

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Racial Conflict in Ann Petry's *The Street***

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of  
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This thesis entitled "Racial Conflict in Ann Petry's *The Street*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mr. Netra Bahadur Kunwar, has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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## **I: Introduction**

The present research work is a study of Ann Petry's first novel, *The Street* published in 1946. It studies how racial prejudice and discrimination bring the white and the black into conflict, and make the latter's lives difficult and miserable during the 1940s in Harlem, New York City. The study delimits itself to examine the miserable condition of a black female protagonist, Lutie Johnson, who fails to lead a free and dignified life due to racial discrimination, and therefore runs away from her social obligation by abandoning her own child in the end.

In the novel the protagonist, Lutie Johnson finds herself trapped in a miserable situation because she is a black. Although she is educated and talented, her efforts to qualify for civil service post or to become a night club singer prove fruitless in white dominated society. She is forced to take the most menial jobs which leave her tormented and frustrated throughout her life. Moreover, her beauty, which does little more than identify her as a sex object is worthy only of being exploited, thereby increasing her vulnerability. Thus, as a black female, Lutie Johnson becomes a victim of racial prejudice.

Racial conflict arises from the discriminatory attitude of the white towards the black. Racial discrimination is often based on the discrimination of 'color' where the word 'discrimination' denotes the denial of equality based on communal characteristics such as race and color. This shows that discrimination is based on prejudice and stereotypes by forming an instant fixed ideas of a group usually based on false or incomplete information, and the ideas that are formed without any knowledge about others. Gretchen Gerzina defines racism as follows:

An active or passive response to the specious belief that genetically transmitted traits are linked to social characteristics. . . . Racism at individual level involves a misguided personal belief that an entire racial group is deficient or superior because trait that are thought to be indicated by the group's biological origins. (126)

The above quote clarifies that the racism is the product of racial prejudice, and it works with biological and sociological definition. Queen and Gruener define, "From the biological standpoint, a 'race' is a large body of people, relatively homogenous as to inheritable and non-adaptive features. . . . There are various criteria of race – head, hair, skin color, stature, blood group and so on" (21).

Racism emerges when one believes in one's racial superiority over other. It encompasses the beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and practices that define people on racial basis. It involves a generalized lack of knowledge or experience as it implies to negative beliefs and attitudes. It uses the inflexible assumption that differences are biologically determined and therefore inheritably unchangeable.

Racism can be both overt and covert. Overt racism is what most people are familiar with since it is easily detectable and takes the form of direct behavioral or verbal racially discriminatory acts. Covert racism is more subtle, yet occurs more often than overt racism, and is more easily hidden, denied or discounted. Covert racism expresses ideas of racism in disguised forms; sometimes the covert racist is not even aware of the fact that he is racist. "Racism, it is asserted, is no longer blatant: people nowadays are reluctant to express openly their dislike of and contempt for minorities, indeed are not prepared to express publicly a sentiment that could be interpreted as racist. Racism, it is said, is subtle: it is disguised, kept

out of sight" (Enrlich 73). The suggestion that there is "a new racism – a racism that has a new strength precisely because it does not appear to be racism –deserves serious consideration" (Piazza 66). Avoiding minorities on the street and denial of a public benefit to a minority which would be awarded to a white are examples of covert racism. "Since it is no longer politically correct to openly express one's racist views, people therefore favor disguised, indirect ways to express their bigotry" (68). Covert racism is the most abundant form of the racism in our society today. This kind of racism has caused an unfriendly and hostile relationship between whites and blacks.

Race relation implies all relationships which determine the relative status of racial groups in community. B. Berry uses the term 'race and ethnic relation' to describe and analyses the "phenomena which arises when group of people who differ racially or culturally come into contact with one another" (VII). In race and ethnic relations, B. Berry offers the definition as "differential treatment accorded individuals who are considered as belonging in a particular category or group" (372). He further illustrates with negative treatment: "Dominant people everywhere have resorted to various devices for restricting economically, politically and socially the racial and ethnic group" (432). G.W. Allport in *The Nature of Prejudice* finds "[t]he conception of discrimination as the overt manifestation of prejudice which comes about when we take steps to exclude members of an outer group. . ." (52-3).

Racial prejudice is an unfavorable and negative attitude toward a colored group or its individual members. It is characterized by stereotyped beliefs. The attitude results from processes within the bearer of the attitude rather than from reality testing of the attributes of the group in question. In social sciences, the

term prejudice is used almost exclusively in relation to ethnic group. Racial prejudice can be defined as "an attitude of generalized hostility or aggression against a group of human beings who possess different color" (McLemore and Romo 153). It manifests itself in such ethnic stereotypes as the lazy Negro, the drunken Indian, the unscrupulous Jew or the unruly Irishman. It may be a manifestation of conformity to group norms. So, racial prejudice invites different social problems such as disintegration, brawls, killings and other criminal activities. And the minority groups are always at the receiving end of such atrocities.

The present study examines how racism has made the Southern White community displaced and disintegrated. The American South originally belonged to Afro-Americans who gave a new shape to the landscape by building houses clearing the forest and planting and harvesting crops. It was shaped by their labor, so they still have the spiritual relationship with the South. But, it is surprising to state that they were the tenants in their own land, they were alien in their own country. Their labor was valued, yet they were dehumanized. It was neither economically nor legally their own land. The white claimed for the land cultivated by supposed inferior race. Nowadays black Americans consider the South as their motherland. The Southern Landscape encodes their ancestors, their family history, and their identity. Place in this sense is a space to which meaning has been ascribed. Carolyn Jones claims south as the place "that human relationship that occurred there holds the ultimate meaning the region has for the blacks and they also inscribe the realities that have affected psychological wholeness and self-identity" (38).



Indeed the real practice of racial discrimination began with the discovery of New World. It was a new Hemisphere that also brought radical changes in the outlook of people in the South. The racially victimized people left the South in the post-bellum period in the hope of gaining freedom. The North was not the Promised Land for the blacks. Regarding the racial discrimination there, Nathan A. Scott writes, "Racial prejudice was greater in Free States than in the Slave States. The government legally abolished racial discrimination, however, in practice the black continued to suffer discrimination and injustice" (289). At the unconscious level of the white there is still racial prejudice which affected the black females more than their male counterparts.

Prejudice is a central concern in Ann Petry's writing. In almost all of her works, complex relationship develops among individuals prejudiced against each other for reasons of race or gender. But her fiction contains few characters who are either victims or oppressors. She imbues even her most objectionable characters with humanity. The would-be rapist, Boots Smith in *The Street*, for example, has been a victim of racial prejudice. While Petry does not excuse his behavior, she does acknowledge the pathos of his life. Likewise, in *The Witness* provides the delinquent boys with a social context. They are intelligent young men, stifled by both church and school, who have no positive outlet for their myriad frustrations.

Similarly, Clarence V Reynolds takes the novel as the most successful and best-selling book. According to him, "In *The Street* and other novels, Petry portrayed brave and truthful characters confronting racism and struggling with personal failures and fears" (15).

While comparing Petry's *The Street* with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Amanda J. Davis finds striking similarities between the two works. He writes:

Both Ann Petry's *The Street* and Walker's *Jubilee* carefully examine how attempts to find and maintain a home are continually met with violence and thwarted by prevailing social and economic injustices that pervade the boundaries of home and threaten to disrupt any resistance that has been forged. (19)

As Petry is a female writer, there has been a tendency to view her works from the feminist point of view. Petry is black but she is also a woman. Thelma J. Shinn appreciates and honors the struggle of black female characters in Petry's fiction in these words:

Particularly for Lutie Johnson in the *The Street* the struggle for survival alone is so demanding that even her attempt to struggle also for some status as human being -- despite poverty, racial and sexual stereotypes and loneliness -- gives her more stature in her failure than most people earn in victory. (110)

Petry's *The Street* presents a true picture of the subhuman condition of the blacks in American society. So, Heather J. Hicks calls the novel a realist and says, "The protagonist in the novel suffers from the violations of privacy that segregation and its attendant overcrowding engender in 1940s Harlem" (89).

Although the aforementioned critics have touched the issue of racism in the novel, they have not really focused on the miserable condition of the protagonist who becomes the victim of racial conflict. She not only suffers from racial discrimination at the hands of the whites. Her whole life becomes disintegrated as she is compelled to leave her own family and social responsibility

in the end. So, the present research focuses on how racial prejudice and discrimination bring miseries and sufferings in the lives of the black during the 1940s in Harlem, New York City. The study delimits itself to examine the miserable condition of a black female protagonist, Lutie Johnson who, despite her hard struggle, fails to lead a free and dignified life in white dominated society.

The present research work has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents a short background to the novel, an introductory outline of the present study and short critical responses. The second chapter tries to briefly explain the theoretical modality applied in this research work. It discusses racism, racial identity black feminism and the concept of racial conflict in American society. On the basis of the theoretical modality outlined in the second chapter, the third chapter will analyze the text. It will analyze the protagonist's miserable situation and struggle to lead a free and dignified life. It sorts out some extracts from the text as evidence to prove the hypothesis of the study. The fourth chapter is the conclusion of this research. On the basis of textual analysis in the third chapter, it concludes the explanation and arguments put forward in the preceding chapter.

## **II. Theoretical Modality**

### **Racism**

Racism is generally known as the predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of subordination a racially different group and maintaining control over that group. According to Brace, "Race has been a cause of misunderstanding and human suffering that anything else that can be associated with a single word in language" (116). It is, in fact, a prejudice conditioned by perceptions. In America it has been the practice toward the black man. The practice as such is seen in two levels – individual and communal. In individual level, individual whites act against individual blacks and in communal level the total community acts against the black community. The former is related to death, injury or the violent destruction of property whereas the latter is less destructive of human life and originates in the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and this receives far less public condemnation than the first type as it is an indirect discrimination.

Where a black family moves into a home in the white neighborhood and is stoned, burned or routed out, they are the victims of act of individual racism which is condemnable by many people. But when hundreds of babies die each year because of lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities, and thousands more are maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, they are the victims of the act of institutional racism. This kind of racism refers to a system of oppression. Barbara Field argues that "institutional racism keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily victims of exploitative slumlords, merchants and discriminatory real estate agents" (67). The society either pretends

it does not know of this latter situation or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.

Moreover, institutional racism relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices. A sense of superior group prevails. The statement "whites are better than blacks, therefore blacks should be subordinated to whites" is a racist attitude and it permeates the society, on both the individual and institutional level" (Du Bois 45).

Racism is not a stable ideological form consisting of the same assumptions for a long period. It accepts the new scholarly ideas to be maintained in the society. Rather rejecting all the epithets of singularity, it prefers different shapes and different political relations. In Gilroy's words, "Racist ideologies and practices have distinct meanings bounded by historical circumstances and determined in struggle" (148). The struggle of racist ideology takes itself to attachment with other forms of ideology. As a result, racism arises with its distinctive characteristics and shapes.

The notions like Negro race is inferior race which lacks social, organization and social action, social fellow feeling, originality of thought and artistic qualities and shows no tendency towards higher development. The Negro race is powerful in physique, strong and normal in intellect and has not achieved a higher social and intellectual civilization, reflects the racist attitude. The principles of Race Orthodoxy in Thomas Peace Bailey's words is that

the white race must dominate; the negro is inferior and will remain so, this is a white man's country; no social equality; no political equality; let there be such industrial education of the negro as will

best fit to serve the white man; let the lowest white man count for more than the highest negro". (*Racism* 16)

These attitudes reflect the essentials of racial creed and action.

Regarding race, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton say, "Racist assumptions of white superiority have been so deeply engrained into the fiber of the society that they infuse the entire functioning of the national subconscious" (31). Thus, racism is ubiquitous and informs every level of discourse in American society.

The racial situation in America is very important because it is the most complex and dynamic. It challenges the further progress of Christianity and civilization in the foremost democracy of the earth. This presents the acid test to the culture of the most modern and progressive branch of the white race.

Reflecting factors of American racial prejudice, George W. Ellis says,

In the United State race prejudice is predicted upon the belief that the colored is naturally inferior to the white race, physically, intellectually, religiously, socially and morally. As a matter of fact it is actually based upon the advantages, temporary and imaginary, which the white groups believe they derive from this superior attitude to the colored groups economically, politically and socially.

A historical study of these beliefs discloses that two powerful factors have contributed above others to the abnormal American situation and that in their broadest sense they are ethnological and sociological. (11)

Thus, in America, the practice of racism that is predicted on the belief that one is superior to another is much more deep-rooted. Though the society is itself

plural, the binary projection of whiteness and blackness is much more practiced. Afro-Americans are understood racially "Others" more strongly than the Native Americans and the Asian Americans though the latter, too, are culturally different than Anglo-Americans.

Racism, however, is not considered in terms of individuals and groups, but also the spatial community which reflects the institutional and social life of black people:

The black community, like other communities, is defined by its sharing of common space, experiences, views, the value systems, social institutions and self-consciousness. Its common space, however, is a bounded area of living-a-ghetto – which not only closes blacks in the community, but simultaneously shuts them out from the access to various opportunities available in the larger society. (Scott 289)

Racism, Marxist theory defines, "as a reflection of the main population of workers by the capitalist class to divide them along racial lines and reduce their capacity to struggle against the system" (Stoler 123). This only helps in encouraging discrimination against blacks, arguing for their inferiority. The use of blacks as a surplus, marginal low-paid working force, and establishing privileged better-paid racist white labour force is a racist attitude. Thus racism is a function of class struggle, not an independent variable itself. Regarding Racism, Elazar says, "Racism which begins with the creation and mystification of race is social thought and practice which expresses itself in three basic ways – imposition, ideology and institutional arrangement" (78).

Today the term ' racism' is widely and variedly used. In the West it appears to be a recent phenomenon. The historical roots of racism disappeared. However, racism itself did not. Rather, new racist ideas evolved all the way from classical antiquity, utilizing the images of medieval thoughts and the color symbolisms of Christianity to inform discriminatory practices right into the modern period. Gilroy says, "The new racism primarily concerned with mechanism of exclusion of inclusion." (250). Contemporary form of racism links itself to discourses such as patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia and gender differences. These themes combine to provide a definition of race in terms of culture and identity. Its link to different institutions of the society is the newness of racism in contemporary approach. Although races are socially imagined and not biologically real categories, human beings continue to act as if they were real; and as long as they do so, race becomes real in its consequences.

### **Racial Identity**

The question of identity emerges with the displacement of something previously assumed to be fixed and stable by the experience to doubt the uncertainty. Identity has become an important subject for the study of ethnicity, class, gender, race, sexuality, culture and subcultures. Identity becomes an issue when somebody previously assumed to be fixed and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. Identity deals with the form of justification of life. But identity for Cornel West is the matter of life and death. For he says:

Identity is fundamentally about desire and death. Here you construct your identity is predicated on how you conceive of death; desire for recognition; quest for visibility; the sense of what Edward Said would call affiliation. It is the longing to belong a deep,



visceral need that most linguistically conscious animals who transact with an environment participate in. And then there is a profound desire for protection, for security, for safety, for surety.

(15-16)

While talking about identity, we have to look at the various ways in which human beings have constructed their desire for recognition, association and protection over time and in space, sometimes under circumstances not of their own choosing. From the above proposition, it becomes clear that the notion of identity, therefore, is elusive and is often a subject of doubt unless it is in crisis. Crisis in identity results from the lack of space to a specific culture, society or nation. Such lack of location has become the site of conflict because of globalization, migration and the politics closely associated with these processes.

Racial identity is defined by Janet Helms as:

a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group. In a society where racial group membership is emphasized, the development of a racial identity will occur in some form in everyone. Given the dominant versus subordinate relationship of whites and blacks in the society, the developmental process will unfold in different ways. (89)

As far as racial identity development is concerned, we can see it in different stages. In the first stage, the Afro-American has absorbed many of the beliefs and values of dominant white culture, including the notion that "white is right" and "black is wrong" (Elazar 67). In the second stage, one desires to surround oneself with visible symbols of one's racial identity and an active

avoidance of symbols of whiteness. Thomas Parham describes: "At this stage, everything of value in life must be black or relevant to blackness. This stage is also characterized by a tendency to denigrate white people, simultaneously glorifying black people" (190). At this stage, an individual activity seeks out opportunities to explore aspects of his/her own history and culture with the support of peers from his/her own racial background. In the third stage, one is secured in one's own sense of racial identity. In general "black attitudes become more expansive, open and less defensive and weak" (Cross 24). At this stage, an individual is willing to establish meaningful relationship with whites who acknowledge and are respectful to his/her self-definition. The individual is ready to build coalitions with members of other oppressed group. In the last stage blackness becomes " the point of departure for discovering the universe of ideas, cultures and experience beyond blackness in place of mistaking blackness as the universe itself " (Helms 330).

In America, the Negro was taken only as an American and nothing else, with no values and culture to guard and protect. But the Afro-Americans refuted the ideas and started seeking the sources of black American culture and character. They started raising the question like: To what degree are they a product of Africa? Of American racism ? of poverty, and economic marginality? Of the will to be black? Regarding the issue of Afro-Americans' racial identity, Du Bois, and outstanding Afro—American historian, describes the socio-psychological experience of black Americans as double consciousness in his classic book *The Souls of Black Folk*:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second – sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him

no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the world. It is peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unrecognized strivings; two warning ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 6-7)

This double vision and double consciousness, thus, is a product of the historical dialectic in American society between black and white cultures. The end of the black American's striving, writes Du Bois, is

to make it possible for a man to be both an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed in his face. . . .To be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his talent genius" (7).

The Afro- American, moreover, refuted the notion that black Americans have no culture or that black culture is merely a colorful variety of the culture of poverty. The historical quest of Afro-Americans, their principal striving, is essentially for life, liberty, and wholeness – the full development and unity of self and the black community – as a biracial, bicultural people, as Americans of African descent. The paradoxical existence of black Americans is underscored by their presence in a society where they form one-tenth of the population and where they are spread over diverse regions, speak different dialects, and re-divided by a wide range of backgrounds and points of view.

### **The Idea of Racial Conflict**

Racial conflict is one most potent elements of contemporary socio-political unrest. It is one of the most dangerous elements surrounded by emotion, passion and fear. In America, "there are about 150,000,000 Afro- Americans, most of them descended from slaves brought from Africa after 1689 until the Civil War (1861-65)" (Levi-Strauss 34).

The Afro-American was first introduced in America as a slave in 1619. Levi-Strauss writes:

Afro-Americans, the then Negroes, as explorers and as servants in large numbers came with the first Europeans as they set out to exploit the resources of the New World. Form the sixteenth century onward, Europeans ranged the earth conquering native peoples and establishing themselves as conquerors and ruling aristocrats. Then specially during the seventeenth century, ruling white men and subjugated black men became increasingly conscious of their racial differences. (35-36)

Until the late eighteenth century, thinking on race was distinguished chiefly by its verbosity. In theory, Christianity argued that all men are spiritually alike in the sight of God, but in practice, all sorts of arguments could be found to prove the inferiority of the black men. By the late eighteenth century, the enlightenment was in full swing, and efforts were made for the first time to assure a scientific understanding of race. Distinctions were made between "higher" and "lower" races (Levi-Strauss 24). European whites were placed at the summit in the hierarchy of races. With the onset of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, it became necessary to show that weaker race should die out to make room for the

stronger. Racism became more and more irrational. The only important thing was to prove the inferior races as "outsiders", a kind of racial proletariat with the firm objective to keep them under subjugation. (35)

The history of America began with the grabbing of the land from Native Americans and enforcing the blacks to cultivate the land. It consequently created hierarchies in color and division of land. The whites established a system of privilege in terms of oppression and exploitation Harris and Ordone says,

The social division along the color line crossed class, nationality, language, and religious barriers. The simple fact of "whiteness" meant the overall life, fortune, and destiny of white people. White people were exempt from slavery, land grab, and genocide- the first form of white privilege. Whites enjoyed wide latitude of opportunities, personal freedom, and democratic rights protected by the state. Even though rich white people viciously exploited poor American-born and immigrant whites, they were not on the bottom. The bottom was reserved for Indians, blacks, and other people of color. (27-28)

Thus, the American society was clearly based on exploitation. Previously rich white people and later on the whites in general excessively exploited Indians and especially blacks and marginalized them.

The history of American society is a history of oppression and migration. In this regard Vincent F says,

American geographical and cultural space has provided limitless potential to the white since its settlement, but the blacks have been denied such space. Their African heritage and later the

Southernness are repudiated by the larger culture. Over the different historical event-slavery, emancipation, migration, and integration- they tried to negotiate their relationship with their cultural traditions. Neither the white race nor its cultural heritage consistently marginalized them. Therefore, it will not be hyperbolic to state that American history itself is a practice of racism. (127)

American society generated and condoned so much prejudice before the abolition of slavery, that the country since has not been able politically to remove the evil efforts of its former bad examples. A white man in the South had always had greater power than two for three white men in the north and Negro people were entirely excluded from their proportionate representation and participation in the government. The government had failed in the hands of the white man to do political justice to itself and to the Negro. American injustice to her colored citizens deprived the American people of their just influence in the world movement of freedom and democracy. Regarding political prejudice, George W. Ellis says,

The government of the United States represented at its birth the political dream of countries. By its constitution it substituted for the capacious of man the government of the people regulated by law. Founded upon the freedom and equality of all men, it invited to its shores the oppressed of every land. Its founders laid the foundations of a democracy that was supposed to be a political light to the nations of the earth. But before this government was established the institution of slavery has manufactured so much class prejudice in industry, education and religion, that are the adoption of the

constitution, the white race was unable to make this government in fact what in theory it was announced to the world. (15)

Thus, it is clear that there was ambivalence in American politics. On the one hand there was commitment for political equality and there was prejudice on the other. The Negroes were restricted in the matter of political activity. As slaves, they were obviously outside the party system and could take no part in government. This situation continued even after the Civil War.

It is from the time the Africans were first brought to America, the social body and mind of the white race had been in action against the Negro. It was supported by an active and increasingly hostile sentiment and emotion that constituted the historical cause of that abnormal social situation in the United States. The social situation was a threatening social malady. It embraced years of ethological misinterpretation on the one hand and social customary practice on the other. Despite the fact that the Negro was involved from the very beginning in the problems of America, first as a group of colonies, then as a nation, the Negroes had been placed at the last rank of the social ladder.

The Afro-Americans lived in a state of constant humiliation. His dignity as an individual was not admitted and he got no respect from the white and even nonwhite people of the world. The Afro-American was segregated from school, was deprived of public facilities and had to suffer excessive police brutality. The Afro-American's true identity was only that of a wage earner and professional man in American society. Afro-Americans were never given chance for more skilled jobs. Rather they continued to be concentrated in the less skilled jobs and most of them remained unemployed. Ann Laura writes,

They had both socially and economically depressed status. It is due to the discrimination against them in training and employment opportunities offered by the armed services, discrimination against them by labor organizations, discrimination against them in referral services rendered by state employment services that the Afro-Americans were forced to live under the depressed status.

Moreover, the Afro- American students had been denied admission to the white school. Even if given admission the student was not given equal treatment, he was required to sit at a separate table in the library and had a specific seat in the classroom. (94)

It was believed that many Negroes were poor, uneducated and deficient in health, morals and manner and thus were not very agreeable as social companions. It was also pointed out that Negroes were different in physical appearance even if they had the same basic mental capacity and moral propensities. Beside these beliefs centering on Negro inferiority, there were a great number of the popular thoughts arranged to justify social segregation. The thoughts that Negroes liked to be separated, that they were happy in their jumbled status and would not like to be treated as equals is the white ideology. Another idea with the same function is that the separation was necessary in order to prevent friction between the two groups.

Against their condition the Afro-Americans started uttering the voice of deep hurt and bitter disappointment. They glorified the attainments of Negroes in music, literature, painting, athletics, business, or the professions. They promoted Negro fraternal orders, civic associations, churches, commercial establishments, and other groups and institutions. People like cooks, butlers, maids and shoeshine



men served white people but they no longer trusted, respected nor loved them. And with the breakdown of faith in the integrity of the while power structure there was a loss of respect for law as an effective means of social change. Since the Afro-Americans were merely bundle of resentments and sufferings, and explosion was inevitable. As a result, on December 1995, an explosion emerged with a Negro woman's refusal to a bus driver's demand that she get up and let a white man have her seat. This step, indeed, sowed the seed of Afro-American revolt which later flourished in a disastrous way.

### **Black Women in Racism**

Black women have found themselves in a unique and extremely difficult position in racist American and European society. They are forced to deal with the oppression that arises from being black in a white-supremacist culture and the oppression that arises from being female in a male-supremacist culture. The black women have gone through bitter experience because of their being Black and female. So, it is very difficult for black women to survive in the white dominated community.

Racism makes Black women and girls especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and keeps them trapped in the sex industry. In this regard, Scot Bowels says,

Racism does this by limiting educational and career opportunities for African-Americans in this country. It does this through a welfare system that has divided the poor Black family. If a mother works, or her children's father contributes to their support, her check and food stamps are cut by that amount. (9)

Thus, poor Black women are left alone to find for themselves and their children on inadequate Aid to Families with Children grants.

Racist stereotypes in the mainstream media and in pornography portray Black women as wild animals who are ready for any kind of sex, any time, with anybody. Arlene Carmen describes the plight of black women:

Additionally, strip joints and massage parlors are typically zoned in Black neighborhoods which give the message to white men that it is alright to solicit Black women and girls for sex--that we are all prostitutes. On almost any night, you can see them slowly cruising around our neighborhoods, rolling down their windows, calling out to women and girls. And we got the message growing up, just like our daughters are getting it today, that this is how it is, this is who we are, this is what we are for. (13)

Many people have said that prostitution is tolerated in the Black community. They are wrong. Prostitution is not tolerated; it has been imposed upon black women. It has been imposed upon them since the days of slavery, when the master came out to the field and chose whichever Black woman he wanted to have sex with. Light-skinned slaves, known as "fancy girls," are sold at high prices in the marketplace and later "rented out" or sold to brothels. Deborah G. White describes the nature of white man:

Today, middle-class white men from the suburbs drive through the ghettos of America to pick out whichever Black women or girls they want to have sex with, as if our cities were their own private plantations. No, prostitution is not tolerated in the Black

community any more than African-American slaves tolerated it on the plantation; it is imposed upon us. (16)

Once a Black woman gets into prostitution, it becomes harder for her to get out than for a white woman. Racism in the courts results in Black women paying higher fines and doing more jail time than white women. "Racist probation officers and child protection workers can create nearly impossible case plans for Black women, setting them up to fail and resulting in their being returned to jail or losing custody of their children" (Lambert 34).

The lack of culturally sensitive services designed by members of the Black community, for women in the Black community, keeps women trapped in prostitution. Black women who are seeking to escape abusive and exploitative situations are forced to go to white agencies for help. This creates a double bind. First, there is a strong taboo in the Black community about talking to outsiders, particularly whites, about problems within the Black community. Second, even if women overcome that obstacle, white-dominated agencies are ill-equipped to understand and deal with the problems of poor Black women.

The problem can be as simple as a language barrier. Black women who use ghetto slang as a form of expression are viewed as "stupid" because many social workers have difficulty understanding them. (Lewis 67). On the other hand, the problem can be as complex as "appropriate parenting skills" (Lewis 69). To spank or not to spank has become a bone of contention between white, child-protection workers--and often white, battered-women's advocates--who view spanking as child abuse, and African-American mothers who believe it is an appropriate and necessary form of discipline.

A deeper problem is the failure to understand Black emotional pain, the pain that African-Americans experience due to their inability to acknowledge, take pride in, and be at peace with their own individual African-American identities. The root cause of Black emotional pain is white racism. Other causes are the subtle and overt ways that Blacks have internalized the values of the white culture: straight hair is "good" hair; thick, tightly curled hair is "bad" hair. Light skin is "good"; dark brown or black skin is "bad" (Byod Franklin 58).

Programming developed by and for white women is not necessarily useful to Black women, even when provided by a Black professional who has adopted the agency's approach to problem solving. For example, traditional "talk" therapy or groups that require disclosure on the part of the client have proven unsuccessful with African-Americans. (Bell 21). Additionally, class differences between the middle-class Black professional and the poor client can often foster distrust.

An African-American underclass has developed in the United States which has at its core a culture shaped by the legacy of slavery and which is defined by drug and alcohol abuse and addiction. The Black underclass includes second- and third-generation welfare recipients, has gangs as a social institution, and has an underground economy built on drug traffic and prostitution. Today, the Black underclass includes increasing numbers of the rural poor, as well as those who were raised in large urban environments.

The Black underclass, along with some members of the poor of other races, makes up the culture of poverty. Its members share a common system of values and behaviors. They lack access to legitimate economic resources and adequate medical treatment, forcing them to resort to emergency room health care. They are alienated from most social institutions except those that perpetuate

the cycle of poverty and despair: welfare, corrections, and the underground economy. Most Black women used in prostitution were born into the Black underclass. They lost their childhoods to the streets. Many came of age in juvenile detention centers and matured in adult correctional facilities. They raised some of their children in-and lost some of their children to the culture of poverty.

In 1970s and 80s, several black women writers rose to the literary and critical forum and started voicing out their agonies as marginalized, doubly oppressed (as black women) in their works. Black feminists have challenged white women's ability and Eurocentric and essentialist nature of some feminisms. bell hook's *Ain't I a woman* (1981) relates the history of black women in the United States and their relationship to feminism, Hooks argues that the rape and brutal assaults on black women during the period of slavery in the United States led to a devaluation of black womanhood that permeated the psyches of all Americans, even now US society still perceives and represents black women as "fallen women, whores and prostitute that racism has taken precedence over sexism which is evident in the behavior of white woman who turn their deaf ear to severe assaults upon black women."

Black feminists, majority of feminists want to be counted as men and share the bounties of the dominant society such as equal wages, child care and other accepted social rights, while black women have been marginalized within a paradigm in which, "they are ignored, romanticized or ghettoized" (Beasley108). Although the black feminists were as conscious of the problems of women as white feminists, their situation remained the same. Being black and women they were doubly suppressed. They were victimized by blacks as well as the white society. The black female experience is characterized by the interlocking

oppressors of race, class and gender. These oppressors are interwoven into social structures and work together to define the history of the lives of black woman of color. According to writers like Bell Hooks, the history of these cultural oppressors can be traced back to slavery. Within her book, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Woman and Feminism*, Hooks asserts that, "as far as black slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex, that ranked white men first, white women second, though some times equal to black men who ranked third, and black woman last" (53). Black women have been defined and categorized in dehumanizing term, term employed to attack the essence of black women's sense of personal integrity and self worth.

Various writers argue that historically black women have been stereotyped as sex objects and breeders. Black women's personal growth has been impeded by the continuing myths of the black matriarchy, a myth occurring black woman of emasculating both black and white men. Black women have also been stereotyped by both black and white as the 'bad' women. The white women were also oppressing black women. They always viewed black women as sexual temptress of white men and prostitute. These stereotypes and myth have helped control black women's characters in the society from the time of slavery black women have always been exploited as the object of white male sexual assault. White men take pride in seducing black women. They often become the victim of rape because sexism of white male was socially legitimized. Bell Hooks says, "Rape was a method used to terrorize, de-humanized and [. . .] to trip the female slave of dignity" (*Ain't I a woman* 36). Black men can no longer protect them because they themselves are in dehumanized situation.

Some of the black feminists writers like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Ann Petry and Tony Morrison etc. protest the 'massive silence' of feminist criticism about black and third-world women writers and call for a black feminist aesthetic that would deal with both racial and sexual politics. They celebrate black culture, tradition and their genesis and believe that they possess rich cultural and sexual properties as black and as female. They try to situate the study of black women's writing in the context of black history and culture and explore its thematic and stylistic correspondence with the literature of black men as well as investigate its special use of language and imagery. These feminist writers have revolutionized the role of women in society and forged the concept of "the emergent women" (Washington 214).

These writers have also recognized the self-expression of the black women writers is important because this reflects the expansion of American literary sensibility and offers the possibility for studying black women's lives in depth. Alice Walker also believes that the act of writing itself is a powerful tool for bringing about change in the lives of women. She describes how this sense of purpose affects her work: "In my own I write not only what I want to read understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one is so vitally interested or enable of doing it to my satisfaction. I write all the things I should have been able to read" (Walker 13)

Ann Petry's *The Street* also centers on the concept of 'the emergent woman' who tries to empower herself through her talent and hard work in the community of black women. This shows that there is a gradual transformation of the black woman, which gives her an inkling of her true identity and endows meaning to her life. However, the protagonist fails to establish her black female identity due

to discrimination. The above mentioned feminist discourse has helped us to generate arguments and justify the protagonist of Ann Petry's novel *The Street*, Lutie's behavior amidst male-dominated society. The discourse has given us a perspective to observe and analyze the novel in a meticulous and a scrupulous manner.



### III. Textual Analysis

Racial conflict in Ann Petry's *The Street* arises from the discriminatory attitude and behavior of the whites towards a black woman who struggles to live a good, safe and meaningful life in white dominated community. Generally the street is the public road which different people use. In the novel the idea of "street" develops from many levels conflicts (5). Personal conflicts arise in superficial level, but conflicts about race, social status, and gender viewpoints go beyond these superficial levels. The characters act out in rage due to the stress caused by social circumstances. It is a powerful, intensely gripping story of a Negro woman driven to abandon her own son by reason of a Harlem tenement environment, pressure of racial injustice and gender discrimination. In this novel, Petry shows a black woman's failure to lead free and dignified life due to racial and gender discrimination. The protagonist of this novel Lutie Johnson is the victim of such a discrimination which compels her to abandon her own child in the end as she becomes frustrated and neurotic.

Lutie Johnson, is grown up poor, and unprivileged though she manages to get education. She has been suppressed and controlled by white and black males throughout her life. Her life is full of struggle for survival. She has no parents and husband. He leaves her as he is involved with another woman. As a result, she has to undergo many hardships and problems. By carefully observing her struggles we find how she attempts to find and maintain a home, but racial conflict makes it impossible. She continually comes into conflict with the white and black males and her struggle is thwarted by violence and prevailing social and economic injustices that pervaded the boundaries of home. Lutie Johnson confronts the

violence of racism, sexism and poverty while trying to make a home for herself and her family.

Although she is educated, she has to work in the kitchen as a domestic for living because she is black. It is impossible for both herself and her husband to get good work. She works reluctantly in white people's houses in Connecticut. She works for Mrs. Chandler to rear up her husband Jim and son, Bub. Petry writes about Lutie's work in the kitchen:

So like it that might have been the same kitchen where she had washed dishes, scrubbed the linoleums and waxed it of termed. Then gone to sit on the small porch outside the kitchen, waiting for the floor to dry are maundering low much longed she would have to stay there. At the time it was the only job she could get. She had through it as a purely temporary are, but she had ended up by staying two years- thus earning the money for Jim and Bub to live on. (28)

Since she thinks that the job as a kitchen wife in Connecticut is temporary, it is hardly enough to feed for family. She is in search of job. She sees an advertisement and goes to work as a kitchen wife in White's house. She has to look after little Henry, and work in the kitchen. Because of poverty and racial discrimination she has to work in other's houses. She has been washing someone else's dishes when she would have given time for Jim and Bub. She cleans others' house and looks after another woman's child while her own marriage has gone to pot. She remembers her happy days with her husband. However, because of racial prejudice not only Negro women are frustrated, desperate but also male Negroes are victims of the white prejudice. Lutie's husband's search for job, his miserable

condition due to lack of job reveals the prevailing color discrimination which has displaced the black people's life in America. This is asserted in Lutie's own word:

And Jim could not get a job, though he haunted for one-  
desperately, eagerly, variously. Walking from one employment  
agency to another; spending long hours in the most agency's  
waiting rooms, reading old newspapers. Waiting, waiting, waiting  
to be called up for a job. He would come home shivering from the  
cold, saying, had Damian white people anyway. I don't want fevers.  
All I want is a job. Just a job, don't they grow if I knew how I'd  
change the color of my skin? (35)

Lutie Johnson grew in a society where two worlds, white and black, were apparent. These two worlds are physically separated. Petry mentions: "There were white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white business and black business, white graveyards and black graveyards, and moreover, a white god and a black god" (36). This is an example of institutional as well as communal racism. Thus, black people, like Jim, curses gods and wishes to change color to get job. This apparently brings white and black people into conflict.

Lutie and her family is the suppressed victim of white, exploitative, industrialized world. Because of their color, their poverty and the white myth of Bad nigger, they are forced to lead miserable life as they cannot pay off the money they have borrowed. The writer says: "There was the interest to be paid on to mortgage. It did not amount to much, but they did not have anything to pay it with" (30). She worked for six months in Mrs. Chandler's house and compares her rented house with her house. She thinks that white house and its decoration is

like something in the movies. She has to cook all types of dishes and look after babies. Although Mrs. Chandler loves her, she does not like her friend's behavior towards black women. They think that black women are whores and if they keep them at home, they ruin white people's family. This is an example of overt racism. White people have really internalized that the black people are savage, animal and there is vast gap between whites and blacks. Lutie repeats the words of Chandler's friends and their behavior towards black people she did not like their behaviors as Petry says: "But she did not like Mrs. Chandler's friends much they came to the house to luncheon parties or to bridge parties in the afternoon" (40). It shows the vast difference between the life style of black and white people. Lutie has to serve them and they accuse her of being black. Though they admire her good cooking, they hate the colored girl to keep at home. This is an example of covert racism. The writer says:

Whenever she entered a room where they were, they stayed at her with a queer, speculative look. Sometimes she caught snatches of their conversation about her. 'Sure, she is a wonderful cook. But I would not have any good-looking colored wench in my house. Not with John. You know they are always making passes at men.

Especially, white men.' And then, Now I wonder . . . . (41)

It does not make her angry but contemptuous. They do not know that she has a handsome husband of her own. All these white women think that colored girls are whores. It is the prejudice which makes Lutie unhappy and consequently she hates white people from the core of her heart. Gradually she encounters the world where there is a wall which prevents her from mingling with the whites.

She describes the new world as “a very strange world that she had entered” (41). She makes out that it isn't just because she is a maid; it is because she is colored.

Animal-like behavior of white people towards blacks makes Negro women feel unhappy. Lutie is thought of as a means of recreation, object of quenching sexual lust of whites:

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 steeping with her would be just a simple matter, for all one had to do was make the request. In fact, white men would not even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight. (45)

The idea that black women are prostitute and they get source of livelihood by selling their body for white men for temporary entertainment makes her angry and knows the reality of white people's behavior towards black people. She refuses to prostitute herself to earn extra money. One of the white man says to her: “Lutie, baby, don't you never let no white men put his hands on you. They ain't never willin to let a black woman alone. Seems like they all got a itch and a urge to sleep with 'em. Don't you never let any of 'em touch you" (45).

When Lutie gets a letter from her husband, she leaves Chandler's house. She used to work in white woman's house to feed her husband and son. On the other hand, her husband also leaves her thinking that she worked in white man's house. She is alienated, frustrated. She is not only exploited and segregated due to prevalent color and racial discrimination but also due to outranging gender discrimination. Now after she leaves Mrs. Chandler's house, she gets only

contempt and laughter from her husband. At the time of separation Petry describes the pitiable condition of Lutie:

He only shrugged and laughed that was all she could get out of him – laughter. What’s his use – what’s the point – who cares? If even once he had put his arms around her and said he was sorry and asked her to forgive him she would have stayed. But he didn’t. So she called a moving man and had him take all the furniture that was hers. (55)

She is earning her living either by washing dishes or working in a laundry but now she does not want to work as a domestic. Now she lives on Seventh Avenue which is crowded, fearful; she wants to improve her situation by earning money. She is living alone with Bub. There is no one to take care of her, and son. She has understood the reality of Negro women who used to serve in white people all day and at night and they had to work for their own families. She feels destitute and suffers double domination. The writer describes their miserable condition: “They have been out all day working in the white folks’ kitchens then they come to their house and cook and clean for their own families by the night” (65). This realization of discrimination against the blacks makes Lutie outraged.

In the novel the “street” symbolizes the burden for Negro women. The women in the street trudge along overburdened, over worked. Negro women have to neglect their own home while they look after someone else’s. White men on the streets wander along empty-handed, well-dressed and carefree. Women become the sexual object for white men in the street. Men wander to look at beautiful women on the other hand; women have to return home being tired of working

whole day. This prejudice that women are for providing pleasure for male has made Lutie and other women undergo vicious circle of problems.

When Lutie sees the Shoes Polish Box on her son's hand, she compares niggers and white people children's behavior. Niggers are for polishing shoes on the other hand white people's children are busy with study. She says, "I am working to look after you and you out here in the street shining shoes like rest of these Little Niggers, you know little Henry is wearing gray flannel suits and dark blue caps" (67). This has created a gap between the whites and blacks.

White people want colored people to do hard and dirty work. They physically and mentally exploit black people. They think that black people do not have mind and intellect to do good work and official job. White people's exploitation of the black is described in Lutie's own works:

You see, colored people have been shining shoes and washing clothes and scrubbing floors for years and years. White people seem to think that's the only kind of work they are fit to do. The hard work. The dirty work. The work that pays the least. (70)

Lutie feels uneasy and leads hard life due to white people's biasness that colored people are inferior and should please white people by doing hard and dirty work. Her son does not know the real attitude of white people towards black people. White people do not want Negro children to go to school and become intellectual person. They want Negro child to shine shoes. Bub asks his mother, "Mom, why do white people want colored people shining shoes?" (71). So, black people have internalized the white ideology that white are good, intelligent, boss, whereas black are savage, uneducated, and damned by god. This type of cultural influence makes Lutie dejected and lonely throughout her life.

Lutie faces a very different sort of problems than do most American heroines in other narratives. She never gets the opportunity to be dependent. She, being woman, feels loneliness and unprotected. So, she decides to get married to be secure:

The only way of getting out was to find a man who had a good job and wanted to marry her. The chances of that were pretty slim, for once they found out she did not have a divorce they lost interest in marriage and offered to share their apartments with herself. (72)

She must find her way in the discriminatory world on her own. This is her major problem. Because of white people's dream for material comforts to lead successful and sophisticated life, she has its impact on her, which leads her to failure in her life. She seems materialistic; she dreams of better job, a cleaner apartment, a more decent neighborhood. But this desire only becomes her dream because, for a black woman these desires as far as the stars.

Lutie, though educated and has high ambition in comparison to other black women tries to escape from 'the street,' yet she is compelled to lead handicapped life due to social prejudices. Every route off "the street" which symbolizes the poverty and its concomitant walls which she is trying to escape seems to be through offering herself to some man for the alternative he can offer her. Again such behavior is expected of her: "Sure, Lutie thought as she walked on, if you live on this street you are supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights. With nice white gentlemen" (57).

Because of the influence of bad habit of people living in the street she is compelled to slap her son, Bub. He gets attracted towards Lil, Junto, a white man, and other people who do not want him to be a great man, but want him to become



shoe-cleaner. Wherever she goes, she is thought to be a source of providing sexual pleasure for white and black males; finally she even commits murder. When the man she has hoped to borrow money from locks her in his apartment and intends to sleep with her and then to pass her on to his white boss, Junto, she rejects Junto Boots tells her: "I don't take that kind of talk from dames not even good looking once like you. May be after I beat the hell out to you a copula times, you'll begin to like the idea of sleeping with me and with Junto" (256).

She gets angry with Boots and Junto and becomes violent. She goes against white and male dominated world. She grabs a heavy iron candle stock and attacks him:

A life time of pent- up resentment went into the blows first she was venting her rage against the dirty, crowded street. Finally, and the blows were heavier, faster, now she was striking get against the white world which thrust black people in to a walled enclosure from which there was no escape. (266)

Lutie works hard, she worked as a house wife, domestic worker, as big mother of children. But none of these works provided her enough salary. The more dutifully she worked, the dirtier works she had to do at her Madam's:

Some of her madams had been openly contemptuous women who laughed at her to her face even as they piled on more works; acting as though she were a deaf, dumb, blind thing completely devoid of understanding, but able to work, work., work years and years like that . . . . (127)

Junto, a white man, who has a Bar, tells Lutie to earn her living by singing in the Bar. He praises her way of singing songs. But he refuses to pay salary. His

real intention is to quench his sexual lust. That is why he applies the technique by giving her bait which is clearly known through these lines:

The only difference in the technique was that he had placed a piece of bait in front of her – succulent tantalizing bait. He was waiting, watching to see whether she would nibble at it or whether he would have to use different bait. (151)

She is fed up of this “street” life and white world she realizes to have been suffered due to her philosophy of self-confidence. She thinks his world is one of great contrasts. Her feelings have been expressed in this way:

It would better to have been born blind so you couldn't see it, born deaf so you could hear it born with no sense of touch so you could not feel it. Better still born with no brain so that you would be completely unaware of anything so that you would never know there were places that were filled with sun light and good food and where children were safe. (155)

Lutie knows very well that white men hate Negroes. White people think of themselves superior and black people inferior. So, black people must not get superior job. She knows the reality why white people dominate and hate black people. She realizes that as Petry writes:

And she knew, too, that this was a reason white people turned scornfully to look at Negroes, crazy niggers who swooped past them on the highways with autos' in the way they looked. Because they sensed that the black men had to roar past them, had for a brief moment to feel equal, feel superior; had to take reckless chances going around curves, passing on hills, so that they would be better

able to face a world that took pains to make them feel that they didn't belong, that they were inferior. (158)

Lutie comes into conflict with white and black and suffers a lot because of male domination. Even black males do not realize her miseries and suffering. They take her to be an object of plaything for males. They behave as if she has no sense. Male brutality of Boots on Lutie, is illustrated clearly when Boots captures her for fulfilling his sexual desire:

Her mind sought some plausible way of frustrating him without offending him. She could not think of anything. He was holding her so lightly and his mouth was so insistent, so brutal, that she twisted out of his arms, not caring what he thought, intent only on escaping from his ruthless hands and mouth. (161)

Desperate and frustrated Lutie goes back to Harlem after she does not get money from the Bar owner. She consults pop and starts looking after street children. But it also does not last long. Again, after a white woman comes there takes the children away despite Lutie's earnest request to her. When the white woman takes the children away, Lutie again becomes jobless and thinks and curses white people:

Damn white people, she thought. Damn them. And then – but it's not that woman's fault. It's your fault, That's right, but the reason Pop came here to live was because he could not get a job and we had to have the State children because Jim could not get a job  
Damn white people, she repeated. (179)

White men treat black people as animal. They could kill black people if something they dislike happens. Without studying black people well, they take

colored people as naturally criminal and animal. So, they do not really see what any Negro looks like. They think that Negro is not an individual. Petry mentions one of the white man's remarks about the black man: "He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or blight or a Joke" (199). Same kind of behavior happened to Lutie at Chandler's and their friend's in Connecticut, who looked at her and did not see through her, "but saw instead a woman with no moral who would be easy to come by" (199). She is dominated and taken as a sexual object by males. So, she suffers double suppression which makes her unhappy and lonely. She is again dominated and exploited by males, Jones. The writer says:

She tried to scream, and when she opened her mouth no sound came out; and she thought this was worse than any nightmare, for there was no sound anywhere in this. There was only his face close to hers- a frightening, contorted face, the eyes gleaming, the mouth open- and his straining, sweating body kept forcing her even nears the party open cellar door. (136)

Discrimination on the ground of color, treatment of black women as animal, and object of hatred and quenching sexual desire frequently occur when she haunts employments agencies seeking jobs. She is hated, looked at, and thought as monster and sexual object. She realizes in Petry's words:

She began thinking about the period in her life when she had hunted employment agencies seeking works when she walked in them, there was an uncontrollable revulsion in the face of the white people who looked at her. They stared amazed at her enormous size, at the blackness of her skin. They glanced at each other, tried

in vain to control their faces or didn't bother to try at all, simply let her see what a monstrosity they thought she was. (241)

Once when she was eating and chewing bone and leaning over the garbage cans, she saw a white man coming behind her and he scolded her for going ahead of him. He thought that Negro should always remain aside and behind white people. It is his prejudice that Negroes are inferior and white is superior. He examines her with the chicken bone in her hand, the ragged coat tied around her, the men's shoes on her feet. He says, "You are going through this stuff ahead of me" (243).

The white prejudice, superiority and inferiority, hate and love between white and black becomes clear when Junto and Boots talk about the war between America and Germany. White folks fight for their country, on the other hand black people, Boots says, "White guys in the army on fighting for something. I ain't got anything to fight for" (259). The black people work under white people. They have no identity of their own, because they have no country and nationality. Boots says, "Any saying "Yes sir," "No sir," Until my throat was raw with it until I felt like I was dirt" (259).

White man's domination on black women is serious enough. Junto, a white man does not like Lutie walking with her head up. He wants to entrap her in the trap by pretending that he loves her very much. He is proud of being white man. His behavior shows as if he is born to rule over blacks and blacks are born to be ruled over by whites. His real intention towards Lutie is expressed by Petry:

It was simply that he didn't like the idea of anyone possessing her, except of course himself Was he in love with her? He examined his feeling about her with care. No. He just wanted her. He was

intrigued by her. There was a challenge in the way she walked with her head up, in the deft way she had avoided his attempts to make love to her. It was more a matter of itching to lay his hands on her than anything else. (263)

Black people do not have names, they are called just niggers. They are regarded as porters, whores and thieves. They are treated as animals which are sold. Niggers are told to dance and fight for the entertainment for the whites. When the black people get job, they are ordered and commanded like “Here boy, You boy, Go boy, Run boy, stop boy, just hate, no longer hunger. Yes, sir, No sir, of course, Sir” (267).

Junto and Boots made her sing song in their casino for sometime persuading her that they would pay her. But they only wanted to fulfill her desire by making her a puppet, a source of entertainment. Their behavior shows the color and gender discrimination prevalent in Southern province. As she was not given payment at the casino, she felt frustrated, and she expressed her anger and hate towards white and black male. She remains still in that street full of dirt, noise, ravage and different types of discriminations. At this Petry writes:

Her thought returned to Junto, and the bitterness and the hardness increased. In every direction, anywhere one turned; there was always the implacable figure of white man blocking the way, so that it was impossible to escape. If she needed anything to spur her, she thought, this fierce hatred, this deep contempt, for white people would do it. She would never forget Junto. She would keep her hatred of him alive. She would feed it as though it were a fire.

(315)

Again, she finds an advertisement showing, “Singers Needed Now for Boarding Shows, Nightclub Engagements.” She talks to Mr. Crosse who praises her for her soft singing voice. This job is also impossible for her because she has to pay training fee of hundred and twenty five dollars. He repeatedly asks her to earn easy money in Harlem. He also behaves sees her as inferior and sexual object. All these treatments meted out to Lutie shatter her hopes to live a good life. She is anguished and remembers all the people who deserted her and prevented her from getting out of the street life street:

She thought of Mr. Crosse with a sudden access of hate that made her bite her lips; and then of Junto, who has repented her from getting fob at the casino. She remembers the friends of chandlers who had thought of her as a nigger wench; only of course, they were too well-bred to use the word, 'nigger.' And the hate in her increased. (323)

Prevalent racial discrimination is clearly projected in the novel through Miss Rinner, a white woman who works in a black school. She does not like to work in that school. She thinks that they are like animal. That place is like a jungle for her, she shows the white superiority:

They're like animal – sullen-tempered one moment, full of noisy laughter the next. Even at eight and nine they knew the foulest words, the most disgusting language. Working in this school was like being in a jungle. It was filled with the smell of the jungle, she thought: tainted food, rank, unwashed bodies. The small right braids on the little girls' heads were probably an African custom. (333)

Lutie always wanders here and there in search of job. That's why, most of time she is outside and away from Bub. She is influenced by white people who take money as everything in life. She also wants to be self-dependent which she learnt from Chandlers. This affects Bub; consequently he sometimes starts shining shoes, and sometimes stealing. Bub is accused of stealing letters from the letter box. He is kept in the Reform school. Lutie knows it and there is no other way for her to get him out of there. She becomes desperate, and makes plan to go to a lawyer. Petry describes "her eyes were blood shot, the lid swollen" (391). She has to pay two hundred dollars to the lawyer to take Bub from Reform School. Boots, in loving manner, agrees to give her the amount of money. She goes to his house to borrow money. She finds a white man, Junto and Boots talking in the room. Boots, a black man wants to please.. Boots, a Blackman, wanted to please Junto by persuading Lutie to sleep with him. Instead of understanding and helping Lutie with her problem, Boots and Junto want to quench their sexual desire by forcing her to sleep with them for two hundred dollars. Boots says, "All you got to do it to be nice to him. Just be nice to him as long as he wants and the two hundred bucks is your. And being nice to Junto pays off better than anything else I know. At this, she gets startled and furious. She wants to revolt against white people. She says, "Get him out of here. Get him out of here. Get him out of here quick." (423).

Even after Junto leaves Boots' apartment, Boots traps her by feeding beer. He wants to quench his desire and make others quench it by making Lutie a prostitute. He tries his best to make her believe; when she does not agree, he slaps her. He thinks that she has no sense and power. Women for him are providing sexual pleasure to males. He demonstrates his power as a man. He thinks women



should not also do other jobs except sleeping with males to earn money. It is brutal and inhuman activity towards Lutie is clearly seen when the writer describes his action, "And he reached and slapped her across the face. And as she stood there in front of him, trembling with anger, her face smarting, he slapped her again" (428). This brings her into conflict with the white and male.

Boots exhibits his male power in front of Lutie. He wants her to be passive either by scolding and beating or by persuading. His behavior shows that women should always obey male and they should stay under male. They are to please male. For him women are dames and he does not want to talk to them in formal manner. He says: "I don't take that kind of talk from dames,' he said. Not the good looking ones like you. May be after I beat the hell out of you a couple times , you'll begin to like the idea of sleeping with me and with Junto" (429).

Boots is the person who had strikes her. He even threatens her with violence and with forced relationship with Junto and with himself. At this situation, she becomes mad with rage. But she is weak, powerless due to double domination. When it becomes too much, she becomes violent and goes against these dominations. The white and male exploitation is unbearable for her. She thinks that due to color and gender discrimination her life is shattered, and broken into pieces. She strikes Boots who symbolizes male power with the candlestick. She not only goes against male domination but also against white world which has thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there is no escape. The writer describes Lutie's revolt against male and white world:

Finally, and the blows were heavier, faster, now, she was striking at the white world which thrust black people in to a walled enclosure from which there was no scope, and at the turn of the events which

had forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so that he now faced reform School, now had a politic record. (340)

Lutie, in her anger kills Boots and thinks of herself to have been a murderer. She is afraid about her own life and Bub's life. The oppressive white and male dominated society makes her a criminal; it is oppressive discrimination of racism and gender that forces the blacks like Lutie to revolt against the male and white world and to become criminal. Because of these domination and cultural barrier she is forced to leave her son alone for goods. Her entire life is filled by a sense of failure, inadequacy and constant fear. She has access only to menial jobs, substandard housing and sub- standard food. Lutie is condemned to choose a substandard life due to white racist and male dominated society.

It is not her will to murder and to become a murderer, but for her own defense she kills Boots by beating him with candlestick. In the core of her heart she has a burning resentment against the white and black males which thwart her ambition at every turn of her life and keep her poor and in abject, misery. She is deprived of the opportunity even to live a meager life because she is poor and black woman. Her fear increases because she is going to leave her son; she thinks she will be not accepted in the society as fit and true mother but as a murderer. Now, though she is desperate and willing to keep Bub with herself by giving lawyer two hundred dollar and taking him out of the Reform School, she thinks it is not possible. She thinks that, "the only thing she could do was to go away and never come back, because the best thing that could happen to Bub would be for him never to knew that his mother was murderer" (433).

So far, she has been in search of job and good place for herself and Bub. But, unfortunately, now she is in search of hiding place. For this she wants to go

to Chicago. Her life is ruined and she thinks that Bub will also be lost without her. Now she is aimlessly wandering. Lutie Johnson, alone now in Chicago, running from the law, has abandoned her child. She had thought that she would lead a free and dignified life by getting good job but because of racial and gender discrimination, no where is she free and becomes a murderer. So, she leaves her society and her obligation to bring up her child. All her struggles, strength, love, compassion industriousness, understandings lead her to failure in life. She spends her whole life in conflict.

In this way, we can conclude this novel *The Street* deals with the suffering of the black women, Lutie Johnson. Due to racial prejudice and gender discrimination against black people, she lives a miserable and abject life. She is not free in the society. Wherever she goes, she becomes the victim. Her hope to lead a dignified and free life remains just a dream. At last, due to social compulsion, she is forced to abandon her own loved son, Bub. In Chicago, she becomes just like a mad woman with no one to help her, and no home, no place to go, and no aim. In this way, Lutie Johnson fails to lead a free and dignified life due to racial prejudice and gender discrimination.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The elements of racial conflict play a pivotal role in Petry's *The Street*. Petry's protagonist Lutie Johnson is caught in the vicious circle of racial conflict as she struggles hard for her social, political and economic freedom. She suffers throughout her life because of racial prejudice and discrimination. The novel chronicles Lutie's fatigueless struggle to change the course of her life through hard work, discipline, thrift and ambition. Left to survive by her own wits after the untimely death of her mother and grandmother, Lutie unwisely hires herself out as a live-in maid to the wealthy Chandlers. She has no other alternatives as she is a black woman. As a black woman, her presence in the Chandler household brings her face to face with the alcoholism and adultery that lie beneath the surface of their glitzy, upper middle class veneer and marks the beginning of her disillusionment with the American dream.

Racial prejudice proves fatal not only for the black women but also for the black men. But it is Lutie who bears much of the burdens of racial discrimination. As her desires and ambitions are shattered, her husband is left without the companionship and love of his life, and shattered by his own sense of failure. As a result, her husband Jim becomes involved with another woman and eventually abandons Lutie and their son, Bub. Ultimately it is the woman who suffers most.

In the novel, the white society has chased the Negroes from the community; it has isolated them from the main stream of humanity. The racist society has treated them mercilessly as if they are animals. The black people are subject to subjugation and exploitation. Lutie in the novel finds herself imprisoned in narrow cells of white law. Petry, through Lutie Johnson, who

suffers from double subordination, exposes racial as well as gender discrimination which make the black women's lives miserable.

When Lutie severs ties with her husband and employer, and moves to Harlem, she retreats even further from her dream of success, leaving herself more vulnerable than ever. Trapped in the world where slum conditions and racial discriminations are the norm, Lutie discovers that her efforts to qualify for civil service or become a night club singer count for little. Due to her color, she is offered only the most menial jobs, and she finds herself trapped in the subhuman conditions of a steam laundry. Her vulnerability is increased by the beauty which does little more than identify her as a sex object worthy only of being exploited. While Lutie rejects Mrs Hedges' offer to capitalize on her youthful beauty, Lutie is not so successful at counting the sexual advances of the degenerate superintendent, Jones, the powerful white Harlem businessman Junto, or his sidekick Boots who is a black himself. But he tries to exploit Lutie to please his white boss. This shows Lutie becomes victim not only of racial discrimination but gender discrimination as well.

Lutie's conflict with the whites and black males reaches climax when she kills Boots to ward off a sexual assault, but she is not successful in saving herself or her son, Bub, from the attending ugliness of the sordid world they must inhabit. In conclusion, Petry suggests that Bob will possibly go to reform school while Lutie boards a bus for Chicago, marinating her hope of putting her life back together but no closer to the illusive dream. Lutie emerges as a heroic but tragic victim unable to control her own life due to racial conflict.

## **Abstract**

The Present research work focuses on the racial conflict in Ann Petry's remarkable first novel, *The Street*. It studies how a black woman finds herself in a vicious circle of conflict and discriminations meted out by the white and black males in connection with her struggle for freedom in the Southern America. The protagonist, Lutie Johnson, is doubly subordinated as she is a black female. As she is an educated woman, she becomes conscious of her situation and struggles hard to lead an independent life. But racial prejudice and gender discrimination bring her into conflict and she fails to get her ambition.

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