



Theme of Cultural Alienation in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*

S.Jothimani

Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of
English, Annamalai University, Annamalai
Nagar -608 002 India
jothiram1661990@gmail.com

Dr.P.Dinakaran

Assistant Professor, Annamalai
University, Annamalai Nagar -608 002
India

Abstract

This paper attempts to probe the intensification of destructiveness in the human encounter is scrutinized in the context of cultural alienation in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*. Anne Porter upholds the value of individual liberty and draws attention to the fact that both creation and destruction are within man's power. The staggering outrage of war prompts man to examine the political, legal, and social origin of his threatened liberty. A liberal government is based on recognition of human rights, yet human society is often destroyed by the very hands which construct it for man displays a compulsive need to destroy his own creations.

Keywords: Cultural Alienation, Individual Liberty, Human Encounter

Katherine Anne Porter predicated to be one of the twentieth century America's finest writers. She is an honest and righteous artist but her perspectives on the dogma of craft and art of writing are scattered. She has never explored the nature and character of the genre of short-story. Yet certain of her artistic philosophy can be gathered from her views expressed on various occasions. However, it may be noted that she did not take any special care to demonstrate the theory of fiction as in her critical writings. Her visits to Mexico and Europe, her Roman Catholic conversion and her interest in liberal social causes, constitute the base of her writing. She believes human life is at the core of her art. She describes multifarious faces of love and evil, tensions caused by the conflict of appearance and reality, and man's contracted destiny. She questions all that she inherited, and rebels against old beliefs. Most of her work presents painful insights into life. Her attempt has been to discover and understand the human heart, that is, the human motives and feelings.

Anne Porter perceived at length the colossal bankruptcy of simple human values in the social system that she encountered in America as well as Europe. She seems to have been pained at the situation and it is the essence of this pain that becomes the soul of her art. Her central viewpoint lies in suggesting the extent of evil in the social and domestic systems. One of her main themes may broadly be regarded to be the crisis of identity, which she presents in terms of the sanctity of the individual self and moral responsibility. Her fiction is charged with a sense of tragedy realized through the projection of inner and other landscapes of failures and ruin marking the

careers of the protagonists.

A marked heightening of destructiveness in human relationships is apparent in the novel, *Ship of Fools*. This occurs when human beings are exposed to the detrimental influences of alien cultures. Cultural alienation serves to draw out the inner demons in human nature and man finds himself helpless before the stupendous forces of internal and external evil. These forces of evil originate in the darkest depths of human nature and sometimes take the form of corrupt social or political ideology which prompts man to persecute or destroy his fellow beings. Man imagines he is a lonely wayfarer in life, but discovers that no human being is alien to him, for sombre clouds of destruction and disaster loom over mankind in general.

The theme of cultural alienation finds a forceful expression in *Ship of Fools*. Anne Porter knew that she is expected to produce a novel for the enhancement of her literary reputation and she struggled for about twenty years with the composition of *Ship of Fools*. In *The Day Before*, She writes: "But there is a trap lying just ahead and all short-story writers know what it is - The Novel. That novel which every publisher hopes to obtain from every short-story writer of any gifts at all, and who finally does obtain it, nine times out of ten" (105).

The voyage undertaken by Anne Porter to Germany in 1931 inspired her to think of human life in terms of the journey motif. Letters written by her during this journey to her friend Caroline Gordon formed a nucleus from which the novel began to shape itself. In keeping with her keen interest in human beings our author observed the people on board the ship during her journey. She used these observations later on for portraying characters in the novel. She also made use of several interesting situations noticed by her at that time. For example, an old wizened man who lay dying caught her attention and she bases Herr Graf on him. A fat woman, who weighed four hundred pounds, and a lonely hunchback stood out prominently among the passengers because of their unusual physical appearance; in the novel they become Frau Hutten and Herr Glocken. A rare example of harmony in human relationships is provided by a Spanish honeymooning couple, who appeared to Anne Porter as two people enjoying the happiness of a private Eden on earth. The bride is exceptionally beautiful; she resembled a magnificent wild animal because of her exotic grace. Anne Porter uses the couple for depicting the Mexican bride and bridegroom in the novel.

Anne Porter's description of Dr. Schumann in the novel bears a very close resemblance to her account of the doctor on the Werra; in the novel she writes: "He had a fine aquiline nose, a serious well-shaped head, and two crookedly healed dark duelling scars on his left cheek, ...Dr. Schumann carried it well, as he carried his sixty years" (27). His nature is reflected in his eyes, "His light brown eyes, levelled calmly upon a given point where the people approached and passed, were without speculation or curiosity, but with an abstract goodness and even sweetness in them" (27).

For the noisy strange passenger who wears a cherry-coloured shirt, our author uses her observations of a fat man on the Werra, about whom she writes that there is down there a huge fat man with a purple face and watermelon pink: shirt, who got on at Vera Cruz. He had a voice like seven fog horns, and he roared and sprawled and

guzzled beer and sang in a voice that drowned out the brass band and I think everybody looked forward with terror to so many weeks shut up with the noise. In the novel she writes “There emerged from the bar an inhumanly fat Mexican in a cherry-coloured cotton shirt and sagging blue denim trousers, waving an immense stein of beer. He strode to the rail, elbowed his way between yielding bodies, and burst into a bull bellow of song” (50).

La Condesa is inspired by a Cuban woman on the ship who is conspicuous because of her sensuous beauty and her nervous manner, resulting from an unhinged mind. She forced her troubles on people and related terrible stories of the loss of her family. In the novel she writes:

...La Condesa stood before him, talking very intently but slowly, spreading her arms as if she would bar his way. Her thumbs were turned in flat to her flattened palms, which moved in a monotonous beat; her eyes were like agates, and she swayed from side to side, stretching her neck. (125)

Anne Porter observed a Spanish zarzuela company travelling to Spain on the ship. They inspired the volatile zarzuela company which plays an important role in the novel.

The numerous characters of the novel represent various cultures and classes of society. As they are brought into contact with each other in the confining atmosphere of the ship they act and interact on each other and lose their cultural values. Each individual becomes responsible for the destruction of another human being, or sometimes for a whole group of people. The innocent, infected by evil, discover alarming sins within themselves, of whose existence they had been unaware. In the interview, “The Author,” with Rochelle Girson, Anne Porter states:

Ship of Fools “is the story of the criminal collusion of good people - people who are harmless - with evil. It happens through inertia, lack of seeing what is going on before their eyes. I watched that happen in Germany and in Spain, I saw it with Mussolini. I wanted to write about people in these predicaments - really old predicaments with slightly new political and religious aspects. (15)

This “collusion” occurs mainly through the human encounter. Anne Porter admits this by saying that the novel is the expression of what she knew about human nature, the fatalities of life and the perils of human relationships.

Anne Porter explains her identification with her characters: “I am nowhere and everywhere, I am the captain and the sea-sick bulldog and the man in the cherry-coloured shirt who sings and the devilish children and all of the women and lots of the men. ...You know, I got attached to my gang on the boat, I hated to give them up” (15). It is interesting to note that *Ship of Fools* follows the same thematic pattern as that of the short stories and the short novels, individuals and groups of people are seen struggling against the destruction which is caused by human situations, for which they themselves or others are responsible.

The hostility is aggravated by cultural alienation which seems to bring out the most destructive qualities of the travellers on the Vera, who come aboard frustrated and disillusioned as all of them have been battered in different ways by life. Evidence of man's encounter with one of the most destructive of all forces - human cruelty appears at the start of the novel. A beggar haunts the port of Vera Cruz, he has been disfigured so inhumanly that he appears more like an animal than a human being, his condition is most miserable:

Dumb, half blind, he approached with nose almost to sidewalk as if he followed the trail of a smell, stopping now and then to rest, wagging his hideous shock head from side to side slowly in unbearable suffering. The men at the table glanced at him as if he were a dog too repulsive even to kick, and he waited patiently beside each one for the sound of the small copper coins dropped into the gaping leather bag around his neck. (14-15)

A resemblance exists between the beggar and the passengers on the ship, for like him they are maimed, not physically, but psychologically, by the cruelty of human beings; like him they cannot alienate themselves completely from those who wound and torture them.

The detailed description of the passengers given by Anne Porter as the novel begins is filled with animal imagery. This conveys the impression of human baseness which persists throughout the novel, precipitating disastrous consequences: "A tall thin young woman - a leggy 'girl' with a tiny, close-cropped head waving on her long neck, a limp green frock flapping about her calves - strode in screaming like a peahen in German at her companion, a little dumpling of a man pink and pig-snouted" (22).

The antagonism which results from cultural differences is evident at the very start.. The remarks of the waiter and the clerk at Vera Cruz reveal the scathing scorn the natives have for the foreign tourists: "Speaking of monkeys, what do you call that?" asked the waiter, with a barely perceptible flip of his rag towards a young woman, an American... The clerk dropped his voice, but, not quite enough, and spoke the deadliest insult he knew. 'It's a mule, perhaps,' he ventured" (23). The scorn and ridicule aimed at the girl embarrasses her, but significantly cultural prejudice results in bringing out the true relationship between the couple: "The young woman stiffened, the young man's handsome nose turned white and pinched, and they stared at each other like enemies" (23). The word "enemies" suggests the destructive nature of their relationship.

The American and European passengers come to the ship tired and dispirited, they give the impression that their encounters with life have left them weary and disillusioned.

All of them are "a little gloomy with some mysterious sense of failure" (19), and as they begin the Journey they have "the look of invalids crawling into hospital on their last legs" (27). In contrast to them a group of Spanish travellers dance and sing gaily before coming aboard the ship.

The passengers on the ship represent a large cross-section of modern society, Germans, Jews, Spaniards, Mexicans, Swedes and Cubans are found sailing together towards a country over which war-clouds are gathering. Exposure to cultural influences becomes inevitable as the passengers are forced to observe or mix with each other. As quoted by Hendrick in *Katharine Anne Porter*, Glenway Wescott has rightly observed that the novel is

a large life like portrayal of a numerous and representative society, with contrasts of the classes and the masses and the generations and the ethnic groups with causes and effects in the private psychology of one and all, and with their influences on one another - every man to some extent a part of every other man's fate - and all of this - made manifest in behaviour, action, and plot! (118)

The passengers are divided into a distinct social hierarchy based on their racial origin. Since the ship is German the Germans, headed by the Captain, have the uppermost place in the social hierarchy- The Europeans and Americans come next, then the Spanish dancers and the Cuban students. Last of all are the social outcasts - the miserable steerage passengers, and the Jews.

The soul of humanity is ever-present in the novel for those who seek for it with unbiased eyes. It is found in the down-trodden steerage passengers, who try to introduce joy into their sordid lives. It is further glimpsed in the softening of parent's hearts, and in lovers, Jenny and David for example, in moments of tenderness. These examples are all evidence of the fact that Anne Porter is sympathetic to her characters as she does not side step the nobler side of humanity altogether while tracing other less attractive patterns in human behaviour.

This study of the human encounter has drawn us closer to Anne Porter and has given us a tragic yet heroic vision of humanity struggling against the forces which tarnish the brightness of life. Man has been found to be his own enemy whenever he kindles the fires of destruction, within himself, or in his environment.

Anne Porter has, no doubt, displayed a fondness for the darkness of human life, but she cannot be accused of being a misanthropist. Her fictional philosophy is not completely pessimistic. She believes that there is hope for man in his constant encounter with the destructive forces as his good and his evil are both the mysterious inventions of his own mind. By upholding the dignity and freedom of the human spirit she has suggested a possible solution to modern man's frustration and despair. She might have offered a more positive and hopeful message to the world, but time ran out.

References

- Girson, Rochelle, "The Author." *Saturday Review* 115 (1962): 15.
Hendrick, George. *Katherine Anne Porter*. New York: Twayne, 1965.
Porter, Katharine Anne. *The Days Before*. New York: Harcourt, 1952.
---. *Ship of Fools*. London: Seeker and Warburg, 1974.
West, Ray B. *Katherine Anne Porter*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1965.