CHAPTER - 4

Madness as the desiderium for an alternative reality: Marge Piercy’s Woman On The Edge of Time.


Perhaps the angry and weeping women in mental asylums are Amazons returned to earth these many centuries later, each conducting a private and half remembered search for her mother land - a search we call madness.¹

Marge Piercy’s Woman On The Edge of Time depicts madness not as an aberration, but as a state of mind connected to the female social condition to a greater or lesser degree. Piercy’s feminist and humanistic portrayal of insanity is a trenchant condemnation of the patriarchal political, social and ethical systems. The pervasiveness of patriarchy is exposed as a kind of collusive madness and is perceived to be inimical to female psychological survival. Piercy taps the rage that most people internalise, especially women who live in a society which still subjugates them, makes them live in fear.

Woman On The Edge of Time raises certain compellingly vital questions about female insanity. In her work Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel (1978) Rigney presents the radically humanistic convictions of Laing who held that psychosis whether in women, or in men, was an understandable or even a "sane" response to life in a destructive society. Viewed from this perspective, the hallucinations of Connie Ramos in Woman On The Edge of Time cannot be dismissed as the ravings of a lunatic. According to Rigney, ‘madness’ can be interpreted as a stage in the evolution of a conscious, truly
sane person. As Jungian myth criticism has revealed, all heroes must pass through a phase of withdrawal and deep introspection before they can return as "law givers". What Laing refers to throughout his works as "superior sanity" is achieved only through the experience of recognising the general illness of society. According to Laing both men and women are existential entities. Society however tends to categorise people into dehumanised and oppositional stereotypes like male and female, sane and insane. Laing echoes feminists like Piercy in his plea for the abandonment of role prescriptions and the restoration of the whole person, the undivided self.

Piercy's fictional work *Woman On The Edge of Time*, incorporates such valuable insights and projects 'madness' as a form of truthful perception, a rebellious feeling which can subvert patriarchy. In his preface to *Madness And Civilization: A History of Insanity In the Age of Reason* (1988), Foucault describes the language of psychiatry as "a monologue of reason about madness" and contends that psychiatry has been established only on the basis of such a silence. He insists that he does not write "the history of the language of psychiatry, but rather the archaeology of that 'silence' known as madness." His book is a disconcerting, iconoclastic exploration of what it means to be mad. Foucault examines the archaeology of madness in the west from 1500 to 1800 - from the middle ages, when insanity was considered part of everyday life, to the time when such people began to be considered a threat. In a passionate manner, Foucault marshals overwhelming evidence to dispel more effectively than many previous attempts the myth of mental illness and re-establishes folly and
'unreason' in their rightful place as complex human phenomena. In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault terms "Madness as the manifestation of the soul, a variable concept which from antiquity to the 20th century covered the unconscious part of human mind". (p.x)

Feminist writings have also represented madness as the total or partial rejection of one's own sex role stereotype. In such writings, both utopian and dystopian fantastic modes are employed to create irony. The discourses of dreams and insanity undercut traditional representations and reflect on alternatives that empower women and the possibility for women's revolution against patriarchal constructs; To break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning that sustain the whole of the 'symbolic order' - which includes all human, social and cultural institutions, prefiguring a total 'social' revolution. Julia Kristeva argues that there is a specific practice of writing that is itself 'revolutionary', analogous to sexual and political transformation and that by its very existence testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order of orthodox society from the inside. (Moi, 1985: p.11)

In her work *Sexual / Textual Politics*, (1985) Toril Moi, argues that Kristeva's feminism echoes the position taken up by Virginia Woolf some sixty years earlier. Piercy's *Woman On The Edge of Time*, resonates with the theoretical observations of both Woolf and Kristeva. Piercy also espouses a deconstructed form of feminism very much similar to the concept of "androgyne" posited by Woolf and the theory of Kristeva which demands the deconstruction.
of sexual identity. Kristeva makes a distinction between the 'semiotic' and the 'symbolic' orders in *The Revolution in Poetic Language*. (1984). According to her, the 'unconscious pulsions' or the spasmodic forces of the 'semiotic', are pre-verbal operations stemming from a subject's early identification with the maternal body, the period before the subject gains access to patriarchal law and language which are represented by the 'symbolic' order. But the 'symbolic' realm necessarily encroaches upon what is 'feminine' in pre-Oedipal experience, displaces it to the periphery and represses it. Thus the 'semiotic' disposition becomes an inalienable component of the lost feminine identity. Kristeva states that the 'semiotic' rhythms can erupt into the symbolic order much in the same way that unconscious forces (drives, repressed desires) can erupt into consciousness. Kristeva also argues that many women will be able to let what she calls the 'spasmodic force' of the unconscious disrupt their language because of their strong links with the pre-Oedipal mother figure. But if those unconscious pulsations were to take over the subject entirely, the subject would fall back into pre-Oedipal or imaginary chaos and develop some form of mental illness. The subject, whose language lets such forces disrupt the 'symbolic' order, in other words, is also the subject who runs the greater risk of lapsing into madness. Seen in this context, the 'mental illness' of Connie Ramos, her imaginative voyages into 'Mattapoisett' can be understood as "a private and half remembered search for her motherland" as described by Chesler. Madness becomes a kind of refuge for the self rather than its loss, for a fugitive in a position of revolt against the 'symbolic', patriarchal order, ruled by the 'law of the
father', who disrupts it by allowing unconscious forces to slip through the symbolic repression.

4.2. **Woman On The Edge of Time**: unveiling the patriarchal violence and deprivation at the heart of female insanity.

Piercy's *Woman On The Edge of Time*, is the story of Connie Ramos, a thirty seven year old poor Mexican American woman who exists on the fringes of life in contemporary New York city. Her lover Claud is killed in prison and her daughter Angelina is taken away from her as the social workers who visit her home brand Connie to be an aggressive, psychologically unstable mother. She is accused of child abuse and her parental rights are terminated and her daughter is put out for adoption. The social worker giving Connie that "human to cockroach" look, informs her that it is the clinical judgement of the court psychiatrist that her daughter would be better off with foster parents. Devastated by the twin tragedies in her life, Connie ponders over the events in utter despair.

...............Most people hit kids. But if you were on welfare and on probation and the whole social - pigeonholing establishment had the right to trek regularly through your kitchen looking in the closets and under the bed, counting the bed bugs and your shoes, you had better not hit your kid once. The abused and neglected child, they had called Angelina officially. She had been mean to Angie, she had spent those months after she got the news about Claud's death gulping downs, drinking bad red wine. A couple of times she had shot speed. She had thought nothing could hurt her anymore - until she lost Angelina. Maybe you always have more to lose until, like Claud, they took your life too. .......

I hurt her once. That was a terrible thing to do, I know it. But to punish me for it the rest of my life? (p.26)
Piercy poignantly delineates the predicament of a helpless, impoverished single mother for whom her own child occasionally becomes the nearest target of rage and frustration. She also raises certain disturbing questions about the reality of the so called, abundant, eternally altruistic, maternal love. The patriarchal myths perpetuating the exaltation and idealisation of 'motherhood', and the silent sufferings of a noble mother have been questioned by many feminists. In chapter X titled "Violence : The Heart of Maternal Darkness" (pp.256-280) of Of Woman Born : Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1986) Adrienne Rich writes about the violence and deprivation at the core of the institution of motherhood.

What woman, in the solitary confinement of a life at home enclosed with young children, or in the struggle to mother them while providing for them single-handedly, or in the conflict of weighing her own personhood against the dogma that says she is a mother, first, last, and always - what woman has not dreamed of "going over the edge", of simply letting go, relinquishing what is termed her sanity, so that she can be taken care of for once, or can simply find a way to take care of herself? The mothers: collecting their children at school; sitting in rows at the parent-teacher meeting; placating weary infants in supermarket carriages; straggling home to make dinner, do laundry and tend to children after a day at work; fighting to get decent care and livable schoolrooms for their children; waiting for child-support checks while the landlord threatens eviction; getting pregnant yet again because their one escape into pleasure and abandon is sex; forcing long needles into their delicate interior parts; wakened by a child's cry from their eternally unfinished dreams ... - the mothers, if we could look into their fantasies - their daydreams and imaginary experiences - we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation, we would
see the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood. (pp.279-280)

Connie's sufferings coupled with the agony of bereavement temporarily release anger and cruelty in her and she hits Angelina. It is just the innocuous anger of an impoverished mother who is apprehensive that her daughter might lose her last pair of shoes. But it is grossly misrepresented by the social worker and as a result Connie is transformed into a violent, abusive mother. Incarcerated in the mental hospital of Rockover, engrossed in retrospective thoughts, Connie remembers the episode that made her lose her daughter to the harsh verdict of the social worker. She sadly wonders why she had betrayed her own daughter and why she had thrown Angelina away, after the pain of losing Claud. If she had only loved herself better, she would have learnt to love her daughter as well.

After Claud had died of hepatitis in Clinton, she had mourned him in a haggard frenzy of alcohol and downers diving for oblivion and hoping for death. She had sat for weeks in a chair, letting Angelina scream and weep herself to sleep in fear and hunger. Connie had torn at herself with her nails, with pills, with bottles, with lack of food and all poisons short of open suicide, until she had a nightmare and awakened shivering with sweat in late afternoon on the couch .........

.....and the first thing she heard was Angelina screams, and kicking the wall with anger, kicking the leg of the metal table. Connie dragged herself from the bed hung over and strung out, and it hit her that having a baby was a crime - that maybe those bastards who had spayed her for practice, for fun, had been right. That she had borne herself all over again, and it was a crime to be born poor as it was a crime to be born brown. She had caused a new woman to grow where she had grown, and that was a crime. Then she came staggering off the couch and saw that Angie, in kicking
the table, in kicking the wall - every blow the blow of a hammer on her aching head - had kicked a hole in her lousy cheap shoes. Those were the only shoes Angie had, and where in hell was Connie going to get her another pair? Angie couldn't go out without shoes. There rose before Connie the long maze of conversations with her caseworker, of explanations, of pleas and forms in triplicate, and quadruplicate, and trips down to the welfare office to wait all day first outside in the cold and then inside in line, forever and ever for a lousy cheap pair of shoes to replace the lousy cheap pair Angie had just destroyed.

"You fucking kid!" she screamed, and hit her. Hit too hard. Knocked her across the room into the door. Angie's arm struck the heavy metal bolt of the police lock, and her wrist broke. The act was past in a moment. The consequence would go on as long as she breathed. (pp 61-62).

4.3 'A human garbage carried to the dump': Re-visionsing life in an asylum.

Connie's sufferings are augmented by her penury. Trapped by adverse circumstances, she loses control over herself, her rage and despair manifesting in violence turned first upon herself, then upon whom she loved. The small details which accumulated over a period of time, which contributed to her aggression are presented in a convincing, humane manner by Piercy. Connie is incarcerated in a bleak mental hospital based on a highly insufficient evidence of her insanity. The mental asylum is an abysmal dungeon from where very few people return. It is a 'death in life' existence, a dumping ground where unwanted people, 'insane' men and women are abandoned by their kith and kin.

.....At length she saw through the blowing veil of the rain the walls she knew too well, that place of punishment, of sorrow, of the slow or fast murder of the self called Rockover State. ....

Then the gates swallowed the ambulance-bus and swal-

203
lowed her as she left the world and entered the underland where all who were not desired, who caught like rough teeth in the cogwheels, who had no place or fit crosswise the one they were hammered into, were carted to repent of their contrariness or to pursue their mad vision down to the pit of terror. Into the asylum that offered none, the broken springed bus roughly galloped. as she was beckoned out with rough speed, she was surprised to see gulls wheeling above far inland, as over other refuse grounds. Little was re-cycled here. She was human garbage carried to the dump. (pp.31-32)

Piercy's grim description is reminiscent of Foucault's account of the deplorable plight of inmates in asylums, in chapter IX titled 'The Birth Of The Asylum' (pp.241-278) of Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity In The Age of Reason. (1988) Foucault ironically remarks that the images which are familiar in all histories of psychiatry, are those which illustrate that happy age when madness was finally recognised and treated according to a truth to which people had too long remained blind. He notes that fear appears as an essential presence in the asylum in the control and management of patients. The chains might have been removed and the mad prisoners of these asylums may no longer be brutally confined in strait jackets, but metaphorically these manacles are still the madman's or woman's unspeakable realities. As Foucault observes, "the liberation of insane, abolition of constraint, constitution of a human milieu" - these are only justifications. The real operations are different. According to Foucault even reformers, who wanted to redeem the mad people by alleviating their sufferings only succeeded in creating an asylum where they substituted for the "free terror of madness the stifling anguish of responsibility." (p.247):

fear no longer reigned on the other side of the prison gates, it now raged under the seals of conscience.
Tuke now transferred the age-old terrors in which the insane had been trapped to the very heart of madness. The asylum no longer punished the madman's guilt, it is true; but it did more, it organized that guilt; it organized it for the madman as a consciousness of himself, and as a non-reciprocal relation to the keeper; it organized it for the man of reason as an awareness of the Other, a therapeutic intervention in the madman's existence. In other words, by this guilt the madman became an object of punishment always vulnerable to himself and to the Other; and, from the acknowledgement of his status as object, from the awareness of his guilt, the madman was to return to his awareness of himself as a free and responsible subject, and consequently to reason. (p.247).

There are startling similarities between the objectification of the mad people described by Foucault and the sense of 'alienation' and sexual objectification experienced by women in patriarchal culture. Within this culture, women constitute a generic object whose subject is the male gender. This fundamental assumption dominates all aspects of social, political and cultural life, denying women her own subjectivity, reconstructing her image as man's 'other'. As Beauvoir puts it, in more existentialist terms, this patriarchal ideology represents 'woman as immanence' and 'man as transcendence'. In a patriarchy, women lead inauthentic lives, as they have already, internalised this objectified vision of themselves. Reconstituted as the 'other' within the 'specular logic' and vision of patriarchy, woman experiences the feeling of 'alienation' acutely. By the same logic, a mad woman would experience 'double objectification' and her sense of alienation from patriarchy would be of a far more exacerbating degree than a 'normal' already objectified, alienated woman within patriarchy.
In this context, the analyses of Phyllis Chesler illuminate the condition of female insanity in patriarchy clearly. Chesler describes women's madness as an intense experience of female biological, sexual or cultural castration. Feminist psychoanalysis helps us understand that madness or insanity, is defined by culture and not by biology. Chesler in her pioneering work, *Women and Madness* (1972) argues that 'madness' is a label used for people whose behaviour radically departs from what is socially prescribed. What we considered madness, she suggests, is either the acting out of devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex role stereotype. This sex role stereotyping is a prescription for women's failure and therefore, for subsequent mental illness. Chesler argues that Psychiatry as an extension of the patriarchy, oppresses women. She describes how women are made mentally ill by the social process of sex-role conditioning.

To quote Chesler:

> Women who fully act out the conditioned female role are clinically viewed as 'neurotic' or 'psychotic'. When and if they are hospitalised, it is for predominantly female behaviours such as 'depression' 'suicide attempt' 'anxiety neurosis', 'paranoia'. Women who reject or are ambivalent about the female role frighten both themselves and society, so much so that their ostracism and self-destructiveness probably begin very early. Such women are also assured of a psychiatric label and if they are hospitalised, it is for less 'female' behaviours such as 'schizophrenia', 'lesbianism' or 'promiscuity'.

The asylum is never a retreat from the world, it is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis and therapeutics, but as Foucault points out in *Madness and Civilization*, "a juridical space where one is accused, judged and condemned,
and from which one is never released except by a trial in psychological depth. i.e. by remorse". (Foucault, 1988 : p. 269) For Piercy, asylums are places where little is recycled. The mad woman is "human garbage carried to the dump." In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault argues that according to a new kind of reason which reigns in the asylum, madness does not represent the absolute form of contradiction, but instead a minority status and hence can live only grafted onto the world of reason. Alluding to the infantalizing effects of life in the asylums, Foucault remarks that everything in the asylums is organised in such a manner so that the insane are transformed into minors. Madness becomes second childhood and accordingly they are regarded as children who have an overabundance of strength and make dangerous use of it. They must be given immediate punishments and rewards. Thus oppression becomes institutionalised.

In *Woman On The Edge of Time*, Piercy examines and exposes the tyranny and totalitarianism of the asylums. Connie Ramos' predicament in Bellevue asylum has parallels in Foucault's descriptions of life in the asylums. The parallelism between them cannot be understated. Captive in an asylum, locked into seclusion, devastated by over consumption of tranquilisers, Connie remembers her ordeal at the hands of psychiatrists, doctors and case workers.

Her head leaning on the wall she thought it was going to be worse this time - for last time she had judged herself-sick, she had rolled in self-pity and self-hatred like a hot sulfur spring, scalding herself. All those experts lined up against her in a jury dressed in medical White and judicial black - social workers, caseworkers, child guidance counselors, psychiatrists, doctors, nurses, clinical psychologists, probation officers - all those cool knowing faces had caught her and bound her in their nets of jargon...
and leaked a slow weakening poison. She was marked with the bleeding stigmata of shame. She had wanted to cooperate, to grow well. Even when she felt so bad she lay in a corner and wept and wept, laid level by guilt that too was part of being sick: it proved she was sick rather than evil. Say one hundred Our Fathers. Say you understand how sick you've been and you want to learn to cope. You want to stop acting out. Speak up in Tuesday group therapy (but not too much and never about staff or how lousy this place was) and volunteer to clean up after the other, the incontinent patients. (p.60)

Piercy's portrayal of Connie's existence in the asylum coincides with Foucault's delineation of the mad man in a modern, sophisticated asylum in Madness and Civilization. According to Foucault, the sophisticated modern medical establishment, pursues in the mad man, the least perceptible signs of his madness, "in the place where madness becomes secretly distinct from reason, begins to detach itself from it and the mad man cannot return this observation in any form, since he is merely observed, he is a kind of new arrival, a latecomer in the world of reason." (p.249) Whereas in the past, although the mad man was confined, and was vulnerable to observation, such observation did not, basically involve him. "It involved only his monstrous surface, his visible animality and it included at least one form of reciprocity, since the 'sane' man could read in the mad man, as in a mirror, the imminent movement of his downfall" (p.249). But the more sophisticated asylum existence in our own modern times, destroys this reciprocity between the 'sane' and the 'insane'. Hence

We see that at the Retreat the partial suppression of physical constraint was part of a system whose essential element was the constitution of a "self-restraint" in which the patient's freedom, engaged by work and the observation of others was ceaselessly threatened by the recognition of guilt. Instead of submitting to a simple negative operation
that loosened bonds and delivered one's deepest nature from madness, it much be recognized that one was in the grip of a positive operation that confined madness in a system of rewards and punishments, and included it in the movement of moral consciousness. (p. 250).

These institutions reconstruct the 'self' concept of an individual to establish orderliness and sameness. Insuring homogeneity is often one of the most important tasks of the asylums. Difference is excluded, over looked, forced back into conformity with an artificial norm or suppressed. Given women's 'alterity' or 'otherness' from these established patterns and their exclusion from various structures of power, the concept of 'female insanity' needs to be redefined. Western logocentric patriarchal ideologies are based on oppositional thinking. Things are defined not just by their opposites, but also by a superimposition of hierarchy upon these oppositions. In her essay "Women and Madness: the critical phallacy" Shoshana Felman points out this duality of hierarchical binary oppositions as rather illusory because, "this subtle mechanism of hierarchization assures unique valorisation of the 'positive' pole (of a single term) and consequently, the repressive subordination of all 'negativity'. The observation of Felman problematizes the notion of 'female insanity'. It highlights the double objectification of the 'mad woman' in patriarchy. She has to grapple with the 'otherness' of women in general in patriarchy, who, by the patriarchal assumptions of hierarchical binary oppositions, are supposed to be what the men are not. At the same time, the 'mad' woman is objectified in the eyes of masculine 'reason' as the perfect stranger whose strangeness does not reveal itself, thereby submitting to the surveillance and judgement of the male dominated
institution of psychiatry. Madness and women turn out to be the two outcasts of the establishment of patriarchy. According to Felman, with respect to the woman's madness, man's reason reacts by trying to appropriate it; "in the first place, by claiming to 'understand' it, but with an external understanding which reduces the mad woman to a spectacle, to an object which can be known and possessed". 'Masculine reason', according to Felman, objectifies 'feminine madness' and establishes a direct link between femininity and madness by almost explicitly defining female insanity as the loss of femininity or womanhood. Felman elucidates it further by giving the example of Balzac's story 'Adieu', which symbolically represents patriarchal perceptions of women's madness:

The woman is "madness" to the extent that she is Other, different from man. But "madness" is the "absence of womanhood" to the extent that "womanhood" is what precisely resembles the Masculine universal equivalent, in the polar division of sexual roles. If so, the woman is "madness" since the woman is difference; but "madness" is "non-woman" since madness is the lack of resemblance. What the narcissistic economy of the Masculine universal equivalent tries to eliminate under the label "madness", is nothing other than feminine difference. (p.15)

Felman offers an alternative, feminist reading of 'Adieu' by seeing Balzac's 'realism' as essentially concerned with men and 'masculine reason'. Women and madness are located outside or beyond the 'real' world. For the heroine of 'Adieu', reason and femininity prove to be synonymous, in that what constitutes sanity is the recognition of man, of her lover, giving him back his identity, his own reflection, his interpretation of the world. In this case, it is
obvious that the norms of femininity have worked in the interests of male narcissism and patriarchy.

In *Woman On The Edge Of Time*, Piercy reveals how the same norms govern the understanding of 'female insanity' within a patriarchal framework. She also depicts how the institution of psychiatry denies women autonomy and individuality. The novel begins with a violent episode. Connie Ramos's niece Dolly rushes to her apartment to find refuge. Dolly is battered by her abusive boyfriend Geraldo, who actually operates as a pimp for Dolly. Connie tries to rescue her niece from the clutches of Geraldo and assaults him to prevent him from hurting Dolly. Because of this act, Connie is shifted the second time, to the psychiatric ward in Bellevue hospital, to cure her of violent aggressive behaviour. Connie is admitted to this hospital based on Geraldo's false accusations and allegations. In the hospital, Connie is tied with straps to a bed, injected with a massive doze of thorazine. Connie's vociferous claims to innocence are dismissed by the doctors and nurses as inconsequential ravings of a lunatic. Piercy describes the abysmal conditions of psychiatric wards in great detail:

Connie writhed on the bed, pinned down with just enough play to let her wriggle. They had pushed her into restraint, shot her up immediately. She had been screaming okay! Did they think you had to be crazy to protest being locked up? Yes, they did. "They said reluctance to be hospitalized was a sign of sickness, assuming you were sick, in one of these no win circles... (p.17)

If you complained, they took it as a sign of sickness " The Authority of the physician is undermined if the patient presumes to make a diagnostic statement". She had heard a doctor say that to a resident, teaching him not to listen to patients. (p.19)
How long did she lie strapped to the bed? Day was the same as night. They had forgotten her and she would die here in her own piss. Sometimes she could not stand it anymore and she yelled as loud as she could and begged the walls to open. Moments were forever. She was mad. The drugs made her mind strange. She was caught, she was stalled. She floated trapped like an embryo in alcohol......

She was dozing in that feverish half-sleep without rest or relief, when the door banged open. Two attendants came in and untied her. ...

"She'll smell better when she gets out. You wonder how they can live with themselves, never washing. But that's part of being sick," the blond said loftily. "Probably she's been sleeping in the street, in doorways. I see them around".

She wanted to scream that she washed as often as they did, that they had made her smell, made her dirty herself. But she did not dare. First they would not listen, and second, they might hurt her. Who would care? (p.20).

Connie finds herself walking strangely, not only from the bruises. It is "the old Thorazine shuffle". The drug thickens her body to lead. She is unable to move quickly and gracefully. She is so helpless that she cannot tell her attendants that she needs immediate medical attention for broken ribs. She finds the ward unbearably hot. She also sees other women in hospital clothes, sitting vacantly or staring at the television set placed upon a shelf where no one could reach it to change the station or alter the volume level. Just opposite her, Connie finds two old women chatting, animatedly. They appear to her more like two gossips on a park bench than like two mad women on a plastic bench in a mental hospital. The 'normality' of the so called abnormal, insane people leaves a deep impression on Connie. The claustrophobic existence of the people in the hospital is
reminiscent of Foucault's description of the confinement of people in the mental asylums of 17th century. According to Foucault,

We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors, and communicate and recognize other through the merciless language of non-madness.

In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman: on one hand, the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of disease; on the other, the man of madness communicates with society only by the intermediary of an equally abstract reason which is order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity. As for a common language, there is no such thing; or rather, there is no such thing any longer; the constitution of madness as a mental illness, affords the evidence of a broken dialogue. The language of psychiatry which is a monologue of reason about madness, has been established on the basis of such a silence. (p.ix-xi).

In *Woman On The Edge of Time* Piercy focuses on the tyrannical powers of psychiatry. The psychologists, social workers, doctors and nurses are all part of a network that exploits the helplessness of an economically impoverished, lower class woman like Connie. Piercy gives an account of the trials and tribulations endured by Connie during the early part of her life. Connie's upbringing in a poor Mexican family, her defiance and unbreakable spirit in the face of such adversity, her refusal and reluctance to follow in her mother's footsteps as a wife and mother buried in the rut of the family, her desperate, fervent attempts at college education are narrated with poignant intensity. Thereafter what ensues is a series of disasters which contribute to the
institutionalization of Connie Ramos. Both her marriages turn out to be short lived ones. She loses her first husband in a street murder. In her second marriage which is also a brief one, Connie becomes a victim of domestic violence and spousal abuse. Deserted by her husband, she tries to begin a new life with a petty thief called Claud, who is the only affectionate, considerate man she has ever known in her life. But another misfortune befalls Connie when Claud is imprisoned. Claud dies of hepatitis in the prison. Connie finds herself utterly alone, ostracized by her brother Luis and his family. She struggles to bring up her daughter Angelina. Coping with bereavement, Connie sinks into a deep depression. She is admitted to the Bellevue hospital on the joint recommendation of a social worker from the bureau of child welfare, her caseworker from welfare, and her parole officer for child abuse. The clinical judgement of the court psychiatrist is harsh. It is unanimously decided that Connie's daughter would be better off with foster parents and Connie's parental rights are terminated.

Connie is institutionalised the second time when she tries to protect her niece Dolly against her violent and cruel boyfriend Geraldo. From Bellevue, Connie is shifted to Rockover according to the terms and conditions of the deal made and finalised by her brother with hospital authorities. On her way to Rockover, Connie realises that "Luis had signed her in. A bargain had been struck. Some truce had been negotiated between the two men over the bodies of their women" (p.31) Devastated by her late realization, she finds herself "stymied, trapped, drugged with the Thorazine that sapped her will and dulled
her brain and drained her body of energy" (p.31). Back in Rockover state, Connie is locked into seclusion. She begins to experience the side effects of drugs. During the first time, she is frightened of the other patients - "violent, crazy, out of control animals". But slowly, she learns that it is the staff she must watch out for. The hopelessness of being stuck there once again makes her recalcitrant and Connie refuses to take medication. The punishment for rebellion is solitary confinement. Connie is made to languish alone in a hall with no doors and windows. In the room devoid of all furniture except for the mattress, Connie comes across names, words and dates scratched somehow on the wall "with blood, fingernails, pencil stubs, shit" - grim reminders of the unmitigated misery of the inmates imprisoned in this hall in the past.

Piercy gives an appalling account of Connie's ordeal in the violent ward number L-6 of Rockover state. She presents a disconcerting picture of the pain and terror that permeate its walls.

She hated being around the shock shop. It scared her, regularly some patients from L-6 were wheeled out for shock. One morning there would be no breakfast for you, and then you would know. They would wheel you up the hall and inject you to knock you out and shoot you up with stuff that turned your muscles to jelly, so that even your lungs stopped. You were a hair from death. You entered your death. Then they would send voltage smashing through your brain and knock your body into convulsions. After that they'd give you oxygen and let you come back to life, somebody's life, jumbled, weak, dribbling saliva - come back from your scorched taste of death with parts of your memory forever burned out. A little brain damage to jolt you into behaving right. Sometimes a woman was finally more scared of being burned in the head again, and she went home to her family and did the dishes and cleaned the house. Then may be in a while
she would remember and rebel and then she'd be back for more barbecue of the brain. In the back wards the shock zombies lay, their brains so scarred they remembered nothing, giggling like the old lobotomized patients. (p.81)

Piercy's chilling accounts of the electro-convulsive shock therapies administered to the patients especially the women in the violent ward are reminiscent of Phyllis Chesler's reappraisal of madness in women. Discussing Chesler's work *Women and Madness* with Barbara Gelpi, Adrienne Rich points out how Chesler attacks the ways in which women are labeled as crazy to prevent them from having access to their own powers and depicts mental asylums as prisons for women. Like Chesler, Piercy lets these women speak for themselves rather than be spoken for. She points out how such invasive therapies and surgeries can destroy the patient's coherent psychological self and incapacitate her. Piercy depicts the infantalization of the patients in the psychiatric hospital.

Connie remembers her meeting with another female patient called 'Sybil' in the asylum. "In the strange twilit childhood of the asylum with its advancements and demotions, its privileges and punishments, its dreary air of grade school" (p.83) Connie establishes a warm bond of friendship with 'Sybil'. Raising and dropping through the dim rings of hell, gaining and losing privileges, living between the living cancers of the chronic wards and the nightmare of electric shocks, Connie and Sybil share the travails of their existence with each other. In *Woman On the Edge of Time*, Piercy focuses on the representations of women whose marginality in all respects of gender, race, class and economic
power renders them "non-entities" in terms of the values of the dominant social formation. Connie's friend Sybil is also a social outcaste. She thinks of herself as a witch. She dreams about witches' covens, healing sick people with herbal remedies and casting spells. Together, Connie and Sybil decide to have non-racist appellations for 'spells'. They eliminate racist terms such as 'black and white', replacing them with non-racist colours like 'red' for 'blood vengeance' and 'green', for 'growing and healing'. (p.83) Such poignant little incidents in the novel bring out the agony of these marginalised strata of oppressed women effectively.

The hospital authorities regard Sybil as a lesbian. They are puzzled by her 'asexuality'. Sybil's own attitudes towards heterosexuality are far from conventional. She is dissatisfied with the patriarchal requirements of heterosexuality: "who wants to be a hole?" Sybil asks Connie. "Do you want to be a dumb hole people push things in or rub against? As for sex, it reminded me of going to the dentist the only time I indulged. Now, when you look at it clearly from the outside, Consuelo, with some measure of detachment, you see how perfectly futile it all appears, and how sordid besides." (p.95). Sybil's attitudes may appear to be reductionistic exaggerations, but the most interesting aspect to be noted here is her resistant position. Sybil is representative of a woman, who irrespective of her class distinctions, refuses to be moulded into models of male sexual techniques which do not at all correspond to her sexuality. She can dauntlessly articulate her dissent.
The patients in the psychiatric hospital are subjected to draconian rules and harsh punishments. The hierarchy of psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, case workers and nurses resort to barbaric, violent methods to subjugate rebellious patients. Connie's psychiatric interview with Dr. Redding and other experts powerfully portrays the alienation, helplessness and objectification of a mental patient.

The young doctor who had picked her out of the ward did most of the questioning at first,.... The same old stuff about Dolly and Geraldo, her daughter, her time with Claud, her drinking, her drug use, her difficulty in getting a job. It was like saying the responses at Mass. When what she said didn't fit their fixed ideas, they went on as if it did. Resistance, they called that, when you didn't agree, but this bunch didn't seem that interested in whether she had a good therapeutic attitude. What were they listening for, inasmuch as they listened at all? How that Dr. Redding stared at her, not like she'd look at a person, but the way she might look at a tree, a painting, a tiger in the zoo...... Her mother, her father, her brother, her lover, her husband, her daughter, all fingered, sized up, dissected, labeled. Still, their white faces looked bored...... (p.92).

To Connie, the mental hospital seems like a 'bad joke'. She feels that she can never get healed there. The first time, she hopes that someone could help her. She comes in with a conviction that in the hospital, they would be concerned about her, they would tell her what was wrong with her and give her the right answers. Instead, she finds cruelty and highhandedness. The disillusioned Connie learns that she must keep quiet as she watches the other patients getting beaten and pretend that "the rape in the linen room is a patient's fantasy." (p.194).
Incarcerated in the mental hospital, Connie learns that she will be subjected to a mind control experiment involving electronic implantations in the brain. Connie's friend Sybil informs her that their fellow patient Alice has already had electrodes implanted in her brain. Connie and Sybil see Alice, a black woman lying unconscious on the bed with a great white helmet of bandages on her head and a gadget perched on top of the bandage like a metal beanie. Piercy shows that underprivileged women like Alice and Connie, segregated and marginalised from the mainstream of white, superior, sane, healthy middle class women and men, can be effortlessly bought by the hospital authorities to serve as experimental objects. The patient's consent is not essential as he or she is deemed to be not in possession of their higher faculties. In the elaborately well planned scheme of psychiatrists and neurosurgeons at Rockover, Alice's brain surgery is heralded as the first successful step towards the consummation of a larger project. Dr. Redding, Dr. Morgan, Acker the psychologist, the EEG technician, the secretary and the attendants gather around Alice's bed. Dr. Redding explains Alice's case with great detachment. "Alice is just a demonstration" according to him. Wearing a small mike around his neck, Dr. Redding lectures steadily on amperage and voltage. He holds forth on the stimulation of the patient's 'amygdala', oblivious of her identity as a human being, as a woman acutely embarrassed by her baldness due to the brain surgery. To Connie, he sounds like a repairman from the telephone company calling in to report on a job.

You see, we can electrically trigger almost every mood and emotion - the fight or flight reaction, euphoria, calm, pleasure, pain, terror! We can monitor and induce re-
actions through the microminiaturized radio under the skull. We believe through this procedure we can control Alice's violent attacks and maintain her in a balanced mental state. The radio will be feeding information and telemetry straight into the computer once we are in the institute, and Alice will be able to walk around the ward freely. That concludes our little preview demonstration. (p.204)

Connie realises with a pang that her fate would be no better than that of Alice. She is seized by an intense desire to taste 'the last dregs of her identity' before Dr. Redding and his team of doctors take it away from her.

Tomorrow they were going to stick a machine in her brain. She was the experiment. They would rape her body, her brain, her self. After this she could not trust her own feelings, she would not be her own. She would be their experimental monster. Their plaything, like Alice. Their tool. She did not want to pass over to Mattapoisett tonight; she wanted to taste the last dregs of her identity before they took it from her. (p.279)

Connie is shifted to the operation theatre for an implantation. She goes through the rituals of head shaving without any visible emotion. She watches Dr. Redding drilling on her skull. She feels the pressure, she feels the bone giving way and hears the drill entering. They fit a stereotactic machine over her and "pound it into her head with three sharp metal pins as if she were a wall they were attaching a can opener to." (p.281). The horror and the helplessness of Connie are forcefully suggested. Connie experiences acute terror. Traumatized, she wonders if the implantation would obliterate the memory of her lover Claud. She listens to the stoical assertions of Dr. Redding about his expertise: "The
higher you cauterize the more you involve the intellectual faculties. I don't think these patients have a lot to spare in that department. We're after the centres of aggression, the primitive emotions run amok". (p.282). Dr. Redding remains desensitized and indifferent to the misery and anxiety of his patient. Terror-stricken and bewildered, Connie tries to decipher the attitudes of these doctors.

Now they were looking at photographs, like those of the moon taken by astronauts. That unknown precious country of her brain. They had a dummy second machine, like the one sitting on her skull squatting like a mosquito about to draw blood, and they were fiddling with the dummy. She would have loved to try it out on them. Suddenly she thought that these men believed feeling itself a disease, something to be cut out like a rotten appendix. Cold, calculating, ambitious, believing themselves rational and superior, they chased the crouching female animal through the brain with a scalpel. From an early age she had been told that what she felt was unreal and didn't matter. Now they were about to place in her something that would rule her feelings like a thermostat. (p.282)

Here Piercy targets in particular the male psychiatric establishment, with its sharp lines between the sane and the insane and its rigid categorising of types of insanity. Like Phyllis Chesler, Piercy politicises the issue of female insanity. She shows how more number of lobotomies, electro-shock therapies and psycho surgeries are performed on women than men. The psychiatric establishment is presented as cold and unfeeling, and also serves as a metaphor for other institutions that deny autonomy and individuality.
4.4 'Border Crossing': The delineation of a feminist futuristic utopia.

For women, the condition of patriarchy presupposes the reality of borders. One of the most distinguishing features of Piercy's *Woman On The Edge of Time*, is that Piercy emphasizes the obvious incongruity of patriarchally enforced borders. The vivid, positivistic portrayal of the non hierarchical, harmonious, androgynous society of "Mattapoissett" powerfully brings out the absurdity of rigid sex role stereotyping in patriarchies, thereby concretising the dissatisfaction with the cultural boundaries of femininity and the possibility of moving beyond obstructive gender categories. *Woman On The Edge of Time* provides an example of the psychological 'border crossing'. Piercy's heroine Connie mind travels to different chronological worlds which are envisaged as futuristic possibilities or forseeable realities. These are 'border crossings' across the confines and boundaries of 'normal' state of mind and linear time.

In *The Newly Born Woman* (1986) Clement and Cixous deal with the ritualistic ways in which women's experience of the world and their bodies are categorised as alien, witch like or hysterical by society in order that society can maintain the boundaries of patriarchal power. They reiterate their faith in the exuberant possibilities of women's stories which can break these boundaries. Cixous and Clement describe a utopian journey across the frontier of prohibition as the "way out" of a patriarchal system. This utopian journey is not only an escape but also an attack. Through this imaginative excursion, the woman explores the dark continent of female pleasure and discovers it to be neither dark not lacking, despite the admonitions and anxieties of patriarchal tradition. Cixous champions the 'hysteric', as "a non-Oedipal heroine whose excessive,
polyglottal, polyphonic, imagistic discourse signifies woman's protest and escape from the oppressive order of the phallic signifier and the father's law".13.

The resonances from Cixous are fairly obvious in the 'border crossings' erupting at and disrupting the edge of female consciousness portrayed by Piercy in *Woman On The Edge of Time*. As Sandra Gilbert points out in her introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*, the notion of such a utopian journey becomes a fundamentally political strategy, designed to redress the wrongs of patriarchal culture.14. Furthermore, "The illness or 'anomaly' of womanhood in a culture governed by the invisible but many legged tarantulla of patriarchal law takes multiple forms, but its one energy derives from the singular return of the repressed".15. These transgressive 'border crossings' are 'fantastic' or 'utopian' in nature, emphasizing complexity and multiplicity, positing multiple alternatives which endorse those unheard, denied, subsumed and frequently 'female' voices. They demonstrate that "We must always keep open a supplementary space for the articulation of cultural knowledges that are adjacent and adjunct but not necessarily accumulative, teleological, or dialectical".16. In her delineation of a futuristic utopia like "Mattapoisett", in outlining the contours of an imaginary zone, on the fringes of patriarchy, Piercy overlooks and transcends linear time frame work. Time seems to be a manipulable boundary. Piercy vividly delineates the different chronological and psychological worlds that her heroine inhabits with an irony that has an ineluctable feminist intention.

What redeems Connie from her inexorable ordeal of seclusion in the mental hospital is her contact with Luciente from the "Mattapoisett", her ability
as a 'catcher', her ability to 'mind travel' under the guidance of Luciente. Here the seemingly uncomplicated, straight forward, linear narration of Connie's mental deterioration and hospitalisation, is transformed into a feminist revision of the heroic quest and utopian model of a traveller educated through experience in a strange land. The story moves on two levels. The hitherto buried political dimension comes into the forefront through the manifestation of an utopian impulse envisioned as a salutary alternative to the fundamental insufficiency of the present patriarchy. As one of the foreseeable futuristic possibilities, "Mattapoissett" represents a longing for a more just and humane world which should not be denied. The crucial importance of feminist utopian fiction lies in its power to transform ideologies. The strategy of 'defamiliarization' facilitates the cognitive estrangement of the audience from conventional reality and prepares the readers to question biases inherent in dominant patriarchal ideologies and practices. The much needed distancing from lived reality is provided only by speculative fiction like utopia which can undermine the complacency of patriarchy.

Utopia has been a subversive genre and feminism too has a subversive potential. It is the transgressive, 'critical' character of contemporary feminisms that make the genre of 'utopia' a particularly comfortable position to work from and theorise. Contemporary feminist utopian writing has its roots in nineteenth century women's fiction. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland (1915) is a feminist utopia. As Ann Lane suggests, in her utopia, Gilman transforms the private world of mother-child, isolated in the individual home, into a community of
mothers and children in a socialized world. Many distinguishing features of "Mattapoissett" in Piercy's *Woman On The Edge of Time*, such as class equality, communal child rearing, absence of privilege by sex, freedom from fear of male violence, elimination of sex linked work and the use of persuasion and consensus to maintain social order are analogous to the notions expressed in *Herland*. But *Herland* is a unisexual, uncomplicated 'matriarchate'. Many classic utopian fictions portray a partial or complete segregation of the sexes. In this sense, *Herland* is a classic utopian text. Whereas Piercy's "Mattapoissett" has both men and women who are androgynous human beings. ‘Femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are not polarized absolutes or bifurcated ontological essences in the "Mattapoissett". The men in "Mattapoissett" also take on all the duties and functions which are conventionally associated with women. Piercy's utopia is more dynamic than static, working towards a deconstruction of fixed gender identities.

Connie Ramos's first encounter with Luciente from 'Mattapoissett' leaves her with a disturbed feeling of enormous confusion -

"The face of the young Indio smiling, beckoning, curiously gentle. He lacked the macho presence of men in her own family, nor did he have Claud's massive strength, or Eddie's edgy combativeness. His hands as they clapsed hers, however were not soft. Shaking hands? Absurd. Warm, calloused, with a faint chemical odor. "What should I call you?" the voice had asked. High pitched, almost effeminate voice, but pleasant and without any trace of accent.

"Connie," she had said. "Call me Connie".

"My name is Luciente." (p.36)
Luciente describes Connie as an "unusual person", "a catcher, a receptive with an unusual mind" (p.41). Luciente also informs Connie that he is not a catcher himself but only a 'sender'. He tells her that a 'catcher' is a person whose mind and nervous system are open, receptive to an unusual extent. He expresses his sense of inadequacy to explain something exotic in a vocabulary which is "remarkably weak in words for mental states, mental abilities, and mental acts" (p.42). He tells Connie that in his culture, Connie would be admired for her ability to be an "extraordinary top catcher" (p.42) Connie is frightened by Luciente's declarations. She thinks that he must have been a lunatic who has escaped from Bellevue. But Luciente assures her that he is not her enemy and does not intend to harm her. After his sudden disappearance, Connie begins to think seriously about her ability as a "catcher". She recollects some of the strange premonitions she had in the past about her family members and how these uncanny premonitions had turned out to be true. She remembers her husband Eddie's frequent accusation of her being a 'witch' and wonders whether she truly has this uncanny power.

In her next encounter with Luciente, Connie suddenly senses his presence around her and sees him almost immediately. Luciente tells her that he is not from her time and that he is a plant geneticist who comes from a village in Massachusetts - "Mattapoisett". He belongs to 2137 A.D. He tells her that in their society, they have learnt to mobilize their mental resources and to time travel. Unlike the contemporary patriarchal, hierarchical society to which Connie belongs, Luciente's "Mattapoisett", a futuristic society is anti hierarchical, which
has neither class distinctions nor economic, social, racial or intellectual
discriminations. Luciente also tells Connie about his friends, Bee and Jack Rabbit
and the "kenner" a computer which serves as his own "memory annex" (p.57).

Connie's next meeting with Luciente takes place in the hospital hall where
Connie is locked into seclusion for misbehaving with the hospital authorities. She
is inconsolably grief stricken when she remembers her lover Claud's death and the
episode which led to her separation from her daughter Angelina. In her grief,
Connie unconsciously reaches out to Luciente. They succeed once again in
establishing contact with each other. In this meeting, Connie accidentally
disCOVERS that Luciente is a woman and not a man as she had always presumed
her to be earlier. Connie also shares her grief with Luciente. Their conversation
revolves around the attitudes towards 'madness' in both societies. Luciente tells
Connie that in "Mattapoisett" people do not consider 'madness' as a sickness.
According to Luciente, her friend "Diana goes mad every couple of years. Has
visions. Per earth quakes. Goes down. Emerges and sets to work again with
harnessed passion". (p.65) When Connie admits that she has been forcibly
hospitalised at the insistence of her brother Luis, Luciente expostulates thus.

"Our madhouses are places where people retreat when
they want to go down into themselves - to collapse, carry
on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the
walls, relive infancy - getting in touch with the buried
self and the inner mind. We all lose parts of ourselves. We
all make choices that go bad..... How can another person
decide that it is time for me to disintegrate, to reintegrate
myself ?" (p.66).
This cogent and forceful argument of Luciente is a trenchant condemnation of those therapeutic procedures employed by psychiatrists. Such practices grievously damage the patient's self image. Piercy reveals that analytical techniques adopted in psychotherapies can be often power oriented, paternalistic and coercive. As Phyllis Chesler points out in Women And Madness, the psychotherapist will be seen by his patients as a surrogate parent, saviour, lover, expert and teacher - all roles that foster submission, dependency and infantilism in the patient: roles that imply the therapist's omniscient and benevolent superiority and the patient's inferiority. Way back in the nineteenth century, through her chilling and largely autobiographical study of insanity in the story The Yellow Wallpaper (1892) Gilman retaliated against the damage done to her and others by the powerful psychiatric profession. Luciente's statement on madness as "a state of getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind" corresponds with Catherine Clement's assertions about the 'hysteric' in The Newly Born Woman.

The hysterical, who lives with her body in the past, who transforms it into a theater for forgotten scenes, bears witness to a lost childhood that survives in suffering.... the rebellious body / language that manifests hysteria [is] a culturally stylized channel into which excess demonically flows - excess desire, excess rage, excess creative energy - only to be annihilated by the society that drove it in such directions.

The irrational fantasies of the insane judged and evaluated by the patriarchal institutions are elevated to the level of transcendental experiences of vision and empowerment. Here, the utopian thought or vision that struggles to
free itself from a patriarchal stranglehold is discernible. Utopian thought has always been a source of political inspiration to feminists. The utopian vision takes off from a negative analysis of the treatment of madness in a patriarchal society in order to create images and ideas that have the power to inspire revolt against oppression and exploitation.

"Mattapoisett" is a non hierarchical, egalitarian and harmonious society. There are no ranks and distinctions between citizens and absolutely no sexual discrimination. They have even reformed pronouns and coined gender neutral terms like 'Per' to replace gender specific pronouns such as 'his / him / her'. The concept of sexual activity for procreation is alien to the citizens of "Mattapoisett": "Fasure we couple" Luciente tells Connie, but here it is "not for money, not for a living. For love, for pleasure, for relief, out of habit, out of curiosity and lust". (p.64) Under the guidance of Luciente, Connie is able to travel and arrive in the future society of "Mattapoisett". She finds that the inhabitants of this agrarian society have not committed themselves to socially rigid, patriarchal constructions of class and gender roles. Connie mentally juxtaposes their androgyne with the reification of sexual difference found in her contemporary patriarchal society of United States. In "Mattapoisett", all 'nurturant' qualities are generic human qualities. They are neither 'womanly' nor 'manly'. Both sexes perform these functions. The inhabitants of this society are unaware of the concept of 'fatherhood'. Men and women are both 'mothers'. Pregnancy is obsolete. There is no biological motherhood. By ascribing many of the 'feminine attributes in the patriarchal world to the male members of
"Mattapoisett", Piercy emphasizes the absurdity underlying the polarization of 'masculine' and 'feminine' in patriarchy. "Mattapoisett" reverses the values of the contemporary world that oppress Connie and her kind. The alienating and oppressive features of the nuclear family are replaced by the solidarity of communal living, collective motherhood, sharing of all primary bonds and obligations.

The concept of a nuclear family does not exist in "Mattapoisett". Luciente shows Connie her house and informs her that it is her own space which she does not share with anyone. - "We each have our own space! Only babies share space! I have indeed read that people used to live piled together". Luciente shuddered, "Connie, you have space of your own. How could one live otherwise? How meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study?" (p.72).

Connie is also enlightened about their communal living and collective motherhood and parenting of children.

Connie asked Luciente, "I mean you; have you had any children?"

"I myself? Yes, twice. Besides, I'm what they call kidbinder, meaning I mother everybody's kids. :Taking her arm, Luciente nudged her toward the blue dome she pointed out as a fooder. "Let's hurry. I put in a guest slip for you, in case we got through. I'm mother to Dawn I was also mother to Neruda, who is wanting to study shelf farming. Person will start in the fall; I'm very excited. Course, I no longer mother Neruda, not since naming. No youth wants mothering." All this time Luciente was hustling her along the stone path toward the translucent blue dome.

Connie waited to get a word in. "So how old are your children?"

"Neruda is thirteen. Dawn is seven."
That put Luciente at least into her thirties. "Is your lover Bee their father ? or the other one ?"
"Father ?" Luciente raised her wrist, but Connie stopped her.
"Dad. Papa. You know. Male parent."
"Ah ? No, not, Bee or Jackrabbit, Comothers are seldom sweet friends if we can manage. So the child will not get caught in love misunderstandings".
"Comothers?"
"My coma" - she pronounced the long - "with Dawn are Otter and Morningstar - you'll meet them right now." (p.74)

Luciente takes Connie to the fooder - a home for all of them, a "warm spot" which presents the liveliest scene of institutional feeding that Connie has ever seen. To Connie, the people assembled there, look like children, "all in unisex rompers, sitting at their long kindergarten tables eating big plates of food and making jokes. touching and caressing, hugging and fingerling, they handled each other constantly. In a way it reminded her again of her childhood, when every emotion seemed to find a physical outlet, when both love and punishment had been expressed directly on her skin" (pp.74-75). Guided by a communal spirit, the inhabitants are unaware of the concept of 'surnames' which smacks of possessiveness. Connie struggles to make them comprehend this concept:

"Surnames. Look, my Name is Consuelo Ramos. Connie for short. Consuelo is my Christian name, my first name, Ramos is my last name. When I was born I was called Consuelo Camacho. Ramos is the name of my second husband: therefore I am Consuelo Camacho Ramos." She left out Alvarez, the name of her first husband, Martin, for simplicity.
They looked at each other, several adults and children consulting the kenners on their wrists. Finally Luciente said, "We have no equivalent". (pp 76-77).
They have no surnames because children are not private properties of any nuclear family. They belong to the community. Connie is astonished at the sight of all adults evincing a keen interest in the achievements of all the children of the community. There are no distinctions made between one's own children and the children of others.

Connie is also taken to the 'brooder' of "Mattapoisett". She is shocked by the information that 'brooder' is the place where the genetic material is stored and their embryos grow. Bee explains this to Connie.

.... "Here embryos are growing almost ready to birth. We do that at ninemonth plus two or three weeks. Sometimes we wait tenmonth. We find that extra time gives us stronger babies". He pressed a panel and a door slid aside, revealing seven human babies joggling slowly upside down, each in a sac of its own inside a larger fluid receptacle.

Connie gaped, her stomach also turning slowly upside down. All in a sluggish row, babies bobbed. Mother the machine. Like fish in the aquarium at Coney Island. Their eyes were closed. One very dark female was kicking. Another, a pink male, she could see clearly from the oversize penis, was crying. Languidly they drifted in a blind school. (p.102).

Connie's first reaction is one of horror. She is revolted by the foetuses in the machine which appear like "bland bottle born monsters of the future, born without pain, multi-coloured like a litter of puppies without the stigmata of race and sex" (p.106). Lefanu's essay "The Dream of Elsewhere: Feminist Utopias" in her work Feminism and Science Fiction. (1988) illustrates that "Connie is a complex character. In her twentieth century world she is no victim, but a fighter,
and she enters Mattapoissett in 2137 not as a passive observer but with opinions and importantly prejudices of her own. Piercy convinces her readers with skill: objections that the reader might have to the society portrayed - that it is too good to be true, for example - are raised by Connie herself and answered by the people there. This device makes possible the gradual revelation of this complex new society and it also offers a means of charting Connie's development.19

Connie's rights as a mother are ruthlessly terminated. She is declared as an unfit mother and her own child Angelina is taken forcibly from her by the State. Connie, who will never again conceive a child since her womb has been removed by young doctors who practised their skills upon her, hangs on desperately to the memory of suckling a baby. When she sees a man breast feeding the baby, Connie is revolted. She is also angry: "How dare any man share that pleasure?" she thinks. Her revulsion increases her anguish, bringing back memories of the sensuality and pain of biological motherhood.

Angelina, child of my sore and bleeding body, child of my sad marriage that never fit right, like a pair of cheap shoes that sprouts a nail in the sole. But you fit right. The nurse said I would have to show you, but you reached right for my breast. You suckled right away. I remember how you grabbed with your small pursed mouth at my breast and started drawing milk from me, how sweet it felt. How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, who has never borne a baby in blood and pain, who has never suckled a child. Who got that child out of a machine the way that couple, white and rich, got my flesh and blood. All made up already, a canned child, just add money. What do they know of motherhood? (p.106).
Connie feels that the women of "Mattapoisett" have abandoned and given up their last refuge to men. By renouncing the "last remnants of ancient power sealed in blood and milk", the women of "Mattapoisett" have lost their only claim to being special. When Connie asks for a valid reason to justify the necessity for artificial reproduction, Luciente provides her with a convincing answer.

"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: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers. Every child has three. To break the nuclear bonding". (p.105).

The phenomenon of artificial reproduction in the utopia of "Mattapoisett" is synonymous with the arrangement contemplated by Shulamith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex: The case for feminist revolution (1970). Firestone argues that the material base of patriarchy is its dialectic of production and reproduction which requires woman to reproduce the species. According to her, the fact that only females reproduce is the reason for the gender based division of labour upon which patriarchy and its ruling ideology of sexism are constructed. She visualises a feminist revolution wherein women will seize the means of reproduction. To quote Firestone, "The double curse that man should till the soil by the sweat of his brow and that woman should bear in pain and travail would be lifted through technology to make humane living for the first
time a possibility”. Piercy’s "Mattapoissett" is a utopia where Firestone’s demands for the feminist revolution have materialised. The sexual difference between men and women is totally divorced from reproduction and child rearing.

Luciente and her friends also explain to Connie that the cultural composition of their society is heterogeneous. Although, they have decided to hold on to separate cultural identities, they have broken the bond between genes and culture to eradicate racism. They have preserved the diversity of different cultures.

Piercy’s feminist utopian representations of "Mattapoissett" are more fluid, pluralistic and multifaceted than conventional representations of utopia which are relatively static. In her essay "Contemporary feminist Utopianism; Practising utopia on Utopia", Lucy Sargisson opines that a shift can be identified within contemporary feminist utopianism, away from the universalist tendencies traditionally associated with utopia. She argues that these texts move towards a new, open ended and multiple approach towards the present and the future. Sargisson identifies a new conception of utopian opposition; one that adequately reflects the diversity of contemporary feminisms and escapes restrictive universalisms. Mentioning Piercy’s Woman On The Edge of Time as an example of the fluidity of contemporary feminist utopianism, Sargisson writes:

Marge Piercy's Woman On The Edge of Time combines realism with Utopianism, but does not blueprint the future. Rather, a number of alternatives are sketched to the present, which is in itself a possible future. All of the alternatives are experienced by Connie, the central character, in the present tense. All are equally possible and none are distanced temporally from her own present. The
eutopia of Mattapoissett, and the dystopias of war and macho-technology could all exist as a result of her own time, since neither the future nor the present are fixed in this text. Luce Irigaray has evoked an understanding of time and the relation between the present and the future which speaks to this, she calls it the 'conditional presence', conditional that is on our actions and perceptions in the here and now. Piercy and Irigaray both provoke radical and transgressive attitudes towards what might be called 'the possible' their work is quite profoundly Utopian, but neither invokes or desires the ideal polity.

The traditional, static representation of an ideal utopia is an anachronism. It is replaced by a pluralistic approach. Here Sargisson elucidates the concept of a post modernist, non logocentric, feminist utopia with the application of Derridean techniques. According to her, "contemporary feminist utopianism transgresses the rules and boundaries which constitute the present, constantly moving away from the axis of binarity and dialectical opposition. It's move towards multiplicity is open ended and unrestricted. It allows avoidance of the imperialistic imposition of a singular truth in the guise of a model society." A Derridean deconstructive analysis is clearly discernible here.

Explicating the theory of deconstruction in Sexual / Textual Politics, Toril Moi remarks that according to Derrida, language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning, and any search for an essential, absolutely stable meaning must therefore be considered 'metaphysical'. There is no final element, no fundamental unit, no 'transcendental signified' that is meaningful in itself and thus escapes the ceaseless interplay of linguistic deferral and difference. The free play of signifiers will never yield a final unified meaning that in turn might ground and
explain all the others. In the light of this analysis, we can understand the conception of a fluid, pluralistic, contemporary feminist utopia which is non logocentric and transgressive of the static patriarchal concept of binary opposition.

Percy’s 'Mattapoissett', unlike the separatist, 'only women utopias' of the first wave feminism such as Gilman's Herland, is a complex, pluralistic society. There are men and women, people who are brown, black and white from different cultures. But there is no political, economic or sexual hierarchy. People are bisexual and they are not judged and divided by their sexual orientations but by their strengths and weaknesses. The body / mind dichotomy is a patriarchal concept to the inhabitants of "Mattapoissett". The patriarchal heterosexual marriage with its notion of couplehood according to Luciente is an unstable dyad, fierce and greedy, trying to reduplicate the original mother - child bonding. She considers this effort to be tragic and blind. In "Mattapoissett" the men and women share the responsibility of child rearing. The women are free from child bearing. This makes Connie think about the predicament of women of her own time like her sister Inez who is subjected to a lot of trauma due to her multiple pregnancies. On the contrary, Connie finds that "Romance, Sex, birth and children are not women's business anymore." They're everybody's business in Mattapoisett and gradually she begins to realise that is how it should be. Suddenly, Connie who has had strong misgivings about this society, begins to change. She yearns for the utopian haven of Mattapoisett and strongly wishes that her daughter Angelina must belong there.
Suddenly she assented with all her soul to Angelina in Mattapossett, to Angelina hidden forever one hundred fifty years into the future, even if she should never see her again. For the first time her heart assented to Luciente, to Bee, to Magdalena. Yes, you can have my child, you can keep my child. She will be strong there, well fed, well housed, well taught, she will grow up much better and stronger and smarter than I. I assent. I give you my battered body as recompense and my rotten heart. Take her, keep her! I want to believe she is mine. I give her to Luciente to mother, with gladness I give her. She will never be broken as I was. She will be strange, but she will be glad and strong and she will not be afraid. She will have enough. She will have pride. She will love her own brown skin and be loved for her strength and her good work. She will walk in strength like a man and never sell her body and she will nurse her babies like a woman and live in love like a garden, like that children's house of many colours. People of the rainbow with its end fixed in earth, I give her to you! (p.141)

Connie's initial negative responses of revulsion and disgust at the pastoral nature of Mattapossett in 2137 and men's breast feeding give way to a conversion. She metaphorically gives first her lost daughter, then her beloved innocent first husband and finally herself into the new society's care. Her sojourn in Mattapossett distances her from conventional realities. The inhabitants of Mattapossett question sex roles, gender identities and sexual stereotypes thereby, providing rich insights into the constructed nature of human identity in the contemporary patriarchal society. In Feminist futures : contemporary women's speculative fiction, Natalie Rosinsky makes a distinction between the concept of feminist androgyny introduced by Piercy and the concept of androcentric
androgyny. Rosinsky argues that 'feminist androgyny' differs from classical or traditional western concept of androgyny whose advocates often literalise its symbolic representations in a hermaphroditic or sexually epicene figure to support their own physiologically deterministic outlook. According to Rosinsky, central to a feminist understanding of androgyny is the belief that human potential is not predetermined by physiological gender, nurture rather than nature is the dominant influence on women's and men's mental as well as physical development. To feminist proponents of androgyny, women's and men's abilities are potentially equal. The men and women of Mattapoisett demonstrate this conviction in their physical and mental characteristics. Men are actively involved in a number of so called 'feminine' duties; attending to the physical needs of the baby and even breast feeding it. Connie sees Barbarossa, one of the friends of Luciente, an intellectual school master suckling his baby in the nursery with an expression of serene enjoyment spread over his face. In their initial encounters, Connie mistakes Luciente for a man. When she comes to know that Luciente is indeed a woman, Connie is astonished. Connie finds her rather well built, and "well muscled" for a woman. As a non sexist utopia, Mattapoisett is unique in the sense that it offers possibilities of coexistence for men and women.

The men and women of Mattapoisett remind Connie of the people in the institution where she is locked up. Connie learns that Mattapoisett is an egalitarian society with no prejudices. She finds that she can share her mental problems with them in an uninhibited manner. When Connie talks about the disintegration of her 'self' and the presences of three women inside her, Luciente reassures her
that Diana the healer would help Connie to "meld the three women into one". They are not frightened by Connie's revelations. They do not pass harsh judgements. When Luciente's young lover JackRabbit talks about his 'nervous breakdown' and his temporary insanity nonchalantly, Connie is astounded.

"Do you tell everyone you meet that you've been mad twice?" She resented his casual, almost boastful air. She lugged that radioactive fact around New York like a hidden sore. To find out she had been in an institution scared people - how it scared them. Not a good risk for a job. They feared madness might prove contagious. Jackrabbit looked into her eyes with piercing curiosity, "Why not? Why keep that from you any more than study - ing with Marika?"

"In my time you'd be ashamed... When people find out, they pull away so fast I can see it. Jerky. Afterward, if they have to deal with me, they're thinking all the time that I might suddenly go berserk and start climbing the walls or jumping out the window. Or they don't believe anything I say." (p.124).

Connie poignantly communicates "how madness is shut away from sight, shamed, brutalised, denied and feared." She reveals the social ostracism and the sense of alienation experienced by a woman who has once been diagnosed as 'mad' by the psychiatric institution.

Connie's meetings with Luciente from the "Mattapoisett" empower her with visions of an alternative reality. When Connie learns that the doctors in the mental hospital shall carry out experiments on her, she tries to resist. She makes a last effort to prevent her "amygdalotomy". As an ultimate desperate measure, she poisons Dr. Redding and the team of specialists by pouring a deadly fungicide into the coffee. Connie remembers "Mattapoisett" and perpetrates this final act
of war. She poisons them because "they are the violence-prone. Theirs is the money and the power, theirs the poisons that slow the mind and dull the heart. Theirs are the powers of life and death". (p.375). Connie dedicates this act of war to her friends Skip, Alice, Tina, Captain Cream and Orville and her lover Claud, people who were mercilessly used by Dr. Redding and others as experimental objects in medical research.

4.5. The Dystopian future world as a critique of patriarchal consumerist culture.

Piercy does not bestow upon madness the romanticized glamour of a political protest. She has no romantic illusions about madness as a means of transcendence. She powerfully depicts the critical impasse confronting Connie who is deprived of the very means of protest or self affirmation. Piercy's delineations of the Utopian, non sexist Mattapoissett and another terrifying dystopian future world identify the malady as pernicious influences of an oppressive, patriarchal male culture. Here, there are implications of social and cultural contestation. The dystopian future world of "hand maids who are all either sex workers or mothers", that Connie stumbles upon in an attempt to contact Luciente is a more frightening, macabre version of the contemporary patriarchy. This a world where the objectification and commodification of women perpetuated by a contemporary consumerist patriarchal culture have become indisputable norms and values of the society. While time travelling, Connie accidentally enters this future and meets Gildina.
The woman was younger and her body seemed a cartoon of femininity, with a tiny waist, enormous sharp breasts that stuck out like the brassieres Connie herself had worn in the fifties. Her stomach was flat but her hips and buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved. She looked as if she could hardly walk for the extravagance of her breasts and buttocks, her thighs that collided as she shuffled a few steps.

"How'd you get in here anyhow? Nobody but contract girls and middle flacks stalk in this complex. It's strictly SG'ed."

"SG'ed ?"

"Segregated and guarded - are you cored? How did you get in here? Well?" She stomped to and fro on small - ridiculously small - feet. She looked as if any minute she might fall over through imbalance, the small feet and tiny ankles and wrists, the tiny waist the small head with the tower of Pisa on top.

Somehow Connie had wound up in the wrong place. She had missed Mattapoisett and hit some other place in the future. "Maybe I am in the wrong place, but they let me in. See for yourself. So where am I?"

"They never let you in. Ha! Nobody would take you for a contracty. You've never even had your first grafts. If you ever had a beauty-op, you've reverted. They'd never leave you with that hair and that skin! You're as dark .... I mean I'd have been on that side myself. But of course I had a full series! When I was fifteen, I was selected, and I'm still on the full shots and re-ops". (p.288)

Gildina also tells Connie that in their society, women are hired for contract sex. "It means you agree to put out for so long for so much. You know?" (p.289) They have drugs for all ailments. Gildina informs Connie about "Risers, soothers, sleepers, wakers, euphors, passion pills". The dystopian world of Gildina bears close resemblance to the Republic of Gilead in The Handmaid's Tale. The women are required only for their reproductive and sexual functions.
Most women are either sex workers who are hired on a contract or mothers who are also hired for their reproductive services. Gildina tells Connie that the "mothers are cored to make babies all the time" (p.290). Gildina's man brusquely remarks that she has no more mental capacity than a genetically improved ape and that she is cosmetically fixed for sex use. Connie reflects gloomily that men and women have not changed much in that society. This cheerless prospect worries her. She recoils from this world with horror and revulsion. Piercy employs a parodic strategy of using the body (in Gildina's description) to articulate a caricature of patriarchal culture's image of femininity. Piercy reiterates the views of Spivak who argues for the importance of such strategies in explicitly political terms. According to Spivak, women must avoid the seduction of the 'hystero-centric' discourse, and should instead work from within their position of double displacement to produce a parodic discourse which will undo the presence of the phallocentric order26.

4.6 Conclusion

Through her portrayals of future worlds, Piercy suggests that the "Mattapoisett"of Luciente and the dystopia of Gildina are two possible futures contained within the womb of the present patriarchy. Luciente tells Connie that "probabilities clash and possibilities wink out forever". The contemporary present is the "crux-time" which can ultimately decide the provenance of these alternative worlds.

The clinical summary of Connie provided by the hospital authorities depicts her as a dangerous psychotic. Excerpts from her case history
unequivocally pronounce Connie to be "a socially maladjusted individual subject to periodic dysphorias accompanied by fear, leading to violent episodes and aggressions" (p.380) "Amygdalotomy" is prescribed for this 'paranoid schizophrenic', a thirty seven year old Mexican American woman abandoned by her husband, bereaved of her lover and separated from her daughter. Connie's position at the bottom of the socio-economic scale in the patriarchal, consumerist, acquisitive world of the post 1960s, makes it easy for those in control to interpret her rage as 'madness'. As Jean Baker Miller argues: "Dominants are usually convinced that the way things are is right and good, not only for them, but especially for the subordinates. All morality confirms this view, and all social structure sustains it". The marginalised subordinates can experience an acute "ego boundary confusion". They can attain imaginary wholeness only through fantasy. Their fate, like their identity is sealed and fixed, and only resignation or neurosis are offered as ways of dealing with this inexorable destiny. Percy strongly vindicates this view in her representation of the hegemonic culture of the psychiatric establishment that can label and classify those who do not conform to preconceived standards of normality.

For women to transform the cultural ordering of 'fact', for them to change ideas, for them to participate in the power of naming in order to transform culture, women must write their own stories. They must be the mediators, rather than the mediated within the language. The history written by women will not be a 'true' history but will be reconstituted, re-membered out of the exclusions and negations of patriarchy, and will be written by those who play out their lives "between symbolic systems, in the interstices, offside".
This 'Promethean', subversive feminist vision shapes Piercy's utopian and dystopian portrayals and reveals the dissatisfaction with the contemporary patriarchal reality. The fantasies of Connie Ramos are reclaimed from the 'negations of patriarchy' and 'reconstituted' as glimpses of an alternative reality.
NOTES


4. Foucault x-xi


10. Warhol, ed. 7-8.

11. Warhol, ed. 14


15. Cixous and Clement, xii.


23. Horton and Baumeister 239.


27. qtd. in Waugh 126 – 127.