Chapter II

Struggle for Survival

Ann Lane Petry, the writer of important books for young readers, was the first black female author to address problems black women face. And with the publication of *The Street* (TS) in 1946, Petry made a very special contribution to the tradition of black women's literature and also to the tradition of migration narratives. In this chapter *The Street* will be analysed as a migration novel. It will also be shown how the various tropes which are representative of such a novel can be identified in the novel under discussion.

Petry's experience as a reporter in Harlem gave her the background for her story of Lutie Johnson. In an interview with James W. Ivy in *Crisis*, she expressed her purpose in writing the novel, which was to show how environment could change the course of a person's life. *The Street* was the first writing in which a black man is killed by a black woman for being an unmitigated villain in the oppression of that woman. No one until Petry had so thoroughly portrayed black women as victims of multiple oppression, and no one had so boldly portrayed black men as the levellers of a significant measure of that oppression. Little must Petry have known that she would be considered an important writer in the literary history of African American migration narrative apart from her being the first black female author to address problems faced by black women.
In the context of the migration narrative, urban spaces - Kitchenettes, workplaces, street corners, prisons and theatres - are some of the sites where migrants, white power-holders, and the Northern black middle class vie for control. All these spaces are created by a sophisticated urban power, yet this very power is engaged in a constant power struggle to maintain control over them. The contest over space is symbolic of the larger contest over black bodies. Within these spaces, a struggle ensues in which the migrant tries to resist efforts to dominate him or her. This sophisticated urban power controls the migrant body not only by inflicting violence upon it, but also by creating desire. For instance: the invocation of desire in popular culture forms like movies and advertisements that affect Lutie in The Street, or the desire to meet white standards of beauty and living. Finally urban power will also resort to the use of force and repression when necessary.

At times, the migrants themselves engage in acts of self-discipline. Griffin notes,

> Often in their very attempts to resist they have so internalized the effects of the power that represses them that they become complicit in their own subjugation. (102)

For instance: Boots Smith tells Lutie that she won't be paid for her evening job of singer, as Junto wants her for him. Boots tells her that she still needs practice to become a good singer and that Junto will help her if
she seeks his help. Lutie gets the hint and stops going to Junto's bar. But when her son is to be saved she seeks Boots's help again hoping that he will give her the money, though she knows that he isn't the type. And hence she becomes an accomplice in her subjugation. Nevertheless this is not always the case. Migrants are not passive victims, subjected to the whims of urban power. They are also agents who sometimes are capable of resisting the oppression of urban power. Whatever the case, these migrants come to the realisation that their search for a freer space has led to a space where they are confined in ways they had never imagined. Houston Baker describes the paradox the migrants confront in their search for free space:

For place to be recognized by one as actually PLACE, as a personally valued locale one must set and maintain the boundaries set by a dominating authority, then one is not a setter of place, but a prisoner of another's desire. (Baker 104)

Even migrant-defined "safe spaces" fall under the authority of the dominant society. This severely circumscribes the resisting possibilities of these spaces, although it does not prohibit them altogether. Consequently safe spaces may play an important role in assisting migrants to resist dominant constructions of them. These safe spaces and white urban power representing violence serve as tropes of migration. The former romanticises the South; the latter terrorises the South. Keeping all these tropes and characteristics of a migration novel in mind, it would be
interesting to analyse, *The Street* as a migration novel. This would entail the analysis of the migrants' effort, i.e. Lutie's effort to resist or succumb to urban power. It would also include an appraisal of how other characters join the white power when it comes to oppressing a single black woman who works hard to improve her family's position.

Ann Petry experiments with the possibilities of safe spaces in both the content and the form of her urban narrative, *The Street* by providing viable safe spaces to her protagonist that are rooted in Southern culture. She refuses to romanticise the South while asserting the negative impact of the city on the characters of *The Street*. By utilising memory and dreams as a means of informing her protagonist, Petry distinguishes herself from other contemporary writers writing at that time.

Petry makes a few safe spaces available to her protagonist, Lutie: community, family, and the voice of her grandmother. Lutie rejects all of them. Grandmother is the most important of them, for she serves as the ancestor of the text, and has not only the most potential for Lutie's resistance, but she serves as a resisting device as well. "Grandmother" resides in Lutie's psyche. However, Lutie's memory of her grandmother engages in a tug of war with her retention of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. While her granny's spoken voice tries to guide her through the psychic maze of *The Street*, the written text of Benjamin Franklin, propagating an ethic of hard work and success, influences her
more. Lutie usually ignores the spoken voice of her grandmother while taking heed of the written words of Franklin. She fails to read the silences and the absences that undergird his manual for success. As Griffin rightly notes,

While he (Franklin) provides her with an ethic of hard work and thrift, she fails to see how Franklin's notion of success, grounded on a system of chattel slavery and on a discourse whose subtext constructs her as inferior, acts to her detriment. (Griffin 115)

Though she continues to suffer from and be defined by definitions of black women that first emerged in Franklin's day, she does not make the connection. Her failure to make the connection between Junto, the white owner of the building in which she lives and of the night club in which she seeks employment, and the factors that serve to oppress her is an outgrowth of her blindness in relation to Franklin.

The safe space provided by Lutie's grandmother exists as an ongoing oral dialogue in Lutie's memory. In the Urban North, the South- the ancestor-must live in the psyche because sophisticated, fragmented northern power most effectively oppresses the urban dweller on this plane. Northern power constructs desire and a means of self-disciplining that precedes its need for physical force and coercion. The grandmother always arrives when Lutie's well being is threatened.
The reader first encounters the grandmother when the text's villain, Jones, the superintendent, shows Lutie an apartment. Here, Lutie makes a conscious effort to dissociate herself from her grandmother's influence. Throughout her first encounter with the Super, her grandmother warns her of the danger he represents to her, "Nothin' but evil child some folks so full of it you can feel it comin' at you – oozin' right out of their skins" (TS 20). Lutie justifies her rationalisation of her grandmother's warning by juxtaposing her own rational understanding against Granny's more instinctual one:

Now the Super ... probably wanted to get back downstairs to read his paper ... and she had thought he was filled with the desire to leap upon her. She was as bad as Granny. Which just went on to prove you couldn't be brought up by someone like Granny without absorbing a lot of nonsense.... And Granny had them all at the tip of her tongue. (TS 16)

Here, in fearing and dismissing her grandmother, she dismisses the safe space embodied in the ancestor - a space grounded in the oral tradition and emerging from an African past. As the text shows, this early dismissal of her "grandmother's" advice will prove fatal for her.

Still, subconsciously, Lutie knows that her "grandmother's" voice provides protection and guidance. Immediately after dismissing her granny's warning about the super, she begins to sing a song to soothe her
discomfort: "Ain't no restin' place for a sinner like me. Like me. Like me" (TS 20). Her grandmother had provided the song to ease her fear and discomfort in the night. The "grandmother" exists so deeply in her psyche that Lutie uses her, unaware of her presence, which emerges even as she attempts to dismiss it.

When Lutie heeds her granny's advice, it strengthens her against the attempts of white people to objectify her. Considered a whore by the wealthy white women friends and relatives, who visit Mrs. Chandler, she turns to granny's voice to give her a sense of dignity in the midst of their constant accusing attack:

Sure she's a wonderful cook. But I wouldn't have any good looking colored wench in my house... you know they're always making passes at men. (TS 40)

Instead of becoming defeated by their consideration of her as a whore, she turns to the memory of her granny's voice:

Lutie, baby, don't you never let no white man put his hands on you. They ain't never willin' to let a black woman alone. Seems like they all got a itch and a urge to sleep with 'em.

Something that ... had become part of you, ... you would have preferred crawling into bed with a rattlesnake to getting in bed with a white man.

(TS 45-46)
Here, Lutie is able to resist the white women's construction of her because her "grandmother" has prepared her and as a result she possesses an alternative definition of black womanhood. Her granny's voice is a part of her being; not something removed which she can rationalise away. But Lutie fails to see that the model she has chosen in Franklin is a white man. And therefore she discounts the "folk" wisdom, which might have helped her. For her it is nonsense whether it be through practical wisdom about how butchers in black neighbourhoods adulterate tainted meat or how Lutie might deal with men like the lecherous Boots Smith, "the Granny looms as a tangible presence throughout the novel - a veritable mother figure much like the perspicacious "ghost father" who guides Pilate Dead in Morrison's Song of Solomon" (Clark 500). Perhaps if Ann Petry had been able to read recent novels by Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, she might have been aware of the fictional potential of Granny in her novel - for Lutie's granny seems to have given Lutie at least some of the right advice and knowledge she needs to encounter the street. Lutie remembers Granny's, "... tales about things that had been handed down and down and down until, if you tried to trace them back, you'd end up God knows where probably Africa" [TS 15-16].

But her granny's advice provides small day-to-day measures for survival. She thinks that retreating to her granny's voice wastes time in the face of the harsh realities of urban living. For her it is nonsense. She does not
realise that she needs small day-to-day resistances. She needs these safe spaces to act as foundation for her to make the big changes in her life. She also fails to see that the 'ancestor' does not spring at her out of nowhere, when she least expects it, but instead it emerges just when she needs it most.

While the words of Benjamin Franklin provide her with steps to success for white men, they fail to inform her of the foundation upon which those steps stand - a foundation where white men have equal access while black men and women, Native Americans, and white women do not. His recipe for success depends upon denial of access to people like her. Here it should be noted that the American Dream played a very important part and was a crucial factor in the migration of Blacks from the South to the North to a large extent. Most Blacks believed that with the opportunities available in the North they would soon become rich and would be able to afford a better lifestyle. But they failed to realise that Blacks didn't have equal opportunities compared to whites. They always struggled hard to reach white standards of living but could never reach them. As a result, they soon became disillusioned. Petry shows the failure of the American Dream in Lutie's failure.

Lutie constantly tries to come close to white standards of living. The Chandlers' wealth attracts her. She reads the magazines the Chandler women read, viz. "Vogue", "Harper's Bazaar", "Town and Country", "House
Beautiful", etc. She yearns for a home like the Chandlers' domestic quarters in order that Bub, her little boy could develop into respectable manhood. She thinks that with a lot of hard work the American dream for them can become a reality. White power is embodied here in the Chandlers' wealth, which controls Lutie. This white power later in the novel becomes embodied in Junto who will control her fate. The Chandlers' wealth creates in her a desire for more money and a better lifestyle. Petry notes,

> It was a world of strange values where the price of something called Tell and Tell and American Nickel and United States Steel had a direct effect on emotions. When the price went up everybody's spirits soared; if it went down they were plunged in gloom.

After a year of listening to their talk, she [Lutie] absorbed some of the spirit. The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough. (TS 43)

In order to save more money and become rich one day, she starts going home on weekends less frequently. This new philosophy creeps into her letters too, which she writes to her husband, Jim. She explains to him that she will spend less on train fare and save more by doing this. But, in the bargain she loses her husband Jim to another woman. Perhaps Mrs. Pizzini's advice to Lutie has some substance when she says,
It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for the woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man. (TS 33)

Thus, to a certain extent, the white urban power is responsible for the fragmentation of Lutie's family. The white urban power doesn't give jobs to the Jims but prefers to employ the Luties. This makes the black man feel more frustrated, which he takes it out on his woman. And in the absence of his wife on some other woman.

Marjorie Pryse delineates all the references to Franklin's autobiography and illustrates Lutie's fatal, blind faith in his text. She says, "she [Lutie] fails to recognize the stigma of her race and sex and her consequent disqualification for achieving her particular version of the American dream" (117). Throughout the text she unquestioningly follows Franklin's advice. After having the apartment she feels she was one step farther on the ladder of success. Her blindness prohibits her from seeing that the apartment signals the beginning of her demise. She gains self confidence from her dialogue with Franklin walking down 116th Street and thinks that, "if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and prosper, so could she" (TS 63-64). But she dismisses what she knows to be a crucial difference between her and Franklin. Lutie does not realise the degree of difference between the streets of Philadelphia in the eighteenth century and the streets of Harlem in the twentieth. She fails to make a distinction
between herself as a poor black woman and Franklin as a wealthy white man.

She thinks she will bring up her child in a better way and make a better man out of him. And therefore, Lutie reacts violently when Bub attempts to aid his “Dream crazed mother” (Clark 501) by shining shoes in front of their apartment building. Upon learning of his venture, she slaps him, ... sharply across the face. His look of utter astonishment made her strike him again this time more violently, and she hated herself for doing it, even as she lifted her hand for another blow. (TS 66)

Lutie’s preoccupation with stereotypes about black boys shining shoes blinds her to the grim reality she and Bub face. Neither Granny’s guidance nor the reasons behind Bub’s ingenuity can bring Lutie out of Franklin’s or the Chandlers’ dogma. Clark adds, "Petry portrays Lutie as maniacally enslaved to a dysfunctional ideology, a woman who has swallowed whole the spurious rhetoric of the American Dream" (501). Lutie realises this a little late in the novel that she has become a victim of this sophisticated urban power.

The larger forces in the novel are white people - whom Petry embodies in the Chandlers’, the Connecticut family who hire Lutie as live in domestic; in Junto himself who is also responsible for the Street; and in other white representatives - the white reporter who turns a thin man who tries to
steal a loaf of bread into a "burly Negro" (TS 199); the white night club agent, Mr. Crosse, who promises Lutie, a scholarship to singing school if she is nice to him. He says, "A nice looking girl like you ... should not have to worry about money..."(TS 321). The white schoolteacher Miss Rinner hates the smell of her black pupils. She thinks teaching black kids is like "being in a jungle" (TS 333) and then there is the white lawyers who is willing to charge Lutie two hundred dollars instead of telling her she does not need his help to keep her son out of reform school.

The attitude of hostility and indifference of the whites also marks Petry's description of the landscape - both natural and urban. The writers of migration narratives use the language and, the metaphors to show the hostile environment of Northerners and the North towards the Blacks who migrated from the South. For instance, even the landscape is harsh and hostile towards Blacks. Early in the novel, when Lutie comes home from work to the street for the first time, she finds herself staring at an advertisement on the subway. In the advertisement she sees a blond girl leaning against a white porcelain sink in a "miracle of a kitchen" (TS 28) accented by "red geraniums in yellow pots" (TS 28). The advertisement leads her to recall the Chandlers' kitchen in Lyme - and the main street of that town. The contrast between that street and the one she now lives on is unmistakable. The Chandlers' street was wide and lined with elm trees whose branches met overhead and a beautiful pattern emerged from it like a lace. But the sky Lutie sees on her street is different. And the
pattern is different. The white people on the downtown streets stare at Lutie “With open hostility in their eyes” (TS 70), and Lutie concludes, “it all added up to the same thing” - white people (TS 206). It all adds up to white people in the novel because white people gave the country its “deistic foundation” (Pryse 121). And therefore even when Petry, describes her landscapes in The Street she uses language that evokes a deistic universe. Early in the novel Lutie agrees to go for a drive with Boots Smith, whom she has just met in the Junto’s bar. She notices, “... that the streets had a cold, deserted look. ... (the sky) too, had a faraway look. The buildings loomed darkly against it” (TS 157). Boots Smith was driving the car in such a way that makes him feel, “he was a powerful being who could conquer the world” (TS157). In Morrison’s Song of Solomon too, Macon takes his family for a Sunday drive but it is nothing more than familial exposition, a self-serving ritual. He does it so that the whole community sees them and admires them but they are a lot of amusement to the community. To Lutie, Boots’ driving seems “like playing god; and his engine roaring in the night” brought the people sleeping in the “white farm houses... half away - disturbed, uneasy” (TS 157). In this scene, the indifference of white people toward the plight of the black people on the street seems relegated to the landscape, for it was “... a world that took pains to make them feel that they (blacks) didn’t belong, that they were inferior”. In fact it was very necessary for whites to feel superior, as that was the only thing they had and if “that was taken away even for the split
second of one car going ahead of another, it left them with nothing* (TS 158).

But Lutie Johnson protests against everything that hinders her because of her colour. Wade Gayles rightly comments that, "In attitude and behaviour she is a forerunner of the black militant of the sixties, refusing to scrape and bow to white people" (150-51). Her pride will not let her wear the expensive clothes Mrs. Chandler gives her after a few wearings. Her pride will not permit her to laugh and jest with white butchers who use embalming fluid on the meats sold in Harlem. And her pride will not let her accept change from the hands of a white grocer, "because he was white and forcing him to make the small extra effort of putting the change on the counter gave her a feeling of power" (TS 62). Morrison, on the other hand, in The Bluest Eye treats the same situation in a different way. Pecola's encounter with a fifty two-year-old white storekeeper makes her aware that for many people she does not really exist. Here, white standards have corrupted the minds of black people in such a way that they develop self-hatred. Of course, Pecola is too young to protest like Lutie.

The writers of migration narratives also underline the importance of the effect of environment on their characters. The characters, i.e. black women and men, often become victims of environment from which there is no escape. In their struggle to come out of this environment they
further get deeply immersed into it. For instance: In Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place, though the women act as friends and mothers to each other, these women have no other place to go other than Brewster Place. Their fate and destiny is Brewster Place. Of course, two or three of them move out of this place at the end. Also, Milkman in Morrison’s Song of Solomon feels suffocated and wants to move out of that place. His purpose in the beginning is to search for gold there in the South but becomes rich and matures with the knowledge of his family history. Petry too condenses her interpretation, as the title of her novel becomes a composite of one image, symbol and space, “the street”. This street is first of all, 116th Street in Harlem, a particular block with dirty apartment houses and their victimised, sometimes perverted inhabitants, and also a neighbourhood bar i.e. Junto’s. This street therefore capitalises on Blacks. For Petry makes it clear that the buzzing street life is not the expression of a genuine black urban culture and community, but only the result of abject living conditions of frustration, of psychic displacement, of escapism:

No matter what it cost them, people had to come to places like the Junto, she thought. They had to replace the haunting silence of rented rooms and little apartments with the murmur of voices, the sound of laughter.... (TS 147)

The men and Lutie go to the Junto to escape their fears and loneliness. Junto’s bar serves as the “social club and the meeting place” for these
men and women. Lutie herself, however, is not part of the Street. For her it is an external threat she fights against. Petry paints a vivid picture of this antagonist:

There was a cold November wind blowing through 116th Street... it did everything it could to discourage the people walking along the street. It found all the dirt and dust and grim on the sidewalk and lifted it up so that the dust got into their eyes and blinded them; and the grit stung their skins. It wrapped newspaper around their feet until... (they) stamped their feet, kicked at the paper. (TS 2)

This street is almost a character whose presence is felt throughout the novel and is largely responsible for Lutie's condition. Petry's narrative strategy lays bare another dimension of symbolic space in the novel. She uses the apartment house, and the street in order to explore the symbolic significance of space in the city from a black woman's perspective. She uses the image of the walls that move gradually and persistently to narrow the already narrow space in which Lutie is trapped. Lutie realises that, such streets were the result of the North's lynch mobs because these mobs made Blacks feel insecure resulting in their staying together. Actually it was a method big cities used to keep Blacks in their place as,

from the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever narrowing space, until now she was very
nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick
by brick by eager white hands. (TS 323-324)

Marjorie Pryse points out certain laws of the street, which the white urban power has set in motion and allowed to run their course. The novel depicts among such laws, the following:

... if the women work, the children go to reform school;
women become prostitutes when their men leave,
women who move in with men must try not to be put out; men prey on women; and there is no justice.

(Pryse 123)

The most powerful law on the street is that there is no justice for its inhabitants. This law is quite different from Bub Johnson's fantasy, in which, he is working to steal from mailboxes for Jones he is really trying to help the "cops catch the crooks" (P. 350). Neither is there room for human love in such a world gone wrong, therefore Lutie's husband, Jim, learns a "pretended indifference" (TS 34) when she decides to take the job at Chandlers; and therefore Boots Smith weighs Lutie against all the indignities he has suffered in his life and decides she isn't worth the risk. Even the people moving on the street had that resigned expressionless look. And Lutie always wonders why these people have no expression on their faces. She reacts very strongly to this and feels that only whites are responsible for their situation and hates them as " ... the black folks were cramped on top of each other... Until they were completely cut off from light and air " (TS 206). That is why Lutie decides that Bub and she will
have to move out of this street soon. This migrant (Lutie) who tries hard to improve her situation gets deeper into trouble.

Petry's complex depiction of black women is a testimony to her years as a reporter, where she witnessed first hand the harrowing circumstances many Harlemites faced. Against the backdrop of Lutie's pursuit of the American Dream, Petry has introduced Mrs. Hedges and Min, two other important women characters of the novel.

Mrs. Hedges is a "mountain" of a woman, utterly "unattractive" who runs a brothel in the apartment building. Her history resembles a Horatio Alger "rags-to-riches" fable. She is one character in the novel who has been shown to migrate from the South to the North. Down South when she was young she thought if she moved to a city she would be able to find a man who would love her and marry her. For even in the South people used to stare at her hugeness which she never liked. Embittered she made her way North, to Harlem where she roamed the streets scavenging for food in garbage cans. Her economic hardships have been harder than Lutie's. Petry portrays Mrs. Hedges relying on what Blacks might call mother wit. Upon encountering the white man Junto, she brings to their relationship an "acumen" for business and entrepreneurship. First, she encourages him to expand his business; he is a pushcart man, collecting bottles, "It was she who suggested that he branch out, get other pushcarts and other men to work for him" (TS 243). Her association with Junto eventually
pays further dividends, as he gives her the job of janitor and collector of rents when he acquires some tenements in Harlem. Their collaborative efforts culminate in a thriving prostitution business "the brainchild of a woman who has mastered the rudiments of supply and demand" (498), says Keith Clark. That Mrs. Hedges immediately exploits her chance meeting with Junto, demonstrates, that she recognises the locus of power - the white male. She understands the patriarchal system and thus subverts it by accepting her place as the brains behind Junto's success and resorts to procurement. Petry also alerts us to Mrs. Hedges's grotesqueness. She dons a "red bandanna tied in hard, ugly knots around her head" (TS 173), because a fire in Junto's apartment building has left her bald. Her physical deformities have also prevented her from finding work:

When she walked in (employment agencies), there was an uncontrollable revulsion in the faces of the white people who looked at her. They stared amazed at her enormous size, at the blackness of her skin. They glanced at each other, tried in vain, to control their faces or didn't bother to try at all, simply let her see what a monstrosity they thought she was. (TS 241)

But Mrs. Hedges continues to display an acute understanding of America's "work ethic" and the value of perseverance. She is one migrant in the city who has really changed herself according to the urban landscape. By ardently resisting feminisation - Mrs. Hedges's
unwillingness to exploit her own body in the sex money nexus- she retains her hard fought place in the white male power structure. Petry elucidates this idea further when Junto gives Mrs. Hedges a wig in an attempt to "beautify" her. By staunchly refusing his gift, Mrs. Hedges maintains her leverage and power in the street's economic hierarchy. She also exerts a control over black men that women seldom have. She sits at the open window of her first floor apartment, watching woman passers-by with the malignant eyes of a snake.

They are the lonesome sad working girls just up from the South, or little girls who were tired of going to high school and who had seen many movies and didn't have all the money to buy all the things they wanted... (and) other little girls who were only slightly older who woke up one morning to discover that their husbands had moved out with no warning. (TS 252)

Mrs. Hedges studies them carefully and at a suitable moment, calls out "Dearie ... I been seeing you go by. And I was wondering if you wouldn't like to earn a little extra money sometime" (TS 252). Here it should be noted that prostitution had become a common means of earning one's livelihood for many black women during the 1930s and 1940s. It was a probable danger for single women migrating to the cities. These women were enticed or tricked into prostitution as a means of survival. Young, naïve country girls were not the only ones vulnerable to the lure of seduction and prostitution. Middle aged black women also engaged in
sex for pay, but for them it was a rational economic decision so that they could get the house rent paid for and the bills. And therefore as soon as Mrs. Hedges sights Lutie she greets her "dearie" and is convinced that the young, well dressed, dignified newcomer is fit for her trade. She thinks she may be better for Junto who, she knows, wants to sleep with a nice, warm, coloured girl. For she tells her, If you ever want to make a little extra money, why, you let me know. A nice white gentleman I met lately..." (TS 84). But at the same time Mrs. Hedges acts as a safe space too for some coloured girls, even for Bub, Min and for Lutie too once. She is capable of using her power to ward off evil on the street: she intervenes when the other boys overpower Bub, and she saves Lutie from being raped by Jones. She is also, in her relation to Mary and her other "girls", a mother of sorts. As the madam of a whorehouse, where she gives homeless young women a home in exchange of their prostitution, she is a false madonna. Yet she gives Min, Jones's live-in woman, just the right information when Min, oppressed by Jones, tries to do something, to ward off the forces of the street. When Min comes to Mrs. Hedges with her version of paradise - not being "put out" of Jones's apartment - and asks whether Mrs. Hedges knows of a good root doctor, Mrs. Hedges sends her to a root doctor, Prophet David. Certainly, Mrs. Hedges has at least a reciprocal relationship with the community, which Lutie doesn't have and will, realise later when her son is arrested. Nevertheless, Mrs. Hedges capitalises on black powerlessness.
Against the backdrop of Lutie's pursuit of the American Dream it would appear that Petry uses Min to illustrate what happens when desire for security takes a pathological turn. But closer examination shows how she grants Min the same type of improvisational talents that sustain Mrs. Hedges - the ability to ensure survival in a crumbling, life-abnegating America. Min, is another character, a black woman in the city who is also a victim of oppression and exploitation by the white urban power. Min, unlike Lutie, is full of contempt for her white employers. She says of them, "(they had) openly contemptuous women who laughed at her to her face even as they piled on more work" (TS 126). Min sees white women as more her enemies than white men, because they overwork her one moment and humiliate her the next. Neither Min, nor Lutie blame black men for the broken homes, poverty and hopelessness that characterise too many urban black communities. And perhaps that is why Min considers visiting a root doctor for she believes that he will set things right for her. The Prophet David himself acts as a most promising safe space for Min. When Min is on her way to the prophet's house, she thinks,

the preacher at the church she went to would certainly disapprove, because in his eyes her dealing with a root doctor was as good as saying that the powers of darkness were stronger than the powers of the church.

(TS 122)
In the presence of the Prophet, Min - generally described as a passive, slow-witted creature - begins to see through even Mrs. Hedges herself. The "powers of darkness", however they might be viewed by the white world or the minister of Min's Church, who scorns root doctors, prove superior to all the doctors and ministers Min has seen in her life. For unlike them, the Prophet gives Min all his attention,

... this man had listened and been interested, and all the time she had talked he had never shifted his gaze, so that when she came out from behind the white curtains the satisfaction from his attentive listening, the triumph of actually possessing the means of controlling Jones, made her face glow. (TS 137)

The root doctor, representing the strongest evidence of a cultural cohesion among the black community, acts as a potential force against the streets' laws and the white world. For although the men and (and Lutie) go to the Junto's to escape their fears and loneliness, Min sees only women at the Prophet's. The women she sees there want to solve human problems: they are there to keep their husbands in bed at night or to ward off the spectres of white people in their lives. And they all emerge from the Prophet's, satisfied and confident. It is important that Mrs. Hedges, who doesn't hold, with root doctors, is surprised at the renewed energy with which Min returns from the Prophet's: "there was such energy and firmness about the way she walked that Mrs. Hedges's eyebrows lifted as she craned her neck for a further look" (TS 138).
And as the novel progresses, Min serves as Lutie's foil for Petry. Lutie becomes more hopelessly lost, in her pursuit of the American Dream; but Min follows the Prophet's instructions and manages to protect herself long enough from Jones to make up her own mind about what she wants to do. Min's alternatives, if not Min herself, could have served as models for Lutie. How would the novel, and Lutie's life, been different, for example, had she gone to the Prophet David or Mrs. Hedges for help when Bub is arrested instead of the white lawyer who wants to charge her two hundred dollars? Would the Prophet have been able to tell her she didn't need a lawyer? Lutie realises the consequences of her failure to make friends within her community. She cannot turn to her co-workers to borrow the necessary money to free her son for," She didn't know any of them intimately. She didn't really have time to get to know them well, because she went right home after work..." (TS 395).

Pondering her son's situation she realises that Granny had always provided a sense of security, a homespace for her as a child. Here it should be noted that Lutie's rejection of friendship with the other women folk of her community is also responsible for her failure to a large extent. Friendship with other women i.e. female bonding is a very important feature of Afro-American culture and heritage. The women have strong bonds as they help and support each other in the urban North, just as they did in the antebellum South. This kind of female bonding gives them strength and acts a safe space for all black women in the cities. Petry
uses this as a trope in the North. These women act as the “ancestor” also as they have all the ancient properties of nurturance, love, support, and motherliness. Lutie’s inability to develop this kind of friendship, which Mattie in The Women of Brewster Place and Pilate in Song of Solomon are able to provide, proves fatal to her. It is because of this strength that Mattie and Pilate are able to face the hardships and violence of the North with more strength when compared with Lutie. They have inherited all the motherly qualities and strongly believe in female bonds. Lutie’s inability to make friends with Mrs. Hedges, Min or her co-workers result to a great extent in her failure in the North.

The Gray Cap Gang, too, is representative of the threatening street culture for women and children. For they are young black boys who harass young children like Bub. These boys mete out their anger against the white society in this way. By empowering a young child like Bub this gang feels powerful in some way even if it is for a short period. This gang of young black men does not spare black women also to avenge their lost masculinity at least in the black world; they even rape or kill black women. By doing this they affirm their masculinity at least in the black world. For instance: Lorraine in The Women of Brewster Place is gang raped by C.C. Baker and his gang. In fact these streets are stifling for both black men and women. Black women because they are harassed sexually by both black and white men. White men and women also racially exploit them. This same street culture is stifling for black men.
because they too do not have enough space there. They do not have equal job opportunities compared to white men. Most of the time their women work and they sit idle at home or move out in such streets, eventually meting out their frustration on their women.

Black women migrants face sexual threat in the city from white and black Northerners while confronting the urban landscape. So the city doesn't really improve their situation in this respect too. They were oppressed sexually even in the South. Therefore violence serves, as a trope to portray the southern violence be it psychological, physical or sexual. The Street shows that the black ghetto is not only a social, political, educational and economic colony but that the black ghetto is also a "sexual colony" (Hernton 73). If black people are colonised slaves, then black women are 'multiple' slaves. They are slaves of the white racist society, which exploits their labour and services while holding them at their homes. They are also a market, a reserve of slaves for white men who "plunder and pillage them as sex objects in white homes and in brothels inside and outside of ghettos"(Hernton 73). They are also slaves of black men within the confines of the ghettos, in their homes and along the public streets. Black men harass them, hold them, batter them, hate, demean them, oppress them, exploit and kill them.

In the novel, Jones, the Super and Boots the henchman are woman-hating characters. Jones, for example, is depicted as a beast. His
apartment is like the hold of a cargo ship, darkened and crowded with his junky stuff. He drove all the women out of his life through his violent sex. In these long years, to retain his manhood, he has taken the route of sexual fantasy in which he looked, "at the women who went past, estimating them, wanting them" (TS 87). He undresses women with his eyes, molests them in his mind. His feelings towards the women are about performing sexual harm on them, to prove how powerful and dominating he is. In the opening scenes of the novel, when Lutie encounters him as she comes to apply for the apartment, she feels his eyes are hungry, "... 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" (TS 13). To Jones, Lutie is a thing on which he can take out his hatred against the female in and through the violence of fucking. Jones enters her apartment when she is at work; while pretending to make repairs, he rambled through her personal belongings specially the white blouse in her closet. Jones is so certain that Lutie is nothing but a "whore" that when she wards off his repeated advances, he believes at first that she does not comprehend his intentions, he has not made himself clear enough. But after Lutie along with Mrs. Hedges fights off his rape attempt, Jones decides he knows the reason. Lutie will have nothing to do with him. For he thinks she was in love with Junto. He vows revenge. He plots and succeeds in getting Bub into trouble. Here the migrant makes a significant attempt to resist this sexist urban power but that power is greater and her son lands into trouble. Petry shows how
these men look at Lutie, nothing more than a sex object. None of them are really interested in giving her a job.

Boots Smith is a younger version of Jones. He too hates being called a nigger. He too had lots of women in his life but he had kicked most of them around. He ends up at Junto's which he likes for there is no racism there. Boots sees Lutie and wants her. He regards her the same way that Jones feels towards all women. His lust for her is a lust for power over her, a lust to dominate and "revenge" himself for what white men have done to him, for they have robbed him of his manhood. He offers to drive Lutie in his shiny pimp's car. He addresses Lutie as "Baby" more than half a dozen times. He never calls Lutie by her name throughout the novel. When she says that she is single, he remarks, "Never saw a good looking chick, yet who didn't belong to somebody" (TS 159). But Lutie refuses to be "nice" to him. Added to this now Junto wants her and orders Boots to stay away from her at the risk of losing his job in the cabaret. Thus Smith joins Mrs. Hedges as Junto's procurer. Two blacks join hands and help a white sexist power to get another black "object".

Taking advantage of Lutie's need for money, when Bub is arrested for breaking mailboxes, Smith sets up a rendezvous between Junto and Lutie at his Sugar Hill apartment. She is unaware that she is supposed to sell herself today to Boots for money. She is faced with an endless web of exploitation and domination. When she realises this she becomes
enraged. She sees Junto as the embodiment of all her ills and wants to kill him. Junto slips out but Smith assures him not to worry. But Boots is mistaken. Lutie will not be compromised by him or Junto or by anybody or anything. Her final realisation of her failure to utilise the “safe spaces” available to her comes when she recognises that,

From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was nearly walled in and the wall had been built brick by brick by eager white hands. (TS 323-24)

One hundred pages later, when she meets Junto in Boots’s apartment, she realises that it is Junto’s face which has to be placed with those eager white hands:

And all the time she was thinking, Junto has a brick in his had. Just one brick. The final one needed to complete the wall that had been building up around her for years, and when that last brick was shoved in place, she would be completely walled in. (TS 423)

The tone of this passage reeks with a resignation Lutie has sought to avoid. It is Smith, however, upon whom she eventually unleashes her rage. The rage previously directed against the white man emerges again, moving beyond Smith to encompass the street and the white world at large. Out of this sense of rage,

A life time of pent up resentment went into the blows... she kept striking at him... First she was venting her
rage against the dirty, crowded street. Finally, ...she was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape. (TS 430)

Lutie realises that white urban power appears in a different, more omniscient form in the North than in the South. As here the collaborative efforts of black and white men in the exploitation of black women, worsen her situation. Petry shows the black migrants in the city ill prepared for the culture that awaits them. They suffer an immediate attack on their consciousness and experience the effects of domination on psychic and spiritual levels. The street and the city operate silently and invisibly on the inhabitants. Lutie falls a victim to the harsh realities of the urban North because she ignores the sustaining elements of her culture.

Petry also highlights the core differences between Lutie and the novel's other black characters. Mrs. Hedges, granny and Min are grounded in an African American ethos, which has served blacks well historically. This culture facilitates the development of improvisational techniques, such as the "subversive" acts of Mrs. Hedges, Boots and Min (Clark 501). "Masking, signifying, disguise/concealment-black characters have exploited these techniques in order to survive in a country bent on their annihilation"(Clark 503-4). But Lutie doesn't resort to subversion and has to abandon her son at the end of the novel. Petry shows how Lutie tries to decipher Franklin's text during the entire novel - a "white" book blacks
were never meant to read in the first place. In aiding Min in her subversive actions, David the Prophet epitomises the power of "conjure" in eradicating evil and effecting change in an unjust society. Petry shows how people with similar concerns benefit each other in the post-bellum urban North, just as conjure women served as a corrective force in the dehumanising antebellum South. Subversion as a prominent skill catapults black women from the confines of a patriarchal, dehumanising America to another country, where they can operate business, keep a roof over their heads, and move beyond restrictive and male dominated literary configurations. Lutie's departure reinforces the indifference of the landscape in the street world, white people have made; yet her departure though cruel, seems fated. The reader is given this hint as throughout the novel she thinks of Ben Franklin and the American Dream. The reader is left, above all, with Bub's isolation hovering in the background. The image of "homelessness" or the absence of "mother" in the urban North, which Petry gives her readers, is disturbing.

Though *The Street* is a migration narrative, which does focus on the possibilities of ancestor and safe spaces, it also gives the reader a protagonist who rejects their value. Lutie is one of them. Petry is fully aware of the subtlety and sophistication of modern power, of its ability to construct subjects through the creation of discourse and desire; the novel does not provide successful models of resistance. It should be noted here that Petry is all the time preoccupied only with how a migrant from the
South to the North encounters the North. Lutie is all the time struggling for her survival against the urban power. Petry in no way suggests a journey back to the South, even after Lutie's failure in the North. There is a refusal to romanticise the South, unlike Morrison. The tropes, which are used to represent the southern migrants' attempt to negotiate the urban landscape, will undergo significant revision in the other two narratives namely: Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. Nonetheless, *The Street* does offer its readers an alternative in the vision of a black community that might embrace its grandmothers, its folklore, and the survival of human feeling. The novel also suggests an alternative in a street which might become, and thereby transform any street in the city - even the street in Lyme, Connecticut, on which Petry shows us white people. In so doing, *The Street* stands as a connecting link in a fictional tradition of migration narratives that looks back to Hurston's portraits of black community and folklore and looks ahead to those contemporary novels by Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison etc. They have taught readers to rediscover, reassess, and reclaim the human values signified by folk community in black fiction. These writers will further revise and modify the tropes of migration.


