

*The Narrows:*  
**An Exposition of Ann Petry's Racial Protest, Quest for Identity,  
and Repercussions of Blind Adherence to American Dream**

**Ashaq Hussain Parray, M.A., M.Phil., NET/SET, B.Ed.**

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**Ann Petry 1908-1997**

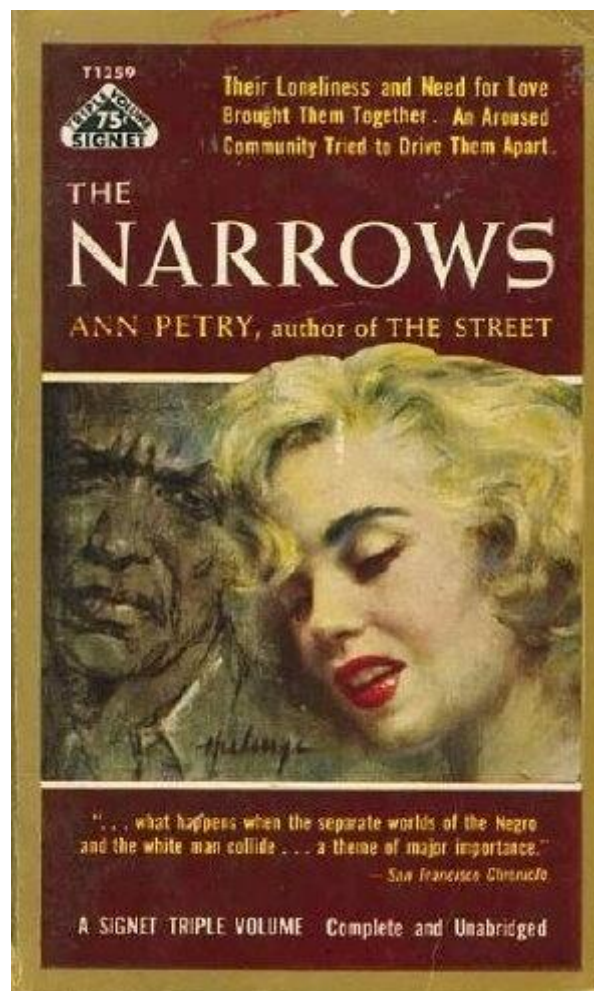
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**Abstract**

African-American fiction is loaded with the protest themes, for it has to explore the bruised consciousness of its race. Therefore, it has haunted the memories of readers' ever since its inception. Though the earlier writers of this variety of fiction have been often labelled as sheer protest writers, yet there is an effort to resuscitate them from the

appropriation of partial canon makers and to show that they are matchless in terms of their literary thrust and originality. In this paper I will analyse one such writer Ann Petry, whose fictional aura is exceptionally superior and original as far as the exposition of the racial, economic and sexual issues of 1940s America are concerned. The masterpiece novel of Ann Petry, *The Narrows*, will be the focus of analysis. This novel is an exceptionally heart-rending interracial love affair of a young black man and a beautiful white lady. What happens to their *tour de force* in the racist America of 1940s will be succinctly scrutinized in this paper.

**Key Words:** Ann Petry, *The Narrows*, Racism, American Dream, Moral bankruptcy, Capitalist Repercussions, identity-crisis.



## *The Narrows*

*The Narrows* (1953), Ann Petry's third novel, explores the lives of an eclectic group of residents in the fictional town of Monmouth, Connecticut, England. By not just focusing on a single linear narrative perspective, rather making several characters the target of racial, sexual, and capitalistic oppression, Petry is trying to elicit empathy and action.

The novel focuses on Abbie Crunch's adopted son Link Williams, a Dartmouth, Phi Beta Kappa graduate. He feels himself socially unacceptable because of his inter-racial love-affair, which he develops with the white heiress of Treadway Hall, Camilla Sheffield. Vernon opines, "This system has strengthened itself, linking slavery, racism, and money, from the first slaves through the Civil War, up until the present times" (71). Quite aptly, the protagonist is named Link Williams, a connection between past and present, who like a joint tries to link the two races. 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.

### **Link Williams and Camilla Sheffield**

The relationship of Link Williams and Camilla Sheffield is a perfect communion of 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 her sincerity. She, however, reveals the reason, i.e., the beauty and safety she felt in his voice:

It was a perfectly beautiful speaking voice and it belonged to a colored man. I had to try to match that voice that meant safety with your being colored and I couldn't. In the fog, when I couldn't see, I clutched at you, because all I had to go on was the sound of your voice and the feel of your arm, the long smooth muscle in the forearm, a man's arm, hard fleshed, a man's hand, strong, warm, the skin smooth. Yet the hand belonged to a colored man. (*The Narrows* 88)

### **Racial Concerns**

Petry is able to vividly portray the conditions prevalent in those times, when it was inconceivable that a white female can embrace a black man, let alone sleeping with her.

Link's thoughts reveal the same, as he speculates over what might be Camilla thinking about him in particular and the black people in general:

Cat Jimmie on a cart equals terror, equals drowned-in-fear. All those colored people in beer garden equals terror, equals drowned-in-fear. Link Williams, once one knows he is colored also equals terror, equals drowned-in-fear. Equals friendship? Highly implausible. Come to think of it, what in hell had she expected to find on the Dumble Street Dock, in a beer garden on Franklin Avenue? (TN 93)

### **Racial Encounter**

The most heart gripping racial encounter takes place when he takes Camilla to his home and there, their love gets consummated. As soon as Abbie (Link's mother) comes to know of it, she couldn't tolerate the sight of a white bitch sleeping with him and that too in her house. She threw her (Camilla's) clothes out on the street. Link becomes a mere puppet who could do nothing to protect his love. But instead is compelled by the circumstances to push her gently out of the house, before it takes an ugly turn. Later on, when she (Camilla) meets him, she abuses him, "You bastard," She said, "You knew-you-knew, leave me alone," turning and twisting under his hands. "That woman, laughing at me, laughing at me," twisting, turning, pushing him away, "Get out of my car", voice imperious (TN 257). This infuriates him and he demands justification from her, for keeping him on sea-saw as he was waiting there from the last two weeks for her and above it the reason for her present awkward behaviour toward him. In a reckless manner, she rewards him 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 and he couldn't control the storm, and what was the outcome of such a disturbance, he slapped her.

### **Magic Realism Where Fiction and Truth is Mixed**

The novel seems to be a piece of magic realism where fiction and truth is mixed. 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).

Abbie Crunch, who with her husband Major has adopted Link Williams, is an extremely class-conscious lady, a tough moral-fiber, and an old-fashioned lady. She constantly reprimands herself for the neglect of Link at the time of her husband's death that ultimately changed the entire course of Link's 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. 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 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.

### **Racism All Around**

The racism is so deeply entwined with the consciousness of almost all the characters of the novel. But ironically some of the black characters have imbibed the white racist notions toward their own people as well. It is especially because of the emerging middle-class consciousness among the blacks. The blacks around that time had also started to undergo the process of social transformation. Abbie is so class-conscious that even the views about her own husband are shaped by it. It gets amply reflected when Petry explores her thoughts:

She went into the kitchen, sat down at the table. She couldn't seem to think straight. She would have Hod arrested. She kept the Major breathing, labored, stentorian, like a snore. Drunk. Drunk as a lord. What could have come over him? People would laugh at her. President of the local WCTU. A drunken husband. Well, he's colored. Ha-ha, ha-ha, ha-ha. (TN 30)

If she had known Link's reason of abstaining from the minstrel show:

She'd say that he'd let The Race down. She said colored people (sometimes she just said The Race) had to be cleaner, smarter, thriftier, more ambitious than white people, so that white people would like colored people. The way she explained it made him feel as though she were carrying The Race around with him all the time. (TN 138)

The intensity of prejudice against the white race in her mind is reflective of the times of 1950s, when it was inconceivable to think of a communion between the whites and the blacks, as her introspection reveals:

Link? She would ask him to leave, to live somewhere else. A white girl. In my house. In bed with Link. Tramp of a white girl. Pale yellow hair on the bridal pillow cases. Sweet smell in the hall. He would bring a tramp into my house. I am a fool- Frances, "Howard's a fool". You fool. You god-damn fool. Get a doctor. (TN 253)

Link's memories of Camilla were acting as tormenting agents, and this made him restless and careless. He couldn't speculate how much dangerous it is to get involved in an interracial love affair. He is mesmerized by his "Helen of Troy". Camilla's love has tainted his vision. To him it seems, in the darkness of night, everyone basically is same and this actually hypnotized his mind and started to dream that he can achieve his Helen (Camilla).

### **American Dream as a Nightmare**

Petry has exposed 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, starts unconsciously disclosing his thoughts about Camilla, as "how beauteous mankind is! O' brave new world that has such people in't" (TN 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 'Utopia,' and Petry has catered to the demands of the romantic and ideal people who wanted a happy and secure world for all.

### **Negative Sermons and Negative Attributes**

Link didn't pay heed to what Abbie had said, because he'd heard her preach the negative sermons about the black people before as well. These negative attributes were deliberately associated with the blacks, but ironically some of the blacks were falling in the racial trap casted by the whites imbibing these racist ploys (especially the emergent Negro middle-class ), and proved a stumbling block in the economic, and emotional journey of the budding Negroes who wanted to do something of their own choice. His wish to become a historian and her rebuking him saying, "Whoever heard of a colored historian?" (TN 328), is reflective of the imbibed stereotypical ideology and Abbie had proved herself throughout the novel, a mere teacher of one such institutions where, the Negroes are reminded of their 'negritude' and that the Negroes are incapable of doing something worthy, let alone sticking to a job for quite a long time. However, if any black does so, it is viewed as a miracle. Her always criticizing him sometimes makes her identity ambiguous. Is she on the white side or on the black side? Obviously, it reflects her identity crisis. Margaret McDowell opines, "Abbie's situation in which she is torn by the pressures of guilt, aloofness, and false pride also demonstrates the destructiveness of the society in which individual differences--in her case, largely racial in origin--promote hatred, intolerance, and alienation" (141).

### **Role of Bill Hod**

Bill Hod was the mysterious master-mind behind all the illicit, illegal, and immoral activities that were going on in The Last Chance bar. He controlled or operated from, behind the scene, but who could go against him? He had established links with the police officials, and his business was thriving day by day. The photograph of Camilla that appeared in the Monmouth Chronicle is deliberately maneuvered by him to make Link believe, and start believing 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)

### **Shattered Identity**

Link's whole identity is shattered. Was he her lover or the muscle boy? This gothic truth bewilders him, and he starts retrospection, and the only question that echoed in his mind is, why hadn't she told him about her real identity? He starts retrieving how he was told by Weak-Knees and Bill Hod; Frances Jackson and Abbie not to visit The Moon Beam bar as he was under-age, and it wasn't good for his intellectual development and over all personality. The path leading to that Moon Beam bar is aptly called the "Primrose Path" (TN 278), i.e. a path full of thorns, but Camilla has made that plush by her money. Link could also realize that money can transform a black into a white like Lutie Jhonson of *The Street* (1946) by the same author. In the bar, even the identity of Buddha becomes distorted and disgraced in his mind that is implicit of the corruption in the ethics of the fictional society that obviously reflects the reality.

### **White Beauty and Black Beauty**

Petry is trying to play with the notion of white beauty, and inverts it by glorifying the black beauty. It becomes obvious at various places in the novel. In the initial pages, Abbie describes Malcolm Powther as: "A colored man. His skin was just a shade darker than her own. Yet he was dressed with a meticulousness one rarely ever saw these days creased trousers, highly polished shoes, because the back of the shoes gleamed, a darky grey felt hat on his head, the shape perfect" (TN 7). It tempts Abbie to believe that he is an ideal black male representing elegance, and an epitome of mannerism, which the younger generation must imitate. After seeing him, her mind broods over her own make-up which shows that the notion of beauty for her is blackness, rather than whiteness. The thoughts going on in her mind about him, reveals, the general human nature, i.e., how one feels when opposite sex is nearby, irrespective of whether one is black or white. It shows that the blacks also feel as the whites do. The way she is disturbed by Mamie's presence seems to show that unconsciously, she had an eye on Malcolm Powther and wanted to replace her place.



## **Ambivalent Identities**

The identities of the characters in the novel are ambivalent. Is Link Camilla's true love or just a plaything? Is she a whore or the demon lover of Link? Is Bill Hod Link's true supporter or just an instigator or his true father or a surrogate father? Malcolm's identity like Abbie's is also ambiguous. At home he was a cuckolded-husband. He has three children, one of whom J. C. Powther, who quickly becomes intimate with Abbie Crunch as soon as they shifted there as tenants. Malcolm is a very pathetic and sceptical character. He feels a constant threat that he might lose his wife, in case she falls in love with somebody else. Bill Hod and Link Williams adds fuel to the fire of already burning suspicion in him by constantly visiting Mamie Powther, in Malcolm's absence. But at the Treadway Hall, he manipulates the circumstances to suit his designs. Artistry of Petry is such that it brings out the multi-dimensional nature of racism, classism, and the identity-crisis of the 1950s Afro-American people very craftily.

Miss Dwight's approach towards Link in the school is a clear manifestation of the racist approach. It is because of racism that she made him an object of ridicule; she wants him to act as Mr. Sambo, a stereotypical lazy black figure, but Link on the appointed day, pretends illness. Thus, the minstrel show fails. Link's reaction was a trenchant and an apt type of rebuttal, she deserved. The entire episode is full of suspense in which she and he, both tried to have an upper hand at the opponent, and eventually he was able to decipher and decode her plan. Then he distorts, and dismantles her malign designs. Through the character of Link, Petry is trying to reverse the notion of smartness of the white race, as Link even at the age of ten made Miss Dwight an object of helplessness.

The identity of the white women in the novel seems to be really at stake. They have been castigated in negative terms as the whores, the manipulators involving in power politics, thereby acting as the most dangerous racist forces of oppression, i.e., social, political, and psychological exploitation. Mrs. Treadway, Mrs. Camilla Sheffield, and the unlimited nameless white women involving in illicit sex are quite sufficient examples to prove the point raised.

## **On the Immorality of the “Superior Race”**

Ann Petry lashes out at the immorality of the so called superior race. She has thrown ample light on the scepticism in the relations, and on the moral bankruptcy of the white females especially:

Sometimes the rich white ladies married the big muscle white boys, the penniless, body-beautiful white boys. And the marriages wouldn't work, couldn't work, because the wenches had too much money, and the penniless muscle men couldn't control them in life except the good bones and the long smooth muscles, the fighter's heart and the dockhand's vocabulary, and after a while the novelty of the whole thing wore off, the rich white lady called quits, until she ran across another one with bigger muscles, a stronger back. (*TN* 279-80)

Camilla's love 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 tears she shed are symbolic of her genuine feelings for him. She even mentioned that it was Mamie for whom he is deserting her. He arrogantly laughed. The ball was now in his court. But he didn't play safe. 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.

## **Characterization**

Petry's characterization and peculiar attributes, which she gives to her characters, is quite appreciable. Her describing Bill Hod and Link Williams as belonging to “Copper breed,” i.e., no woman safe around them is very artistic. Earlier, Abbie at the time of her husband Major's death, had decided not to weep in front of the crowd that would gather for the funeral rites of Major. Petry herself in an interview with Mark Wilson has revealed that Abbie, Malcolm, and Frances Jackson came closer to being the archetypal New Englander (77).

## Corruption in Democratic Institutions

There are ample evidences in the novel which show 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, i. e, the police that can prevent crimes and protect the vulnerable is too corrupt. Right from The Treadways' illegal enterprise, The Moon Beam bar, and The Last Chance bar, all are in full public glare operating, under the illicit and immoral Bill Hod's ownership. The police man who supplied Bill Hod the license, was helped by Bill Hod once. But his supplying the license can't be justified merely on account of this. It is a downright illegal act. Also the Monmouth police department is not effectively investigating into the reasons of the accident by Camilla in which a boy was seriously injured, and not checking the child labourers being employed by the white families. Later on, their sexual identity is encroached and demanding proof and witness first, that results in the crimes being committed. These crimes could have been averted if police would have been alert enough. Link is kidnapped in full public glare. All such and other crimes are going on in the Harlem ghetto of America. Rutledge, head of Monmouth's police department, was himself a drunkard and a glutton. How could one have expected any sort of justice from the police officials, when they themselves are corrupt? Rutledge himself did unjustified acts, e. g, he knew who the culprit was, but did nothing instead just watched. Petry has thrown ample light on this side of reality and hinted that all the democratic institutions through whose honest functioning only can the American dream be achieved, are not honestly working. So, the American Dream is in a state of continuous deferring state.

## Peter Bullock

Peter Bullock, as far as the last part of his name is concerned, *The Oxford Dictionary of English* defines it as a young bull, or cow that is castrated. As we go through the pages of this novel, we come to know that he's not physically castrated. But he helps in the castration of Link, though indirectly, in his execution. Vernon E. Lattin in her essay "Ann Petry and the American Dream" opines, "Peter Bullock is the castrated American male of the novel" (71). His character is an exact foil to the Apollo-like figure of Link as describes by Petry herself in the novel. His personal house details also reveal his castrated nature: "Siamese cat part of

their family. No children. Siamese cat took their place. Sat in front of fire warming its behind and sneered. Lola's cat" (TN 46).

## **Jubine**

Jubine, the photographer, the eighth wonder of world, is a mysterious artist who captures in his camera, the events which are very unique in itself. Through his character and the artistic talents that Petry has bestowed him, she is lashing implicitly at the whites, who claim that creativity is the inborn gift of theirs, and they are the masters in every field. She is trying to dismantle this old myth. Jubine refused the job of Peter as he doesn't want to lose his freedom. Because the mantra for him in life is freedom and it comes when what you wish, you could do that. As he says to him:

I am free. But you, my dear Bullock, you are a slave, to custom, to a house, to a car. You have given up yourself little raw places in your stomach, little sore burning places, so that you can't eat what you want and you can't sleep at night because you have turned so many hand-springs to pay for that long shiny car. . . . It's a-slave ship. Think of it- a slave ship right here in this beautiful little New England city called Monmouth." (TN 43)

His actions and speech explicitly makes it obvious that he is a communist at core as Peter Bullock says, "Because he is against wealth. Every time he gets a chance, he takes a potshot at the wealthy" (TN 47). It clearly shows he is dissatisfied with the capitalistic system of economy, which breeds injustice, violence, and corruption.

Peter, editor, owner, publisher of Monmouth Chronicle is blackmailed by Mrs. Treadway to create a conducive environment so that on one side, she can restore her daughter's honor, and on the other hand make way smooth for, if not execution, at least Link's confession that he tried to molest the honor of Camilla, which is sheer power politics. Earlier: "Peter had made the Treadways' girl look like a whore and made the nigger look Apollo" (TN 365). Lola says to Peter Bullock, regarding the directions of Mrs. Treadway, "don't do it. Whatever it is she wants you to do, don't do it" (TN 367). However, Peter Bullock defied her advice and went on to dance to the tunes of Mrs. Treadway. Perhaps, he himself was accustomed to middle-class life style and he falsely believes that Lola may leave

him in case he is not able to support her. This all underlie the economic insecurity that compels the blacks to go against their very race.

### ***Monmouth Chronicle***

The history of *Monmouth Chronicle* reveals that it was set as an abolitionist paper, but now it seems to end in the hands of capitalistic forces. Peter Bullock loves his wife. He knew that maintaining her middle-class life style, besides keeping in view the pensionary benefits he has to provide to his staff, depend on the advertisement money of Mrs. Treadway. So, he starts to ponder over the whole issue. After meditating over the whole issue of Camilla's accident and her love affair with Link Williams, decides to work against his conscience and run a series of news on the crimes committed by the Negroes, till he is able to turn the whole situation in Treadways' favour. This all shows how dangerous the repercussions of capitalism can be for the fourth pillar of democracy.

### **Bunny Sheffield**

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 giving his personal tragedy a cosmic sweep. Link 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 experienced earlier 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 symbolic figure of corrupt capitalistic system of the 1950s America.

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). 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).

### **Moral Bankruptcy and Scepticism**

The moral bankruptcy and scepticism in the married couples, irrespective of any race, is quite brilliantly exposed by Petry. Money is the basis of relations rather than love in the Harlem ghetto of 1950s. 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” ( Wilson79).

Abbie’s introspection, close to the end of 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 gave 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)

### **Hope Vanished**

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). Thus, it can be said that the blacks in America were still not assimilated in that way, as was 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).

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Ashaq Hussain Parray, M.A., M.Phil., NET/SET, B.Ed.  
Department of English Language and Literature  
Degree College Boys  
Anantnag 192124  
Jammu & Kashmir  
India [Ashaq533@gmail.com](mailto:Ashaq533@gmail.com)

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