

The Healing Process in Marge Piercy's Novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*

Sinem Çapar
Ege University, Izmir, Turkey

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is considered as a utopian science fiction novel which also has concerns about feminism. Marge Piercy (1936-), who was initially a poet then a novelist, was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1936. The main character in the novel Connie Ramos is a Mexican-American woman who is confined in a mental hospital. She is considered as mentally sick, which is an unjust treatment to her. On the other hand, Connie can communicate telepathically with the future world of Mattapoissett in 2137 via Luciente. In order to understand the unjust treatments in the protagonist Connie's world and compare the health system in both societies, it is the author's intention to analyze the healing process in the *Woman on the Edge of Time*, both in Mattapoissett and the protagonist Connie Ramos' world. Thus, the author argues that in order to stay healthy in personal and societal level, one needs to live a holistic and egalitarian life similar to Mattapoissett, which is the antithesis of Connie's capitalist, greedy, and conformist world. The healing process includes the health system in both societies: the asylums, hospitals, and psychiatric institutions in general. In order to analyze and compare the healing process and the health system in both societies, it will be important to look through the dynamics and norms of the society.

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Introduction

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is considered as a utopian science fiction novel which also has concerns about feminism. Marge Piercy (1936-), who was initially a poet then a novelist, was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1936. She was the first person in her family who graduated from university. In the 1960s, Piercy participated in the women's movement as a political activist and she was also active in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). She wrote nearly 20 books of poetry and 17 novels. Her novels include: *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), *Gone to the Soldiers* (1987), *He, She and It* (1991), *The Longings of Women* (1994), and *Sex Wars* (2005). Moreover, her poetries include: *The Moon Is Always Female* (1980), *Circles on the Water* (1982), *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems With a Jewish Theme* (1992), and *What Are Big Girls Made of* (1997).

Her mother was a Jewish woman and her father was a Welsh immigrant. Her Jewish background has a great influence on her upbringing. Due to being raised by her Jewish grandmother and mother, Piercy's relationship with her mother was much closer than her father. She said, "I'm a Reconstructionist Jew myself; that's the movement of Judaism I feel most at home with" (Lyons & Piercy, 2007, p. 332). According to George Robinson's (2016) definition in his book *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs & Rituals*:

Sinem Çapar, master, research assistant, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters, Ege University.

A reconstructionist Jew has strong commitments both to tradition and to the search for contemporary meaning. Reconstructionists encourage all Jews to enhance their own lives by reclaiming our shared heritage and becoming active participants in the building of the Jewish future. (Robinson, 2016, p. 528)

So, similar to this definition of a reconstructionist Jew, Marge Piercy feels her belonging to the Jewish tradition. At the same time, she tries to search for a contemporary meaning of Judaism in order to become an active participant in the community. Throughout her life, Piercy was influenced by her religious upbringing as a Jewish and later on, she became a feminist and a political activist as an adult. In her poetry, she is more personal and autobiographical considering her novels. She dedicated her collected poems *My Mother's Body* (1985) to her mother. In her poetry, Piercy focuses on the ordinary lives of human beings while trying to find a solution to their problems as an activist:

Tikkun olam, Hebrew for "healing the world" is central to her poetry, which works to awaken her readers' passionate recognition of all that could and should be changed through human effort. Her poems are frequently anthologized, especially in volumes of feminist, political, and Jewish work. (Lyons & Piercy, 2007, p. 328)

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Considering these lines above, in her poetry, Piercy tries to "heal the world" with her words. On the other hand, her novels are multi-charactered and the plot is traced by the main characters in various chapters and every other character has their own voices. For example, in the *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), the main character Connie Ramos confronts the effects of the decisions of the other characters and Connie goes back and forth between the future world Mattapoisett and her own lifetime (Shuman, 2002). Moreover, as a significant example of the feminist science fiction novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) is also considered to be one of the first examples of the cyberpunk which contains both dystopian and utopian components. As Marge Piercy stated in her interview entitled "A Harsh Day's Light: An Interview With Marge Piercy" with John Rodden (1998), her novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* is in the utopian tradition, but she does not consider herself as a utopian. Because Piercy continues to mention that she has written in utopian tradition but there are also dystopian elements in the *Woman on the Edge of Time*. That is the reason why she tries to be critical about this tradition. Moreover, she is conscious about the received legends, myths, and stories of the culture. So, as Marge Piercy concluded, she is playing with these legends and myths in order to be critical which creates her difference as a writer in the utopian tradition.

Similarly, as it is asserted in the influential book *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction in Literature* by M. Keith Booker (2015), Marge Piercy becomes the one who creates the difference as a writer who belongs to utopian, feminist science fiction tradition:

Though the cyberpunk fiction of the 1980s has typically been viewed as a mostly masculinist realm, cyberpunk did have important precursors in feminist science fiction, including: *The Female Man*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Sheldon/Tiptree's *The Girl Who was Plugged in*. (1973, p. 112)

So, Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* becomes one of the precursors of the cyberpunk, which is generally considered as a masculinist realm. In the process of time, cyberpunk evolves into a different direction as it is asserted in the introduction of the book *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction: A Critical Study* by Carlen Lavigne (2013): "... women have re-created cyberpunk as a medium for feminist political voices; their works may be read as acts of participation in contemporary feminist discourse" (p. 4). Subsequently, Piercy's character as a revolutionary figure, a feminist, and a political activist can be seen

through her fiction. M. Keith Booker also stated *Woman on the Edge of Time* as a counterpoint to the dystopian present of 1970s America. Because Piercy tries to create a future community of Mattapoisett as an alternative world where divisions between race, gender, and class are eliminated. That is the reason why in Mattapoisett, society's norms are fluid and flexible, and people are open-minded (p. 205).

In his article "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," Lyman Tower Sargent (1994) asserted utopia is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space" (p. 9). Similarly, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* presents a utopian future where Piercy's feminist, ecological, and communitarian ideals are put into practice in Mattapoisett. Peter Fitting (2013) in his article "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction" described this utopian community. Connie Ramos is a Mexican-American woman who is confined in a mental hospital. She is considered as mentally sick, which is an unjust treatment to her. On the other hand, Connie can communicate telepathically with the future world of Mattapoisett in 2137 via Luciente. People of Mattapoisett live in self-sufficient regions where they achieve a utopian future world. They overpower the exploitative forces of capitalism and this fight still continues both in the future and in Connie's world. Furthermore, Connie has been contracted to join this struggle in order to achieve a better future without multinational capitalism. As the novel continues and begins to narrate both Connie's world and Mattapoisett, it can be seen that Connie realizes that she is also a victim in the mental hospital who needs to fight against the unjust system in the hospital (pp. 145-146). As Peter Fitting (2013) continued:

... She also realizes that her own situation in the hospital, as the unwilling subject in a psycho-surgical experiment designed to control "anti-social" behaviour, is a part of the war to control the future. In a desperate act of defiance and as her own conscious declaration of war against the increasing repression and exploitation of our present system, she poisons the doctors' coffee: She cannot remain in utopia; she will not be saved by a happy ending. But, the novel tells us, if we also begin to fight in the present, we may yet win the battle or the future. (p. 146)

So, Connie continues to experience both worlds with time travel via Luciente and she begins to appreciate the alternative world better than her own. She is considered as having "anti-social" behavior in her own time. But in the utopian Mattapoisett, Connie is considered as an equal to other citizens in the future world. That is the reason why she finds enough courage to fight against the unjust treatment in the mental hospital as well as the health system in general. To sum up, in order to understand the unjust treatments in Connie's world and compare the health system in both societies, it is the author's intention to analyze the healing process in the *Woman on the Edge of Time*, both in Mattapoisett and the protagonist Connie Ramos' world. Thus, the author argues that in order to stay healthy in personal and societal level, one needs to live a holistic and egalitarian life similar to Mattapoisett, which is the antithesis of Connie's capitalist, greedy, and conformist world. The healing process includes the health system in both societies: the asylums, hospitals, and psychiatric institutions in general. In order to analyze and compare the healing process and the health system in both societies, it will be important to look through the dynamics and norms of the society.

Motherhood in Mattapoisett

Initially, in order to look through the dynamics and norms of the society, it will be important to analyze the norms of sexuality, motherhood, and parenting. According to Alessa Johns (2013) in her article "Feminism and Utopianism," Piercy's Mattapoisett offers an alternative sexuality where inhabitants are free to choose whom to love and their sexuality is fluid. Even monogamy is not a common choice for a citizen (p. 185). The women's imprisonment to biology is no longer a problem in Mattapoisett, since reproducing human life is produced in

laboratories and there is no such term as the nuclear family (p. 190). Because regardless of gender, both man and woman are free from the restrictions of biology and there are no social expectations of a single mother to be the only responsible for the child. In order to prevent from the woman to have the total responsibility of a child, people of the Mattapoisett invented a term which is named "comothering" and even a man can be a "mother."

It was part of women's long revolution, when we were breaking all the old hierarchies. Finally, 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. The original production is the power to give birth. Because as long as we were biologically enchained, we would never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So, we all become mothers. Every child has three (Piercy, 1976, p. 97).

So, in order to break the nuclear bonding of the family, people of Mattapoisett invented "comothering" and they all become mothers regardless of gender. Also, as is quoted above, this innovation is a part of the women's long revolution of emancipation. Because if the woman continues to be biologically enchained to be a single mother, they cannot be an equal of the male counterpart. So, they share duties equally and even men are breastfeeding (p. 126). Being a comother is voluntary: A comother can choose not to be a mother anymore if he or she wants to. Also, comothers need to set their children free when the youngsters reach a mature age of adolescence.

On the other hand, Connie has a fragmented personality whose identity is divided into three. The first woman is Consuelo who is a traditional slave like Mexican woman and the second one is Connie, who tries to have a proper education. Finally, the last one is named Conchita who becomes an outcast in the society when she gets by in the jail and then becomes mentally ill. She explains her fragmentation as a woman while talking to Luciente:

... I've always had three names inside me. Consuelo, my given name. Consuelo's a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay. The woman who suffers. Who bears and endures. Then, I'm Connie, who managed to get two years of college—till Consuelo got pregnant. Connie got decent jobs from time to time and fought welfare for a little extra money for Angie. She got me on a bus when I had to leave Chicago. But it was her who married Eddie, she thought it was smart. Then I'm Conchita, the low-down drunken mean part of me who gets by in jail, in the bughouse, who loves no good men, who hurt my daughter (p. 114)

Healers in Mattapoisett and Connie's World

Thus, the author argues that Connie's fragmented personality as a woman is the product of her own capitalist, greedy, and conformist world. Moreover, her healing process as an outcast in the society is limited into mental hospitals, asylums, and psychiatrists. But in contrast to Connie's world, Mattapoisett offers another healing solution to Connie. There are healers in their community who help people to get through illnesses and chaotic situations. For instance, Diana, who is Luciente's old friend and lover, is a healer in Mattapoisett. Even Luciente offers a solution to Connie for merging her three diverse personalities while saying: "Maybe Diana could help you to meld the three women into one" (p. 114). Moreover, Luciente says:

Sometimes a healer like my old friend Diana can help. Diana the rose. A healer can go back with you and help you grow again. It's going down and then climbing a hard path. But many heal well. Like you, Diana catches. (p. 93)

Similarly, Jackrabbit who is Luciente's friend says: "The second time I was mad, Diana helped me" (p. 116). For instance, as the health system in Mattapoisett has no medical doctors or psychologists, they seek

medical advice from those healers. When Connie and Luciente talk about doctors and healers, Luciente expresses the difference between these two professions in Mattapoisett: "We don't do much taking out. When we do, we regrow. We program the local cells. Slow healing but better after" (p. 151). Then, Connie expresses her astonishment to Luciente about how come there is no doctor in Mattapoisett. As a response to Connie, Luciente points and says: "Look! Erzulia is a healer." But when Luciente says that Erzulia is a healer, Connie responds immediately that she is a witch-doctor. After hearing Connie's answer, Luciente says that being a healer or a witch-doctor is not an insult. Because she works in a hospital and teaches people to heal themselves. She is gifted at healing: surgery, pain easing, bone knitting, etc. (p. 151).

In Mattapoisett, healers like Diana and Erzula have a special place in the social structure. They contribute to the healing process of both physical and psychological illnesses. Furthermore, Diana, as a symbolic meaning, is that name of the goddess of the moon, hunt, and nature in Roman mythology. She is considered as the virgin goddess and has an equivalent in the Greek mythology which is Artemis. In Kristy S. Coleman's (2010) book *Re-riting Woman: Dianic Wicca and the Feminine Divine*, it is asserted that goddess of the moon, Diana is associated with the sacred female autonomy: "... Diana whose character traits include not consorting with men and being 'virgin' in that she is 'whole unto herself'. The goddess Diana, identified as Artemis in the Greek pantheon, signifies sacred female autonomy" (p. 24). Coleman then added that Diana becomes the wild woman so as the witch with her untamed spirit of nature: "She symbolizes oneness with the untamed spirit of nature, embodying the wild woman and protecting the wilderness" (p. 24).

In parallel with the Diana the Roman goddess, Diana in the *Woman on the Edge of Time* is an untamed spirit, a wild woman, a healer, and a witch. In the book, she is an old lover of Luciente and similar to the goddess Diana, she has no sexual intimacy with men. Moreover, Luciente says: "When I was first with Diana, I called myself Artemis" (p. 113). Jackrabbit responds: "Actually the twin of Artemis was Apollo. Or did you want to be Diana? ... You wanted the moon, Luci, instead of recognizing yourself a creature of the broad pragmatic day" (p. 113). According to these lines, Luciente identifies herself with both her lover Diana and the goddess of the moon Diana. Because, in Mattapoisett being a healer or a witch is not a forbidden practice, instead they appreciate it due to their non-hierarchical, holistic lifestyle. They even name Connie's world as "the Age of Greed and Waste" (p. 47). Instead, in Mattapoisett, they "grow enough food" (p. 242) who are "connected to all living" (p. 243) and everybody does their roles coordinately in order to serve the need (p. 246). That is the reason why Luciente becomes "a fraction of her mind, a voice of an alternate self" of Connie Ramos (p. 246) while Connie remains as an outcast who is kept under surveillance in a mental hospital.

As an antithesis of Mattapoisett, Connie's world punishes healers, untamed spirits like her friend Sybil in the mental hospital. In order to describe her, Piercy chooses to define her as a "witch," because Sybil tries to teach women how to heal themselves that causes her persecution in the mental hospital. Instead of despising her, Connie adores Sybil. She considers Sybil as a fighter who fights those who threatened her and never gives up (p. 76). According to Rachel S. McCoppin (2015) in the book *The Lessons of Nature in Mythology*, Sybil means a mother goddess figure in Roman mythology who has a prophetic vision and she resides where the earth and underworld met (p. 98). So, while Connie time travels with her "alternate self" Luciente, she also encounters the treatments to the healers in both societies: While Sybil as a "prophetic goddess figure" is banned from social life and becomes an outcast in a mental hospital, Diana is celebrated as a healer in Mattapoisett. Moreover, as an untamed woman figure, Sybil continuously questions the health system while asking: "Are

they hunting witches with needles today?" (p. 79). Sybil also makes a Macbeth's witches reference while saying: "When shall we two meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" and she admits that she is a witch who can heal with herbs, cast spells with an intention of good or bad (p. 75). Throughout their healing processes in the mental hospital, they have undergone harsh treatments like electroshock, medical experiments like putting an implant in the brain in order to control patient's behaviors, multiple sedative drugs, seclusion from other patients that result in their struggle to fight against the system. For instance, Connie says to Sybil "We're at war, Sybil, don't you see that?" and she answers "Some war! More like a massacre ... Soon to be burned at the stake" (p. 335). Considering Sybil's words, she once again makes a reference to witch hunt where the so-called witches are burned at the stake. As an example, in the book *The European Witch-Hunt* by Julian Goodare (2016) in Vevey, Switzerland in 1441, a woman named Sybille Goura was burned at stake and six cartloads of wood were required to burn her. Unfortunately, in the dystopian world of Connie, Sybil cannot survive as a healer. She and Connie try to escape from the mental hospital, but the novel ends open-endedly without setting them free. At the end of the novel, Connie thinks about the alternative world of Mattapoissett and Luciente. Connie tries to make a connection with Luciente once again, but she cannot manage to do it. Moreover, she concludes her words that she will continue to fight who dedicates her act of war to the other patients like her (p. 370).

Conclusion

In conclusion, with its open-ended ending, *Woman on the Edge of Time* portrays various woman characters who are all in need of freedom of speech and a complete identity in order to survive in the society. Both communities treat patients differently and they become the antithesis of each other. Luciente's Mattapoissett, as a non-hierarchical, egalitarian society, heals their patients with holistic methods of the healers like Diana. On the other hand, in Connie's capitalist and hierarchical world, healers or witches like Sybil are banned from society who are put into mental hospitals. The doctors treat their patients like they are "experimental animals" which causes patients like Connie and Sybil to fight against the health system. But in the end, Connie reminisces about Luciente and still has a hope for the freedom from the repressive system. So, Connie Ramos is "a strong woman is a woman determined to do something others are determined not be done" (Piercy, 1976, pp. 56-57) like the author Marge Piercy, who continues to fight against the capitalism, gender inequality, environmental issues, etc., even though these problems are not completely solved in our contemporary world.

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