Amidst the Pandemic: A Study of Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*

Jap Preet Kaur Bhangu

Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering & Technology, Longowal, Punjab

Abstract

The predominant narrative of global development and progress celebrates the power of science and technology and reiterates faith in human accomplishment and achievement. A pandemic effectively challenges it, debunks it, and reduces it to shambles. As the disaster strikes, the fact that it happened in the past also brings no comfort; instead, it adds to the anxiety, fear, and stress. There is hardly time to learn how to face it, let alone record, remember, or write about it. Since the disaster draws its power from its inevitability and all-encompassing capacity, no one can stay intact, separate, or aloof from experiencing its trauma and suffering. The boundaries between social categories lose their significance not because the world comes closer but because everyone is forced to focus on surviving in isolation and seclusion. There is a false sense of unity in this separateness; the experience of pandemics, however, is primarily individual. It does not lead to a shared, communal experience. Unlike war narratives where death and destruction can be presented as tales of glory, the pandemic does not offer that consolation to victims and survivors. Katherine Anne Porter's short novel *Pale Horse Pale Rider* fictionalises personal as well as collective memories of the Influenza pandemic of 1918. This article explores how Porter recalls, re-members, and narrates the trauma experienced as a victim and as a survivor of the pandemic. Through her narrative, the article examines the individual and social experience of disease, particularly in the light of the ongoing Covid 2019 pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic narrative, Memory, Trauma, Storytelling, Healing

An onslaught of the 2019 Corona pandemic has made the world recall similar encounters with disease and death. Events that had almost disappeared from collective memory have come back to add to the panic, fear, suffering, grief, and loss. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*; Katherine Porter's chronicle of almost a hundred years back, 1918-19 Spanish Influenza pandemic is a significant source since it provides a rare record of personal and cultural trauma experienced at the time. This article examines Porter's work in the light of the recent experience of the pandemic; how it affects identity and shapes personal and social relations. The aim is to explore how being face to face with unpredictable and uncontrollable disasters changes the way individuals think of themselves and the world around them. The article also focuses on the lessons the world should have learned or, perhaps, can still learn about its attitude towards others during the pandemic.

Published in 1939, Porter's novella is a tale of love blossoming amid World War I and the Influenza pandemic. The story features Miranda, an intelligent young girl working as a journalist who falls in love with Adam, a young army officer. With the First World War going on, death is already in the air. As the reader worries that Adam might become a casualty of war, there is a shift in the narrative; instead of Adam, Miranda falls victim to the influenza epidemic. Having symptoms for a while, she reaches a point where she can ignore no longer and must acknowledge her precarious condition. The story unfolds as she lies sick, drifting in and out of consciousness. Miranda's dreams, nightmares, delusional ramblings, and a few lucid memories form the content of the short novella. The action takes place in the twenty-four hours before she collapses, followed by the span of her illness, but mostly in her mind as she recalls several incidents from the past.

The uniquely vivid portrayal is due to it being autobiographical; through Miranda, Porter is telling her own story. Porter too had worked as a reporter with *Rocky Mountain News* in 1918-19 during the final months of the Great War as also the beginning time of the Influenza

epidemic outbreak. Like Miranda, Porter caught the virus, and things got so bad that even her obituary had been prepared. She, too, had lost someone very close to her. Also, like Miranda, she survived and slowly regained her health. The traumatic experience, however, stayed with her. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a "wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world--- not like a wound of the body, a simple, and healable event, but rather an event that…imposes itself…repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). Porter went through it but it took her around twenty years before she could finally write the story. When she did, as she wrote to a friend, she finished writing the book within nine days in one go. With this work, Porter put on paper what she had experienced first-hand and what was ingrained forever within her memory. As Susan J. Brison argues in another context, the only way to diminish the repressed experience of trauma is to transform the "traumatic memory into a coherent narrative that can then be integrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world." (Brison 39). Writing for Porter thus was to seek relief from her burden and achieve catharsis. As a reporter, she had come in direct contact with innumerable men dying in the war and subsequently due to the disease. The public and the private thus merged in her life as well as in her narrative. The short novel indeed is one of a kind, written from the point of view of a victim of a pandemic who suffered but was lucky to survive even though she lost a lot and as a result, became different from what she had been before falling sick, a different person altogether.

Porter's narrative is significant for its sensitive exploration of the theme of human mortality even as the world goes on with everyday business, continuing with its struggles with numerous issues related to love, truth, economic and social disparity, and women's identity. As she records, the perspective changes due to the outbreak, and soon all such matters take a back seat while the aim shifts to that of staying alive, surviving. Porter skilfully captures the physical and psychological struggle to cope with an unfamiliar and horrifying situation. Jewel

Spears Brooker rightly situates Porter's work alongside modern classics such as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Waste Land* for portraying "relation between the flittering consciousness of the individual and the nightmare of the contemporary history and, at the same put both into a larger context that at once, de-personalises and de-temporalises, thus giving the personal and the temporal a shape and significance they otherwise would not have" (Brooker 213). Even as Porter faithfully recreated the moment from her own life as well as the history of the times, she simultaneously wove together a timeless work of art. As one reads the novella, one is struck by numerous similarities with the present Covid scenario, not only in the fast spread of the pandemic but also in terms of the response of the people to its tragic unfolding. Miranda continuing to ignore her symptoms for as long as she can, as well as the reactions of people around her once her sickness is known, sound painfully familiar. It is almost as if Porter is writing today about the ongoing pandemic. The discussion about the origins of the outbreak is naturally endless. It coincides with the prevalent war-time sentiment, and the blame naturally falls on the typical 'other'.

" They say," said Towny, "that it is really caused by a German ship to Boston, a camouflaged ship, naturally, it didn't come in under its own colours. Isn't that ridiculous?" "Maybe it was a submarine, said Chuck, "sneaking in from the bottom of the sea in the dark of night. Now that sounds better." "It started in Boston, somebody reported seeing a strange, thick, greasy-looking cloud float up out of Boston Harbour and spread slowly all over that end of town. I think it was an old woman who saw it." "I read it in a New York newspaper," said Towny; "so it's bound to be true." Chuck and Miranda laughed ... loudly... "Towny still reads the newspapers," explained Chuck." (Porter 206). With a few minor changes, the conversation indeed could have happened today, right from fixing blame to the trust newspapers inspire!

In a similar vein, Porter narrates, initially; Miss Hobbe, Miranda's landlady, is sympathetic when she learns about Miranda's illness. Soon, however, she threatens to have her

evicted, "... with her face all out of shape with terror...crying shrilly, "I tell you; they must come for her now, or I'll put her on the sidewalk... I tell you, this is a plague, a plague, my God" (Porter 232). In the present context, these words echo numerous reports of even close families refusing to come forward to look after the unfortunate patients. Miranda, however, is lucky as Adam steps in to nurse her and look after her. The tragedy occurs when as a result, Adam contracts the disease, and subsequently, Miranda discovers later, he dies due to that.

Porter's novella thus portrays individuals dealing with traumatic circumstances forcing them to make difficult choices. While some, like Adam, are unable to walk away, many just do not wish to endanger themselves. There is little medical care available and hardly any ambulances, beds, rooms, or doctors in the hospital. Miranda has a "burning slow headache... she can't smell or see or hear..." Adam tells her to stay confined in her room because, "It's as bad as anything can be...all the theatres and nearly all the shops and restaurants are closed, and the streets have been full of funerals all day and ambulances all night--" (Porter 233). It will take long for her to get any medical help, even as she gets worse hanging between living and dying, coherence and confusion, passing back and forth from consciousness to unconsciousness. As Porter depicts the disruptive nature of the pandemic leading to panic and suffering, alongside, there are references to a tendency to accuse someone, to fix blame for the disease, even if it is without any logical basis. No wonder the world forgets once the pandemic is over. This is how the human mind deals with the intolerable memories of a situation beyond control, through concealing and forgetting. Porter writes, "Her mind, split in two, acknowledged and denied what she saw in the one instant, for across an abyss of complaining darkness her reasoning coherent self-watched the strange frenzy of the other coldly, reluctant to admit the truth of its visions, its tenacious remorses and despairs" (Porter 251). Miranda now is the victim inching towards death as well as Porter, re-living, remembering, and recording her personal traumatic experience

In the novella thus, Porter draws heavily from her personal memories; days she lived and when she found her life interrupted by the pandemic. Porter is not interested in portraying the progression of the disease as much as its effects on herself and others around her. Nevertheless, the disease occupies center stage colouring every aspect of Miranda's life. As Porter writes, the disease turns out to be more deadly than the war. Adam calculates his chances of surviving the war, ironically, he ends up dying of the disease. A soldier dying in battle is tragic, yet, one may argue, he chooses to fight and when killed in war, covers himself in glory. Moreover, there is political agenda at work. The soldiers 'death is celebrated as an affirmation of nationalism, patriotism, heroic sacrifice, and human achievement. In the novella, Miranda is nastily accosted by two men who question her in a veiled threatening manner about her not buying the Liberty Bonds. Her explanation that she does not have money is not acceptable because, as the older man says, "There is no excuse, no excuse at all, and you know it… with our American boys fighting and dying in Belleau Wood…anybody can raise fifty dollars to help beat the Boche" (Porter 186).

Thus, a compellingly impressive narrative is built around the war. Dying of the pandemic, on the other hand, brings no such consolation. Its victims are caught in the predicament, unaware and unconsciously, and often they are blamed for their condition and accused of making careless mistakes. Nancy Mairs cynically observes, "The subtext here is that we are all going to die, and that that's all right. It's not a message that will attract readers in droves" (Herndl 771). A pandemic gives rise to images of the unexpected death of countless people even though there is a continuous presence of illnesses all around us. Hardly a year goes by without some or the other alarming disease dominating the international news. A pandemic with its grand expanse and pervasiveness not only kills but also makes death not count at all. The literary narrative, however, makes it possible to register the individuality of suffering, which otherwise the pandemic snatches away from its victims.

As Miranda collapses from the virus, in her delirium, she has recurring dreams of death. She awakens from the dream about 'a lank greenish stranger,' a pale rider riding a pale horse who comes galloping to take innumerable victims along with him. The reference is to the Biblical apocalypse. In another memory, she remembers a conversation with Adam about a traditional spiritual in which death takes away the singer's lover, mother, father, siblings, and eventually, the entire family. Miranda identifies herself with the singer in the spiritual. She tells Adam, "But not the singer, not yet. Death always leaves one singer to mourn" (Porter 240). Porter thus suggests that victims of war and of the pandemic can be rescued from being forgotten by the survivors through a song of mourning. Though trauma caused by wars, political upheavals, (1947 partition of India, for instance), natural calamities, and pandemics, tends to impact collective memory, it especially stays and builds up in the individual survivor's memory. Miranda believes she is the lone survivor; hence it is her duty to sing and mourn and remember the dead. Porter's telling of the story is her way of holding onto the memory as also a testimony of her faith in the healing powers of storytelling. Religious connotations and beliefs getting mixed up in the progression of the war and the pandemic, is born out of the human desire to make sense of the chaotic traumatic happenings.

In the novella, Miranda contemplates dying and falling into oblivion: "Oblivion, thought Miranda, her mind feeling among her memories of words she had been taught to describe the unseen, the unknowable…I shall not know when it happens, I shall not feel or remember, why I can't consent now, I am lost, there is no hope for me." (Porter 251). Almost at once, as if a curtain has fallen, Miranda realises that she is quite familiar with this ultimate reality. The thought leads her to return and look at the living again. But now she laments, "Where are the dead? We have forgotten the dead" (Porter 255). This aptly sums up the fear and the worry; of forgetting those who died or being forgotten after death and no one to remember or mourn the loss and the pain, the trauma felt by the unfortunate victims. Perhaps,

as she wrote the book some twenty years later, Porter already felt the memories becoming blurred or mixed up leading her to think that the suffering and devastation experienced by so many would disappear from cultural memory. Miranda, (as Porter did), quite miraculously returns from the brink as if, and back to life. She, however, feels no joy of recovery, only despair and foreboding.

As Miranda recovers from her illness, she discovers that the world has changed in comparison with how it was before she fell sick. The war is over, and so is the infection. As the people celebrate in the streets, Miranda tells her nurse, "Please open the window, please, I smell death in here" (Porter 256). She hopes that she can resume living, but as she opens one of the letters waiting beside her bed, she learns that Adam is dead. He died not in the "filthy war," but of infection, probably caught from her. Miranda initially does not react. The grief of losing him as well as the guilt of surviving is tremendous. She desperately prays that the news is a lie, "She said, "I love you," and stood up trembling, trying by the mere act of will to bring him to sight before her. If I could call you up from the grave I would, if I could see your ghost I would say, I believe" (Porter 264). As a survivor, Miranda cannot bear the thought of Adam not being there, and she feels it is her responsibility to remember him always. Rather she has an obligation to remember. David A. Davis aptly points out how Porter draws from her personal trauma to provide an authentic and powerful creative expression of an almost forgotten historical event. As Davis notes, "She incorporates trauma ...by embedding a cycle of remembering and forgetting into the text's language and structure. Miranda uses the language of memory 'remember,' 'reminder,' 'memory,' 'forget,' 'forgotten, '--- on more than a dozen occasions." (Davis 58). The aim is to ensure there is no forgetting or disappearing from historical as well as cultural memory. It is only through mourning that Miranda can look towards the future: "No more war, no more plague, only the dazed silence that follows the ceasing of the heavy guns; noiseless houses with the shades drawn, empty streets, the dead cold

light of tomorrow. Now there would be time for everything" (Porter 264). The 'time for everything' does not indicate that Miranda is moving on in life as if it is all in the past now. Instead, these words convey profound sorrow and a deep sense of loss even as life goes on. Porter achieves her objective of coming to terms by inviting readers to share her trauma. With her literary text, as Porter facilitates readers' participation in the pandemic experience, she ensures the survival of its memory.

To sum up, approaching Porter to understand the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic is to enter the nightmarish world where the pale rider on the pale horse continues to gallop away claiming victims without mercy and one after the other. Covid 19 has indeed altered the way people think about life and conduct business on day-to-day basis. Confronted suddenly with vulnerability to pandemics has renewed interest in the historiography of infectious diseases and what it did to individuals or how it played havoc with lives. Porter's narrative provides a perspective on all these issues. Whether a literary text can be a tool of memory to draw lessons from maybe a point of debate, but for those who venture to learn from the past experiences of the pandemic, Porter offers a rare and real opportunity. By combining images from the Biblical apocalypse, World War one, and the Influenza pandemic, she creates an enduring memory of a particularly critical historical moment that continues to be relevant today. The tender tale of love and tragedy, particularly in times of covid, offers much to learn about human grief, loss, illness, and suffering. As a pandemic narrative, it can help develop deep compassion towards the suffering of others and to do something about it among its readers. Since no one is immune from infection, we must find a way to hear the stories of the sick. We must learn to make and read representations of the sick without judgments based on categories governing race, gender, or caste. To imagine that some time from now, all the suffering as also the victims of the ongoing pandemic might vanish from collective memory is a disturbing and sobering thought emphasising the transient nature of human life, experience, and memory. After all, all this, even

if it is termed as 'useless dying, 'should obviously mean something. As the world moves on from the current pandemic as well, it would do well to remember the suffering, grief, and loss of all who are suffering and take care of them genuinely. Perhaps, the solution would be to embed the memories within the world of literature, where they shall be retained, nurtured, cherished, and referred to forever. It should not take another pandemic for the world to take notice of Porter's work or, for that matter, of the painful accounts of contemporary history of the Corona pandemic.

Works Cited

Brison, Susan J. "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self." *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, New England UP, 1999, pp. 39-54.

Brooker, Jewel Spears. "Nightmare and Apocalypse in Katherine Anne Porter's Pale Horse, Pale Rider." *The Mississippi Quarterly,* vol. 62, no. 2, Spring 2009, pp.213-34.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Davis, David A. "The Forgotten Apocalypse: Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Traumatic Memory and the Influenza Pandemic of 1918." *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol.43, no. 2, Spring 2011, pp.55-74.

Mairs, Nancy in Diane Price Herndel. "Writing About Illness, Bodies, Culture." *American Literary History*, vol. 10, no.4, Winter 1998, pp. 771-85.

Porter, Katherine Anne. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. Random House, 1939.