

## Ann Petry: A Victim of Canonical Representation

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### Abstract:

Afro-American literature has received an immense scholarly attention, especially from the times Toni Morrison received Noble Prize in literature. America has definitely proved “a melting-pot” of cultures, despite being a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. However, Afro-American literature throws entirely different light on the American history. It highlights the traumas of slavery, racism, sexism and classism. The current paper will apprise the readers about the Afro-American history and contribution of Afro-American fiction writers, especially Ann Petry who delineated the impact of racism, sexism and classism quite efficiently in her fictional world. Petry herself has been an unfortunate novelist, for she has been a victim of canonical representation. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are considered to be the representative figures of Afro-American women’s fiction, but Ann Petry’s contribution is neglected for reasons unknown. Key words: racism, sexism, classism, American Dream and double-consciousness etc.

### Ann Petry: A Victim of Canonical Representation

The term African-American is preferred over the Negroes, Pan-African, and black American in the field of literary theory and criticism. It finds its intellectual roots and myths in African-traditions. The African-Americans are not able to align themselves with the theories established by the whites, because the whites have castigated them as barbarians, savages; brutes, sexual objects; and other associated negative terms. Therefore, they are notable to feel comfortable with these theories.

African-American theory is grounded on the premises that the Negro writer can't, and mustn't be evaluated with the critical theories derived from the white tradition as it has its own racial pros and cons. It is highly stated that the African-American writers feel that they can't explore their dilemmas, emotions and aspirations within the ambit of white aesthetics.

While glancing over the literature of African-American women, one comes across the fact that intellectuals ranging from the first black woman poet Phyllis Wheatly to Gates, no one could desist from mentioning the conflict of slavery in his/her writing. *Iola LeRoy*, *Shadows Uplifted* by Frances Ellen W. Harper, was the first novel by an Afro-American woman to be published, appeared in 1892. America by that time had experienced historic trauma of racism and sexism. The Civil War and Reconstruction periods had badly affected the nature of life of the black people in general and the black women in particular. Frances Harper as an abolitionist and as a black feminist has played a leading role in the national struggle to free the blacks from the slavery. It is not only the physical rape of which the black women became the victim, but also the emotional rape when the jealous mistress instead of consoling and sympathizing the victim,

taunts and rebukes her. The manner of controlling and exploiting the black woman by the white man is what Angela Davis calls “an institutionalized pattern of rape” (qtd. in Marjorie Pryse 40).

The conjure women along with mulatta figure were other stereotypes generated of the black women by the South intentionally to exploit her. The negative images of Mammy, Aunt Jemima and Sapphire were already running in their prejudiced minds. Black women were believed to be the source and cause of sin (a religious misnomer). The mulatta according to the literary conventions of the 19th century as well as half of the twentieth century could be the only type of black women beautiful enough to be a popular heroine. 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.

Jessie Fauset in her novels insists that the upper middle-class Negro has the same values that his/her counterpart has. In her novels, she employed the theme of “passing” as a phenomenon that exemplifies the dilemmas of upper middle-class life. If the upper-middle class blacks could successfully compete with the whites why then they would have to resort to passing? Ironically, passing is a major theme of 1920s novels when the race pride was supposedly at its peak. However, many blacks found this very alienating because they were betrayed by not getting a graphic and true description in these novels. Mulattoes were shown unique from the blacks by their restlessness and frustration, a motif that reminds of the rebellious mulattoes of the abolitionist novels.

With Gwendolyn Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* (1953), one sees a shift in African-American fiction. Now the focus is more on the process of self-definition. Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), deals with the life of black motherhood. Because of the negative definitions surrounding it, the image of the black women became more complex with the shift of the black women to the North. They now became prostitutes and garment factory workers. In this transition the works of Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston, the literary idol of Alice Walker, mostly known for her piercing masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which became very instrumental in influencing writers like Brooks and Marshall, both of whom focus on the impact of black community and culture in developing one's identity.

Black feminists sought to interrogate the phallogocentric bias in the black thought and the racist bias in feminist theory. 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.

The interest with which the black feminists have tried to trace out the information about the black women writers and prominent black women social activists helps a lot in getting a proper assessment of the historic traumas that the black women in America have undergone. It also helps the readers to delve deep into the layers of racism, classism and sexism in a new way. It helps the world to have a clear assessment about the various reasons on which the black women couldn't ally either to the black males' movement against racism or the white feminists against the menace of sexism.

Throughout the history of women's movement in America, working women of all the races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of class system. As white women didn't face racial and class discrimination, they were unwilling to give up the benefits which they enjoy by virtue of their class. Ann Petry's *The Street* and *The Narrows* amply reveal this systematic exploitation. Regarding the myth of liberated black women, as many writers suggested, the black women in American society have the fewest choices and are the lowest paid, being triple victim of racism, classism and sexism. To change that, racism should be her only concern. Black women have contended with the mountain of racism, sexism and classism that is what Barbara Smith calls, "geometric oppression". The black women are, therefore, bearers of triple consciousness.

The contemporary period witnessed path breaking works like *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, which is just an effort in the larger project of strengthening Afro-American literary heritage. Barbara Smith's *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism* and Deborah E. McDowell's "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism" are primal efforts in building new Criticism tools and aesthetics. In her *Black Woman: the Development of a Tradition 1892-1976*, Barbara Christian displays her view and offers a unique perspective from a black 'Womanist' point of view illuminating the works of Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and Ann Petry. Alice Walker's term "Womanism" has been the topic of many recent critical debates.

An important myth that has become the part and parcel of American consciousness is Franklin Myth. According to Franklin Myth anybody could become rich, if he worked hard enough, and strives for this richness; he is bound to achieve success. This enticing ability of the Franklin Myth to be "all things to all people" is instantly seen in Petry's works. The novel encompasses the survey of the hard route taken by the heroine Lutie, who strives for economic independence and a home for herself and her eight year old son-Bub. The novel exposes the rot beneath the American ghetto of Harlem. It also exposes the deep racist and sexist ideologies which hamper the economic, social and psychological flight of the black characters at every possible corner. The novelist presents the view that the black people themselves are also responsible for their agonies. They face identity crisis because of the lack of pride for 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 murder of Link by her husband.

Petry has this talent of making the common place seem cosmic. Her novels expose the malevolent ways in which the daily newspapers, police and other democratic institutions work together to exploit the black people, which is most ironic. The forefathers of America had not dreamt about such a dream because the people are not yet the ideal people which they had conceived of.

### A Brief Introduction of Ann Petry

Ann Petry: pharmacist, journalist, feminist, novelist, lecturer, and humanist was born on 12th October 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. She died on 28th April, 1997. She received her primary education at public schools of Old Saybrook. She did his PhG at the University of Connecticut, and worked as a pharmacist in the family-owned drugstore for almost nine years. She got married to George D. Petry in 1938 and moved to Harlem, and started her career as a writer. From 1938-1941, she worked as a reporter for *New York's Amsterdam News*. For next three years, she was a reporter-cum editor of the *Woman's Page for The People's Voice*, and wrote about the Harlem middle-class in the weekly column *The Lighter Side*. Her debut short story *Marie of the Cabin Club* a suspense-romance that is set in a Harlem night club was published in 1939 in the Baltimore newspaper *Afro-American*. Her literary arena is encompassing her first hand experiences. Incorporating history, detailed narration; pornography, lesbianism; psychology, environmental determinism; and ecocriticism etc., into her works, she is able to give a kaleidoscopic view of the post Second W. W. America. Multiple layers of meaning are interwoven very intricately in her works. *On Saturday Night the Sirens Sound* (1943), appeared in *The Crisis*. This Story allured an editor at Houghton Mifflin, who encouraged, her to apply for Houghton's Fellowship in fiction. In 1945, Petry won the same and in 1946, Houghton Mifflin Published *The Street*, a piercing account of a black mother, who tries her best to provide a home for herself and her son in an urban environment that, foreshadows failure.

Her characters are throbbing with life and thus catch the attention of the casual reader, as well. Her characters amply reveal that she is a visionary humanist who can see through the walls that trap the people in America. *The Street* is universally hailed as a master piece of urban realism and environmental determinism. *Country Place* (1947), explores the cross currents of gender and class within a white New England Community. *The Drugstore Cat* (1949), her only children's work; *The Narrows* (1953), a complex novel of psychological realism; *Legends of the Saints* (1970), a juvenile work that includes in its documentation of saints an African American; *Miss Muriel and Other Stories* (1971), a collection that presents "well-founded" portrayal of characters in both urban and small town America; and *Harriet Tubeman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964), juvenile works with convincingly human depictions of well-known slaves Harriet Tubeman and Tituban Indian. *The Moses Project* (1988), a short story about house arrest in modern times.

Recognition of her aesthetics have also come in the form of honoriums, citations, lectureships at universities, library collections, and numerous translations of her novels, short stories and juvenile works. In 1946, Martha Foley, an editor, dedicated to Petry the collection *The Best American Short Stories*. She has received honorary degree from Suffolk University (1983), the University of Connecticut (1988), and Mount Holyoke College (1989). She has lectured at Miami University of Ohio and was a visiting Professor at the University of Hawaii.

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.

Petry seems to be much influenced by Freud's theory. It has revolutionized the interpretation of literature in general and human thinking in particular. Everything is interpreted in terms of the repressed desires. Abbie's thoughts about Malcolm Powther can be attributed to the unfulfilled sexuality as her husband has died. Link's relation with Camilla seems to be a dream in which the white and black libido mingle. The tragic death of Link adds to the dream like quality to their relation.

Ecocriticism in simplest terms takes into its restrictive sphere the impact of industrialization, over population, and wars etc. on the natural environment. Petry has in the back of her mind, always a tendency that aims at hitting the sources that cause environmental pollution.

Clare Virginia Eby opines, " 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 commentator's like Marjorie Pryse, Amanda J. Davis, and Keith Clark etc. emphasize how the environment deforms individual subjectivity" (34). What Jones is in simpler terms can be called a product of bad environment. His deep longing for Lutie reflects how desperate he was for human sympathy and love of a desirable lady especially a beautiful and young one.

Petry's works do have a scope of further analysis which can definitely through enough light on the panorama of the 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.

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