

5.2. Breaking All the Old Hierarchies: Sex and Gender in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*

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Abstract

Marge Piercy's 1976 speculative science-fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* analyses and critiques patriarchal culture while proposing solutions to discrimination faced by women and the LGBTQ+ community. Written during the second wave of North American feminism, the novel provides a contrast to the USA of the 1970s by identifying concerns and then showing how they have been resolved in her fictional Mattapoissett society. In the novel, sex differences have been eliminated, giving women increased self-determination through mechanical gestation and enabling all people to breastfeed children. Same-sex, multiple-partner, and polyamorous relationships are valued, removing the patriarchal notion of a man owning his wife. In several ways, Piercy's novel anticipates recent progress such as preferred pronouns and advances in artificial womb technology. Piercy recognizes that several of the book's proposals are controversial but asserts through the characters that true equality cannot exist as long as one sex bears any responsibilities alone.

Key words: utopia, feminism, LGBTQ+, abortion, pronouns

In her speculative science-fiction novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Marge Piercy's protagonist Connie Ramos illustrates problems faced by women in the USA in the 1970s. Connie's visit to the utopian society of Mattapoissett in the year 2137 allows Piercy to provide solutions to the oppression of women, both in her novel and in the historical family setting. Piercy draws upon feminist thought of the twentieth century to illustrate the consequences of forcing women to

assume a role as mother and nurturer. These challenges remain today, but greater understanding and social progress have placed our world closer to Piercy's utopian vision in several ways. However, this utopia may be more at risk now than it was when Piercy was writing in 1976.

Woman on the Edge of Time incorporates elements of the feminist utopian genre, defined by Sally Gearhart, an advocate of lesbian and women's rights, as one which

- a. contrasts the present with an idealized society (separated from the present by time or space),
 - b. offers a comprehensive critique of present values/conditions,
 - c. sees men or male institutions as a major cause of present social ills, and
 - d. presents women not only as at least the equal of men but also as the sole arbiters of their reproductive abilities.
- (McKenna, 2001: 137–8)

Piercy's novel fits all of these descriptions, and advances utopian thought by incorporating contemporary technology and criticisms of patriarchal society to demonstrate the growing potential of women to free themselves from patriarchy.

In the post-World War II period, bearing and raising children was one of the main issues believed to be preventing women from finding fulfilment. Some women called for an end to the nuclear family and the inequity it brought (Teslenko, 2003: 50). Although most women accepted childbearing as a necessity, they were unwilling to assume the full responsibility for caring for their children. While accepting that sex differences made females biologically suited to care for their offspring in early years, many women believed that men were using this fact to place the entire burden on women.

Many feminists agreed that raising children was a source of oppression, and some felt that gender problems came from childbearing itself. Shulamith Firestone (1970: 232) put this succinctly: "Nature produced the fundamental inequality—half the human race must bear and rear the children of all of them." With biological differences working against them, many women felt that equality in male-dominated aspects of society was almost impossible.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Connie sees what male sexual domination has done to her sister. Dolly is regularly beaten because she is pregnant and unable to convince Geraldo, her pimp, that he is the father of her child. Eventually, Geraldo demands that Dolly have an abortion against her will. Dolly's fear of loneliness and harm from Geraldo allows him to control her life, using her body

for sex and profit. She eventually frees herself from Geraldo, only to sell herself to a new pimp. Although Vic does not beat her, he takes even more control over her body by convincing her that she will make more money posing as an “Anglo” prostitute. He forces her to dye her hair and take drugs to lose weight. Vic is able to exert so much pressure on Dolly that she forsakes her heritage to increase her value as a sex object, illustrating the extent to which these men are able to control her. This brings back memories of Chuck, Connie’s classmate in college, who took advantage of her and left her when she became pregnant: “Some bargain. A baby in her belly by March and the end of her schooling, her pride, her hope” (242).

Piercy’s novel was published only three years after the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision upheld the right to abortion. The issue has been contentious for decades, and, after a series of political and legal challenges (Kelly, 2021; McCammon, 2021), it was overturned in June 2022 (*Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, 2022). This ruling placed decisions about abortion access in the hands of individual states, giving male-dominated political and judicial systems the ability to decide on matters related to women’s health. While this was one of many aspects of Mattapoisett in which Piercy showed parallels to increased gender equality in our society, recent campaigns against abortion rights in the USA have demonstrated that these advances can never be taken for granted.

Firestone looked back to how differences between the sexes had historically affected the composition of society. She believed that “the natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor based on sex, which is at the origins of all further division into economic and cultural classes and is possibly even at the root of caste” (Firestone, 1970: 9). Women regularly had to excuse themselves from the workforce for months or years at a time. Unable to pursue equal employment or hold a job without interruption, women’s place in the workforce was never secure. For many, this led to a dependence on men for financial security. When the US Department of Labor reported on the gender wage gap in 1973, three years before Piercy’s novel was published, women earned 57% of men’s wages (Jones, 2021). This has since risen to 82% (Jones, 2021), but more progress is needed to create a truly egalitarian society.

Some radical feminists took this idea further and called for technology to create complete gender equality. Claire Myers Spotswood, writing in 1935, claimed that “women as a race will never be able to accomplish any great and enduring work in the world until babies are conceived and born in test tubes in the chemical laboratories” (Albinski, 1988: 117). In the 1970s, Firestone defended the idea against charges that it would lead to the dehumanization seen in Aldous

Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. She stated that "[p]aradoxically, one reason the 1984 Nightmare occurs so frequently is that it grows directly out of, signifying an exaggeration of, the evils of our present male supremacist culture". She believed that "the first demand for any alternative system must be ... [t]he freeing of women from the tyranny of their reproductive biology by any means available, and the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women" (Firestone, 1970: 233). Although this idea was controversial, it found support with many women and plays a central role in *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

To avoid stratification due to childbearing expectations, babies in Piercy's Mattapoisett are incubated in a machine referred to as "the brooder", which carries out the functions once performed by the woman's reproductive system. They float upside-down in fluid for over nine months before entering the world. Connie is initially shocked and upset by the appearance of the machine, where "[a]ll in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine" (102). After considering what sexual domination has done to herself and those around her, Connie eventually becomes convinced of the benefits of Mattapoisett's reproductive technology. Her fears of the "1984 Nightmare" give way to desire for the sexual freedom and equal opportunities that accompany this mechanization. Nan Albinski (1988: 181) describes Connie's transformation: "After some time, she comes to see what this [freedom] means: no more prostitution, no more exploitation, no more unwanted children, no more unhappy women forced into marriage for the sake of social conformity".

Ever since being molested by her older brother as a child, Connie's life has been an ongoing series of exploitation. After seeing how she and Dolly could have been spared this suffering, Connie is willing to accept the brooder as a step forward for women's rights. While technology exists today to help conceive and protect babies through in-vitro fertilization and incubators, little progress has been made toward eliminating humans from childbearing altogether. The first patent for an artificial uterus was granted in 1955 (United States Patent 2,723,660), but the technology remains far from functional. The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia announced promising results in 2017 (Partridge *et al.*, 2017) and scientists from the Netherlands have stated that they expect their work to be operational within a decade (BBC, 2019). Even if the technology is viable, it remains to be seen whether it would be used only in emergency situations or would eventually become a widely available alternative method of gestation.

Piercy demonstrates through Connie's reactions that not every woman supports the call for technology to replace bearing and raising children. In addition to her initial opposition to the brooder, Connie is angered to see a man breastfeeding his child. She feels that women "had abandoned to men that

last refuge of women" (134). Through the use of hormones, men are able to develop breasts during the months that they help nurse the child. Although Connie is upset because this destroys the uniqueness of womanhood, Piercy clarifies this by demonstrating that equality is not possible while either sex has abilities not available to everyone. Piercy portrays this as a bittersweet victory. Luciente explains: "there was that one thing we had to give up too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone" (105). The motherly connection is a necessary sacrifice to completely eliminate gender differences that stratified society.

At the same time as the push for women's rights, the lesbian movement, a forerunner of LGBTQ+ activism, was gaining strength. Although some goals differed between these groups, they benefited each other in many ways by sharing similar views on several important topics. Many of these women believed that "[h]omosexuality, bisexuality, and celibacy should be just as socially acceptable as heterosexuality" (Teslenko, 2003: 50). Joanna Russ claimed that not requiring women to attach themselves to a male protector and provider was an important objective in both feminist utopias and the women's movement as a whole. She wrote (1981: 76), "the societies of these stories are *sexually permissive* ... which would be quite familiar to the radical wing of the feminist movement, since the point of permissiveness is not the break taboos but to separate sexuality from questions of ownership, reproduction and social structure". Naturally, these views were not limited to the lesbian movement, as such ideas benefited the women's movement in general.

The nature of the family is drastically altered in *Mattapoisett*. People are free to have sexual relations with any consenting person. In sharp contrast to Connie's society, the majority of characters enjoy "coupling" with both men and women. When she asks why people do not object, she is told, "All coupling, all befriending goes on between biological males, biological females, or both. [Male and female are] not a useful set of categories" (214). However, there is a clear distinction between these "sweet friends" and the "comothers" who work together to raise a child. The child is raised by any group of three people who can get the approval of the society. These comothers can be any combination of men and women, as both are equally suited for the role. Because children are not treated as private property, everybody is invited to assist with their education and development. Women are free to pursue their own goals, as no woman is left with the responsibility of raising a child with little or no assistance from the father.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Piercy responds to feminist criticisms of the differences between sexes by making the men and women almost indistinguishable. From the second sentence of the book, Luciente, one of the central characters,

is referred to as a man. It is not until the third chapter that Connie realizes that Luciente is a woman. Luciente is more muscular and assertive than the women in Connie's time, leading to understandable confusion. As Susan Kress states (1981: 117), "Judging from her self-assurance, her manner of walking, talking, and taking space, Connie had been convinced that [Luciente] was a man". Because women in Mattapoissett are not controlled by their biological sex, physical differences are no longer as evident.

Connie's confusion is understandable because she is used to a world in which the sexes are clearly differentiated because people's bodies are shaped to reflect their gender roles. Frances Bartkowski writes (1989: 67) that "such misrecognitions [as Connie's] are inevitable in a culture where heterosexuality is the norm, and where biological sex is immediately trained into a cultural gender identity". In contrast, "Luciente's world is one of two sexes and no gender" (Bartkowski, 1989: 68). With separation between the concepts of sex and gender, it is no longer possible to identify people's social roles based solely on their physical appearance. The inclusion of trans and non-binary identities is particularly relevant to today's world. Many people see this as a step toward liberation from birth-assigned sex roles, allowing them to live a life more in keeping with their own understanding of themselves. While this is a move toward the freedom of Piercy's society, several governments are targeting the trans community with bills to ban people from areas or activities unless they conform to their assigned sex (Cole, 2021; Paley, 2022). Politicians using this tactic to appeal to a conservative voting base pose a major threat to inclusion and the possibility of realizing Piercy's utopian vision.

The restructuring of language is an important feature of Mattapoissett's society. To reflect the equality of the sexes, "he" and "she" have been replaced with "person," and "his" and "her" have become "per." To fully abolish sexual discrimination, it is necessary to eliminate the words by which it takes place. This is an essential aspect of the society's transformation to utopia, as it removes the very concept of sexism from people's minds. Several decades after the publication of Piercy's novel, a wide range of pronouns are used by people who feel that he/him and she/her do not reflect their identity. Piercy was not the first author to use gender-neutral pronouns, and linguistics professor Dennis Baron states (2020: 12) that pronouns such as "E," "ze," and "thon" can be traced back to the nineteenth century. These pronouns and others including "they", "xe", "ip", "hir", and "heer" can be used today by people not wishing to identify as male or female. This enables them to feel greater respect and self-confidence. This is not always well received, and Jordan Peterson is among the notable names who have opposed the used of preferred pronouns, again putting the advances anticipated by Piercy's novel in jeopardy.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy incorporates feminist philosophy and draws upon the call of many radical feminists to free women from their reproductive systems through the use of technology. By proposing alternative methods of childbearing and childrearing, Piercy creates a society in which women experience true freedom and equality. Her book provides not only a discussion of the problems faced by women, but also possible solutions designed to lead toward a utopian world of true egalitarianism. Progress has been made in many of these areas, but true equal treatment and protection has never been attained. In recent years, some of these advances have been undone through conservative political and legal efforts, threatening to move society back to the time of Piercy's novel, if not further.

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