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Existential quest for identity and individuality in Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*

The aim of this article is to discuss and examine the problem of identity, individuality, human dignity and freedom in Katherine Anne Porter's novel *Ship of Fools*. The author of the article is going to show how the American writer depicts the theme related to socio-political discrimination, cultural alienation and isolation at the beginning of the 1930s by presenting different protagonists, being passengers on the German ship, their grotesque, eccentric lives and tempestuous relations. A special attention will be drawn to the examination of ethnical prejudice and social segregation on the eve of Nazism and a menace of the oncoming mass killing and annihilation of individuals.

The issue of individuality and quest for identity has been a frequent motif in varied literary, cultural and philosophical texts. This subject matter has dominated 20th century world literature, in particular literary works during World War II and after 1945. Holocaust and its aftermath as well as racial and ethnical problems came to the fore in numerous books, plays and films, mainly in Europe and in the United States. These themes became ubiquitous in the works of such well-known writers as Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner or Paul Auster and reflected a grave human crisis, moral degeneration, anti-humanitarian values and existential anxiety.

The aim of this article is to examine the problem of individuality, identity and human relations in the works of the American short-story writer and novelist Katherine Anne Porter, particularly in her novel *Ship of Fools* (1962) which was adapted for a film released in 1965. As the writer pointed out in one of the interviews, it had taken her twenty years to complete the novel, yet it had an even longer (incubation), as part of her external experiences and internal life over the course of sixty years (Roney 2000). In the short preface to the novel, the writer introduces the readers into the origins of the book, explains its title and makes a comparison between her personal experience and the events she recounts in the work:

The title of this book is a translation from the German of *Das Narrenschiff*, a moral allegory by Sebastian Brandt (1458?-1521) first published in Latin as *Stultifera Navis* in 1494. I read it in Basel in the summer of 1932 when I had still vividly in mind the impressions of my first voyage to Europe. When I began thinking about my novel, I took for my own this simple almost universal image of the ship of this world on its voyage to eternity. It is by no means new – it was very old and durable and dearly familiar when Brandt used it; and it suits my purpose exactly. I am a passenger on this ship.

(Porter ix)

From the above quotation it transpires that the cruise in which the author is a passenger has a universal and cosmic significance - it symbolizes a voyage to a timeless space where human beings search for their identity, individuality but above all where they are deranged, displaced while creating their own world of madness and being unable to liberate themselves from the hell in which they are imprisoned.

The novel narrates the voyage of a German passenger ship from Vera Cruz, first to Havana, then to some European ports, and finally to Bremerhaven in August, 1931. The large cast of characters includes a few German couples and individuals, a Swiss family; several Mexicans, two young American artist-lovers, an American divorcee, an American engineer, a troupe of Spanish dancers; a group of Cuban medical students; the captain and the ship's doctor, a Swede; and a Spanish countess deported from Cuba. In addition, in steerage there is a mass character consisting of almost 900 Spanish workers being returned from Cuba who sicken, fight, commit murders and give births below decks during the crossing (Kauffmann 1962). It is about 30 of the first-class passengers who are the main characters of the story and with whom the author of the book identifies.

Irrespective of the class and status of the protagonists *Ship of Fools* denotes a travel of insane and eccentric individuals locked in their private infernos, the evil whose most conspicuous tokens are racial and ethnical prejudice, social segregation, political indoctrination, hatred towards "otherness," human distinction and individuality.

While a lot of parallels can be seen/drawn between Porter's life and her work, the anti-eugenics themes saturating *Ship of Fools* are linked not solely to her steamship travel to Germany and experiences with proto-Nazism when the author lived in Berlin in 1931, but also with her personal history of tuberculosis, from which she suffered for a few years. The critics draw the attention to the work's deep pessimism, the vision of building anti-human civilization, racial and ethnical segregation and a threat of extermination depicted by Porter when seen through the

lens of her experience of shameful chronic illness that created a kind of “double consciousness” (Roney 2000). It is probably the writer’s physical and mental state, ceaseless pain and suffering which enabled her to create a distorted, frenzied vision of humankind, a microworld of political and social fanatics, indoctrinators, freak, frustrated artists, unhappy, convenient love relations and discriminated handicapped individuals.

Katherine Anne Porter remarked in various interviews that her novel concerns the endless collusion between good and evil and that she believes that human beings are capable of utter evil, yet none has ever been entirely good and this gives the edge to evil (Atlantic/Little Brown 1984). In this regard the novel apparently presents a pessimistic, gloomy view of the human condition. It is Germans who are portrayed in a particularly negative light, most of them being anti-Semitic and contemptuous of races other than their own, with an arrogant sense of their own superiority. It is worth remarking on how accurate Katherine Anne Porter conveyed the German mentality on the eve of the rise of Nazism and how precisely she illustrated the alienation of Jews:

...Yet at the very last dinner together, they drank each other’s health and gave each other friendly looks, and Herr Professor Hutten said warmly, “At last we are nearing home, and we are, after all, all good Germans together. Let us thank God for his blessings.”

(Porter 472)

Her Lowenthal, who had been put at a small table by himself, studied the dinner card, with its list of unclean foods, and asked for a soft omlette with fresh green peas...In all his life it had never happened to him, but here it was, the thing he feared most was upon him: there was not another Jew on the whole ship. Not one. A German ship, going back to Germany, and not a Jew on board besides himself. Instantly his pangs of instinctive uneasiness mounted to positive fright, his natural hostility to the whole alien enemy world of the Goyim, so deep and pervasive it was like a movement of his blood, flooded his soul... Well, there would be nobody to talk to, but just the same, it wouldn’t cost him anything to be friendly with these people; he intended to get along as well as possible on the voyage, there was no percentage in asking for trouble...

(Porter 59)

The two citations reflect the onset of ethnical segregation, discrimination and a threat of creating of the so-called superior race and modern/advanced civilization

which includes the elimination of those who do not adhere to its standards. Nevertheless, in order to understand fully the problem of human identity, individuality and people's complex relations in the 1930s depicted by the novelist one ought to take into account a larger socio-political context of the book. Miscellaneous critics draw the attention to the significance of its date: August, 1931 and to numerous events that occurred at that time. Among the most weighty ones one should refer to the Great Depression in the United States and concomitantly in Europe, Latin America's eruption through a 400-year-old crust of Castilian brutality and terror, the rise and growing popularity of the Nazi Party in Germany (a leap from 800 thousand(s) votes in 1928 to 6.4 million votes in 1930) as well as the deposition of Bourbons in Spain and the oncoming of fratricidal battles between the two left factions whose arguments eventually brought on the Falange (Kauffmann 1962). Considering these striking world changes, mostly in the two American continents and in Europe it is worth stating that Western man started to run the fever, the turmoil that led into the collapse of a society based on Judaeo-Christian values. One ought to emphasize that after five thousand years of ethnical monotheism, two thousand years of benign redemption we witness a 20th Century which commenced with the I World War, the birth of Fascism afterwards and began speeding towards Nazism which finally gave rise to the most horrendous war and human extermination. Katherine Anne Porter endeavours to show the readers that in the first half of the 20th century, the time marked by dramatic cultural and artistic alterations, social and political movements, technological and scientific progress which apparently aimed at improving people's lives and creating modern advanced civilization, a spiritual and moral effort of the human race did not succeed, generating instead endless moral dilemmas, posing ceaseless questions concerning the sense of the existence of an individual, quest for identity, human distinction and singularity against a background of mass society and collective modernity. With this regard midsummer 1931 marks the onset of a great, perhaps the last landslide which inaugurates and makes conspicuous everything which was always previously latent (Kauffmann 1962).

Ship of Fools vividly illustrates the grotesque, freakishness and oddity of human relations, their personal frustrations and frenzy in the face of the dramatically changing world during the interwar period. The novel constitutes a set of stories recounted by individual passengers, yet it would be superfluous to label each of the book's characters, rather, following the message of the writer, one should draw the attention to symbols and images the protagonists represent. Dr. Schumann, one of the leading characters of the novel, duel-scarred and catholic, embodies traditional, proud, reticent German, the young American couple represent emotional permissiveness, freedom, the licence for neurosis ingrained in the New World's

liberalism whilst the grotesque flirtation between Herr Rieber and Lizzy Spoeckenkieker exemplifies the sexually and socially frustrated constituents that emerged to uphold Nazism. When set beside the first-class passengers and simultaneously main protagonists of the book, the enormous group of Spanish characters in steerage, their birth may symbolize the persistence and growth of the revengeful, rancorous proletariat (Kauffmann 1962):

Seven women who had borne children during the voyage came up slowly in a group, some of them supported by their husbands or leaning upon other women, carrying their young in tightly wrapped bundles. They were flabby and pale, some of them with brassy spots on their foreheads and cheeks, their bellies still loose and soft, with their milk staining the fronts of their faded clothes. Their older children, with sad, disinherited eyes, clung determinedly to their skirts. A boy of about twelve years with a fierce, burning smile turned about as he reached the upper deck, and saw them.

“*Olé, Olé,*” he called out, raising a clenched fist and shaking it in the air. “We are many more then when we started!”

(Porter 352)

As for the presentation of the first-class passengers of the ship, the American novelist adroitly depicts the internal development of the protagonists and the audience get to know most of the characters’ lives and their relations having read a few of their episodes. In this regard, given Miss Porter’s masterly technique of describing and exploring the characters, one may predict the reaction of the protagonists and their changes given certain situations and circumstances. For instance, we may assume that the American pair, Jenny and David, are going to have an argument even though they would like to love each other and that eventually they will be a little wiser about each other, that Denny, the engineer, is going to be vulgar and boorish, that Professor and Frau Hutten are going to behave like George Grosz characters, that finally doctor Schumann will learn and get to know about himself as a result of his encounter with La Condesa, and that Freytag, the German with the Jewish spouse will perceive his position more clearly (Kauffmann 1962). The writer dexterously creates the social ambience, builds the tension between the protagonists, delineates tempestuous human relations and thoroughly examines their internal struggle, moral dilemmas, quest for identity, social and cultural recognition, dignity and respect.

As was mentioned before, the leading motif of the novel is the problem of ethnical segregation, in particular the rise and transmission of Nazi ideology, its

indoctrination, the omnipresence of anti-Semitism among the vast majority of German passengers who contribute to the social isolation and alienation of Jewish citizens and their families. Anti-Jewish hysteria and an utter contempt for the people of the Israelite origin are mostly propagated by Herr Rieber, especially with reference to his cabin-mate Herr Lowenthal as well as by the Rittersdorf couple. On the other hand, Dr. Schumann, a seemingly traditional, proud, presumptuous, reserved German, shortly turns out to disapprove the behaviour of his compatriots and to question certain fixed rules and ideals with which he was borne after his encounter and infatuation with La Condesa. In addition, the doctor is portrayed as an enforced philosopher doomed by heart trouble and that is why he distinguishes himself from other Germans, portrayed by the American author as repulsive and loathsome. Such a negative and highly critical picture of Germans in the early 1930s mirrors the novel's premise - all through the book run prognoses of Nazi action: Nuremberg laws, gas chambers, euthanasia, world conquest, nuclear threat. Bearing this in mind, however, some critics point out that Katherine Anne Porter created an exaggerated image of this country, a grotesque vision of world reality and therefore they remark that the author turned her book into some form of an anti-German tract (Kauffmann 1962)).

Moreover, it is interesting to analyse the novelist's depiction of the Jewish characters, particularly Herr Lowenthal and Mr. Freytag who is "marked" by other Germans due to his marriage to a Jewish woman. Puzzlingly enough, Miss Porter delineates the former as an aggressive, fearful, hateful towards all Gentiles, the product of many centuries' ghettos, and his servile conduct towards his cabin-mate and others mirrors German Jews' lack of resistance to their oppressors. Similarly, Mr. Freytag endeavours to conceal the fact he married a Jew and feels ashamed and dishonored by being forced to have a separate seat reserved for non-Germans. The American novelist gives an unsavoury presentation of Jewish citizens in Germany and people connected with them; instead of their heroism, resistance, struggle for dignity and respect we witness their disinclined acceptance to be discriminated, passivity, cowardice, being unable to stand up against their persecutors and fight for their individuality.

Last but not least, when examining the atmosphere of the emerging Nazi Germany Katherine Anne Porter did not escape the problem of the discrimination, isolation and a gradual annihilation of the handicapped, the physically deformed or the mentally ill. One of the characters of the novel is a hunchback, a person condemned to lead a solitary life, enforced to seat separately, permitted to share the meal with Jews, which is a sign of social degradation, humiliation and alienation.

This character is first presented to the readers by Dr. Schumann when he observes and scrutinizes a crowd of passengers entering the ship:

The passengers, emerging from the mildewed dimness of the customs sheds, blinking their eyes against the blinding sunlight, all had the look of invalids crawling into hospital on their last legs. Dr. Schumann observed one of the most extreme forms of hunchback he had ever seen, a dwarf who, from above, appeared to have legs attached to his shoulder blades, the steep chest cradled on the rocking pelvis, the head with its long dry patient suffering face lying back against the hump...Just behind him a tall boy with glittering golden hair and a sulky mouth pushed and jostled a light wheel chair along, in which sat a small weary dying man with weak dark whiskers flecked with gray, his spread hands limp on the brown rug over his knees, eyes closed. His head rolled gently with the movement of the chair, otherwise he gave no sign of life.

(Porter 28, 29)

It is worth noticing that Dr. Schumann describes the hunchback while juxtaposing him with an old dying person on a wheelchair as if making a parallel between the tragic destiny of the physically handicapped and the terminally ill and the old in Nazi Germany. The doctor, albeit his apparent distaste, disdain for, all the more dread of the dwarf, is capable of feeling compassion for him as well as he seems to realize that the hunchback and other physically deformed people are doomed in his country in the near future. Dr. Schumann, a philosopher and psychologist, is a shrewd observer and a stern critic of the society and the world in which he lives, especially of a stultifying atmosphere in his country on the eve of Hitlerism and therefore he is one of the very few characters endowed with compassion, tenderness and human understanding though he strives to conceal his feelings and emotions. Paradoxically enough, one can bear some similarity between the doctor and the hunchback, both of them being the main protagonists in *Ship of Fools*, particularly in Stanley Kramer's film adaptation of Katherine Anne Porter's book. Albeit their entirely different statuses and positions both of them remain sensitive to social problems, injustice, discrimination, they are the ones who fully realize the perils of the emerging Nazi ideology and its aftermath. The hunchback and the doctor are individuals who do not want to (Dr. Schumann) or cannot (the dwarf) conform to the new reality in their country. As enforced philosophers, acute observers and harsh critics of the society in which they live they constitute the book's moral voices and symbolize the existential search for identity, distinction and a dramatic and seemingly failed struggle for human dignity and freedom.

All things considered, *Ship of Fools* presents a dismal, ignominious failure of Western man and a threat of their creating the new modern civilization based on social, political and cultural segregation, alienation and the oncoming extinction of certain individuals who do not adhere to the standards of the so-called advanced world built on highly developed technology, mechanization, materialism, consumption, philosophical and political indoctrination, moral decay, debauchery and conformity. As was previously pointed out, the American writer delineates a highly pessimistic, anti-humanitarian vision of the world in the early 1930s, making special references to the rise of Nazi ideology in Germany, reveals her anguish about the future of the world and makes a prediction about the collapse of the society and civilization founded on Judaeo-Christian ideals.

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