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Research Article

Mortality Anxiety and Aesthetic Engagements: A Reading in Katherine Anne Porter's Pale Horse, Pale Rider

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Abstract

The article analyses the effect of performance arts (dance, music, and writing) on the central character Miranda in Katherine Anne Porter's novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. The study situates itself within the discourse of pandemics and the discourse of expressive arts. In addition to establishing the correspondence between mortality anxiety and aesthetic engagements, it explores the testimonies of performance arts in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and its impact on its central character Miranda who lives a stressful life induced by the Spanish influenza of 1918 and World War I. Dancing, singing, and writing are expressive activities that belong to the world of aesthetics and senses. Besides, as the findings of the study suggest, they are affirmative responses of Porter against the war and pandemic of 1918. They offer pleasure, ecstasy, escape, and liberty.

Keywords: aesthetic, pandemic, affirmative, ecstasy, freedom

Introduction

Death is inevitable. No one is immune to it. At the same time none, except the small children, are unaware of it. Mortality awareness not only makes a person realize his/her "finitude" or existential vulnerability but also induces anxiety in the subject. Psychologists claim that mortality anxiety is "ontological" and it is not something one can get rid of but a fact one lives with, though repressed, and has

an impact on one's performance. Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death* (1973) argues that "of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death . . . it [is] a major psychological problem for man" (11). Mortality anxiety, as Baker points out, is "a moving force" and "a psychological problem" one wishes to get rid of since it takes away happiness from life. Under the "unhappy" situation induced by mortality anxiety, what one needs is the discharge of tensions which can be possible through "aesthetic engagements" since it nourishes emotional needs and desires.

In *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Katherine Anne Porter frames 'performative arts'- dancing, singing, writing- as "aesthetic engagements" using war and pestilence as the backdrop. The narrative begins with the dream in which Miranda, the protagonist, rides her horse Graylie and wishes to "outrun Death and Devil" (181). In another dream in a hospital bed, she runs screaming: "Hildesheim is a Boche, a spy, a Hun, kill him, kill him before he kills you..." (250). Very often, she wakes up either terrified or screaming. Her nightmares are the testimonies of her latent fear, terror, and anxieties amid war and pestilence. Feeling "too rotten" (202), she wishes to fall asleep. On this backdrop, very often, she wishes to remember the pleasant sight of her lover Adam, and loves to bring the delightful moments of dancing and singing into her memory. War, pestilence, death, disease, nightmares, and the images of the funeral both evoke and aggravate her stress, fear, and mortality anxiety. Even though Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* presents anxiety ridden traumatic account of Miranda and there have been attempts to read it as a trauma narrative seeking the casual relationship between war, pandemic, anxiety, stress, memory, and fear, my reflections, however, are on the performative arts suggested in the novella. I situate my study within the discourse of pandemic, war, and the discourse of aesthetics. I analyze and explore the testimonies of expressive arts like dancing, music, and writing, along with their significance in Miranda's life in this novella. I assume that they are aesthetic responses to the war and pandemic of the early twentieth century by Porter. Cheryl A. Roberts refers to such performativity as a complementary coping strategy for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) patients. He further emphasizes, "Drawing, telling stories, dancing, drama, or doing any activity of creative expression" (163) serve as expressive therapies to tackle PTSD.¹ For Rita Charon, they act as narrative

¹ In *Coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Guide for Families*, Cheryl A. Roberts forwards complementary coping strategies for PTSDs which include exercise, yoga, dance, swimming, good nutrition, consumption of mega vitamins (B-Complex vitamins, vitamins C, E, beta carotene, B6, zinc, fish oil, and others.), relaxation, breathing, aromatherapy, expressive therapies such as drawing, telling stories, dancing, drama, or doing any activity of creative expression, interacting with animals, spirituality, and meditation (155-167).

medicine² since these things help rapport-building between the doctor and the patients and render therapeutic cure through somatic and verbal expressions. Miranda has a great penchant for writing, dancing, and singing which lets her siphon off her pent-up emotions in the context of war and pandemics. Porter's 'aesthetic engagements' are analogous to Robert's 'expressive therapies', in the sense that they function as antidotes to tackle her heroine Miranda's stress, fear, and mortality anxiety.

Textual Analysis

In a pandemic situation, doctors advise to consume nutritious foods, carry out regular exercises, and maintain a balance of moral, emotional, and physical health. They are supposed to act as an antidote to neutralize the literal and psychological impact on the body and soul of an individual restoring humoral balance.³ Ancient and medieval people placed body and soul on equal par and always sought to keep the harmony between the four humors; for they firmly believed that disease was the result of the imbalance among them. The significance of humoral harmony shows how significant space passion and emotions occupied along with physical health issues in ancient and medieval times. Analogous to the humoral doctrine of the ancient world, Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* assimilates the 'aesthetic' and the 'pandemic' in her narrative dissolving the facts of war and pestilence with the imagination of her narrative. The testimonies in the narrative tell about Miranda's mortality anxiety and stress induced by war and the pandemic as well as the aesthetic choices she seeks. Miranda's dancing, singing, and writing can be analyzed as expressive therapies as they all belong to the "science of sensuous cognition."⁴ At the same time, they offer psychological cures to troubled souls like Miranda. Such aesthetic engagements in the narrative lend a creative or curative way out to the person suffering from mortality anxiety which becomes more intensified during pandemics and war.

² Charon, Rita. et.al. in *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine* argues that narrative knowledge and skills have the power to improve healthcare by increasing the accuracy and scope of clinicians' knowledge of their patients and deepening the therapeutic partnerships they can form

³ Hippocrates and Galen formed the core texts for advanced medical knowledge in the Middle Ages. In *Daily Life during the Black Death*, Joseph P. Byrne writes, "Empedocles, who believed that everything in the material world consists of one or a combination of four elements: air, water, fire, and earth. The Hippocratic author claimed that these corresponded to four distinct "humor," generally understood as fluids, in the human body; and these, in turn, corresponded to four major organs and four sets of "qualities" that combined "dryness" and "moistness" with "cold" and "heat." Maintaining good health, then, came to be a matter of maintaining the proper balance of humors, and thus the body's "heat" and "humidity." (15-16).

⁴ Baumgarten defines aesthetics in *Aesthetica* as follows: "Aesthetics (as the theory of the liberal arts, as inferior cognition, as the art of beautiful thinking and as the art of thought analogous to reason) is the science of sensuous cognition." (qt in Herder,4)

The word “aesthetics” belongs to the field of the science and philosophy of fine art. Artasa's way of life consents to Niraj A. Gupta, can raise man " to the level of transcendental" (3). Aesthetics, notes Jerrold Levinson, is " devoted to conceptual and theoretical inquiry into art and aesthetic experience"(1). Jerrold Levinson identifies three foci of aesthetic philosophy- related to practice activity (practice or appreciation of art), aspects of things (property/feature e.g. beauty, grace), and to a certain kind of " attitude, perception, or experience" (1). Troy Organ, while exploring the huge range of Eastern aesthetics, recognizes seven basic assumptions or functions of Indian (Eastern)art. The assumptions include -art as *kama* (desire, pleasure, creation), art as *lila* (expression of high spirits, manifold expressions e.g.tandav dance of shiva, Krishna lila), art as *maya* (illusion, akin to platonic twice removed from reality), art as *yoga* (to join and control the mental and physical), art as *anubhava* (emotional empathy, bhavas are the empathetic responses to 'rasa'), art as *pramana* (a mental activity, seeks the essence, the knowledge as forms of salvation) and art as *sadhana* (disciplining of human endeavors for the realization of ideal goal).⁵ Thus, art or aesthetics covers a wide range of things ranging from creation to practice, experience to a sense of self, illusion to yoga, to salvation moksha. And the 'races' that are applied to *painting, music, dance*, or any other form of art make the essence or soul of aesthetic work. However, as stated above, any aesthetic piece of work is not limited to a narrow sense of pleasure and beauty only. Rather, it can be a practice, a passion, an ideal for perfection, or a source of salvation. It may carry the emotional, spiritual, and factual content; may suggest pleasure, pain, and the cure.

In Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, dancing, singing and writing are actions performed by its central character Miranda, also termed as the narrative medicines in this article since they act as a cure to Miranda's problem. Dancing is an aesthetic practice, a visible performance art. In Hindu religious tradition, *Maheswor/Shiva/Natraj* is the originator of dance. 'Nat' is the root word for "dance" and "natak". Hindu myth says Brahma created natya bidha in which Lord Shiva added dance. He handed it to God Indra who handed it to King Bharat who had a hundred sons. In Hindu rituals, *Natraj* is offered puja before any stage performance. Gupta notes, " Nāṭya was created by Brahma, the god of creation, to meet a demand for a plaything—a source of pleasure to minds made weary by the

⁵ The *bhavas* are the empathetic responses to the *rasas*. "The nine bhavas," explains Troy Organ in "Indian Aesthetics: Its Techniques and Assumptions" (*The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 9, No. 1)," correspond to the nine rasas: love, anger, high-spiritedness, laughter, astonishment, sorrow, disgust, fear, and tranquility" (24). For assumptions/functions of art see Troy organ's "Indian Aesthetics: Its Techniques and Assumptions" page 18 -26.

strife, wants, and miseries of daily existence" (12). "Dancing", writes social and political theorist Max Weber, in his book *Sociology of Religion*, is "a means of sanctification" which he thinks is directed at attaining the "possession of divinity within oneself" (158). Weber holds that dancing is a "musical and rhythmic form of orgiastic ecstasy" (161). Whereas Gupta relates dancing with pleasure one seeks the tranquility of the weary mind, Max Weber connects dance with an elevation of the soul which can bring union with God and; hence, ecstasy in one's life. Analyzing the motives of the performance, Richard Schechner identifies two processes in dancing. A performer, he believes, is either "subtracted," or "added to" becoming more or less other than s/ he is when not performing (167). He argues that performances like dance either produce a "trance" or an "ecstasy" on its performer and in both cases, the self becomes the "other" (167). Miranda, the protagonist of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, reveals her penchant for dancing when she tells her friend Towney, "So I danced hundred's of a mile without opening my mouth ..." (191) and to her boyfriend Adam, "I am always in the mood for dancing, Adam!" (198). The images of men "dying like flies" (200) and the sight of passing funerals make Miranda's head "spin" (201). Death images evoke terror in Miranda, "It frightens me; I live in fear too, and no one should have to live in fear" (224). Feeling anxious and stressed, she wishes to dance. She tells her friend: "I'll dance with . . . every dumbbell who asks me" (191). In corroboration with Schechner's function of dancing, it can be stated that dancing induces a trance-like state in Miranda leading to ecstasy, an extreme form of pleasure which also coincides with Weber's function of dancing. Also, dancing is an expressive art- "non-verbal body movement and gesture that are . . . the motion having inherent and 'aesthetic value' (Cottrell 78)- that allows its practitioner to express feeling, bhabhaor rasa- love, anger, sorrow, disgust, fear, and tranquility. It makes the release of bhabha/rasa- a possibility since dance releases the body from the grip of the mind. In the case of Miranda dance liberates her from the mortality anxiety she lives with during the pandemic and the war. LaMothe, Kimerer L. notes: "Dance appears as a symbolic enactment of what is more clearly represented in verbal forms, or as a physical means for entering altered states of consciousness whose meanings are, again, better represented in verbal forms" (102). Besides dancing being 'a symbolic enactment', it gives the performer a central stage, a role to play, and a platform to express. Since war and pestilence put the liberty of an individual at stake, the human desire to move, talk, act, and express freely gets suppressed, even crushed, in such situations. Thus, Miranda's penchant for dancing can be associated with her desire for pleasure or ecstasy as well as with

her search for liberty amid her confined living; for dancing lends Miranda - a role, a stage, and an escape at a time; the things which people seek very often in their lives too. Dancing offers her the things- 'the life', 'liberty', and 'happiness'- which war and pandemic take away from her. It can be established that Miranda's love for dancing corresponds with her search for liberty; pleasure and ecstasy. In the Weberian vein, it can be linked with her desire for unification with the ultimate, the eternity, or the transcendental.

In addition to dancing, another performative action offered in the narrative is singing. Singing is an expressive art that is part of musicology, the study of music. While listening, one feels music whereas in singing the singer becomes the 'performer' releasing the bhabha/rasa through voice. Allen, Rob, and Nina Krebs in *Dramatic Psychological Storytelling* claim that performing music leads to mind-body experience and music "can be equated with what is termed 'spiritual', 'sacred' or 'ecstatic', as it touches on something inexpressible, universal, and archetypal" (74). Similarly, Oliver Sacks, in his article "The Power of Music" observes that music "moves us to tears of delight or sorrow arousing a feeling of sublime or a great stillness within" (2529). In addition to this, Sacks finds music profoundly important to those with motor disorders ⁶Ulrica Nilsson, assistant professor of Healthcare Science in Sweden, makes the study of music intervention among patients with pain, anxiety, and stress. She finds music as "audio analgesia," "audio anxiolytic," or "audio relaxation" (803). Nilsson observes the therapeutic effects of music, she writes:

Music acts as a distracter, focusing the patient's attention away from negative stimuli to something pleasant and encouraging. Music occupies the patient's mind with something familiar and soothing, which allows the patient to escape into his or her "own world." Additionally, patients can focus their awareness on the music to aid relaxation. (781)

Music, as Nilsson notices, diverts the listener's attention from something unpleasant and negative to something pleasant and positive. It allows escape as well as relaxation. Music acts as a cure for patients with pain, anxiety, and stress. At the same time, it offers the listener to escape into his/her 'own world'. Music

⁶ Oliver Sacks in "The Power of Music" in *Brain* (2006), 129, No 10, asserts that music acts as bliss for patients of Parkinson's disease to ease seizures, in people with autism or frontal lobe syndromes, with Alzheimer's disease or other dementias, who may have become unable to understand or respond to language but can be moved by music, especially familiar music that may evoke for them memories of earlier events, encounters or states of mind that cannot be called up in any other way. Music may bring them back briefly to a time when the world was much richer for them. page 2529

offers ecstatic moments to the listener. In singing, the singer turns out to be a performer, a doer of things rather than a passive listener only. Singing is also an act of giving voice to one's thoughts and desires. It brings catharsis to the singer. While lying sick in her bed, Miranda proposes to Adam to sing, "Let's sing ... I know an old spiritual, I can remember some of the words" (240). Miranda begins singing, "Pale horse pale rider done taken my lover away ..." (240). Both Miranda and Adam try to remember the stanzas. Adam remembers that in the spiritual's over-forty verses, "the rider done taken away mammy, pappy, brother, sister, the whole family besides the lover." "But not the singer, not yet," Miranda adds, "Death always leaves one singer to mourn." (240). Miranda sings this song while she is diagnosed with influenza. She understands the grave consequences of the disease. In such a situation, she asks her lover to sing with her so that she feels some relief from the pain of her sickness. Miranda finds singing pleasant and joyful. The act of singing evokes the deepest feelings of Miranda. The pale rider she knows comes in the lyrics and associated with it is the death of her loved ones; the family to whom she belonged once as a child. In one sense, Miranda's song carries the sorrows of her past; in another sense, it provides her a temporary escape offering her a momentary pleasure and catharsis. The expressive act of singing' in the narrative performs multiple functions, at a time, to Miranda. It offers catharsis and functions both as a distracter and a soothing agent upon her. In a sense, music/singing performs a redemptive role for Miranda.

Apart from singing and dancing, writing itself is an expressive act as it allows the writer to work through his/her trauma. Allen, Rob, and Nina Krebs in *Dramatic Psychological Storytelling* assert that narrative as an expressive art embraces the use of language and can be "used to put forth an idea, describe a situation or a process, give instructions and tell a story. Or, it can be utilized to help us chase our fantasies" (46). The narrative offers the writer a place to act out or express the trauma or support to pursue one's 'fantasies'. In *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Glenn R. Schiraldi claims, "bringing the highly emotionally charged memories under the light of reason settles them down" (54). Writing, as Schiladi believes, is an act of bringing "emotionally charged" traumatic memories into verbal forms or to rationality. Ben-Shir, Deborah in "The endless search: Writing as a way of Being" claims that writers "strive to make their experience interesting to others and in this way reinforce their position as society's authorized authors . . ." (203). Deborah believes that writing is a way of establishing oneself as an author in society. Similarly, "Writing" Bianchi, Ruggero notes, "is not a simple staging of the script of memory and experience. Rather, it is an

improvisation on memory and experience—a sort of live performance or archetypal happening" (65). Bianchi takes writing to the act of "improvisation" on the writer's memory and experience which contrasts with Schiraldi claim of just bringing the emotionally charged memories into light only. Porter gives her traumatic experiences of war and pestilence a verbal form through her protagonist, Miranda, who works as a drama critic in *Blue Mountain News*; and attends theatrical performances and writes reviews on them. Porter herself worked as a reporter during the war and pestilence. Thus, her narrative shares her personal experience and by giving the words to her thoughts and experiences through Miranda, Porter not only tries to release herself from the grip of trauma but also reinforces her position as an author, as Ben-Shir claims, and provides a kind of improvisation to her memory of World war I and the Pandemic of 1918 blending the fact with aesthetics. In this sense, Porter's narrative tells her tale as an author through which she seeks an aesthetic cure for herself.

Conclusion

Finally, Katherine Anne Porter's novella *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* bears the testimonies of aesthetic engagements- dancing, singing, and writing- presented within the narrative string. Dancing, singing, and writing are Miranda's expressive and creative ways of tackling mortality anxiety which provide her the space to forget her pain, to have temporary relief and an escape. In this sense, the 'performative actions' or such 'aesthetic engagements' in Porter's narrative in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* are affirmative actions against her lurking anxiety. They serve as narrative medicines as they offer a cure for Miranda's anxiety, stress, and fear. Porter seeks the meaning of life; death and her existence through these aesthetic engagements despite her ever-present mortality anxiety in the milieu of war and pandemic.

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