

Ann Petry's *The Street* and the Realities of Contemporary African American Women

Claude KOUAME,

Doctoral Candidate

Alassane Ouattara University

Claudekouame861 @ yahoo.fr

Abstract: This research paper aims to show how, beyond appearances, American society keeps on oppressing African American women and how these women must take action if they want to be respected in the American society. As Patricia Collins points out, if the African American woman does not stand for her dignity, no one will do it for her. In this light, Ann Petry's *The Street* shows the illusion of a contemporary American society that is supposed to be freed from all kinds of discriminations, whether racial or sexist. Faced with this reality, Lutie Johnson, the main character of the novel, encourages the African American woman to always uphold her dignity, to never give up and always remain resilient, for the struggle is far from over.

Keywords: Racism, Sexism, Illusion, Resilience

Résumé : Cette recherche vise à montrer comment au-delà de l'apparence, la société américaine continue d'opprimer la femme africaine américaine et comment ces dernières doivent s'y prendre si elles veulent se faire respecter dans la société américaine. Comme le souligne Patricia Collins, si la femme Africaine Américaine ne s'élève pas pour lutter pour sa dignité, personne d'autre ne viendra faire cette lutte à sa place. C'est dans cette optique qu'Ann Petry dans *The Street* montre l'illusion d'une société américaine contemporaine qui est supposée être débarrassée de toute sorte de discrimination qu'elle soit raciale ou sexiste. Face à ce constat, Lutie Johnson, le personnage principal du roman, engage la femme africaine américaine à demeurer digne, à ne point abdiquer et à toujours être résiliente car la lutte est loin de s'achever.

Mots clés : Racisme, Sexisme, Illusion, Résilience

Introduction

The position of African Americans in the American society, especially women, is an issue that continues to generate discussion in contemporary America. In fact, the end of slavery and racial segregation in the USA “held great promise for African Americans. The passage of civil rights legislation that, for African Americans, was designed to redress the devastating effects of slavery and racial segregation was on the horizon.”¹ But as Patricia Hill Collins attests, “(...) while good ideas and solid evidence certainly matter (the kind that I was studying in school), power relations that elevate some groups over others can matter even more in determining whose view of truth will prevail.”² Similar to the sexual minority experienced by women in all societies, the African American women are subjected to a second form of discrimination based on race. Intertwined with the other, the African American women are reduced to an objectified body subjected to male domination. This injustice is denounced by many African American writers, including Ann Petry.

The Street (1946), Ann Petry’s first novel, takes place in Harlem during 1940s. This novel is inspired by a newspaper story of an apartment house superintendent who taught a young boy to steal letters from mailboxes. According to Petry, *The Street* sheds light in how the environment can change the course of a person's life. In this book, the author enlightens the fight of African American women to find a place in the contemporary American society. Indeed, the novel criticizes the reality that despite the official removal of barriers which have kept African Americans and particularly women from being included in the American society, pressure still persists on African American women to push them to the margins of society. Therefore, how does *The Street* convey the disillusionment of African American women and in which ways does it reflect their selflessness in persisting in the fight for a better future?

¹ - Patricia Collins. *Black Sexual Politics : African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York, 2004, p.1.

²- *Idem*, p.3.

Citing Maria Stewart who in 1831 condemned the stereotyping of African American women who were confined to domestic duties, Patricia Hill Collins asserts that race, gender, and class oppression are the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty. Indeed, she lays bare the source of the oppression of African American women and urges these women "to forge self-definitions, self-reliance and independence, [for] it's useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the White; for that will never elevate us."³

To better discern the message of *The Street*, Black feminism will be useful in this research paper. As Patricia Collins states:

On some level, people who are oppressed usually know it. For African American women, the knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender provides the stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women's critical social theory (...) As an historically oppressed group, U.S. Black women have produced social thought designed to oppose oppression (...) Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice.⁴

So, Black feminism will permit to show how Ann Petry denounces African American women social, sexual and economic oppression both by Whites and Blacks and how from this suffering she encourages African American women to resist and remain optimistic. For instance, Lutie's refusal to accept prostitution as the only way for a black woman to gain money in the American society despite her difficult living condition. In doing so, she deconstructs the stereotypes that reduce African American women to nasty women that society should avoid.

This research paper deals with two main parts. The first part examines how African American women remain subjected to dual discrimination despite the

³ - Patricia Collins. *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and Politics of Empowerment*. New York, 2000, p.1.

⁴ - Patricia Collins. *Op. Cit*, pp.8-9.

elimination of formal obstacles and a promise for a fair society. The second part focuses on the perseverance, optimism, and resolve of African American women to uphold their dignity.

1- African American Women and the New Racism

Denouncing what she calls “the new racism” in the United States of America, Patricia Collins explains how the American society implicitly encourages discrimination against minority groups by the means of media and book. As she explains:

Contemporary sexual politics in the United States present African American women and men with a complicated problem. From the display of Sarah Bartmann as a sexual “freak” of nature in the early nineteenth century to Josephine Baker dancing bare-breasted for Parisian society to the animal-skin bikinis worn by “bootylicious” Destiny’s Child to the fascination with Jennifer Lopez’s buttocks, women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, “wild” sexuality. Expressed via an everchanging yet distinctive constellation of sexual stereotypes in which Sarah Bartmann’s past frames J-Lo’s present, this association of sexuality with Black women helps create ideas about racial difference.⁵

For Patricia Collins, even if racial discrimination is said to be over, in the practice, it subtly exists. Set in Long Island, New York, *The Street* points out this new form of discrimination through the description of the environment where African Americans live. The street of Harlem is viewed as a place of misery, where there is no job opportunity and where all kinds of vices exist. According to Nirjharini Tripathy, “Harlem represents a city within a city as an invisible border segregates it from the larger White American neighborhood. Harlem is the American way of keeping out the African Americans.”⁶ Harlem represents African Americans lack

⁵ - Patricia Collins. *Op. Cit*, p.27.

⁶ - Tripathy Nirjharini. “Book Review : Ann Petry’s Novel *The Street*.” *The Criterion : An International Journal In English*. Mysore, 2010, p.345.

of opportunities. The novel describes the street 116th and its inhabitants as everything that is subhuman and inhuman. As Lutie describes her apartment:

Going up the stairs with Bub just ahead of her, Lutie thought living here is like living in a tent with everything that goes on inside is open to the world because the flap won't close. And the flap couldn't close because Mrs. Hedges sat at her street-floor window firmly holding it open in order to see what went on outside. (*The Street*, 68)

The description of Mrs. Hedges' apartment as "the darkest apartment, the smallest, most unrentable apartment where there are no pictures, no rugs, no newspapers, no magazines, nothing to suggest anyone had ever tried to make it look homelike" (*The Street*, 7) clearly demonstrates the misery within African American women live. The Street 116th shows a sad reality of African Americans and their disillusion about the American dream; an ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved. The dark and dirty apartment where these women live and the menial jobs that they undertake make them live in misery. This miserable life leads some African American women to opt for practices that do not honour them.

The description of Mrs. Hedges' business clearly justify what Patricia Collins names as "new racism." In fact, all the opportunities are closed to African American women in the American society and the profitable job that permits Mrs. Hedges to be financial stable is her whore house. As the novel mentions:

Just like Mrs. Chandler's mother Mrs. Hedges slowly teases Lutie to allow herself 'to move' with Whites. Mrs. Hedges in her own way wants Lutie to become a prostitute. "If you live on this damn street, you're supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights with nice white gentlemen... [As the narrator explains] "the same combination of circumstances had evidently made Mrs. Hedges... turn to running a fairly well kept whore house...she has money, an apartment, and "security" of a sort, all Mrs. Hedges. (*The Street*, 57-84)

Limiting African American women to prostitution and viewing this practice as profitable is a way of corrupting them and telling them that they are only good for sex and if they want to be inserted into the American mainstream they have to obey this principle. By portraying Mrs. Hedges whose house as a successful business, the author clearly enlightens how many contemporary African American women have resigned and accepted to be what the American society wants them to be. As Bell Hook declared, “racist, sexist socialization had conditioned us [African American women] to devalue our femaleness ... in other words, we were asked to deny a part of ourselves – and we did.”⁷ In fact, Ann Petry denounces this form of resignation from African American women who have lost hope for the future and abide by what society dictates them.

Describing the new form of racism in the contemporary America, Patricia Collins declares:

[In 2001], The career of Jennifer Lopez skyrockets... Lopez’s rise to fame came after her feature film appearance as Selena... News of J-Lo is everywhere;... One special feature of Lopez’s routinely makes the news—her seemingly large bottom. From late night American talk shows to South African radio programs to Internet websites, J-Lo’s butt is all the rage. Recognizing its value, it is rumored that Lopez insures her buttocks for 1 billion dollars, as one website mischievously described it, 500 million dollars per cheek. [In 2000], The photo insert for *Survivor*, Destiny’s Child third CD, shows the three African American women standing legs akimbo, holding hands, and dressed in animal skin bikinis. Selling over 15 million albums [...] Counseling women to be resilient and financially independent, Destiny’s Child proclaims, “I’m a survivor, I’m gonna make it.” *Survivor* suggests sexual independence as well.⁸

In fact, the new racism Patricia Collins is depicting is the way media and books in America proceed to silently devalue minorities especially African American

⁷ - Bell Hooks. *Ain’t I a Woman : Black Women and Feminism*. London, 1982, p.1.

⁸- Patricia Collins. *Op. Cit.*, pp.25-26.

women. Indeed, in *The Street*, whatever Lutie's efforts to escape from poverty, she is caught by the reality and fails everywhere. American racial and patriarchal society tells her that the only way for African American women to achieve their American dream is to accept to be what society wants them to be. Lutie has to resign and consider herself as a sexual object if she wants to fulfil her American dream. In sum, *The Street* portrays a contemporary American society which is said to be liberated from all kind of discrimination, but in the practice this seems to be an illusion. As Patricia Collins states:

Until legally outlawed in the 1950s and 1960s, the color line policies of Jim Crow racial segregation kept the vast majority of African Americans from quality educations, good jobs, adequate health care, and the best neighborhoods. In contrast, the problem of the twenty-first century seems to be the seeming *absence* of a color line. Formal legal discrimination has been outlawed, yet contemporary social practices produce virtually identical racial hierarchies as those observed by DuBois.⁹

It is this "virtually identical racial hierarchies" and an illusion of a fair society that Ann Petry denounces in *The Street*. But out of this illusion, Petry shows her optimism as far as African American women emancipation is concerned.

2- Lutie Johnson: The Symbol of an Emancipated African American Woman

African American women's fight against racism and sexism has met many obstacles. As Bell Hook explains, "while some black women activists resisted the attempts of black men to coerce them into playing a secondary role, others capitulated to male demands for submission."¹⁰ But with the time many African American women recognize that "true freedom entailed not just liberation from a sexist social order that systematically denied all women full human rights. These black women participated in both the struggle for racial equality and the women's

⁹ - Patricia Collins. *Op. Cit*, p.32.

¹⁰ - Bell Hooks. *Op. Cit*, p.5.

rights movements.”¹¹ This new generation of African American women, far from being docile women and abide by the establishment of male patriarchy, fight for gaining respect in all the domains of the American society. Lutie Johnson embodies this new generation of African American women who fight to show the American society that African American women deserve respect.

In fact, Lutie Johnson, the main character of the novel, is determined to transcend her environment which aims to corrupt her. The novel describes Lutie as a fighter, a young and beautiful woman who everyone, being Black or White appreciates. According to the narrator, African American women and white women fear Lutie because they think she will take their husbands. Some women try to sell her to men as Mrs. Hedges tries to do. White men try to buy, bribe or rape her. In the Chandler’s house, Lutie’s meeting with Mrs. Chandler’s mother demonstrates how almost all African American women are viewed as prostitutes. As the novel describes:

The rich White families, the Chandlers for whom she went to work as a “domestic”, regard her as a workhouse and as a sexual threat to the female Chandlers, “who believe all Black women are promiscuous sluts ready to jump in bed with any and every White man. Apparently, it was an automatic reaction of White people-if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute. If not that – at least sleeping with her would be just a simple matter, for all one had to do was make the request. In fact, White men wouldn’t even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight. (*The Street*, 45)

Despite all these temptations and stereotypes stuck to her, Lutie is viewed as a women who is hardly manipulable. She has a different discernment of herself and views the world and value system differently.

In spite Lutie’s intellectual level, her physical beauty and the fact that she is meticulous, it seems difficult for her to achieve her American dream. The environment where she lives, gives few opportunities and choices to women from African origin. As the novel describes:

¹¹ -*Idem*, p.2.

Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North lynch mobs, she thought bitterly; the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place. And she began thinking of Pop unable to get a job; of Jim slowly disintegrating because he, too, couldn't get a job, and of the subsequent wreck of their marriage; of Bub left to his own devices after school. From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever narrowing space, until now she was very nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands. (*The Street*, 323)

The description of 116th Street subtly tells Lutie how it seems impossible for an African American woman to get away from an environment like this without being submitted to men and white people's demands despite her knowledge, physical beauty or determination.

In her search for a better living condition for her son, Lutie is humiliated, she is treated as a sexual object. Despite her trust in the American dream, and her willing to transcend the barriers of race, gender and class that exist in American society, men patriarchal and white society try to convince Lutie that America was not a place of equal opportunities for African Americans women.

Far from abdicating, Lutie demonstrates to the American society that one can be African American and woman and be respected. Although Lutie is an African American woman living in a time where Black women's concerns are relegated to the background, she has been able to resist to preserve her dignity. She succeeds in demonstrating that an African American woman can resist to all kind of aggressions or stereotypes.

Lutie's murder of Boots Smith sheds light on the exacerbation of a marginalized woman who wants to put an end to the injustices African American women are victim of. As Lutie points out, "... you forgot that you were black and you underestimated the street outside here." (*The Street*, 389). Indeed, this declaration of Lutie shows how in a subtle way the American patriarchal society maneuvers to always maintain African American women at the bottom of the society. Unlike the expectations of this patriarchal society, which always wants to reduce African American women to stereotypes like Mammies, Jezebel and many

others, Petry opposes them another generation of African American women who is determined to impose respect and deconstruct all kinds of negative images of African American women. In this dynamic, Petry and Bell Hook share the same vision. When Bell Hooks ¹² states that unlike some previous African American women who racist and sexist socialization had conditioned to devalue their femaleness, the new generation of black women takes part in racial equality and women's rights movements. Lutie embodies the contemporary African American women view as resilient, mentally strong and as women who never give up.

After the murder of Booty Smith because he tried to rape her, and realizing that this situation constitutes a hindrance to the achievement of her American dream, Lutie makes her to take a decision to leave Harlem and move to Chicago, leaving her son, Bub, behind in the prison. Despite these obstacles, Lutie remains optimist and keeps on wishing a better future for her son. As she declares:

He would probably go to reform school...so he will go to reform school, she repeated. He'll be better off there. He'll be better off without you. That way he may have some kind of chance. He didn't have the ghost of a chance on that street. The best you could give wasn't good enough.
(*The Street*, 435)

Petry puts forth an almost realistic picture of the 1940s Harlem by showing the odyssey of African American women. What is interesting in *The Street*, is how this novel deconstructs stereotypes that characterize African American women as Mammies and Jezebel. Lutie is viewed as a beautiful woman and characterized by independence of spirit. As a single black mother, she challenges racism, classism and sexism in her day to day life. She trusts in Benjamin Franklin's great American model of the self-made man. Lutie works hard and her willingness is to be financially independent. She is trying her best level to beat the negatives and make a better life positive for herself and her son. She is hoping that one day two of them will come out from the poverty and violence in which they live.

¹²- Bell Hooks. *Op. Cit*, p.2.

The decision to leave Harlem to Chicago even if some analyses view it as a defeat or weakness for Lutie, it can be view as African American women dynamism, their capacity to overcome difficulties of time, their resilience and their abilities to always remain optimist because for them the best is to come.

Conclusion

The Street depicts social realities of contemporary African American women in a country where people are said to be equal. Ann Petry aims to denounces how despite the legal remove of racism and sexism in the American society, contemporary America continues to be strongly a racist and patriarchal society. In front of this society which is ready to use all kind of strategies to maintain its hegemony of racist and patriarchal society where women from African origin are abused and smothered in various angles. It is in this respect that Lutie, the main protagonist of the novel tries her best to overcome the obstacles and fulfil her American dream. Despite her efforts, she is caught up by the reality. Lutie's experience sheds light on the limits of contemporary America. But contrary to some analyses who views Lutie's experience as a struggle and defeat, my analysis demonstrates that far from being a defeat or failure, Lutie proves to the American society that African American women deserve respect. She succeeds in deconstructing negative images stuck to these women. She refuses to be reduced to a sexual object and honestly do her best to improve her living condition. Then, Lutie, as the symbol of the African American women, embodies courage, resilience and optimism. Far from a defeat, Lutie's experience is a message to contemporary African American women to be aware of their difficult realities in the American society and be courageous to win future battles.

The example of Lutie is a message Ann Petry conveys to the new generation of African Americans. If in the 1940s when the situation of African Americans was more difficult a woman has succeeded in resisting and imposing respect, so new generations have no excuse to give up.

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