

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 3 March 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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**Willa Cather's Portrayal of the Pioneer Virtues in Alexandra Bergson
with Reference to *O Pioneers!***

S. Latha Venkateswari, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D.

America is at heart a frontier nation, newly born, created out of wilderness. Its character and spirit can be traced back to and accounted for, by its frontier origins.
- Mary Panicia Carden.

Early Settlers

Early in the 19th Century, people in large numbers migrated to the U.S. due to poor working and economic conditions in Europe and elsewhere. These first settlers faced innumerable difficulties as they had to start their life from the scratch. Yet, the possession of the pioneer qualities such as adaptability, adjustability and survivability made them contribute “to the building of a nation by providing a constant source of inexpensive labour, by settling in rural regions and industrial cities” (Fonner 33).

Sufferings of Immigrants

Being an immigrant, Willa Cather, an early 20th Century American novelist, centers her writings on the sufferings of the immigrant population and the transplanted Americans living on the prairies of Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado. In her early novel *O Pioneers!* Cather extols the pioneer virtues of the central character Alexandra Bergson to show how an immigrant woman achieves a unique status in her adopted land where other farmers failed in their attempts and returned to their native places. This paper analyses the pioneer

virtues that were considered essential for setting up a new life at the frontier in a historical perspective.

Homestead Act

1862, the Congress in America passed the historical Homestead Act that promised the family head with 160 acres of land on condition that they should build a home, improve the barren land and do farming for five years. In turn, they were charged \$18 dollars. Hence, between 1865 and 1880, nearly one fifth of the first generation Czeck farmers of European origin and the Bohemians migrated to the U.S.

Along with this, the opening of the railway line farther into Nebraska territory in 1865 lured the Eastern people to the U.S. Thus, people settled more in Kansas and Nebraska. However, life was not easy for them as the grasshoppers invaded the area and destroyed much of the crops between 1874 and 1877.

As a result, the frontiers experienced drought, bad credit policies and fall in the prices of agricultural products that forced them to leave their farms and return to the East. Cather uses this historical background in O Pioneers! to explain the struggle of the pioneers in building new lives in a hostile and unfamiliar atmosphere.

Alexandra Bergson's Pioneer Qualities

Cather, in *O Pioneers!* lists Alexandra Bergson's pioneer qualities, that helped her in overcoming the adversities faced by the first settlers on the prairie. Alongside, Cather juxtaposes the strength of Alexandra and the weakness of other immigrants who yielded to the hardships. To begin with, Cather illustrates how rough weather and unproductive land at the frontier marginalized the immigrants on the Great Divide in Nebraska.

Cather explains this condition through Alexandra's father, John Bergson, who after years of struggle "had made but little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods...Its Genius was unfriendly to man" (O Pioneers! 10). Through these lines, Cather hints at the truth that the barren land did not respond to the coercive and dominant attitude of men.

Dedication to the Land and Farm Life

Alexandra dedicates herself to her land and farm life. In fact, her oneness with the land enhances Alexandra's acumen for building a new life on the prairie. Having understood Alexandra's potential, her father Bergson makes her the head of the family with the hope that her "strength of will and the simple way of thinking things out" (*O Pioneers!* 13) will change the destiny of his land and children. True to a pioneer, Bergson establishes his individualism by breaking the tradition of a patriarchal society that makes the son the

head of the family as Fowler says: “the special idea of the mysterious ability of the paterfamilias to continue the family and keep up its connexion with the genius” (18).

Spontaneous Love and Control of Emotions

Alexandra, through her spontaneous love and care for the land brings in dramatic changes and fulfils her father’s desire of building up their property. Indeed, her innovative ideas and dedication to the land raise the status of their family. She is resolute and resembles her creator in suppressing her femininity under “a long man’s Ulster coat” (*O Pioneers!* 2) with the belief that “achieving in the world was a male prerogative” (Lahiri 96).

Alexandra hardly expresses her emotions and tries to control it with the fear that it may take away the strength needed for accomplishing her goals. She relies on her ability as well as hard work in extracting more work from her brothers Oscar and Lou with a view to developing their land. Though Oscar and Lou lack intelligence, they follow their sister’s words and “worked like an insect, always doing the same thing over in the same, regardless of whether it was best or not” (*O Pioneers!* 31) thereby trusting Alexandra’s ability and skill.

Open to Ideas

Alexandra is open to ideas and follows the advice of the people who possess rich knowledge about farm work regardless of their position. The urge to learn new techniques and try them on their land makes her visit people of different places. Along with her brothers, Alexandra visits old Ivar, a Russian man, whose love for nature and animals make people call him an eccentric. It is through his guidance Alexandra learns about increasing the life span of hogs and how to treat the domestic animals.

Alexandra is so captivated by Ivar’s serene life that she offers him refuge in her residence when he loses his prosperity. This incident not only proves Alexandra’s attachment to the purity of life, but also her interest in enhancing the knowledge of farming in Ivar’s companionship as well.

Patience and Determination

The weather and the yield are not always the same in the prairie. It results in “drouth and failure” driving the farmers to debts that make them feel that, “the country was never meant for men to live in; the thing to do was to get back to Iowa, to Illinois, to any place that had been proved habitable” (*O Pioneers!* 26). Initially, Alexandra too feels depressed but then her communion with nature “fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security” (*O Pioneers!* 39). In fact, it strengthens her and gives her the revelation that she can get a better yield by cajoling the land instead of showing the conquering approach.

Patience and determination are mandatory for building up a new country. But, the immigrant farmers of Hanover succumb to the external pressures and surrender their attempts to make the land better. During crisis, survival becomes more important to them than improving their land. Hence, they sell their lands and get back to their old jobs.

But, Alexandra remains steadfast in fulfilling her father's dream and plants sweet potatoes since they have the capacity to thrive "upon the weather that was fatal to everything else." Though her brothers force her to migrate like other farmers, Alexandra patiently analyses the situation and explains to them the avenues open before them for survival. In this context, she refers to Fuller, an educated man who knows about the nuances of agriculture. She says: "I wish that man would take me for a partner...If only poor people could learn a little from rich people!" (*O Pioneers!* 32). Finally, Alexandra succeeds in her attempt not by coercion but through persuasion. The distinct quality of Alexandra is that she never imposes her choice on others but convinces people before taking up a decision.

Innovative

A pioneer must be brave, intelligent, hard working and ready to face challenges. Alexandra exhibits these qualities when she takes her brothers to the river farms to make them understand the possibilities of developing their land. Further, she explains to them the benefits of mortgaging their homestead and buying more land. Though her brothers hate "experiments and could never see the use of taking pains" (*O Pioneers!* 24), they trust Alexandra's fore vision and dare to take risks. With united efforts, Alexandra and her brothers change the barren land into a fertile one that ultimately results in the multiplication of their wealth.

Success Comes with Hard Work, Intelligent Planning and Trust

John Bergson's children attain success in their attempts and thrive well under the leadership of Alexandra, whereas other immigrant farmers fail in their endeavors. Thanks to Alexandra's possession of the pioneer qualities outlined by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner such as "Individualism, Innovativeness, Openness to new experience, Mobility, Self-reliance, Faith in 'Technology', Trust in quick-working relationships, Personal openness, Sincerity, Sense of effectiveness, Belief in the purity and values of rural areas", she manages difficult situations, protects her father's property from getting sold and fulfils his wish of proliferating their land.

Along with her brothers, she puts in strenuous efforts that change the Divide and it becomes "thickly populated...The rich soil yields heavy harvests; the dry, bracing climate and the smoothness of the land make labor easy for men and beasts" (*O Pioneers!* 41).

Refuge in Tradition and Spirituality

Alexandra faces the odds in her life by taking refuge in tradition and spirituality. For instance, she reads The Swiss Family Robinson to her mother and brother Emil that infuses her with confidence and prevents her from losing hope. Like other Swedes, she knows by heart the long portions of the Frithjof Saga that fills her with the necessary strength to tackle the difficulties in life. Similarly, when her spirits fail, she makes Ivar read Bible and tries to overcome her agonies.

Cather respects old customs and values and acknowledges it through Alexandra. Alexandra does not forget her past in her affluence. When she builds a rich house, she keeps the “old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in their first log house, the family portraits and the few things her mother brought from Sweden” (*O Pioneers!* 46) in her sitting room. Contrary to the attitude of the immigrants, who extremely dwell in the past and welcome their ruin, Alexandra uses her past and the memories related to it for deriving strength that is necessary to handle tough circumstances.

Vision is Vital for Success

Through *O Pioneers!* Cather proves that the pioneer vision is vital for the success of farmers. Besides, it is essential for the farmers to understand the condition of their land in the present, past and foresee the types of crops that will give good yields in the future. Alexandra succeeds in her attempts because she places her faith in the land and establishes spiritual union with it. Moreover, she believes that her destiny is inseparable from the land and dedicates herself to the land.

Alexandra survives the harsh Nebraskan ambiance as she transcends the restrictions imposed on her by the patriarchal society. Her dedication and devotion to the land give new meaning to agriculture and it highlight the role of the pioneer women in the development and construction of the American nation.

Transcending Gender

Interestingly, Alexandra reflects the Hindu concept of Lord Ardhanarisvara, “the lord who is half woman” (Goldberg 1). By giving the right part of his body to his wife goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva possesses both masculine and feminine qualities. Similarly, Alexandra exhibits her masculine qualities while working on the field and her feminine qualities in her motherly care and affection to which the land responds in an amazing manner. Consequently, she becomes a successful farmer and creates an identity for herself that is quite impossible in the field dominated by men. Thus, Alexandra – the pioneer woman transcends gender, community and race in achieving a unique status in her life.

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S. Latha Venkateswari, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Department of English,
Govt. College of Technology,
Coimbatore – 641013
Tamilnadu, India
lveswari@rediffmail.com
drlathagct@gmail.com