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GENDERING UTOPIA: A FEMINIST LITERARY ANALYSIS OF MARGE PIERCY'S WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF TIME

Abstract:

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy offers a utopian revisioning of a society in which gender, mothering, madness and social organization are all radically reconstructed. By means of a feminist literary analysis of the ways in which the text revises some of the most urgent gendered challenges that continue to plague contemporary societies, this article seeks to shed light on the utopian future that feminist theorists and activists continue to strive towards. The novel represents the experiences of Connie, a Mexican American woman who periodically escapes from her oppressive existence in contemporary American society by entering the alternative, utopian society of Mattapoisett. Piercy does not simply accept the traditional view of man and woman, individual and community, heterosexual and homosexual, mad and sane as polar opposites. Rather, in her construction of utopia, she sees them as constitutive elements of a harmonious whole. In her utopia, it becomes clear that patriarchy does not only oppress women and the reader sees male characters basking in the joy of parenting and children flourishing in communal caregiving environments. Through her literary vision of a new type of society, Piercy suggests that a reconfiguration of gender can benefit all members of such a new, utopian society.

Keywords:

Gender; utopia; science fiction; mothering; madness

1. Introduction

The advent of post-modernism precipitated an increasing tendency towards de-canonization and provided the impetus for a proliferation of literary forms. In this destabilized literary milieu, science fiction has emerged as an exceptionally rich forum within which to reflect on, and rework, traditional notions of social constructs in general, and gender in particular. For feminist critics and authors, this genre has proven to be especially attractive since it allows the creation of an alternative type of society which “we can dream into existence” and where “fiction can validate our ideals when real life cannot” (Zimmerman 143). Maggie Humm argues that “[u]topian thinking has always been a source of political inspiration for feminists” (290) while Hester Eisentein suggests that “feminist theory is utopian in itself in the way it creates a space within patriarchy and opens up new horizons”. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy embraces this post-modern destabilization and constructs an alternative reality in a profoundly de-centred universe. By juxtaposing a realistic depiction of a contemporary society with a seemingly fantastic portrayal of a utopian future, Piercy's text offers a critique of the prevailing norms and the ubiquitous power structures that characterise the ostensibly democratic society of Western capitalist states. By means of a feminist literary analysis of the ways in which the text revises some of the most urgent gendered challenges that continue to plague contemporary societies, this article seeks to shed light on the utopian future that feminist theorists and activists continue to strive towards.

Piercy's representation of Mattapoissett can be viewed as a sustained deconstruction of the binary oppositions that pervade the present-day environment of the protagonist Connie Ramos. The novel represents the experiences of Connie, a Mexican American woman who periodically escapes from her oppressive existence in contemporary American society by entering the alternative, utopian society of Mattapoissett. Piercy does not simply accept the traditional view of man and woman, individual and community, heterosexual and homosexual, mad and sane as polar opposites. Rather, in her construction of utopia, she sees them as constitutive elements of a harmonious whole. These normally opposing forces become the yin and yang in a dynamic interaction that generates the meaning of a richer whole. Piercy's rejection of traditional dualism is strikingly employed in her tendency to fuse binary opposites. As a result of this fusion of mother and father, man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual, Mattapoissett is made up of co-parents, persons and bisexuals. In this way, her utopia becomes an exploration of a reality without the social and sexual dichotomies that pervade our own contemporary cultures. By abolishing the boundaries that separate ruler and ruled, owner and worker, feminine and masculine and man and woman, Piercy postulates a non-hierarchical world that draws heavily on the theoretical traditions of anarchism, socialism, feminism and environmentalism.

2. Utopian explorations of parenting

The most radically reconstituted social constructs in Piercy's utopia are those of gender and motherhood. By deconstructing the hierarchy that privileges man and marginalises woman, Piercy's text subtly undermines the hegemony of that totalizing, masculine discourse that dominates contemporary societies. The central technique through which Piercy accomplished the equalisation of the sexes is the liberation of women from their traditional roles as the bearers and primary caretakers of children. In her utopia, women's bodies cease to be vehicles of procreation. Embryos develop in brooders and children are cared for in communal child-care facilities with three adults of either sex as co-parents of each minor child. The African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child is embraced in this society in which the responsibility for the well-being of children is distributed throughout the community. In Mattapoissett, the repressive dictum that a woman's biology is her destiny is thus turned on its head.

Piercy's depiction of the parent-child relationship in contemporary America contrasts sharply with the communal raising of children in the utopia future of Mattapoissett. The comparison that the reader is implicitly invited to draw constitutes a damning critique of the ethos of parenting in Connie's world. The traditional, isolating structure of the nuclear family disproportionately burdens women in general and single mother in particular. Piercy's utopian portrayal of children basking in the love of an entire community, and flourishing as a result thereof, clearly implies that the child's life is also impoverished by the narrow understanding of adult responsibility in modern America. The reader is granted access to the Mattapoissett conception of family life through the eyes of Connie, and the distinctions that emerge between the status of women and children in the two societies are both striking and poignant. In Connie's descriptions of her own extended family, the patriarchal discourse of the father is revealed as a pernicious and destructive force in the lives of women and children alike. This discourse emanates from biological fathers as well as the men and institutions that relate to women in a distinctly paternalistic fashion. As a single, poor Chicana mother carrying the label of insanity, Connie Ramos is particularly vulnerable to this ubiquitous male domination. Due to these multiple levels of marginalisation, Connie's dis-empowerment is compounded. In her world, married/ single, rich/poor, European/ Chicana and sane/insane constitute clear-cut binary opposites and she occupies the marginalised position in each of the resultant hierarchies. Piercy's text clearly implies that a society which insists on slotting Connie into such restrictive categories severely impeded her ability to care for the child she so obviously loves.

3. A utopian critique of madness

Various theorists "have described the way society uses definitions of mental health as a form of social control" (Humm 169) and constructions of madness are undeniably gendered to police women's behaviour. The aftermath of Connie's abuse of her daughter Angelina and her subsequent incarceration in a mental hospital provide a striking illustration of the merciless and damaging way in which contemporary

societies deal with women and children in peril. Even as Connie is engorged with “self-pity and self-hatred” (Piercy 60) and desperately wants to “cooperate [and] to grow well” (60), she is confronted with the judgement and demands of a system that tells her “to stop acting out” (60). Instead of providing support to a mother who clearly yearns to atone for her mistake, the mental health profession responds by contributing to the infantilization of women that has become an all too familiar characteristic of modern societies. The demand to “stop acting out” is an imperative that can appropriately be used with an unruly child, but to apply it to an adult woman is merely patronising and disempowering.

The social worker, who is depicted by Piercy as a representative of bureaucratized state institutions, scolds Connie for being “disgraceful and uncontrolled” (60). By reducing Connie's status to that of a child, the system effectively destroys her capacity of being a mother to her daughter. Even an instinct as basic as protecting her daughter from lead poisoning (60) is thwarted as Connie fears that she “dare [not] touch her daughter in front of the bureaucrat from Child Welfare” (60). The pathos of this perversion of the mother/ daughter bond is reinforced by Connie's internalisation of the negative attitudes of society to a woman in her position. Her thoughts that the “bastards who had spayed her ... had been right” (Piercy 62) are particularly revealing in this regard. By describing herself and her body in terms of a language of bestialization, Connie is in danger of perpetuating the reduction of the female by Western patriarchal society. This is a society that would have her believe that it is a crime to be “born poor as it [is] a crime to be born brown” (62) and that it is a crime to cause the growth of a “new woman” (60). Through her vivid descriptions of the physical, mental and emotional onslaught to which Connie is exposed Piercy manages to suggest that Connie's ability to stay relatively sane and to continue resisting this inherently hostile system is a testament to the quiet but enormous personal courage that sustains her. It seems clear that, if the state institutions were to act in the best interests of the child, they would provide support to a mother who loves her daughter fiercely and is well-suited to teach her the skills needed by any strong, empowered and resourceful woman. The reader gets the distinct impression that Angelina will miss out on a great deal as a result of being “adopted into a suburban white family whose beautiful exotic daughter she would grow into” (62). Although Angelina would undoubtedly gain certain advantages from her assimilation into a new family, there is equally little doubt that, on a very fundamental level, her separation from her mother will be as impoverishing for her as it evidently is for Connie.

4. Imaginary constructions of alternative gendered relations

Piercy's rejection of the traditional dualisms that pervade Connie's world comes to vivid life in her depiction of the utopian future society of Mattapoissett. Rather than viewing the individual and the community as polar opposites, Piercy observes a Taoist-like focus on integration, completeness and mutuality. In this milieu, child-rearing is a collaborative enterprise that draws on the resources of an entire community. The significance of the individual is also preserved by assigning specific

co-parents to each baby. In this society, every child thus enjoys the benefits of individual attention as well as community love and support. Even the most privileged child in Connie's world seems disadvantaged by comparison. At Connie's first encounter with Dawn, she realises that Mattapoissett provides an infinitely richer environment for a child than anything Angelina could possibly have access to in contemporary America. This awareness is prompted not only by the abundance of care offered by the inextricably interwoven nature of individual and community, but also by the radically different relationship between men and women that Connie observes in this utopia. Piercy's depiction of a utopian form of interaction between male and female differs from our familiar, gendered relations in a number of ways. In Mattapoissett, both sexuality and sexual differentiation are highly fluid. There is none of the imposition of the artificial and restrictive norms of heterosexuality and monogamy. Jackrabbit and Bolivar's intimacy is as socially acceptable as that of Luciente and Jackrabbit. Similarly, the fact that both Bee and Jackrabbit are Luciente's "sweet friends" (72) is accepted by Mattapoissett society with a completely *laissez-faire* attitude. In addition, the boundaries that distinguish the female and male body are rendered porous in this utopian society. In Mattapoissett, a forty five year old male character has "[s]mall breasts ... swollen with milk" (136) that enable him to nurse that baby of which he is a co-parent. The description of the "serene enjoyment spread[ing] over Barbarossa's ... face" (134) as he breast feeds his child, suggests that men are as capable of the intimacy and nurturing that tend to be associated disproportionately with women in our own societies. Rather than regarding man and woman as polar opposites, Piercy sees individuals as an anatomical and social fusion of the two. By amalgamating binary oppositions, Piercy thus postulates a reality in which the hierarchization of men and women actually becomes impossible.

Simone de Beauvoir's contention that one is not born a woman but becomes one, is well illustrated by Piercy's juxtaposition of Connie and Luciente and the different societies that shaped their gendered identities. Having established that gender is a social construction, Piercy utilises the utopian setting of Mattapoissett to explore the possibility that it can be constructed in a different way. Connie's initial inability to identify Luciente as a woman reflects the rigidity with which her society imposes its conceptions of proper female characteristics on women. It is extremely difficult for Connie to reconcile Luciente's "brisk, unselfconscious authority (67) with the fact that she is female. Connie's society has inculcated her image of women with notions of deference and self-abnegation to such an extent that the concept of power and female seem mutually exclusive to her. Luciente's assertiveness and the confidence that enables her to "tak[e] up more space than women ever did" (67) emphasize the sharp distinction between the socialization processes that form women in Connie and Luciente's societies respectively. Luciente's seemingly instinctive lack of attention to the way in which "her body [is] displayed"(67) is alien to Connie which comes from a society in which every movement of the female body is subjected to, and thus influenced by, the male gaze, Luciente's depiction as being "too confident, too unselfconscious [and] too aggressive" (99) to fit the female mould constructed by Connie's society, allows the reader to catch a glimpse of the woman that Connie could

have become in a more tolerant and supportive environment. Piercy's text ultimately suggests that individuals are able to develop their full potential by recognising and embracing all aspects of their personalities. Instead of regarding the feminine and masculine as polar opposite, Piercy fuses them within each citizen of Mattapoisett. In this way, the feminine and the masculine become the yin and the yang of the self that are able to supplement and enrich each other, thus facilitating the emergence of richly whole human beings.

In Mattapoisett these well-developed citizens attach great importance to values such as individual autonomy and respect for others. They clearly regard themselves as constitutive elements of a broader community without subordinating or marginalising the needs and interests of the individual. The concepts of individual and community are inseparable and people instinctively accept their share of a communal responsibility to maintain the health of the larger social organism. This voluntary contribution to the social well-being, combined with support and respect for difference and individuality, facilitates a form of social organization that draws heavily on the traditions of anarchism. The utopian potential of anarchism is underscored by emphasizing the detrimental impact that governmental institutions have had on Connie's life. This is particularly well illustrated by the comparison between Connie and Luciente's experiences of "madhouses" (66). While Connie sees the mental hospital as a place to which she "was dragged screaming" (66), Luciente's society regards it as "places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves" (66). Luciente is baffled by the notion that "another person [can] decide that it is time for [someone] to disintegrate [or] to reintegrate" (66). Her amazement reflects the extent to which she has internalised the principles of individual responsibility and self-determination. The mere suggestions that state institution can intervene in the process of "getting in touch with the buried self and inner mind" (66) is anathema to Luciente. Connie obviously perceives the authority that the state exercises over her life as illegitimate but society has marginalised her on so many levels that her capacity to resist governmental hegemony is severely compromised. Whereas individuals in Luciente's world are well-equipped and encouraged to take responsibility for themselves and their mental health, Connie's infantilization is perpetuated by a mental health profession that allows her to be committed against her will by her brother Luis. The obvious inadequacy of the treatment that Connie received, contrasts sharply with Luciente's conception of madhouses as places where people go to "see visions [and] hear voices of prophecy" (66). The text thus unequivocally suggests that individuals are in a better position to determine what is in their own best interest than governmental body. Such a rejection of the coercive role of government in favour of personal autonomy is a central tenet of anarchism. Peggy Kornegger notes that anarchism "has been maligned and misinterpreted for so long" (26) that it is useful to remind ourselves of its focus on "coordination and action via a non-hierarchical network (overlapping circles rather than a pyramid) of small groups or communities" as well as its belief in "both individuality and collectivity". In Mattapoisett, there is no marginalisation of the individual in favour of society. Rather, the individual

and the larger community co-exist and it is in the dynamic interaction between the two that both individuals and society flourish and attain their full potential.

A further illustration of the enriching and liberatory effect of the fusion of binary opposites is provided by Piercy's deconstruction of the sanity and insanity hierarchy. In her utopia, sanity and insanity are present within each individual and it is accepted that people "all lose parts of [themselves]". Rather than attaching labels of shame and stigma to insanity, Piercy's utopian citizens are encouraged to acknowledge occasional disintegration of the self and to see it as an opportunity to explore the "inner mind" (66). By merging the sane and insane aspects of a person, a more comprehensive and richly nuanced understanding and knowledge of the self is facilitated.

In a society in which people own and affirm all the disparate aspects of the self and where they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions, Piercy postulates a radically rethought conception of justice. Her utopia is tolerant, supportive and sexual taboos are almost non-existent. This lack of repression has produced a society in which rape is as much as an anachronism as cannibalism is in contemporary America. Theft is minimized by the fact that Mattapoissett does not "have much private property" (208). By attaining social justice through an economic system that is reminiscent of socialism, lack and deprivation are eliminated in Mattapoissett. When theft and assault do occur, the entire community responds to the needs of the perpetrator and starts to "work on healing" (209). This does not mean, however, that Mattapoissett is a society that indulges infinite permissiveness. This is made abundantly clear by their unwillingness "to live with people who choose to use violence" (209). When a person commit a second violent crime, society does indeed view it as a choice and the individual is forced to accept the ultimate responsibility for that choice. By executing habitual violent offender, Mattapoissett affirms its readiness to take proactive and decisive measures to safeguard and sustain its utopian society. Socially sanctioned murder of violent transgressors constitutes a distinctly dystopian activity and its inclusion in Mattapoissett society is a risk that has the potential to undermine the very foundations of utopia. Piercy thus acknowledges that any attainable utopia must repeatedly weigh the collective good against the rights of the individuals and take the necessary steps to maintain a desirable balance between the two.

5. Conclusion

In Piercy's utopia, the masculine tendency towards social and sexual hierarchization is eschewed in favour of a conventionally female emphasis on fusion and mutuality. Piercy's text ultimately suggests that a decentralised world of cooperation and reciprocity offers a richer reality than a world of hierarchies and polar oppositions. The repression of the subordinated sectors of society and the suppressed aspects of the self is a tendency that has a damaging and impoverishing impact on Connie's world. Through the fusion of binary oppositions, Mattapoissett eliminates the possibility of

restrictive hierarchies and thereby generates an environment in which diversity can flourish. Rather than shunning the female, the homosexual, the Chicana and the poor, utopian society celebrates them. By embracing these traditionally marginalised forces, the yin and the yang of the self and of society are able to supplement and enrich each other.

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