

The Theme of Oppression in Ann Petry's *The Street*

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The entire Afro-American Community was subjected to endless suffering. Yet the Black woman's condition was much worse than the Black man's because "To be Black and female" was to be in "Double Jeopardy" (Deal 90). There has ever been an unholy nexus and sexism. They in fact from the same set of circumstances.

Both are motivated by similar economic, social and psychological forces, it is only logical that those who sought to undermine Blacks were also the most virulent antifeminists. The means of oppression differed across race and sex lines, but the wellspring of that oppression was the same. (The impact of Black women on Race and Sex in America, p.6)

Despite all for his abused wife, the Black man gradually developed a kind of aversion to her. He also began to see her as a loose woman who preferred extra martial adventures to martial permanence. The stigma attached Black woman by her White slavery ironically received the Black man's sanction. Thanks to such an enormous misconception, he felt sexually neglected and rook his woman to be his enemy. The White man's clever manipulation of the social situation thus escaped the Black man's attention. On the other hand, one discovers the latter's actual helplessness. Being a slave himself, he was absolutely powerless to question the scheme of things. Either way, the Black women was "deprived" of a strong Blackman on whom she could rely for protection. So her awful predicament continued. (Afro-American Women's Fiction, p.30)

Black Women in the 16th century were pictured as "icons of evil". Western culture further tarnished the image and projected Black Women as a symbol of sexual excess in the White men's mind. So the Black men were made slaves and "women became sexual receptacles of men"(The Street, p.143). The Negro women taken to America were forced to serve as breeding animals. They were forced to serve as a "body toy" or a "Sexpot". This continued even after the abolition of slavery in America.

Bell Hooks is of the opinion (or) views:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of woman, any particular race or class of women. It has the power of transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, Feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into. (Feminism and Equality,p.71)

The objective of “Feminism” is to eradicate sexual oppression of women, irrespective of race, religion and color. Every woman faces this challenge all over the world, especially the Black-women.

In “The Street” Petry treats Black women as both Black and female and in addition to racism and capitalism incorporates a third dimension to oppression, namely sexism. As Hernton says No one but Petry had made a thesis of the debilitating mores of economic, racial and sexual violence let loose against Black women in their new urban ghetto environment.

Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of the novel is trapped on all sides by the big “three isms” of American White and Black societies, namely Capitalism, Racism and Sexism, unleashed on her by the Chandlers, Junto, Mr. Croose, Jones, Boots Smith, Mrs. Hedges and Jim. At the top is capitalism, represented and personified in the novel by the Chandlers, for whom Lutie works as a “domestic”. The Chandlers (both the men women) are also racist and sexist toward Luite.

In the Chandler’s house, Lutie’s meeting with Mrs. Chandler’s mother revealed another unwritten (dirty) myth that almost all Black’s women are prostitutes. The rich White families, the chandlers for whom she is obliged to work as a “domestic”, regard her as a workhouse and as a sexual threat to the female chandlers, who believe all Black women are promiscuous sluts ready to jump in bed with any and every White man.

Apparently, it was an automatic reaction of White people-if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute. If not that – at least sleeping with her would be just a simple matter, for all one had to do was make the request. In fact, White men wouldn’t even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight. (The Street,p.45)

The angry Lutie was further provoked when she was asked about her ‘encounters’ with White men. One wonders how White men like Black women and dislike theirs. One has to also observe how cruel the White men are. They are ready to surfeit their sexual urge with Black

women. At those junctures, the color of the women never stands as a barrier. One has to observe the mental; agony of Lutie too. She being chased encounters such harassment even from her own people. The paradox in the novel is also to be noted here, the White men are not ready to give jobs to Black men but are ready to have sex with Black women.

One day Lutie, receives a letter from her father saying that Jim is living with another woman. The letter she receives from her father states. 'Dear Lutie: You better come home. Jim's carrying on with another woman. Pop' (The Street, p.52)

Lutie's mental stability is jolted. She could neither believe nor disbelieve her father. She loses her mental focus for a while she wonders:

That Jim had fallen for some other women. And it must be something pretty serious if it so alarmed Pop that he actually wrote her a letter about it. She thought Pop can't suddenly have turned moral – Pop who had lived with so many Mamies and Lauras and mollies that he must have long since forgotten some of them himself. (The Street,p.52).

She was unable to slight her father's letter. At the same time she consoles herself by recalling his relationship with a few women. Though her heart said that Jim won't do such trivial things, her mind believed her father's words.

Finally it is her mind, which won the battle; still hurrying, she opened the front door and walked in. Walked into her own house to find there was another woman living there with Jim. A Slender dark brown girl whose eyes shifted crazily when she was her. (The Street, p.53)

The crest fallen Lutie would have killed the Black lady with Jim. However Jim prevented her. Lutie could hardly imagine Jim moving with that Black lady. She wondered why she worked all these days with the White people. Dejected Lutie moved away with her son to her father's house. Jim has toyed with her affection and love all these days – the couple earlier decided to avoid frequent visits to save money. But Lutie has now lost her family partner. Jim's selfish attitude is also to be noted. He is not able to curtail his sexual instincts in spite of his wife's suffering in a distant place with White people.

Just like Mrs. Chandler's mother Mrs. Hedges slowly teases Lutie to allow herself 'to move' with Whites. Mrs. Hedges in her own way wants Lutie to become a prostitute. "If you live on this damn street, you're supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights with nice white gentlemen." (The Street, p.84)

Mrs. Hedges is a “Mountain” of a woman and is utterly “Unattractive”. Down south, when she was young, she was trapped in a fire, suffering burns all over her body; her hair was burned away and she must wear a wig. Stubbornly embittered, she made her way north, to Harlem, where she roamed the streets pilfering garbage cans and living in doorways. One night she meets a White man in the same condition as she, an ugly, dumpy wretch, and they are drawn to each other. The man is Junto, who is also endowed with sheer stubbornness. Together they form a team and start a junk business. The White man and Black woman are – beyond racial prejudice and hate. But, observing the rules of society, Junto puts the money earned through his brains and Mrs. Hedges labour to good use; he works his way up the ladder, acquires property and several bars and night clubs in Harlem and other parts of Manhattan; he makes the necessary connections with the big boys down town, and becomes a kingpin of a sort. He sets Mrs. Hedges up in the whoring business and provides protection. In turn, she is loyal to Junto and steers some of her ‘girls’ his way.

Though she has money, an apartment, and “security” of a sort, all Mrs. Hedges ever really wanted in life is what she cannot have, “a man who will fall in love with her”! (But she is “repulsive”, with burn scars and no hair, Lord, “no bair”). So she sits framed in her window, with a bandanna around her head, casting eyes of prey down on the street in search of “girls” for her business. She calls everybody “dearie”.

As soon as Mrs. Hedges sights Lutie she greets her, “dearie”, and is convinced that the young, well-dressed, dignified new comer is fit for her trade, or better yet, for Junto who, she knows, wants to sleep with a nice, warm, coloured girl. Though Mrs.Hedges shows some human kindness by stopping Jones from Lutie in the darkened hall and invites Lutie to tea, she is thinking all the White of “catching” Lutie for Junto. Mrs.Hedges is a vampire who puts the “girls” out of doors when they have earned no money; it requires much stamina of Lutie to keep from being sick in her presence.

After Lutie Johnson moved into the building Jones became fixated with her and after his failure at raping Lutie, Jones becomes insanely cruel. He beats Min and hates her similar to Albert in “The Colour purple”, who beats Celie is not shug. The taking out of frustration on the woman in the house is a standard traditional procedure. Men oppress, batter, and make woman “ugly”. Then men turn around and beat them some more for being “ugly”. Significantly, Petry points out that all the men in Min’s life have treated her as her White Employers and even worse.

Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique” (1963) is cited as the first book of what is called the ‘Second Wave’ of Feminism. She has said, “To vastly oversimplify, the goal of Feminism became to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which, it was thought, would end discrimination against women on the job, in the home and in all areas of

women's lives". Again the objective of feminism is to put an end to sexual harassment of women in houses, in work places and in places where women trend.

Lutie was subjected to harassment by both Black and White men, Earlier Mrs. Chandler's mother suggested that all Black women are bound to move with Whites. Later her husband Jim cheated her by moving with a Black lady. Finally she was tortured by Boot, Junto and Jones.

Then there is Min, who fearfully believes in the decree that, "a woman alone has no chance". This belief drives her from man to man. Though she is "protected" from other men, she is not "protected" from the incredible cruelty of the very man who protects her. Min has been beaten down by facile forces of oppression on every side. In order to survive, she has succumbed and accommodated herself to nothing less than enslavement. She feels helpless against White people, women in particular, who work her like a mule of the world and slander her Black sexuality, which makes her, more accepting and expecting of the battering she receives from the men in her life. More than one of the men she has lived with (For "protection") has pimped her, taken her money, used and abused her, stayed drunk, and then left her. In the dimly lit hovel of Jones's apartment, she exists as though she were a hostage. Silent, inarticulate, tipping about, she is forever trying to make she invisible. She feels "ugly", she feels at fault, for what? – She does not know- for being a woman, surely. In her campy room there is a caged canary and a table with crawl foot legs: these are Min's sings. She is utterly confined without friends, male or female.

It is noted that both Min, who is a concubine of Jones and Lutie Johnson are protagonists. Both represent the turmoil of the Black women. Min readily accepts the invitation of Jones to be his concubine. She has no other option. Like most of the Black women she accepts the proposal. She is used as "sex toy" not by Whites but by a Black. Min travels in the "same boat" with Lutie. She is not given the opportunity to work and live. She could not earn bread by any desirable way. She runs to save her chastity. Ann Petry had boldly penned her as a murderer who escapes without punishment.

Min was unable to receive certain fortunes which Lutie received. Even she cries "what possible good has it done, teach people like me to write". The scholar finds similarities between Min and pecola of 'The Bluest Eye'. There Pecola was finally raped by her own father.

1. A greater number of Black men than Black women form interracial partnerships.
2. College – educated Black women are further disadvantaged in finding a mate if they want to marry someone with a comparable educational background because college – educated men marry younger women with less education than theirs. Almost one – third of college – educated Black women remain unmarried past the age of thirty.

In “The Street” Jones, the Super, Mr.Crosse (singer’s school) and Boots Smith, the henchman of Junto are “archetypal paradigms” of all the women hating sexism that Black men and Black society feel towards the women in their midst.

She remembered the inkwell on the desk, back of him. She picked it up in a motion so swift that he had no time to guess her intent. She hurled it full force on his face. The ink paused for a moment at the obstruction of his eye brows, then dripped down over the fat jowls, over the wrinkled collar, the grease stained vest; tricked over his mouth. She slammed the door of the office behind her.
(The street,p.322)

She neither confronted nor allowed him to discuss the issue further. The slamming of the door said it all. Like Nora Helmer in ‘The Doll’s House’, the slamming of the door is a significant scene in this piece. Even the receptionist was scared. Lutie had shown her fury. But her cup of sorrow is full. She is teased by everybody in the novel except one or two. The agony of Lutie is lengthened by every male character. Either they want to take advantage of her economic state or her charm.

Jones is depicted as a beast. His apartment is like the hold of a cargo ship, and crowded with his junky stuff. We learn that he drove all the women out of his life by his violent sex. On the street lounging in front of the building, he undresses women with his eyes, molests them in his mind. His feelings toward the women are about performing he is. He hates the images he conjures up in his mind of Lutie and her husband having sex. Then he hates Lutie and “desires” her even more. To Jones, Lutie is a “piece of meat”, an assemblage of body parts, a “thing” on which he can take out his hatred against the female sex, in and through the violence of “fucking”

Jones is to certain that Lutie is nothing but a “whore”, that when she wards off his repeated advances, he believes at first that she does not comprehend his intensions, he has not made himself clear enough. But after Lutie, along with Mrs. Hedges, fights off his rape attempt, Jones decides he knows the reasons why Lutie will have nothing to do with him. She was in love with Junto, the White man weren’t good enough for her. He had seen women like that before. He fantasizes about Lutie and “the White man” together in Copulation; his anger almost kills him. He vows “revenge”. So he becomes frustrated and as revenge makes her son steal letters from the other apartment buildings in the street and fingers him to the police.

Boots Smith is a younger version of Jones. he is a victim of White racism. His wife cheats on him with a White man and from then on he begins on him with a White man and from then on he begins hating women. Boots always had a grudge over White as well as Black. He wanted to tease the White by presenting them his “leaving”. At that juncture Lutie comes into his

life. He wanted to seduce her not only for her charm, eloquence and his sexual appetite but to show the White that they are going to enjoy his 'leaving'. After all, he's White and this time a White man can have a Black man's leavings.

When he sees Lutie, he sees her as he saw his wife and all women. He regards her the same way, Lutie's husband Jim regarded her and feels the same way that Jones felt towards all women. Petry portrays his desire for Lutie as being at the base of every man's desire for woman-conquer and enslave. To him money is more important than Lutie or any woman. But still he tries to rape Lutie even after being warned by Junto that he wants Lutie for himself, only because for once he wants a White man to have something left back by a Blackman. Like Jones he also mistakes Lutie and pays dearly with his life for the mistake.

According to Hernton, in "The Street" Petry shows that the Black ghetto is not only a social political, educational and economic colony, but that the Black ghetto is also and foremost a sexual colony. Here the Black women are slaves of the White racist society, which exploits their labour, and of White men who treat them as sex object in their homes and brothels and again of Black men who enslave them in their homes, in the ghettos and in the public streets.

Conclusion

The different circumstances in which Lutie and Min find themselves contain the same social realities. First and foremost both of them are Black and poor. Secondly, they are victims. They are looked upon by society and by the men of both the races as sex objects. Both are denied better opportunities because of their sex and colour. Both are domestic servants working for Whites who consider Black women as non-persons and whores. In total, because of their sex and race they are subject to the same general oppression. No one is ready to see and accept, them for what they are and what they want to be. As Hernton says, They are not only natives of and contradicted by a sexist world.

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