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**CULTIVATION AND DESTRUCTION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES IN  
*MARIA CONCEPCIÓN* BY KATHERINE ANNE PORTER**

*The article examines the peculiarities of feminist discourse in Maria Concepción by the American writer Katherine Anne Porter, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1966). The author's gender worldview reveals the combination of contradictory tendencies. The story demonstrates a number of gender stereotypes, some of which are refuted. The protagonist is as an embodiment of the female impelling force which seeks to eliminate gender inequalities, but experiences certain transformations within the course of plot collisions.*

**Keywords:** *women's fiction, character, feminism, gender, gender stereotypes.*

The Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980) possessed a type of artistic thinking which «was characterized by variation and tension, rather than by unity or internal consistency» [4, 367]. In her first published story, *Maria Concepción* (1923), Katherine Anne Porter embarks on a meticulous exploration of the ambivalent nature of female power. The protagonist of the story – Maria Concepción – is a dynamic and round character whose behavior and manners change throughout the narrative. In fact, the story features the theme of woman's strength which consists in her active position as well as in her obedience. The aim of the article is to investigate Porter's story in terms of gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes, i.e., the socially shared ideas about roles, personal qualities and behavioral patterns of men and women, are firmly anchored in our consciousness. For example, there is a widely spread opinion that women are stereotypically more emotional and men are stereotypically angrier. The nature vs. nurture debate cultivates certain opinions as to the gender differences. For example, the adherents of the «nature» theories assert that a person's aggression depends on the level of hormones. However, it is necessary to remark that the causal link between aggression and hormones has not been proved. For example, Robert Baron and Deborah Richardson (2004) only draw «some tentative conclusions regarding the

likely connection between aggression and testosterone» [1, 258]. As a matter of fact, the scholars argue that «although testosterone may play some part in aggressive behavior and may account, to some extent, for gender differences in aggression, other factors may play an even more important role» [1, 258].

At the beginning of the story, Maria Concepción walks carefully, «keeping to the middle of the white dusty road» [2, 4]. She is a practical woman who cannot waste time «drawing cactus needles from her feet» [2, 4]. The author depicts her pregnancy with beautiful naturalness and womanhood: «The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman» [2, 4]. Maria Concepción represents the ideal of female fertility, «the most ancient archetype in human experience – the eternal feminine – whose office is the continuation of life» [5, 42].

In developing the character of Maria Concepción, the author emphasizes and actually admires her self-sufficiency. Maria Concepción is depicted as a self-assured and active person; she is an «energetic religious woman who can drive a bargain to the end» [2, 6]. It is essential that the main heroine is able to earn her own money and therefore enjoys the stable financial position: «Maria Concepción sold her fowls and looked after her garden and her sack of hard coins grew» [2, 8]. Maria Concepción performs her social role which provides her with the feelings of internal balance and harmony.

The source of Maria's income is rather symbolic. As Mary Titus remarks, the means of Maria's independence is her «quick and able knife <...> her skill at slaughter – at cutting and reshaping flesh» [5, 44]. Thus, her instruments are the embodiment of aggressive power and violence which contributes to the image of Maria Concepción as an active and strong woman: «she took the fowl by the head, and silently, swiftly drew her knife across its throat, twisting the head off with the casual firmness» [2, 6].

As a matter of fact, this aspect of Maria's personality is emphasized during her conversation with Givens. The archaeologist is an embodiment of civilization and science, the man is actually horrified when Maria Concepción easily decapitates the

fowl in front of him: «Good God, woman, you do have nerve,» said Givens, watching her. «I can't do that. It gives me the creeps» [2, 6]. Hence, the heroine possesses skills which turn out to be unattainable for a male. It is worth of mentioning that by virtue of her «hard coins» Maria Concepción is able to secure herself a stable position in her marriage: «She had paid for the license, nearly a year ago, the potent bit of stamped paper which permits people to be married in the church» [2, 4]. The main heroine insists upon marrying in the church, instead of behind it, since it provides her with a more steady social position and legal status: «Maria Concepción was always as proud as if she owned a hacienda» [2, 5].

When Maria Concepción learns about her husband's infidelity, she is strong enough to suppress and conceal her anger; the heroine is confident that she will manage to settle this problem. Maria Concepción is depicted as an independent and strong woman who meets the ills of life extremely stoically: «María Concepción did not weep when Juan left her; and when the baby was born, and died within four days, she did not weep» [2, 7]. The extraordinary internal forces allow the woman to face up to difficulties. Abandoned by her husband, the heroine deliberately isolates herself from the townspeople; she refuses to share her suffering with other women. This detachment renders Maria Concepción emotionally and psychologically tempered; it actually makes her even stronger. In such a manner, she brings emotions under control, establishes her feminine freedom and independence: «She was gaunt, as if something was gnawing her away inside, her eyes were sunken <...> She worked harder than ever, and her butchering knife was scarcely ever out of her hand» [2, 8].

Even when her husband tries to beat her in order to reestablish his dominating position, the heroine stands her ground and resists: «Maria Concepción, knowing all the events of that unhappy day, was not in a yielding mood, and refused to be beaten. She did not scream nor implore <...> she even struck at him» [2, 10]. In this context, the fact that Maria Concepción «was not in a yielding mood, and refused to be beaten» [2, 10] is very important. This detail discloses the author's conceptual design of the feminine character, since it suggests that the internal strength of a woman is far

more complex: it is up to her to decide whether to demonstrate submission and obedience or to reveal her real power depending on the situation.

As Darlene Unrue observes, «Juan is carrying out an acceptable masculine tradition of infidelity, apparently a legacy of the patriarchal European conquerors» [6, 22]. As a result, Maria's anger is directed at Maria Rosa: «During the day her anger against him died, and her anger against Maria Rosa grew» [2, 7]. Finally, Maria Concepción decides to restore order in her world and retrieve what belongs to her by right. For this purpose, she ruthlessly murders her rival – the young beekeeper Maria Rosa. Quite symbolically, the main heroine eliminates the young temptress with the help of her permanent means of independence – with her knife. Maria Concepción turns out to be a remorseless and dangerous avenger indeed: «Now she must sit in hell, crying over her sins and her hard death forever and ever» [2, 13].

It is also necessary to remark that as soon as Juan learns about Maria's crime, the subordinate position of the wife to her husband is once again reasserted. Now it is his duty to protect her, despite that fact that she has just killed a person. Juan gives her orders to clean the knife, change the clothes and cook dinner. Juan actively makes plans in order to save his wife from the gendarmes: «Don't be afraid. Listen to me! I will hide thee away; I thy own man will protect thee!» [2, 11]. Now Maria Concepción depends on him again, and she accepts his protection and authority. As Mary Titus observes, «the conversation between husband and wife is now a sequence of commands, Juan speaking, Maria silently obeying» [5, 45]. When the gendarmes come, Maria Concepción loses her own voice. As a matter of fact, the main heroine moves out of her female independence, she gives up her authority. This is actually the cost Maria Concepción has to pay to escape prison and death. Her husband has taught her a feasible story, and Maria Concepción obediently repeats it word for word, taking the submissive position in order to survive.

Indeed, her conversation with gendarmes consists of the facts she has learned from Juan: «It was true at first she was troubled when her husband went away, but after that she had not worried about him. It was the way of men, she believed. She was a church-married woman and knew her place. Well, he had come home at last.

She had gone to market, but had come back early, because now she had her man to cook for. That was all» [2, 14]. Maria Concepción renounces her work at the market which provides her with money and social independence. Instead, the traditional duties of a good wife and dinner for her husband move to the forefront, as the man retrieves his authority and Maria Concepción allows him to do this.

Thus, Maria's family life, as well as her position in the community, is settled now. She conquers her rival and obtains the unanimous support from the villagers. As Janis Stout asserts, «the title character is, in a strange and surprising way, the center of her community» [4, 73]. The townspeople respect Maria Concepción, as well as her legal status: «She is a woman of good reputation among us and Maria Rosa was not» [2, 14], and therefore refuse to betray her secret. Even the god-mother of Maria Rosa – Lupe the medicine woman – supports the main heroine: «She could have ruined that Maria Concepción with a word, but it was even sweeter to make fools of these gendarmes who went about spying on honest people» [2, 13]. Thus, the primitive tradition of bloody vengeance overpowers and conquers the legislative rules of civilization. In this context, the image of blood attains in the story a number of symbolic meanings: the townspeople use the figurative expression «bad blood» for «enmity»; the child of Maria Rosa «spat blood the moment it was born, a bad sign» [2, 13] and so on.

As a matter of fact, Maria Concepción as an embodiment of the Great Mother archetype structures the entire village around her; she affects the primitive community, implicitly imposing her will on the townspeople. This is why the compatriots vouch for her: Maria Concepción is «the symbolic center of the village whose continued presence is worth maintaining even by lying» [4, 73]. The fact that the townsmen vouch for Maria Concepción and support her is indicative of the woman's extraordinary power to influence people around her.

Thus, the main heroine deliberately sacrifices her social and economic status which she has worked out with such effort and pain. Maria Concepción turns into an obedient and subservient woman. However, she maintains her active positions, even if privately: at the end of the story Juan falls «straight back on the floor, almost

instantly asleep» [2, 15]. However, Maria, «even as she was falling asleep <...> was still aware of a strange, wakeful happiness» [2, 15]. Ultimately, the story ends with the triumph of a female, notwithstanding the fact that this triumph is undisclosed and quiet. Hence, the woman is wise enough not only to demonstrate her power, but also to reveal her female weakness at appropriate time.

Thus, the story «presents a complex and unresolved enactment of the author's gender-thinking» [5, 43]. Katherine Anne Porter explores the unknown and hidden resources of the female identity. Maria Concepción is depicted as a many-sided, contradictory and unpredictable character which enables the author to represent the complex and ambivalent feminine nature. María Concepción is described as cautious and strong (and even ruthless in her fury); passionate and detached; extremely religious and murderous at the same time. The hidden forces of a woman not only can trigger dramatic actions and drastic changes around her, but are also capable of rendering her flexible and compliant at necessary time.

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Ю.В. БЕРЕЖАНСЬКА

**РОЗВИТОК І РУЙНАЦІЯ ГЕНДЕРНИХ СТЕРЕОТИПІВ У НОВЕЛІ  
КЕТРІН ЕНН ПОРТЕР «МАРІЯ КОНСЕПСЬОН»**

*У статті досліджуються особливості феміністичного дискурсу у новелі «Марія Консепсьон» американської письменниці Кетрін Енн Портер – лауреатки Пулітцерівської премії (1966). Гендерний світогляд автора виявляє поєднання суперечливих тенденцій. Новела демонструє ряд гендерних стереотипів, деякі з яких піддаються спростуванню. Головна героїня постає втіленням потужної жіночої сили, що прагне елімінувати прояви гендерної нерівності, однак зазнає трансформацій у ході сюжетних колізій.*

**Ключові слова:** жіноча проза, персонаж, фемінізм, гендер, гендерні стереотипи.

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**РАЗВИТИЕ И РАЗРУШЕНИЕ ГЕНДЕРНЫХ СТЕРЕОТИПОВ В  
НОВЕЛЛЕ КЭТРИН ЭНН ПОРТЕР «МАРИЯ КОНСЕПСЬОН»**

*В статье исследуются особенности феминистического дискурса в новелле «Мария Консепсьон» американской писательницы Кэтрин Энн Портер – лауреата Пулитцеровской премии (1966). Для гендерного мировоззрения автора характерно сочетание противоречивых тенденций. Новелла демонстрирует ряд гендерных стереотипов, некоторые из которых подвергаются опровержению. Главная героиня предстает воплощением мощной женской силы, которая стремится элиминировать проявления гендерного неравенства, однако испытывает трансформации в ходе сюжетных коллизий.*

**Ключевые слова:** женская проза, персонаж, феминизм, гендер, гендерные стереотипы.