

THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
ABDERRAHMANE MIRA UNIVERSITY OF BEJAIA
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND LANGUAGES
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH



A Marxist Feminist Study of Ann Petry's
***The Street* (1946)**

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Fulfilment of
the Requirement for an **M.A. Degree in English Literature and Civilization**

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Academic Year: 2022 / 2023

Abstract

The current study undertakes a Marxist feminist reading of Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). In the light of the Marxist feminist literary theory, this research examines the nocuous impact of the capitalist patriarchy on black working-class women. Therefore, this present work underlines the main origins and impacts of black female's exploitation, and also attests that racism can be the key factor to the foundation of black's broken union. It reveals the intra-racial conflict between the black race itself. Furthermore, this research paper analyzes how the protagonist is dehumanized by both white and black men within the selected novel. Most importantly, and through Marxist feminism, this work aims at demonstrating that criminality could be the outcome of sexism and rape against women.

Key Words: Capitalist Patriarchy, Feminism, Female Exploitation, Intra- Racism, Marxism, Rape, Sexism.

Dedications

To the memory of my grandmother, may she rest in peace.

To my beloved family and siblings, for whom I would never be thankful enough for
supporting and believing in me.

To my cherished friends who encouraged me to accomplish this work.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to Almighty God for providing me with support throughout my journey.

I am also thankful and grateful for the help and assistance of my supervisor Dr. Ounissa CHIOUKH-AIT BENALI who believed in me. This work would not have been accomplished without her precious advices and constant guidance.

I would like also to express my warm thankful for my beloved mother for her care and encouragement, and to my dearest friends Kahina LEBSIR, Kaouther KRIA, and Yasmine BAOUZ for their support and precious advices.

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General Introduction

Literature has always been a medium for several writers who use it as a tool to embody and consider various political and socio-cultural matters. Yet it was only around the 20th century that African American authors could express themselves freely through writing, by which numerous authors and writers emphasize racial prejudice. African American literature is influenced by the accumulated segregation and enmity that black people endured throughout their existence in the United States. Thus, they examined diverse subjects pointing out not only the issue of racism and separatism, but also female's struggle in a patriarchal society that views black women as worthless objects. Among these writers the author Ann Lane Petry whose works aims to shed light on black's constant struggle for an improvement amidst a chaotic exploitative and patriarchal society.

During her settlement in New York, precisely Harlem, Petry was affected by the tough conditions that African Americans underwent. Therefore, she published her first novel *The Street* (1946) in which she discusses a working-class woman's fight under the Second World War rough period to pave her way in a capitalist patriarchal system where men are viewed as the central focus of life. Petry addresses issues of racism, exploitation, and sexism that are key factors leading black communities to form a broken union.

However, by selling a million and a half copies of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship winning novel, *The Street* (1946) has been a subject studied by many scholars and researchers. For instance, in his dissertation entitled "Ann Petry Like a Winding Sheet" David Chaura explores the discriminative and oppressive system which he argues to be the basis of evils in society (4). He adds that the novel's protagonist is seen only as a "factor of production" (4). In his turn, the scholar Jacob Sloan suggests that Petry sees herself through the protagonist's narration of her own life in Harlem (3). He claims that *The Street* (1946) is set in a moment of decomposition centering anti-racist struggle (5). Sloan considers the novel

as representing an organized and effective protest (5). From his critical review, one comes to understand that Petry highlights through her novel the idea that most often black's violence and cruelty are caused by white's apartheid system. Besides, a study by Chelsea L. Horne in her article entitled "'The Street' as a distorting lens in Ann Petry's novel", considers that Petry gives face to the white oppressive force (480), and argues that the novel serves as a "counter narrative" to the ideal American dream (481).

From the above mentioned reviews of existing literature, we conceive that the novel *The Street* (1946) has been studied from different perspectives. However, few of them have approached the novel from a Marxist Feminist Perspective. Therefore, the objectives of our study consist of examining the impacts of the Capitalist exploitative society on black working-class women, in addition to patriarchy and sexism as the outcomes of gender dominance. Through our research, we will attempt to answer the following questions: how did the novel's major characters contribute to the downfall of the protagonist? What are the origins and effects of the intra-racial conflict between African American Communities in *The Street* on the basis of the Marxist Feminist perspective? How does the sexist and patriarchal system exploit and impact black women's position in 1940s American society.

The current work studies *The Street* from a Marxist Feminist perspective. In this respect, we will try to explore the main causes and outcome behind the creation of black broken solidarity under white supremacy. We will highlight African American working class women's struggle to face the misogynistic and capitalist society. Besides, we will depict the outcome of gender disparities and sexual violence on black females.

In the light of the current study, our research paper will be divided into two chapters. The first chapter will be separated in two parts. In the first one, we will introduce Petry's biography including the literary influences that shaped the author's writings. Additionally, we

will provide a plot overview of *The Street* (1946) and the socio-historical and cultural background of the novel. In the second part of the first chapter, we will tackle the theoretical and conceptual framework of the current study. Since our work focuses on the African American working-class woman's subjugation and exploitation, we consider that it is more appropriate to rely on the Marxist Feminist theory. Therefore, we will provide an overview of the principal origins and concepts of the two theories separately.

The second and final chapter is devoted to the analysis of the selected novel using Marxist Feminist theory. By doing so, we will introduce the readers to the color line's racial classification in 1940s America. Then, we will analyze the major characters and the setting of the novel in order to disclose the author's intention in selecting the title. Furthermore, we will examine the intra-racial conflict between the novel's main black figures and their impact on the protagonist. Finally, we will depict the most important passages from the novel to highlight the most prominent theme; namely, sexual exploitation and gender disparities.

Chapter One: An Insight into Petry's Life, Socio-historical Background of *The Street*, and the Theoretical Framework.

Introduction

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first one, we will introduce the author Ann Lane Petry and the literary influences that determined the author's published writings. Additionally, we will provide a synopsis of *The Street* including its socio-historical and cultural background with the most prominent events that characterized twentieth century America.

The second part is devoted to the theoretical and conceptual framework. Since our work deals with African American women's class struggles, we assume that it is more appropriate to introduce the Marxist Feminist theory. In order to get more familiar with this literary theory, it is important to explain the two concepts as independent theories. Thereby, we will establish Marxism, Feminism as well as Black feminism as a branch, then introduce the Marxist Feminist theory.

I.1. Biography of the Author

Ann Lane Petry was born in October 12, 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. The younger of two girls, her mother Bertha James Lane was a chiropodist entrepreneur while her father, Peter Clark Lane was a pharmacist who owned a drugstore in the same city where they lived. Emerged from a middle-class working family; Petry's childhood was peaceful, she lacked nothing. However, being the only African American family in that town has caused her many obstacles while being a student. The stories of her ancestor's hardships have influenced and inspired her to write short stories and plays while she was in high school.

After graduating from high school, she attended Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute where she studied Home Economics. But shortly after, she realized that it was not her cup of tea. Thus, she has decided to follow her family's tradition. In 1931, Petry graduated from Connecticut College of Pharmacy, and started to work in her parent's drugstore as a pharmacist.

Aside from working at the drugstore, Petry continued writing short stories in her free time. In 1938, freshly married to George David Petry, the couple has decided to settle in Harlem, New York. Throughout her arrival, she was fortunate. She soon started selling advertising space for a weekly Harlem publication entitled *The Amsterdam News*. She took a job as a columnist, reporter and editor for *The People's Voice* magazine which highlights the social, political and economical constant struggle of the colored people. In order to strengthen her literary writings, Petry assisted to courses of writing at Columbia University.

Therefore; from 1938 till 1944, she wrote several short stories for literary journals. Among them, her first fictional writing under a male pseudonym Arnold Petri; a short romance-suspense piece entitled *Marie of the Cabin Club* 1939 (Quintana). In addition to working as a Journalist, she taught at the *National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*. Petry was also implicated in Art. She participated in theatrical performances at *The American Negro Theatre* whose main discussions were based upon interpretation, illumination and criticism of the black's common lives (Shandell 533). Petry has always been supportive toward working class women especially the African American ones. Besides being the co-founder of *Negro women Incorporated*; in advocacy group that aimed to help women get their money's worth, she also contributed a women's column called *The Lighter Side* which tackles new stories and social events (Shandell 533).

Regardless of Petry's rich career, she emerged as an actual novelist in 1946 with her first published winning novel of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship *The Street* (1946). This served as a turning point in her career as the first African American woman to sell a million and a half copies to become later on a bestseller. Submerged by both the First and Second World War, in addition to the painful domination of the segregated racist and sexist stereotypes toward the African Americans in the 1940s, Petry aimed to portray in most of her writings the misery of the blacks that she saw in Harlem's Ghetto. *Country Place*, her second novel was published in the following year in 1947 (Shandell 533).

After the dense adventure she had, Petry and her husband moved back to Old Saybrook where she gave birth to her only child Elizabeth Liz Petry. Accordingly, she has become involved in children's world with the publication of *Drugstore Cat* in 1949. Petry's ulterior publications included her third novel *The Narrows* published in 1953, *Harriet Tubman: Conductor of the Underground Railroad* 1955; *Tituba of Salem Village* published in 1964, and the last novel before her departure from New York, *Legends of the Saints* 1970; in addition to a book of short stories entitled *Miss Muriel and Other Stories*, published in 1971 (Shandell 533).

From 1973 till 1975 Petry moved to Hawaii where she served as a visiting professor in the English Department at the University of Hawaii. In 1983, 1988 and 1989, she received honorary degrees from Suffolk University, the University of Connecticut, and Mount Holyoke College. Ann Lane Petry died on April 28, 1997 at the age of 88 in her home town, SayBrook (Quintana).

I.2. Petry's Literary Influences

Petry's involvement with literature was created by her experiences as an African American woman. She liked to get into writing since adulthood. However, Louisa May Alcott

was the most influential author for Petry. She was precisely attracted by Alcott's fictional character Jo March in the novel entitled *Little Women* (1868) (Atlas 2). Since Petry has always supported women's affair, she could identify with Alcott who is herself a feminist who often tried to demonstrate through her writings self-made independent women, which is most of the time inspired by reality. Nava Atlas, in his article entitled "Ann Petry, Author of *The Street*" (2018), reveals that Petry was particularly taken by the fictional heroine Jo March as a role model for her writerly aspirations (2).

Additionally, Petry's contributed into several newspapers and magazines. She aimed to underline the political conflicts of the black people which led to her implication with the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)* where she worked as a teacher (Atlas 2). Whereby, one could deduce that she has Du Boisian ideas. Petry followed the Marxist convictions of W.E.B Du Bois, one of the most influential founders of *NAACP*. She transmitted her Marxist persuasions and thoughts throughout her literary writings.

I.3. Plot Overview of *The Street* (1946)

Set in the 1940s World War II era, Ann Petry's first novel *The Street* (1946) is composed of eighteen chapters. The Novel reports the life of Lutie Johnson, a single African American working-class woman. Due to the constant struggle against poverty, she tries to provide some money to live on and pay the rent by working as a maid at Chandler's house while her jobless husband Jim was cheating on her. Astonished by the news, Lutie and her eight years old son Bub found refuge at the 116th street, Harlem. A ghetto that made of her father Pop a drunkard, and drove Mrs. Hedges to the brothel. The buildings and streets were gloomy and dirty, but Lutie had no other choice than to take a flat there.

Living with a constant battle against the Super Jones's attempt to rape her, in addition to the neighbor's daily oppressive attitude, Lutie always thought about a better place where

she and her son Bub could flourish in a healthy environment. In fact, her encounter with Boots Smith made her vision about the “American Dream” grow bigger (L. Horne 481). Boots is not only attracted physically by Lutie, but also offers her the chance to become a singer with his band at the Junto Bar. By accepting the offer, Lutie believed that with all the considerable amount of money that she could gather, she would no longer need to stay at the 116th urban ghetto. Unexpectedly, Lutie has realized that the white man bar owner Junto had scammed her, and didn’t want to pay her. He believed that by doing so, she will feel obliged to earn money and then accept his offer and attempt to sexually abuse her.

Regardless of the twist and plots that Lutie went through, she believed that somehow, she could figure out a way of getting out of Harlem’s obscure corner. However, Jones is going to be a turning point for both Lutie and Bub. In fact, he manipulated the little boy by convincing him to grasp letters from the neighbor’s mailboxes and then Jones will hide them in the basement. Once Bub gathers many of them the police would ask after the guilty. Hence, Jones would denounce Lutie’s kid. The man knew exactly that “he would destroy her” (*The Street* 203). It appears that Lutie found herself stuck on how she would get her son out of the children’s shelter. She consulted a lawyer, who apparently took advantage of her case because in actual fact she didn’t need one. The lawyer proposed to her to come back having two hundred dollars so that he could officially get Bub out of his trouble. After hours of thinking, Lutie has realized that maybe Boots Smith is the only person who can possess that amount of money and actually help her. In fact, she arranged to meet at his apartment. Once there, Lucie was surprised by the presence of Junto and suddenly all the hatred and frustration started to climb her body. So, she started yelling at Boots to get the white man out of the house so that she could talk openly and regain her strength.

As long as Boots got rid of Junto, he locked the door and put the key in his pocket and then returned to Lutie convincing her to stay along with him and then, far into the night she would have the money. It took no longer than a few minutes for Lutie to realize that she has put herself into a real issue. However, she tried to get the way out of there before that her anger increased. But Boots was more malignant than her. In fact, he started pulling her closer to him so that he could abuse her. While Lutie tried to push him away, he slapped her twice. Hence, she felt desperate and stuck into a situation where none could help her. She thought that the only way to get the beast away from her body was by hitting him. So, she gripped a heavy iron candlestick just behind her and hit hardly Boots at his head so many times that all the frustration and hatred got out of her. Obligated to handle the situation and leave her kid alone, Lutie believed that she couldn't get her son Bub out of the children's shelter anymore. Thus, the only solution left was to flee away by buying a one-way ticket to Chicago and never come back.

I.4. Socio-historical and Cultural Background of the Novel

Post-World War I has discouraged the African Americans to finally gain the full citizenship and obtain their equal rights. They, indeed, fought against the discrimination and segregation in the United States through the use of several political and cultural movements. Artists and Writers led the battle between the wars, and even during the deprivation of the Great Depression using many artistic expressions.

I.4.1. The New Negro Movement

Due to the lack of economic and social opportunities in addition to Jim Cow's Laws who increased the segregation toward the blacks, most of the African Americans have migrated to the Northern States, mainly Harlem to seek more advantages. The term "New Negro" was popularized and defined by the scholar Alain Leroy Locke. However, the years of

1920s and 1930s marked the period which is very important for African American cultural event that occurred during the twentieth century. Known as *The New Negro Movement*, or *New Negro Renaissance*, it goes hand in hand with *Harlem Renaissance* (Buck 925-926).

The *NAACP* played a major role in the advancement of the latter movement. W.E.B Du Bois, along with other leaders had provided aesthetic guidance and financial support to this literature awakening. As a matter of fact, the Negro intellectuals in literature have mutually reinforced each other. The most well-known figures are Langstone Hughes, Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude Mckay, Zora Nael Hurtson and many other writers (Buck 925).

Judith L. Stephens, in her article entitled “The Harlem Renaissance and The New Negro Movement” (1999), claims that the enduring value of the work produced by the black artists from this era has prompted literary scholars to recognize the *Harlem Renaissance* as “the one period in black letters that stands out above all others” (98). *The New Negro Movement* was not only concerned with literary works, but it has also gathered artistic contributions, including arts and music. Through the creativity and ambition of the above-mentioned writers, the purpose behind those cultural manifestations was to break the black stereotypes, and show the African Americans right value by pursuing racial renewal through cultural diplomacy (98).

I.4.2. African Americans and the Great Depression

Under the President Herbert Hoover’s term office, the United States of America underwent the most wide economic crisis of the time. It was so much severe that it was referred to as “great” depression. Many Americans started investing beyond their means, and millions of people would take out loans to accomplish their business. However, most people

took profits, but none returns the credits. So, the percentage of the economic gain decreased automatically (Andrews 1-3).

Accordingly, lots of Americans remained jobless in addition to lower level of productions. From 1929 till 1941, the Great Depression lasted about 10 years. Yet, white Americans have not been affected as much as the blacks. By 1932, approximately half of the African Americans were unemployed. As long as there were whites out of work, blacks will be automatically fired from any jobs. Many blacks, including women, have found themselves completely lost (Andrews 2). Racial segregation and violence toward them became more common. As a result, huge number of African Americans were obliged to steal here and there, and go unnoticed to survive in an America that left no place to them (2-7). It was America's utterance to the World War II that made an official term to the Great Depression (8).

I.4.3. African Americans and World War II

The period between 1939 till 1945 has formed a huge conflict opposing the greatest powers of several countries. The war's real reasons originated from political actions; Allies and the Axis were two military alliances of the war. Many countries have joined the battle, and more than 60 billion people died (Merve 2). It was recognized as one of the deadliest of wars.

Due to the War, the United States economy following the Great depression started to get back in shape. However, every American supported the conflict as he could with all the dollars he earned. The war time was not certainly easy for the Americans, but those who were more affected were the blacks. Most of the African American men and women made major advances. They were engaged in military operations and defense industry. Furthermore, African Americans were left behind; they suffered from high rates of unemployment (Kersten 13). Yet, Mathias Reiss in his article entitled "Solidarity Among "Fellow Suffers": African

Americans and German Prisoners of War in the United States During World War II” (2013), reported the experience of Pritchett, one survivor of the harsh mistreatment of the black prisoners who were interned in the United States. James Pritchett, as a true example, wrote a private letter from camp Livingstone, Louisiana, in 1944 assuming that, “Here the Negro is nothing...it is a hell hole. The German war prisoners are treated better than we are” (531).

From the above-mentioned report one could deduce that the Americans did not only miss any chance on flattening the blacks in the military troops and outside, but also excluding them from receiving recognition for their World War II services. Blacks were constantly struggling with whites racism.

Moreover, black women who held jobs for the military industries, have worked as home markers, took jobs in aircraft manufacturing as well as military uniform production factories (Hegarty 112). Additionally, they appeared in public hiding by wearing male’s pants and behaving like men. While examining the African American conditions during the Second World War, we could notice the class inequality even during War time. Black families were homeless. Most of them migrated to northern states where the formation of “black ghettos” took place (Kusmer 458). Children were deprived from attending school, and several black soldiers were killed at the prisons.

II.1. A General Insight to the Marxist Literary Theory

For the sake of analyzing Petry’s novel, we judge pertinent to apply the Marxist feminist approach. Therefore, in this section we will attempt to provide a brief overview of the two theories separately, and then introduce Marxist feminism as a literary theory.

Popularized by the German philosopher and economist Karl Heinrich Marx, Marxism is the fruit of several attempts to maintain economic changes in the society. Through several

published works, Marx alongside with his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels, have tried to treat the social matters in relation to the others and relate them to political and economic realities (Peniston 2). The latter ideas emerged after the publication of Marx and Engels two major political works, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and *Das Kapital* (1867).

According to Marx, several capitalist ideologies must be changed. He has established that conflict is inherent in the society, and the basis for this conflict is the economic conditions (Luper 2). Moreover, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the two authors claimed that, “Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other; ‘Bourgeoisie and Proletariat’”. (Marx, Engels 15).

Regarding the above-mentioned quote, the authors have drawn two opposing classes over the nineteenth century. The ruling class that owns the private property referred to as “The Bourgeoisie”, and the working suppressed class known as “The Proletariat”. As a matter of fact, the Bourgeoisie holds the power within the society which makes them being the Oppressor of the class system. That is to say, the Proletariat is the product of an exploited and subjugated capitalist fabric; for them, money doesn’t come easily, they have to work hard for it which makes them the oppressed in the society (Peniston 3).

Nevertheless, through his texts, Marx has raised social consciousness regarding the abolition of the private property and instead, raises the proletariat. This would make a term to the Capitalist inequalities. One of the key concepts that Marx has introduced in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) is the Class Struggle, which he has inherited from the French Social Theorist Henri de Saint-Simon (Chambre, McLellan). Marx claimed that, class struggle could be sharpened due to the development of Capitalism. Through this ideology, the proletariat falls into the trap of “false consciousnesses” of the Bourgeoisie system which manipulated and made them the exploited and dehumanized class (Peniston 3). Working

under pressure and submission, the laborers found themselves exploited without even getting the minimum from the benefits of production. Thereby, while achieving free consciousness, the proletariat became aware of the social struggle. Marx and Engels first book could contribute into the rise of class consciousness so that the lowers of the social scale create a revolution for their situation (Iorkongoso 2).

In *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx asserts that the market product along with the social class division have created the alienated laborers (244). In fact, the scholar Luper Iorkongoso, in his article entitled “The Political Thought of Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883)” argues that Capitalism has maintained its evils; such as eviction of peasants from their land, creation of poverty in the midst of abundant, subjugation and alienation of the workers and creation of the proletariat (2-3). Under capitalism, the working class relates to their labor as a strange objet, lacking of any sort of identification to it (Pfefferle 1). As a matter of fact, the concept of alienation could be manifested if the worker loses something in him in the process of producing this alienated object. In the other part, the process of Labor is alienation itself; while the worker is introduced into a forced labor that he could not choose freely, it is considered as alienation (3).

Moreover, while referring to the Marxist literary Theory, it is important to highlight Marx and Engels’s perspectives toward family and gender, precisely; the exploited ones. Both of them have made an extensive examination of women as hostages within the Capitalist industry (Forster, Clark 2-3). In doing so, Engels turned his attention to “Woman Question”, asserting that family could be the origin of oppression and exploitation of women. Men’s patriarchal behavior is manifested in the outcome of the hierarchical division in the families. That is to say, oppression emerged within family since a long time ago. Women in houses

were referred to as male's private properties. In fact, Marxism emphasized the exploitation within families and labor industries as well. (Foster, Clark 3).

II.2. A General Insight to the Feminist Literary Theory

Regardless of the contradictions that women continue to face, they have always been trying to make their voices heard over several decades. However, the reasons differ but the purpose is the same. The first major feminist writer in the Western Tradition appeared through the written work published in (1405) by the Italian writer Christine De Pisan, entitled *The Book of The City of Ladies* (Bannett 1). Thus, the author tackles the misogynists of her day. Afterward, the French philosopher and radical socialist Charles Fournier arrived with his feminist writing entitled *Théorie des Quatre Mouvements et des Destinées Générales* (1808) which he supported women's suffering.

Moreover, it is important to note that the goals of early feminists differ from modern ones. Women's suffrage has grown harder and so have their request. In fact, the first wave of Feminism took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with Mary Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) (Segalebra 22). Through the first movement, the author sought the renewal of women's education. She claimed that it was necessary to dismiss the traditional ways of constructing female's awareness and the false education (155). Wollstonecraft sustains that, "this is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves" (Wollstonecraft 155-156). From this passage, Wollstonecraft argues that women's liberation can be obtained only through a complete reform of education. (Segalerba 22-32). Furthermore, the first feminist wave focused on the political cause; they claiming equal legal rights, such as the right to vote in addition to education and decent work.

Far apart from the first movement, the 1960s, 1970s Second Wave focused on social and cultural inequalities. With the rise of new laws in the United States; feminists became increasingly radical (Khan 1-2). This phase drew women to seek sisterhood and solidarity through the creation of supportive organizations namely “The National Organization for Women (NOW)” and “Sisterhood is Powerful”. The interested party opposed the subjugation of women, the patriarchal society and women’s role as wife and mother (Rampton 1-3). Furthermore, socialist feminists such as Emma Goldman, stood for women’s right to abortion, and divorce (Khan 1-2). Female’s private life was bothered not only by the state; but also by the opposite gender. In fact, Women were considered only as mothers and housekeepers which used to displease the radical feminists.

Likewise, Betty Friedan gave voice to women through her published book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). The author claimed her dissatisfaction with society’s attribution toward women, and that the only acceptable status for them was to get married and have children, in other words, holding the role of a wife and a mother (Khan 1-3). Accordingly, many laws were adopted in this period; such as, Women’s educational Equity Act (1974), the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of (1978), and the Criminalization of Martial Rape (2-3).

Due to the power achieved by Second Wave Feminists, the expansion of the third movement emerged in the mid-1990s. The term “third wave feminism” was coined by the feminist Alice Walker’s Daughter, Rebecca Walker in her famous article entitled “Becoming The Third Wave”(1992) (Mohajan 5). The movement shifted from communal objectives to individual rights. Rebecca Walker, Judith Bulter, among many other feminists have fought to eradicate sexual harassment in workplaces (5). As a matter of fact, males oppression has grown widely either at home or outdoors. Thus, women have developed self-consciousness regarding their subjugation and dehumanization within a patriarchal society (5). Pacific

University's director of the *Center of Gender Equity*, Martha Rampton, argues in her article entitled "Four waves of Feminism" (2015) that "the grrls" of the third wave stepped on the stage as strong and empowered, avoiding victimization, and defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy (1). In fact, feminists main object was to prevent sexual violence, rape, and the diverse ranges of exploitation.

However, the feminist ideology drew women of color to feel excluded from the feminist engagement. African American women felt affected by the racist attitude of the "white feminists" especially those of the second wave (Vignesh 1). Accordingly, Alice walker was the first writer who coined the term "Womanism" in 1983 to defend the black women's rights (1-2). She claimed that black women's word has the most meaning for her; Because they experienced life not only as black persons but as women (2). Walker dealt with female consciousness through various thematic motifs; such as, the exploitation of ethics, and rising voice against the sexual politics (Dwivedi, Sharma 82-84).

Furthermore, the African American scholar and activist Gloria Jean Watkins, known under the name of bell hooks, shed light on the connections between race, gender, and class. Her contributions into depicting the social inequalities in the American society are important to mention. hooks inspired the title of her first controversial book entitled *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), from Sojourner Truth's discourse, "Ain't I a Woman?" (Sheftall, Ikerionwo 84). The author exposed the conflicts of racism and sexism toward the black woman. She mentioned that, "One has only to look at American television twenty-four hours a day for an entire week to learn the way in which black women are perceived in American society, the predominant image is that of the "fallen woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute" (hooks 76).

American society tends to objectify black women through their sexist and misogynistic view. In fact, hooks joined this idea in another book dedicated to black subjectivity and whiteness entitled *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992). The author affirmed that there is a direct and constant connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in society (Soares 2). The representation via mass media of specific images of race and blackness support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and domination of black people especially women (Soares 2).

As a matter of fact, hooks supported the notion of black sisterhood. In her point of view, it is prominent to break the thoughts built up by society affirming that women are “natural enemies” and that harmony will never exist between them. The value of Sisterhood must be taken seriously into consideration so that, women of all genders and classes live and work in solidarity (hooks 126-128).

II.3. Marxist Feminist Contributions

Marxist feminism occurred as a result of the constant conflicts against both Capitalist economic systems in addition to women’s oppression under patriarchal societies; two main concepts that regularly appear in the Marxist Feminist theory. Yet, Marxist feminist ideology was shaped from the Marxist Literary theory (Cliff 6). That is to say, Marxists believed that it was the rise of private property, and the division of society into classes that led to the subjugation of working-class women. So, the fight for women’s liberation cannot be separated from the fight against Capitalism.

However, the authors Patricia Ann, and Wasley Lomire in their article entitled “Marxist Feminist Theory: a Review, a Critique, and an Offering” (1989) reported that, family is meant to be repressive and conservative institution that reproduces within itself the

hierarchical, authoritarian relationships of the Capitalist workplace (58). In fact, from the beginning women's oppression could be deep-rooted in the family itself since before all, they are properties of their own family. Thus, belonging is an active agent of the hierarchical system. Since family's interest is enormous, they are seen as the "locus of struggle" (Ann, Lomire 58). Whether this could be related to Capitalism, it would be the same for the workers who were under the possession of an exploitative system for which women were subject to patriarchy and class oppression. Based on Feminist perspectives, and Marx's Literary contribution; we can deduce that Marxist feminists targeted the omission of the domination of the Capitalist system, gender and class domination in addition to patriarchy. Yet, they sought women's liberation from society's exploitation and male's oppression and domination (Ann, Lomire 58).

One of the most persistent subjects embodied by the Marxist feminists is the relationship between women's subordination and patriarchy. It is undoubtedly underlined several times by the feminist movements. The concept of patriarchy has been used to address the question of the real purpose behind the subordination of women. Thereupon, a variety of feminist convictions have been based upon the concept of patriarchy in the search for an explanation of the feelings of rebellion into a political practice and theory. Thereby, Marxist feminists have adopted the latter term in attempt to manage the Marxist theory so that it can account for the subordination of women in addition to the forms of class exploitation (Beechey 66).

Additionally, sexual and class exploitation are among the Marxist feminist emphasized items. The first step to women's liberation is to get rid of patriarchy (cliff 6). In fact, the Socialist feminist Juliet Mitchell sustains in her article entitled "Women: the Longest Revolution" (1971) that, women's liberation can only be achieved if four structures which

are; production, reproduction, sexuality and socialization becomes integrated transformed in society (75-76). Moreover, above all socialist feminist fulfillments, there are still social, political and cultural obstacles in eliminating the agony of capitalism, and male oppression (Olin Wright 39).

The social theorist and author Michèle Barrett in her book entitled *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (1980), addresses two central problematics that enhance the overall analysis. In the one hand, Barrett highlights the concepts of Patriarchy and Reproduction. She discusses women's oppression and how it could be seen as independent from the capitalist mode of production. On the other hand, she uses the concept of Ideology to examine whether women's oppression take place solely at the level of ideas. (Connelly 338). Barrett sustains that, the entry of women into production could itself end "male dominance" (29).

However, one could deduce that women's oppression could be the product of Patriarchy and capitalism, among many other conceptions. The Marxist feminist's attempts to dismiss the social barriers that create class struggle, oppression, and subjugation of women has grown harder (Beechey 66). The latter mentioned obstacles are the source of multiple social reverses and repulse.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we highlighted the author's life, the literary influences that pushed her to follow her writing career, including the plot summary of the novel *The Street*. Moreover, we initiated the readers to the socio-historical and cultural surroundings through which the novel had been written. Then, we introduced the theoretical framework and exhibited the Marxist Feminist theory, and shed light on its major concepts. In the second and

final chapter, we will apply the Marxist Feminist literary theory while analyzing the setting including the major characters in *The Street*. Finally, we will consider the main themes of the novel.

Chapter Two: A Marxist Feminist Analysis of Petry's Novel *The Street*

Introduction

As we have seen in the first chapter, we tackled the socio-historical context of the novel including the theoretical and conceptual framework. Throughout the present chapter, we will provide a brief overview of blacks racism during the 30s and 40s. Additionally, the major characters will be analyzed using the Marxist feminist approach. Then, we will examine the themes and setting of *The Street* using the Marxist Feminist main concepts of sexism, class division, patriarchy and exploitation.

I. Color Line and The Marxist Feminist Perspective in *The Street*

For decades, racialization and classification have been one of the biggest issues in America. Its society is based on racist and misogynistic foundations. As a matter of fact, the arrival of blacks in the United States was purely by profit. Though slavery ended years ago, the aftermath of the apartheid remains rooted in the American society. Hence, white supremacy created systemic segregation in the States; so that African Americans would automatically believe themselves inferior to the white race.

Several factors contributed to the rise of racial superiority during the 30s and 40s. Whites are more likely to grasp greater opportunities and hold better conditions than the colored ones. Racism during the Twentieth Century was shown both through direct and indirect ways. In fact, black people were put under the pressure of the Second World War including severe laws that provided them no rights in the country, especially in the Northern States.

We presume that the notion of “color line” refers to W.E.B Du Bois’s perspective on the problem of race in America. It has been highly emphasized in his book entitled *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). Through his writings, the author asserts that, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (03). In other words, African Americans

were marginalized in public transportation and workplaces of all kinds. Jim Crow laws have strengthened the hatred in the States and whites used to keep a distance from blacks who were treated by whites just like “beasts”. They didn’t even have the right to use common places such as parks, restaurants, bars, and several other public areas. Additionally, blacks were segregated in schools which have pushed them to no longer attend the courses because of fear and shame. So, they would have to look after schools for colored people. Even in daily life, for the same reasons, they would settle for locations that were made only for the blacks; which wasn’t as better as those of the whites, not by option but by lack of choice.

According to the Marxist Feminist perception, class and race division contributes mostly to the creation of misogynistic and patriarchal social principles (Wright 39). Indeed, blacks marginalization has made its neighborhood places where youths were put under the pressure of discrimination and inferiority. This has contributed to the depravity of those colored people that would undoubtedly make those districts ghettos for aimless lost people. It is therefore, the case of Petry’s depiction of *The Street* as an accurate pattern of the external discriminative tensions that leaves to the blacks no alternative choice but to behave under the burden of racial separatism.

As a matter of fact, the protagonist Lutie faces racism and unfairness because of her skin color. As portrayed in the novel, Petry demonstrate Lutie’s suffer as a subject of whites discrimination while working as a maid for the Chandlers. In this way, Petry highlights the social barriers created between the whites and the blacks. Hence, the protagonist is a victim of the classification that the American society establishes according to the norms of color line.

II. A Marxist Feminist Analysis of the Setting and Characters: Class/ Race Struggle in the Novel

Through the use of “*The Street*” as a title, Petry gives an outline to the readers which reflects a lot about the environment itself. Indeed, the novel exposes one of New York’s most considerable African Americans’ asylum, Harlem. This city was completely different during the 1940s from what it is nowadays. The novel opens with a description of Lutie’s arrival at 116th agonizing street located in Central Harlem; a city where segregation reigns over its colored inhabitants. Petry’s fiction was set during the darkest period the African Americans had known. The author Manuela Matas Llorente joins this idea, and argues through her article entitled “The Other City: Harlem in Ann Petry’s *The Street*” that, “Harlem is segregated from the white world by the color line which marks the space for blackness and whiteness” (109).

As affirmed above, “*The Street*” is an urban black ghetto where both Lutie and her son Bub are exposed to denigrating conditions, under the burden of the Second World War in addition to the great economic depression which have negatively impacted the blacks during the twentieth century. Thus, Lutie has to manage a way to survive in a place where poor people like her became drunkards and violent.

Lutie believes that Harlem is made of two different categories of people. On the one hand, it contains districts that are made for the white rich families who live in safety and luxury just like the Chandler’s for whom she used to work as a maid, an opportunity she describes as “a miracle” (*The Street* 32). On the other hand, the part that includes colored people who have to struggle against misery in a capitalist society. She pictures its buildings and alleys demonstrating how small, dark, and old they are, without “any sunlight in the apartment” (9).

Therefore, Petry illustrates two incomparable and opposite worlds in which Harlem could be a symbol for hope and success, or frustration and despair (Llorente 108). Besides, while analyzing the setting we come to understand that Petry depicts the most demeaning and tempting city in order to demonstrate that the environment can be one's life turning point. She highlights not only Lutie's struggle against racism and exploitation of male's patriarchal behavior, but also the Super Jones and Boots Smith as a definition of blacks' broken union. Petry claimed in one of her interviews that even forty-one years after the publication of *The Street* (1946), Harlem as any other ghetto remained the same. That is to say, life in urban ghettos becomes worse than when she wrote this novel. (Barry 141-159).

Throughout the character's analysis, we attempt to demonstrate the author's portrayal of the protagonist's struggle as an African American working-class woman under the burden of race and class within a misogynistic and exploitative society. Indeed, Lutie Johnson is a single mother trying to integrate into American society whose life turns out to be a tragedy. Petry introduced her as a determined and valiant woman who does her best to protect her son and get rid of poverty. Since teenagerhood, Lutie was aware that marriage was seen as a sacred indisputable goal: "let her get married, Grant. Looking like she do men goin' to chase her till they catches up. Better she get married. And she had" (*The Street* 59).

Marriage was the only option women had, especially for the colored ones; whose Families didn't consider the age, or if it was a bad choice. Thereupon, it confirms the Marxist Feminist conception of family which argues that it could be the first source of repression and patriarchy. In this regard, we believe that the idea of authoritarian relationship means that male family members are considered as the primitive source of female's oppression. As it is the case of Lutie in the novel, she has no other the choice but to accept. Besides, bell hooks in her book entitled *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* asserts that male supremacist

ideology encourages women to believe they are valueless so they can obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men (43).

Regardless of the deception and frustration that her drunkard father Pop has caused her, Lutie's arrival at Connecticut in order to work for the Chandlers was full of will and desire to achieve the "American Dream" (Winter 104) and get rid of poverty forever. Indeed, after a year working at the Chandlers as a housekeeper, she only confirmed her wish to become wealthy. Lutie believed that, "anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and worked it out carefully enough" (*The Street* 36). She knows that the money she can possess could afford her the pleasant life that she always dreams of.

Lutie had to cook and clean to keep whites houses polished, and takes care of Little Henry Chandler while she would have stayed at home and took care of her son Bub. Yet, Lutie was put under the offensive racial harassment of the Chandler's friends who treated her as a "colored whore" (*The Street* 34). As a matter of fact, Lutie thought that it is not a world made for her. Above all, blacks like her are excluded from white communities. Moreover, readers might realize that it is not the only source of inequality that Lutie faces. She was subject to the boss's racist mother who pointed out talking to her daughter about Lutie that, "now I wonder if you're being wise, dear, this girl is unusually attractive and men are weak. Besides, she's colored and you know how they are" (*The Street* 37). When it comes to colored people, whites are very demeaning.

It is apparent marginalization affects negatively those African Americans, which manifestly leads to the creation of racial inferiority within the black community itself. Petry shows how America's prejudiced social class division is at the origin of African Americans' despair and degradation. That is to say, racism pushes the blacks to believe that they are good only for "the hard work, the dirty work, the work that pays the least" (*The Street* 55).

Being conscious about her situation as an oppressed working-class woman, Lutie exposes her desire to change her economic way of living. Her liberation from the Capitalist exploitative system could be achieved only through economic consciousness that she is going to manifest after receiving a letter from her father Pop. He reports that her husband Jim was cheating on her while she was working at the Chandlers. Thus, she decides that she had enough with taking care of white's houses. Lutie would rather move away and search for better solutions to earn enough money than working as a maid for other people; especially the white ones. Thereby, Lutie made her way to the 116th Street. The current situation pushes Lutie to believe that economic independence is the key. She supposes that her struggle as a poor woman repels not only her husband, but also all the men she encounters.

Moreover, relations among blacks are not as perfect as one might imagine. As depicted in Petry's novel, Harlem is viewed as "the black Mecca of the world" (Rodriguez 7). That is to say, the more blacks' expansion increases, the more conflicts and contradictions are set among the black communities, especially those who are derived from a lower-class socio-economic system. In our case, Lutie lives in black racist and sexist surroundings. Thus, it will consequently lead to her objectification for being a colored woman.

Lutie's neighbors at 116th Street are portrayed as oppressive and ruthless. Namely, Mrs. Hedges, a black woman who lives by her own and uses her apartment as a brothel. Petry describes her as, "gaunt, all hard, firm flesh, a mountain of a woman" (*The Street* 171). Readers might be skeptical about this character's ambivalent behavior. On the one hand, Hedges seems to be helpful and comforting when it comes to giving advices to help Lutie or the girls who work for her. On the other hand, she might be repressive and becomes involved in things that do not concern her.

In fact, Lutie interpreted the way Hedges examines people asserting what follows, “the only pleasure she got out of life was in watching what went on in the street outside her window... It was the woman’s eyes. They were as still and malignant as the eyes of a snake” (*The Street* 10). Indeed, despite the fact that Lutie’s environment is mostly made up of colored people but it did not prevent them from crossing the boundaries of her privacy. Hedges doesn’t miss the chance to constantly remind Lutie that she is economically helpless. This woman wants Lutie to become in touch with the white man Mr. Junto so that he could approach her sexually whenever he wants to do so. From Hedges point of view, we can confirm that Lutie is an object of the exploitative society. Her black neighbor Hedges and even Junto represents perfectly the capitalist beliefs, because both of them considers Lutie as their private property. Thereby, she has no intimacy in that street event when it comes to her own body. Hedges and even Junto are always waiting for her to relapse.

To join our conception about Lutie’s oppression, the Marxist feminist leader Lise Vogel in her book entitled *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (1983), affirms that women’s situation could be labeled in two positions. On the one hand, there is the “dual-systems perspective” (134), which means that women’s oppression derives from their situation within a system of sex division of labor and male supremacy. On the other hand; she adds that women’s submissiveness has its roots from female’s differential existence within society (134).

To illustrate Vogel’s idea, Hedges and Junto takes advantage of Harlem’s desperate African Americans in order to expand their elaborated business. Thus, people like Luite would be victims of this private property. As previously mentioned, Hedges could not have succeeded without the help of Junto, a white man that owns “Junto Bar” at 116th Street. He started when arriving to Harlem as a businessman, but later on, his encounter with Mrs.

Hedges changed everything. She suggested that “bars and dance halls and whorehouses were the best possible investments” (*The Street* 181). It is therefore, in this way that with the help of Junto, Hedges could rule a brothel on the street without the interruption of the police. So, Junto could benefit from his investment in a place where their communities are African Americans who need to dance and drink in order to forget life’s struggle. Hedges the malignant woman believes that she could use Lutie in Junto’s service.

III. Intra-Racism in *The Street* According to the Marxist Feminist Perspective

Readers generally tend to become familiar with racism within white and black communities but not that one between middle-class and lower-class blacks. Our aim is therefore, to analyze *The Street*’s black characters based on the Intra-racial interpretation in accordance with the Marxist feminist perspective. In order to shed light on the issue of this concept, it is pertinent to introduce and give a brief explanation of it.

Racism has been defined as the act of categorizing and discriminating a specific category of people based on their distinctive physical features; namely, skin color as it is the case of Petry’s notable characters. So, Intra-racism results from blacks’ dehumanization and exploitation. Additionally, growing and evolving in a circle full of despair, jealousy, and enviousness generates a sense of hatred and inferiority within people belonging to the same race. The conflict between blacks will go deeper which will create a broken union. The scholar Faedra Chatard Carpenter suggests that the phenomenon of intra-racism is based on phenotypic appearances most notably, the skin’s colors and shades. It is full with complication reversals, and conflict all propelled by the obligatory factions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. (15-17).

Intra-racism appears in the novel when the tenant’s supervisor, William Jones known under the name of the Super is going to be the turning point in Lutie’s life. He is the one who

rented her a room at 116th Street. Since her arrival, she didn't feel comfortable with Jones' presence. The man lives with Min a black woman who keeps him company, cleans up, and cooks for him. When he was showing Lutie her new home, she noticed that he was getting a little much closer to her. The following passage attests Jones' physical attraction toward Lutie and her corresponding mistrust:

She didn't need to turn around, anyway; he was staring at her back, her legs, her thighs. She could feel his eyes travelling over her, estimating her, summing her up, wondering about her. As she climbed up the last flight of stairs, she was aware that the skin on her back was crawling with fear. Fear of what? She asked herself.

Fear of him, fear of the dark, of the smells in the passages (*The Street* 15).

The Super's entrance to Lutie's life when she arrives to Harlem makes the beginning of several obstacles. This man is obsessed with her shadow, "ever since she moved in he's been hungerin' after her" (*The Street* 89). This mentioned excerpt depicts the Super's sexual advances which Lutie experiences without any interaction. Not because she accepts the situation, but she has not the choice. She is aware that her financial situation doesn't allow her to get an apartment elsewhere. Thus, Lutie represses her feelings of disgust and fear because she is sure that the sexist society would support the man's position rather than hers. The Super is economically speaking more powerful, and above all, he is a man while Lutie is simply a desperate black woman.

Though taken by poverty and life's burden; Lutie finds peace at Junto Bar, where several people of her race find shelter for their different soreness. Carried out by the music, Lutie feels catharsis in the lyrics. So, she starts singing of "despair, loneliness, of frustration, and sadness" (*The Street* 109). It is at this moment that the bar owner Junto notices her. Subsequently, he sends a band leader, Boots Smith whom Petry portrays as having "dark

brown skin, tough face, hard-boiled, unscrupulous, with a long and thin scar on his left cheek” (112) to offer Lutie the chance to become a singer alongside with his band.

At the first sight, she recognizes that Boots isn’t from the same social class as her; “she got in thinking, this is the kind of car you see in the films” (*The Street* 114). Seeing a man of her own race hanging with a wallet full of money, and expensive beautiful cars, while she is struggling to pay the rent makes Lutie feel upset and frustrated with life’s unfairness. The following extract demonstrates her annoyance:

This world was one of great contrasts, she thought, and if the richest part of it was to be fenced off so that people like herself could only look at it with no expectation of ever being able to get inside it, then it would be better to have been born blind so you couldn’t see it, born deaf so you couldn’t hear it, born with no sense of touch so you couldn’t 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 sunlight and good food and where children were safe (*The Street* 115).

From the novel, we understand that women’s value in society is seen as worthless. It offers greater chances and higher opportunities in work and so forth for men rather than for the other sex. In white communities and even the black ones, females’ position is rarely considered as valuable as that of men. Thus, we might notice that Lutie is suppressed by the capitalist patriarchal system that views women only as means of reproduction. That is to say, though Lutie tries hardly to earn the half of Boots’ profits, she could never succeed. Even the social theorist and feminist activist Simone de Beauvoir in her book entitled *The Second Sex* (1949) asserts that women’s place in society is very limited. She adds that Woman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up

equally; still today (29). Her status can never be legal to men. Therefore, at the moment that women are beginning to in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men (30).

Lutie's consciousness appears in the novel as she accepts Boot's offer to become a singer only so that she could get out of that "Street". In doing so, she will be able to get rid of the exploitative surroundings for which she is a victim. However, proceeding with the analysis of Boots, we have to mention that life wasn't neither that much easier for him. Boots once used to sleep outside in the cold. He had occasional jobs and used to be a piano-player in drives and whorehouses. Even though he was talented, Boots was in fact treated ruthlessly and excluded from Harlem's society. Life's injustice and hardship pushed him to become drug addict and drink liquor frequently. The next passage attests about Boots desperation: "he was an out-of-work piano player shivering on street corners in a thin overcoat. The hunger hole in his stomach had gaped as wide as the entrance to the subways. Cold nights he used to stand in doorways out of the wind, and sooner or later a white cop could come up and snarl, 'move on, you'" (*The Street* 191).

Through the analysis of blacks' situation and mainly Boots, We can deduce that it was extremely difficult for colored people to create a solid status in 40s America. The Great Depression and the Second World War didn't play in their favor at all. On the contrary, it made the situation worse. Boots couldn't escape whites' hatred and harassment "drunken white couple would say toward the piano, mumbling, 'get the nigger to sing', or, 'get the nigger to dance'" (*The Street* 191). Moreover, he was betrayed by his black girlfriend. She used to hang out with a white man in his absence. As a matter of fact, the following extract shows that what upsets Boots the most is not the fact of being tricked or deceived, but being replaced by a white man, just like those who used to bother him: "Boots could see him quite clearly. Finally the man looked up. He had his necktie in his hand. And he was white.

Unmistakably white. When he turned back into the room, he was so blind with fury” (*The Street*193).

From the above-mentioned passage, readers could notice that Marxist feminism appears in the situation of this black woman. She chooses to be with a white man rather than a black man who is socially and financially inferior to whites. Through the black woman’s malicious act, we come to understand that she doesn’t want to belong to the working- class system anymore. But instead climb the social ladder by undertaking a revolution to overturn the hierarchical class structure.

Social degradation and discrimination might be an important factor that pushed Boots to create certain barriers in order to protect himself from life’s injustice in addition to the malice of his surroundings. It is due to the disappointments which Boot has experienced that created a harsh temper in him. Thus, he is portrayed as an unscrupulous person because of poverty, his class-inferiority, marginalization, and all the sufferings he has endured.

Yet, it is important to note that when he was going through hard times, he found only Junto by his side. The man offers Boots a place at his bar so that he could stop living outside and secure himself a good position. That is why he is grateful for Junto and should stay obedient to this capitalist position. To be more specific, “he had built the orchestra slowly, and Junto had been pleased and revealed his pleasure by paying him a salary that had now grown to the point where he could afford to buy anything in the world he wanted” (*The Street* 197).

It is true that Junto is pleased to welcome Boots in his casino. But it more importantly reveals that Boots is considered as his personal property. As it is shown in our case, Junto uses this black man as an intermediary to his first target who is Lutie. Because since he couldn’t reach her through the help of Mrs. Hedges, he therefore uses Boots who will by his

turn, catch her attention to become a singer. Thus, one comes to realize that Lutie and Boots are both victims of the capitalist and exploitative society.

However, In the case of female's class-consciousness, Lutie expresses her craving for economic independence. So, she thinks about releasing herself from poverty through the economic consciousness. That is to say, she will no longer need to consider her class position. Craving for prosperity, Lutie put all confidence in her new work. She believes that by starting her career as a singer, she could provide herself and her son Bub better living conditions to come out of that ghetto where her son is exposed to prostitution, and drugs that could undoubtedly influence him badly. Lutie's relief is expressed through her thoughts about leaving that cursed ghetto forever. She is described by Petry as follows:

Though she sang the words of the song, it was of something entirely different that she was thinking and putting into music: she was leaving the street with its dark passages, its mean, shabby rooms; she was taking Bub away with her to a place where there were no Mrs. Hedges, no resigned and disillusioned little girls, no half-human creatures like the Super. She and Bub were getting out and away, and they would never be back. (*The Street* 160)

However, the black woman is assaulted relatively by more powerful black men. In her turn, Petry demonstrates male's authoritarian relationship over women. She depicts Lutie's constant struggle against both the exploitative and patriarchal society. While she finally starts believing that her financial situation is getting better, the Super maliciously attempts to rape her. As he found Lutie alone down stairs, he didn't want to miss the chance to approach her, "he side-stepped and blocked her passage to the stairs" (*The Street* 169). She was petrified, but she fought back; fortunately, Mrs. Hedges could hear Lutie's scream of sorrow. Thus, she intervened and saved her. With her powerful hands she "thrust the Super hard against the

cellar door” (*The Street* 171). The following part reveals the Super’s craving to sexually abuse Lutie without mercy:

Instantly his arm went around her waist. He was pulling her back, turning her around so that she faced him; he was dragging her toward the cellar door. She grabbed the balustrade. His fingers pried her hands loose. She writhed and twisted in his arms, bracing her feet, clawing at his face with her nails. He ignored her fanatic effort to get away from him and pulled her nearer and nearer to the cellar door (*The Street* 170).

The above-mentioned excerpt reveals the Super’s lust which threatens every female he comes to encounter. In this way, he is convinced that women are obliged to respond to his sexual demands. For men were taught that showing their power possession over women means they are stronger and has more rights to dominate the other sex. Thus, several rape cases are labeled due to the exploitative beliefs that bind power and violence to superiority. In her turn, the feminist writer Susan Brownmiller shed light on the violence of rape asserting that women’s capture and rape leads to the foundation of a primitive male protectorate (17). Through power gain, women are put under male’s possession as his property; which could be the source of women’s objectification under patriarchy (17).

Blind with revenge and the refusal of the idea that he got rejected by a woman that he once believed to be his “own property”; the Super, tries shortly after to infiltrate Lutie’s close circle, and attacks her son. Through the Super’s state of mind, one comes to understand that he can’t assimilate his inability to abuse Lutie. Thereby, the only option through which he could exteriorize his frustration is revenge. His planning is clear; the Super targets to hurt the woman through the manipulation of her eight years old son Bub by a diabolic plan. To be more precise, the Super was sure that “he would destroy her” (*The Street* 203).

Bub is Lutie's only kid, a naive little boy who got easily tricked by the Super. Even though he grew up under poverty and still struggling with life's hardship, but he didn't lack anything. His mother is always doing her best to provide the kid with the minimum of necessities. The boy is somehow forced to get used to his mother's separation and therefore endure life's burden at a young age. He lives with his mother and attends school as any other child. Bub is lucky to attend Harlem's school which receives only blacks; where he makes many friends. The thing is that the teacher is completely racist toward those innocent Children. She hates "the colored people's smell" (*The Street* 235). As a matter of fact, such a pressure is a lot for young children. Outside Bub is exposed to racism and inside home; he has to struggle with poverty and his mother's absence busy running after a job.

Lutie's little kid is forced to fit the instable life that he and his mother are facing. The 1940s American capitalist authority puts forward the means of production by maximizing workers exploitation. In other words, Lutie and even her 116th Street black neighbors from lower-class divisions are victims of the private market. In the same way, those blacks including Lutie are made to believe that superior jobs and opportunities are reserved only for the whites while African Americans are meant to produce like machines and stay in lower-class hierarchical division regarding the whites.

Through the aforementioned character's analysis, we have deduced that the intra-racial conflict between Lutie and her surroundings started after her encounter with both Boots and Jones the Super. It is in fact, as though hatred against life and its injustice blows up, driven by an internalized burden and pressure. Thus, since these men cannot manifest their madness elsewhere, it happens inside the same community which is mostly based on women and men of their own racial belongings, that is to say, the black community. In this regard, bell hooks

believes that “the politics of domination as manifest in imperialist, capitalist, racist, and sexist oppression must be challenged and changed so that a new social order can emerge” (126).

However, as planned before, the Super followed the postman steps all day long in order to study his movements and get more familiar with the way he will steal the mail box keys. So, it will be handed to Min the woman who used to live with him so that she could “get the master key made” (*The Street* 211). Then, Bub is going to fix it up by stealing the neighbor’s mail boxes and get them to the Super, and once the police would search after the guilty; he would surely denounce Bub and consequently destroy Lutie. The following mentioned extract from the novel shows how Lutie’s son Bub becomes easily fooled and manipulated by the Super:

Now what you have to do is open letter boxes and bring the letters to me. Some of them will be the right ones and some won’t. But you bring all of them here to me. You gotta make sure nobody sees you give them to me. So you bring them down in the basement. I’ll be down there waiting for you every afternoon (*The Street* 215).

The only reason that pushes the little boy to accept the Super’s offer is to help his mother. Bub thought that he could finally support her financially and make her be proud of him. Though he tried once to earn some extra money by “shining shoes” (*The Street* 54), but it didn’t work. Because Lutie feels upset to see her eight-year old son doing such hard and inappropriate work. She used to observe Little Henry Chandler being treated nicely while Bub has to face poverty by working at a very young age. Furthermore, Bub sees his mother changing a lot recently. She is very busy struggling with life and forgets to take care of him. The thing is that Lutie always talks with Bub about money. She reminds him every night to turn off the lights to watch the bills.

Reminding her son repeatedly to watch every step he is doing in order to save extra money pushes him to naively accept the Super's offer. Bub believes that he is going to earn extra cash and aids his mother who is going to be proud of him. In fact, the following passage exhibits Lutie's ambivalent attitude toward Bub. She is a desperate mother. Her status in the society doesn't allow her to spend money as she wishes. Consequently, she and Bub find themselves repressed by the capitalist system and placed at the lowest scale. Bub presumes what follows:

When he had a lot more, he'd tell her about it, and they would laugh and joke and have a good time together the way they used to before she changed so. He tried to think of a word that would describe the way she had been lately mad, he guessed. Well, anyway, different because she was so worried about their not having any money (*The Street* 244).

The intra-racial conflict is shown not only through the Super's aim to rape Lutie, but also through the malicious use of her son Bub as a trap to ruin her existence. Instead of creating solid relationships between the black communities itself, some of them prefer to verbally and physically hurt each other. In the light of the Super's attempt to use rape as a factor of power and authority, the scholar Angela Davis in her book entitled *Women, Race and Class* (1983) argues that capitalist countries like the United States have set rape laws only for upper class men in order to protect their daughters and wives (101). Indeed, one might realize that supreme laws protect only the white category while blacks are left to fight each other which results in the foundation of a broken union.

Lutie knew nothing about the Super's plan. Meanwhile, she is busy with her work. She arrives at a stage where she finally feels happy because she could manage a way out of poverty. Subsequently, everything changed. The casino owner Junto orders Boots to deprive

Lutie of her wage and give her gifts instead. He orders what follows: “don’t pay her for singing with the band, give her presents from time to time” (*The Street* 197), he adds “leave her alone, I want her myself” (197). Through those affirmations, readers understand that Junto plans to have Lutie only for himself. As time passes, the woman notices that she didn’t receive money in reward for her efforts as Boots promised before. But the latter was malignant, and tried to convince her that she needed “months” (*The Street* 218) before being finally paid.

Lutie refuses to be subject of those men, so, she is denigrated and prejudiced. The poor woman realizes that she is fooled and will never receive her money. Thus, Lutie becomes conscious that even if she tries to work hard and achieve her goal which consists of moving off from that ghetto and get rid of poverty; she will never be rewarded as the whites or even black men. For a while, all her dreams became an illusion.

Class-consciousness makes Lutie realize that men and women aren’t socially equal. The capitalist system is not only tough for the whites themselves but also for the blacks, especially middle-class black women. Likewise, being a colored woman from a lower-class division makes Lutie, above all, a subaltern who is completely excluded from America’s social system. According to Marxist beliefs, the notions of the ruling-class are the “ruling ideas” whereas; the other different classes tend to produce different forms of class-consciousness (Milner 161-176). That is to say, as it is depicted in Petry’s fiction, the middle and lower- classes can’t integrate the capitalist society because they are only considered as factors of production. So, the only way they could change their situation is through class-consciousness. In this regard, labor exploitation is labeled in the novel through Junto and Boots misleading of Lutie. In other words, she is alienated under Junto’s Private property. The two men oppress Lutie because they consider her as their “own property”.

As a matter of fact, interesting and professional jobs are reserved to the whites who are hierarchically well-placed. Thus, the African Americans hold jobs that do not “pay enough for them” under the idea that blacks are meant to practice only dirty and hard working (*The Street* 278). As it is mentioned in the following lines, Lutie feels betrayed by both the white man Junto who treats her as an object, and also the black Boots who takes advantage of her innocence and weakness. Petry states: “she had seen herself moving away from the street, giving Bub a room of his own, being home when he returned from school. Those things had become real to her and they were gone” (*The Street* 219).

Shortly after, Lutie realizes what happened to her son. He was caught under the Super’s confession to the police and put in children’s shelter. She is astonished by what happened to her poor child but what made the things become worse is the lawyer’s price. She arrives at a stage where two hundred dollars are more than a burden for her. Neither her father Pop nor anyone else she knows can help affording such a sum of money. Lutie keeps trying to find a solution as soon as possible because she can’t even imagine her life without Bub. Despite her anger and the fact that she stopped talking to Boots after what he and Junto did to her, she decided that he is the only person who can afford that amount of money. Accordingly, they agreed to talk and met at his apartment the next evening.

Through Lutie’s attitude toward what happened with her son, we assume that she gains class-consciousness and desires to act a revolution toward life’s unfairness. But the only mistake she did was believing in Boots, a man of the same race as her. The scholar Kari J. Winter explains that Lutie believed that she could reach the ‘American dream’ and triumph over racism, sexism, and poverty through hard work, virtue and frugality. (104). However, it is not the case with Lutie. Despite the hard work and determination that she puts each time she comes to start a new job or career, she suffers constantly of racism of those white men

and women who treats her an alienated person. In the other side, Lutie faces sexism whenever she encounters men, even black ones. She couldn't reach the American dream, but instead lives the American nightmare.

Boot's attentions toward Lutie are clear. He knows from the beginning that he would never provide the money. But instead "he was going to have her first" (*The Street* 303). Hence, once she arrived at his apartment, she is surprised to see Junto there but shortly after she succeeds in putting him out. Thus, Boots takes advantage of his absence and finally feels powerful over both Junto and Lutie. The following passages demonstrates Boot's trick to rape Lutie: "Junto had pushed him hard, threatened him, nagged him about Lutie Johnson. This would be his revenge. He locked the door leading to the foyer and put the key in his pocket... she tried to back away from him and he forced her still closer" (*The Street* 303-306). Consequently, it led to a desperate ending for both Lutie and her son. While the man is using force and violence over her, she sees a heavy iron candlestick and thinks that it is the only solution that can save her from that "beast". In this way, with rage and anger she executed what follows:

He was so close to her that she struck him on the side of the head before he saw the blow coming. The first blow stunned him. And she struck him again and again, using the candlestick as though it were a club. He tried to back away from her and stumbled over the sofa and sprawled there (*The Street* 308).

In her review, Susan Brownmiller argues that the majority of rape and sexual harassments could be previously planned, and it has nothing to do with the way the victim dresses or acts. But instead, the rapist manifests his desire to "dominate" his target (72). Brownmiller recommends that whenever a woman is threatened with rape, she should attack the aggressor at his most vulnerable area (73).

In order to erase blacks' separatism, the capitalist and racist systems must be replaced. Whites take advantage of blacks' separated union in their favor. In our case, Petry depicts the whites marginalization and alienation of the blacks until it created an intra-racial conflict between them. That is to say, instead of being supported, Lutie is excluded not only from the white community, but also the black one. Both the Super and Boots attempt to rape and abuse her represents the outcome of their frustration toward the unfairness of the social class-division. In this way, the feminist activist bell hooks argues about blacks separatism and affirms that the lack of self-consciousness is the result of this separation (132).

Through the analysis of Lutie's motif behind committing a murder we come to understand that it is entirely by self defense. She finds herself stuck in a situation where nobody can help her. So, killing her aggressor is the only option left for her. She reluctantly felt obliged to escape and leave her son Bub alone because if she chooses to stay, justice will have no mercy on her. Besides, once in jail she will probably be denigrated and killed by the blacks because of the crime that she committed. The following excerpt confirms that the whites' racist and separatist system pushes the black community to destroy each other. Petry states that: "she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape; and at the turn of events which had forced her to leave Bub alone while she was working so that he now faced a reform school" (*The Street* 308).

IV. Sexual Exploitation and Gender Disparities in *The Street* from a Marxist Feminist Perspective

Lutie is a vulnerable victim of black men's sexual predations. She is exploited both sexually and psychologically until she is forced to defend herself by committing a crime. On the one hand, she feels obliged to handle the Super's malicious plan and his sexual desires, on

the other hand; Junto and Boots have destroyed all her dreams of possessing and leading a simple life.

As previously explained in the above section, the Super takes advantage of Lutie's loneliness in order to destroy her. The fact that she is a single woman who lives in the same tenement as him allows the Super to become closer and exploit her. Lutie couldn't manage a way out of that apartment because it is of cheapest prices, and Harlem is one among the rare places where few African Americans are welcomed to. However, as described in the following passage, Lutie is put under the oppression of the Super's attempt to have control over her body: "She tried to scream, but when she opened her mouth, no sound came out; and she thought this was worse than any nightmare... she put her head on her knees, wondering how she was going to get the strength to climb the stairs" (*The Street* 170-171). In fact, Lutie stood motionless toward what happened to her; for she has never experienced such a horrific episode.

Marxist feminist leaders argued that patriarchy and dominance tend to be driven by males' feeling of superiority over women. Thus, the latter find themselves repressed under men's social and sexual control. The Super's assault of Lutie is indicated in the outcome of patriarchy. Therefore, the authoritarian relationship is represented by the Super's subjugation of women, namely Lutie.

Moreover, Lutie lives the traumatic experience of sexual exploitation twice. Boots believes that a woman in need will automatically decline for his desires. He exercises his power over a weak single woman; and benefits from Lutie's weakest moments in order to sexually abuse her. The malicious man wants to "have her first" as if she is nothing but an object (*The Street* 303). Boot's aimed to rape Lutie first because of Junto who keeps

reminding him that she is his property. It is therefore obvious that Lutie is objectified by all men that she comes to encounter in her life.

As the following passage from the novel demonstrates, Boot's outrageous aim to sexually abuse Lutie is not enough for him. He beats and assaults her over and over after that he locked her in the bedroom and hid the key, "he reached out 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... 'maybe after I beat the hell out of you a coupla tims, you'll begin to like the idea of sleeping with me and with Junto'" (*The Street* 307).

Rape is a subject that is discussed by several psychologists and scholars among them the feminist writer Susan Brownmiller. She affirms in her book entitled *Against our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1976) that since the victim is in a helpless situation there is nothing heroic in rape. Besides, society embodies the belief that women do not have a right over their own bodies but instead they are the natural possession of men (72). That is to say, women are taught to be male's property. In the case of Lutie, she has no other alternative but to accept society's exploitative and patriarchal imposed convictions.

As agreed previously, Lutie is a victim of exploitation by men who treats her like an animal. Boots slaps her until the blood fills all her whole face. Everything in front of her is swaying, her vision is so much blurred with blood that "she saw not one Boot Smith but three of them" (*The Street* 307). The violating scene that she is living makes her shake and tremble with fear and frustration. She is desperately struggling to escape from the thirsty predator's subjugation. Thus, Lutie commits the unwanted crime. All the hatred has been externalized through the tragic incident. The following extract illustrates that rape and sexual assault has in a way or another damaging consequence since the victim might have no alternative:

He was the person who had struck her, her face still hurt from the blow; he had threatened her with violence and with a forced relationship with Junto and with himself. These things set off her anger, but as she gripped the iron candlestick and brought it forward in a swift motion aimed at his head, she was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure. A figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her (*The Street* 307-308).

Likewise, hatred and resistance to all the traumatic events that occurred starting from her work at the Chandlers up till her arrival at 116th Street has developed an accumulation into a great deception. As it is mentioned in the novel, Lutie was already heavy with frustration and disgust. Petry explains it through what follows: “Junto who had prevented her from getting the job at the casino. She remembered the friends of the 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” (*The Street* 232).

Lutie keeps reminding and blaming herself about the horrific crime she committed; believing that she became “a murderess” (*The Street* 310). She thinks that Bub doesn’t deserve to have such a mother. Additionally, the Court would give her no chance to obtain her son’s custody. However, through the novel’s analysis, we assume that sexism is a strong evident fact in Lutie’s life. She is objectified by every single man she comes to encounter. Since her arrival to Harlem, Lutie tries to integrate America’s capitalist society, but she is only repressed and prejudiced. In this regard, Marxist feminist writers state that patriarchal and sexist society renders women submissive.

As a matter of fact, Junto refuses to pay and accord her the Job at the casino unless she accepts his sexual advances. In the same way, Boots doesn’t want to provide her with the

money that she needs to get her son out from the children's shelter because he sees himself powerful over Lutie. Hence, we can presume that those men give importance to Lutie only by targeting her as a sexual object while exercising their superiority over her. These males have no mercy on her and have the same patriarchal convictions. That is to say, men tend to oppress and subjugate females under the aim of power and strength.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we emphasized African Americans' racialization under the concept of Color Line. Moreover, we have analyzed the characters using the Marxist Feminist literary theory. Then, we highlighted the setting under which the author Ann Petry has captured the horrific wrestle of a single working-class mother. By doing so, we illustrated how the frame contributed to the changing of the protagonist's life into a wrong way. Additionally, we examined the intra-racial conflict between the major black characters in accordance with Marxist feminism. In this regard, we have concluded that whites' supremacist attitude toward the blacks could be the first source of blacks conflict. Finally, we exhibited the most prominent theme which is sexual exploitation and gender disparities. In this respect, we illustrated the author's view toward class struggle, in addition to females' subjugation under patriarchy and exploitation.

General Conclusion

Throughout our study we used the Marxist Feminist theory to examine the way African American communities fall in the trap of the supremacy of the whites. Besides, we explored the aftermath of exploitation and sexism on black working-class women and how patriarchy and subjugation could be the reasons behind crime's expansion.

The first chapter examined the author's biography and the literary influences that inspired her to consider African American writings. We provided a review of the novel's socio-historical and cultural background. In doing so, we assumed that blacks conditions under the Second World War and the great economic crisis have increased separatism and female's subjugation. Additionally, we considered the theoretical and conceptual framework of the novel using the Marxist Feminist theory. In this way, we provided a separated explanation of the major concepts and principles of Marxism which assumed that patriarchy is mostly formed within the family first and develops over time to become females' major obstacle. In other words, it abuses and exploits women. Besides, we attempted to demonstrate the applicability of the Marxist leader's agreement stating that working-class submissiveness is due to the capitalist system of production which takes advantage of the proletariat's weakness. Moreover, we explored the different feminist waves and briefly overviewed black feminism and its prominent applications including the most important concepts as introduced by Alice Walker and bell hooks. Lastly, we exhibited the Marxist Feminist contribution.

In the second and final chapter, we analyzed *The Street* (1946) using the Marxist feminist theory. We first highlighted Du Bois's most known concept of race by which we assumed that the problem of racism is limited by the color line. Then, we analyzed the novel's major characters including their physical appearances and states of mind. Additionally, we

examined the setting by which we assumed that petry's depiction of Harlem as a general frame of her story confirmed her perception of blacks' oppression in the urban ghettos.

In studying the main black figure of *The Street*, we have revealed that, first, whites' segregation and domination could be the basic roots of blacks' separatism. Second, we demonstrated that intra-racism was the result of inferiority and rejection under which the protagonist was a victim of rape and sexism. Third, we found that female's struggle against her own race exploited her instead of supporting her. At last, while analyzing the major theme, we come to the conclusion that patriarchy is enhanced by male's dominance. That is to say, the protagonist was not only discriminated for being colored, but also subjugated and abused because she is a woman until she was forced to commit a crime to save her life.

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Abstract in French (Résumé)

Ce travail entreprend une lecture féministe marxiste du roman *The Street* (1946) de Ann Petry. À la lumière de la théorie littéraire féministe marxiste, cette recherche examine l'impact négatif du patriarcat capitaliste sur les femmes noires de la classe ouvrière. Par conséquent, ce travail examine les principales origines et impacts de l'exploitation des femmes noires, et atteste également que le racisme peut être le facteur clé destructif de l'union des Noirs. Il révèle le conflit intra-racial entre la race noire elle-même. En outre, illustre la façon dont la protagoniste est déshumanisée par les hommes blancs et noirs. Plus important encore, par le biais du féminisme marxiste, ce travail vise à démontrer que la criminalité pourrait être le résultat du sexisme et du viol à l'encontre des femmes.

Mots-Clés : Conflit Intra-Racial, Exploitation des femmes, Féminisme, Marxisme, Patriarcat Capitaliste, Sexisme, Viol.