for running elevators and cleaning. Men who felt frantic and inferior gathered around bars and indulged in anti-social activities such as theft, fighting etc. We see a trace of this situation in a place where Lutie goes to the Junto to have a beer. The author clearly brings out the situation in Harlem from the below lines, *'The men who didn't work at all – the ones who never had and never would – stood in front of it in the mornings. As the day slid toward afternoon, they were joined by number runners and men who worked nights in factories and warehouses. And at night, the sidewalk spilled over with men who ran elevators and cleaned buildings and swept out subways'* (Petry, 142). Men feel comfortable at Junto as it gives them news to discuss, to be around with people and look at women and they enjoy spending their time and energy in these kind of unconstructive works.

The protagonist worries about her stay in Harlem and how the street will impact their lives. She questions herself as to where she will be after five years if she fail in her attempts to overcome poverty. When she meets a man named Boots Smith at the junto, who pursues her to take up a singing career, she instantly wishes to grab the opportunity and try her luck. But at the same time feels threatened as to what the street will do to her. Her anxiety is clearly dealt by the author in the lines, *'Suppose it didn't work and she had to stay there, what would the street do to her? She thought of Mrs. Hedges, the super, Min, Mrs. Hedges' little girls. Which one would she be like, say five years from now? What would bub be like?'*

¹Petry.A(1946),The Street, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York., p 141

²Petry.A(1946),The Street, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, p 142

³Petry.A(1946), The Street, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York.p 184

She shivered as she headed toward home' (Petry, 184). Her fear comes true when the Super tries to sexually assault her in the basement. Single women in Harlem are considered easy targets by the society and they are subjected to utmost bad treatment by people around them and very rarely they get shielded. Lutie was however lucky as Mrs. Hedges came to her rescue and tells Lutie not to worry about the Super. But the fear which the protagonist already feels as she is alone increases drastically due to this incident.

The street with its variety of characters threatens the protagonist from all corners, upon having a conversation with Boots about her singing career, Lutie joins his band and starts singing, with the dreams that she will be able to succeed in her career as a singer and break down the barriers of poverty surrounding her. Her dreams get shattered when Junto gets interested in her and persuades Boots to arrange his meeting with her. Lutie was given presents from Junto instead of salary for singing, as per Junto's instructions. Boots on the other hand refrains from crossing Junto as he knew of his fate in doing so. Lutie gets enraged but is left with no choice when she learns that she will not get paid for her singing. Her desperateness is clearly quoted in the lines, ⁴*'And time and Boots Smith and Junto had pushed her right back in here, deftly removing that obscuring cloud of dreams, so that now tonight she could see this hall in reality'* (Petry, 312). This line clearly depicts how bad time becomes the reason for her failed marriage, how she gets into the hands of Boots Smith and gets a chance to sing in the Junto and how she fell in Junto's eyes who can influence people with his power and money. This three-sided attack on the protagonist is clearly stated in the above lines. Boots Smith, who is interested in Lutie decides not to go against Junto as he had helped him build a career and he can very well destroy it if he intends to. Women like Lutie who want to lead a decent life and fight poverty get only such treatments back from the street. The author has clearly pictured the fate of single women in the streets of Harlem in this novel.

The efforts of the lead character, Lutie gets crushed in every step she takes in Harlem to overcome poverty. She runs continuously and finds, she has not moved even an inch further, the erroneous society has constantly stung its venomous nails in her life. She tries to check out a singing career by looking at an advertisement in the subway on her way back home, but is again disappointed when she is demanded to spend two nights in a week with a fat white man handling her audition or pay \$125 for a six-week training. Her frustration about the street is clearly portrayed in the lines, ⁵*'Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North's lynch mobs, she thought bitterly; the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place'* (Petry, 343). These lines clearly indicate the state of Harlem and how the people in it have contributed equally along with the whites for their status. Even after the independence of black people they were treated like mobs and the status of people living there is highly deplorable. The author gets exposed to such places during her stay in Harlem after her marriage and these bitter experiences were objectively put in with her imaginative skills in this novel.

The deleterious impact the streets of Harlem has on young minds that are caught in the clutches of poverty is well explained by the author, when Bub Lutie's son is misdirected by Jones the super of the apartment. As a child is left alone at home with fear of darkness and hankered for care and presence of his mother, young Bub feels that his mother is continuously bad towards him and feels that she will be nice if he can contribute by earning some money. Jones uses this attitude of the kid to involve him in stealing mails. Though Bub resisted the idea at first, gets involved eventually to support his mother financially and gets caught by the police for theft. The street teaches young minds, wrong ways of earning right from their early ages. The clutches of poverty urges them to pursue acts which will yield them money despite the nature of the work. When Lutie meets Bub in the children's shelter she sees a few others who are not black mothers.

⁴Petry, A. (1946), *The Street*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York. P 312

⁵Petry, A. (1946), *The Street*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York. p 343

Lutie's thought on seeing others are clearly stated in the lines,⁶ *'Perhaps she thought, we're all here because we're all poor. May be it doesn't have anything to do with color'* (Petry, 409). Buried in her own thoughts, Lutie even misses to ask Bub about the mail theft and the reason for committing the crime. But when she comes back home, she feels the loneliness filled in the house due to the absence of Bub and she feels how Bub must have been frightened about being alone in the home. The loneliness of the child and his feeling about his mother has persuaded him to indulge in mail stealing. This is the state of children in Harlem who lack proper parenting or who are subjected to single parenting. Even if Bub comes out, his record in police will keep following him and may persuade him to take-up meager paid jobs, say an elevator operator or a cleaner thus increasing the mob strength in Harlem without rendering proper guidance to them.

The characterization of Lutie is made very strong by Ann Petry as the protagonist strives hard to maintain sanity despite the threats of racism, sexism and gender inequalities. She feels nobody can live a decent life in the street and somehow they will turn evil at one point in time.⁷ *'And Lutie thought no one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of the people – slowly, surely, inevitably'* (Petry, 229). The phrase 'sucked the humanity' is used aptly as the roots of decent behavior originates from humanity and when that is at stake, the behaviour of people definitely turns monstrous. The streets of Harlem turn her into a murderer in order to maintain her ethics of living and also make her forego her son who is in children's shelter. The sufferings of the protagonist are poured out with vigor when she stabs Boots Smith and vents her piled up feelings of resentment. Lutie feels she can never survive in this street and head to Chicago ignoring her son Bub who will not be able to make out the reason for the disappearance of his mother. When he comes out of the children's shelter, the street will have its tainted hands on him and his fate will decide his future.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has brought out the influence of the streets of Harlem in Ann Petry's novel, *The Street*. The author creates the plot with an imagination well ahead of her time to focus the social issues such as issues of children left alone at home, single parenting, sexism and racism. The unique perspective of the author of the life of black people is clearly depicted in the novel. The brutalities which are cast upon the lead character on the streets of Harlem is explained in detail with annotations from the novel.

The powerful, uncompromising work of social criticism is clearly depicted in the novel by the struggles faced by the two characters Lutie and her son Bub. The ways in which a single black mother struggles to live with dignity and self-respect among the rusty streets of Harlem is studied in detail from the author's perspective. The characterization of the protagonist who wades through the day to day ordeals which she faces in the street is explained in detail. It also provides a detailed study on the various impacts the street has on young minds and the effect of such impacts. The author's work on the classic depiction of the street and its people are elaborated in this study.

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⁶Petry.A(1946) Chapter 17, The Street, Houghton Mifflin Harcount, New York., p 409

⁷Petry.A(1946), Chapter 9,The Street, Houghton Mifflin Harcount, New York, p 229

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