



Vol.5. S1., 2018

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

## THE TREATMENT OF WOMEN AND GENDER ISSUES IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF MARGE PIERCY

MENAKA S

II M.A. English Literature, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women

Marge Piercy is an American poet, novelist and social activist born on March 31, 1936. She is the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Gone to Soldiers*, a historical novel set during World War II. She was born in Detroit, Michigan, to a family which was deeply affected by the Great Depression. She is the first in her family to attend college, studying at the University of Michigan. She won a Hopwood Award for Poetry and Fiction in 1957. She is the author of seventeen volumes of poems. Among them are *The Moon is Always Female* in 1980 and *The Art of Blessing the Day* in 1999, fifteen novels, one play, one collection of essays, a non-fiction book, and a memoir. She has won many awards like Paterson Poetry Prize 2000 for *The Art of Blessing the Day*, Barbara Bradley Award, New England Poetry Club 1992, Honorary Doctor of Letters, Lesley College and other prominent awards.

The first poem to be dealt here is *Barbie Doll*. It is a powerful poem which speaks about a young American girl who tries to fix herself in order to fulfill the expectations of society which expects her to dress and act accordingly and look in a certain way to be accepted. The name of the poem may be that of a famous toy but it is highly significant as it exemplifies a woman with a perfect body flaunting her beauty. This poem portrays the life of an American young girl from her birth till the end of her life at the funeral. The poem starts with the line "This girl child was born as usual" (1) and plays with her dolls like any other child referring to male child. The doll that she has is a Barbie doll which is perfect and flawless. The poet says that she grows "in the magic of puberty" (5). At that time one of her friends says that she has a big nose and fat legs which makes her feel that she is not perfect and beautiful like the doll.

In spite of her being healthy and intelligent the girl goes to and fro apologizing because she thinks that her flaws would make the people go away from her. The poet says "Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs" (10-11). She has a very low self-esteem. She is obsessed with the thought of not being beautiful. The poet says that this shows how the society gives more importance to the outside appearance of a woman rather than looking at her heart. When the girl is not able to make up to the expectations of the society, she finally commits suicide. This poem obviously brings out the intentions of Marge Piercy as a feminist who had undergone a lot of inequalities in her early and adult life.

The poet says that at the end the girl has achieved what she has been craving for all through her life. Her death is the compliment of being pretty and beautiful although she wears fake make up and fake clothes. "Doesn't she look pretty? Everyone said" (23). It shows how the society's expectations have made the girl take such a harsh decision. She cannot be herself and when she cannot fulfill the expectations of her society, all that she can do is to end her life instead of being confident and intelligent. As Wayne Dyer, a famous American philosopher and motivational speaker says that if one changes the way one looks at things, the things looked at will change, it all lies in one's perception of looking at things. The real beauty is not in appearances but in beautiful behaviour, manners and mind. Women are beautiful both inside and out. Thus the poet says that the woman's view of looking at herself must be changed and she must also understand that she is an integral part of a society in spite of her illusions being fake and full of flaws. This poem deals with many pertinent issues with

society today. It was written in 1973, and the sixties and seventies were defined by anti-conformism and rebellion against set social standards.

The next poem dealt with is *The Work of Artifice*. This poem speaks about the social conditioning of women to live a limited life. The title itself is loaded with sarcasm. "Artifice" is a cunning device used for deception. It tells how women are deceptively made to lead limited lives. The speaker refers to women as bonsai trees which show the oppression of women and their inability to grow. It represents the enclosures and hurdles that stop women from achieving their goals. It shows how the women who are so worthy are considered as materials for interior decorations. The bonsai, not exposed to sunlight and made to grow only nine inches tall are restricted to grow fully like the women in the society who are not allowed to achieve their dreams and goals.

The speaker says that women are conditioned to follow their traditions and live according to it. Like bonsai trees they are pruned and tightly tied so that they do not grow to their real size. Then the poet says that "But a gardener carefully pruned it"(6-7). The 'gardener' here represents the society and the male members of the girl's family who actually set rules and pose restrictions on her. The poem is about gender bias and the resulting inequality that does not permit women to live her life to the fullest. The tone of the poem is painful like a woman asking for more space and freedom so that she can breathe free.

The third most feminist poem is *Secretary Chant* where the speaker says that she has lost her humanity towards her occupation. It shows how she has lost connection with herself as a person and consequently views her body as a separate entity from whom and what she once was. In the very first line "My hips are a desk" (1) she compares a living thing to a non-living thing, a mere furniture. It shows how she portrays herself as an object. The paper clips adorn her ears and cash bands, her hair. She also brings out the bold image of her breasts as "My breasts are quills of mimeo graphic ink" (5-6).

The speaker is a woman doing secretarial work, where she becomes one with her job which is obvious as she describes her body parts as different pieces of office equipment. The women during 1970s are viewed as phone call answerers, coffee fetchers and meeting schedulers. The speaker's tone is simply robotic. It seems that there is no creativity and imagination in her voice, her mind or in her body because she is the machine. She has no words to say or ideas to speak up or voice to shout out because she is machine disguised as a woman. This poem goes deeply and speaks to the core of corporate America's culture and views toward women in the dominant male work force.

These poems show how women are treated in a marginalized way though they have intelligence and talent equal to men in the society. They also explore and criticize social pressure and conformity, along with body views and treatment of women as mere aesthetic objects. Germaine Greer, a critic says "Every human body has its optimum weight and contour, which only health and efficiency can establish. Whenever we treat women's bodies as aesthetic objects without function we deform them" *The Female Eunuch* (35).

Marge Piercy in these poems *Barbie Doll*, *The Work of Artifice* and *Secretary Chant* shows how women are considered to be the objects of decoration and mere machines. As Germaine Greer points out this treatment of women deforms them.

It is based upon the theory of psychoanalytical feminism which deals with the gender inequality that comes from early childhood experiences that lead men to believe themselves to be superior and women to be inferior. Woman is the Goddess, an angel, a mother, daughter, wife, professional, achiever and what not. She plays her part inevitably in all the ways and always. But the society makes her to deserve the worst. Everything needs to be changed. Malala says that when whole world is silent even a single voice becomes powerful. Let it be a whole voice for equality and freedom. Stand for justice and womanhood where she will be no longer a Barbie doll, a work of artifice and a machine. As Maya Angelou says,

"I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me." – *Phenomenal Woman* (10-13).  
Let her be phenomenal in her own way.

**Works Cited**

Greer, Germaine. *The Female Eunuch*. Harper Collins. 2009. Print.  
Angelou, Maya. *Phenomenal Woman*. Random House. 2000. Print.  
<https://margepiercy.com>

---