THE MENTAL HOSPITAL AS THE CONTROL AGENCY AND THE MIRROR OF A TYRANNICAL SOCIETY IN WOMAN ON THE EDGE OF THE TIME

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Abstract - Main stream of criticisms on Woman on the Edge of Time by Piercy have examined the novel in terms of feminism: they find in this novel the criticism of the oppression of females by the male-oriented society as well as a "new definition of motherhood". This novel, however, is basically "an explicit critique of hierarchical cultures" which dominate and control socially marginal beings. To suggest the tyrannical nature of the hierarchical cultures, Piercy introduces Luciente, a time traveller from the future, who takes Connie, the protagonist of the novel, forward in time to two future societies. One of the future societies is the hierarchical society where the riches control the people through their agents such as super-cops, SD men, and Assassins, as well as various kinds of drugs which give the illusion of euphoria. This dystopian society of the future, however, is an escalation of the world Connie currently inhabits. That is, the future dystopia mirrors the present world whose control over the people is epitomized by the mental hospital in which Connie is incarcerated. Therefore, there are many striking similarities and parallels, in terms of methods and purposes, between the mental hospital and the Complex of the future dystopian society as the control agency of the ruling classes of each society. Hence Connie who, through the visit to the future dystopian society, realizes the tyranny of the present world epitomized by the mental hospital, determines to fight against the mental doctors who, on behalf of the ruling class, control the inmates of the hospital, because fight, she believes, is the only way to change the present world which might become the dystopian world.

Index Terms - Dystopian Society, Hierarchical Cultures, Marginal Beings, Mental Hospital, Piercy, Woman on the Edge of Time

I.

Main stream of criticisms on Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy have examined the novel in terms of feminism: Kathy Rudy maintains the novel "provides a guide to futures wherein technology could be used to enhance the position of women in society" (Rudy 37); and Choi finds a "new definition of motherhood in the future era of artificial uterus" (4) in the novel which, she argues, criticizes the present ideology of motherhood. Their arguments based on feminist perspectives seem to attain their critical justification since technology in the future world suggested in the novel has been developed to gestate babies in a mechanical brooder, while making motherhood a duty to be shared equally by each parent.

The above criticisms, however, ignore diverse aspects of domination and control manifested in the novel, while confining their concerns to the feminist perspective. The domination and control suggested in the novel is not only over females, but also over classes and races, and etc. That is, the novel handles the domination and control over socially marginal beings or social "underdog" by the ruling class who employ technology as "a central tool through which the white male power structure has perpetuated its power" (Booker 343). This novel which "dramatizes the oppression of a power", in this sense, is "an obstinate critique of existing tyrannies" (Khouri 56) as well as "an explicit critique of hierarchical cultures" (Neverow 19) which is maintained by the oppression of the social underdogs.

To reveal the tyranny of the ruling class, and to suggest the way to free oneself from their tyrannical control, Marge Piercy introduces Luciente, a time traveller from a future, who takes Connie, the protagonist of the novel, forward in time to two future societies, that is, an agrarian, communal community of Mattapoisett and a dystopian society controlled by the ruling class, the riches, who employ a machine called "Multi". The community of Mattapoisett encourages social harmony and individual freedom, whereas the tyrannical society controlled by the riches is a dehumanized one where everybody is under control and under surveillance.

Piercy presents two future societies in such an ambiguous way that we cannot know for certain whether Connie's visions are by-products of her mental instability or are literal time-travel. Whether Connie's visions are her fantasies or real, however, is not important because her real or imaginary visit to two future societies leads Connie to realize the nature of the tyrannical control of socially marginal beings by the governing class, while suggesting the way to construct the ideal world, community of Mattapoisett, without any kind of control and domination. In short, the dystopian society controlled by the riches, the governing class in the future, is an escalation of the world Connie currently inhabits; and the community

of Mattapoisett is a utopian society where any kind of discriminations in terms of class, race, and gender are eliminated.

Naturally, there are similarities or parallels between the world Connie currently inhabits and the future dystopian society, especially between the mental hospital where Connie is incarcerated and the Complex where the residents of the future society are obliged to stay. It is because the mental hospital in Connie's world and the Complex in the future society function as a means of supporting and maintaining the interests of each ruling class, while serving as a control agency devoted to suppressing and taming social underdogs.

II.

Connie is a typical social underdog in terms of social class, race, and gender, since she is a poverty-stricken Mexican-American woman who lives on welfare in a one-room apartment in tenement housing in New York City. So Connie is helpless even when she is unfairly incarcerated in a New York mental hospital by Geraldo, her niece's pimp, on grounds of violent behaviour, after she struck him as an attempt to protect her niece, Dolly, from him. The doctor "had not even interviewed her but had talked exclusively to Geraldo" who lied to the doctor that "she[Connie] had attacked him and Dolly at Dolly's apartment on Rivington" (12), and incarcerated her in the mental hospital. With the mental doctors, Connie is just one of the social underdogs whose violent and impulsive behavior should be controlled and suppressed, because her behavior challenges and threatens the stability of the male-dominated ruling class. The mental hospital, as the control agency of the ruling class, attempts to control and tame its inmates in various ways in order to make them obey the rules and regulations made by the ruling class and accept the status quo where marginal beings are suppressed. The inmates of the mental hospital, first of all, are segregated and locked up in confined space as if they were prisoners, thus prevented from any communication with other inmates. Connie incarcerated in the mental hospital, likewise, is assigned a wide deserted room called 'seclusion', and is locked up in the bed, as if she were a dangerous prisoner. Furthermore, Connie is tied with straps to a bed, like a "holiday bird trussed in the oven." (14)

The inmates are constantly under surveillance because any private space is not given to them, and even the bathroom of the mental hospital is without a door. Besides, the doctors use cameras to monitor and check the inmates' behavior. To be specific, they bring the camera crew to film patients and their reactions. Knowing their movements are always watched and observed by nurses and doctors, the inmates, consequently, try not to betray what they feel or think, controlling their own behaviors, even if they are alone in the room. They, in this way, become their own prison warders who incessantly watch and monitor themselves. The most coercive measures, however, are the electric shock and diverse operations performed on the brains of inmates. In the belief that the electric shock on the brain is effective in making the inmates tamed and well-behaved, the mental doctors frequently "send voltage smashing through your brain and knock your body into convulsions", because they are convinced that "a little brain damage" can "jolt you into behaving right". When the inmate "regains their consciousness, after the electric shock, they come back to somebody's life, jumbled, weak, dribbling saliva … with parts of our memory forever burned out" (83). Electric shock destroys their identities as well as brain-cells, changing them into zombie-like figures, though the mental doctors maintain it can have the inmates' violent impulse eliminated. Psychiatrists also believe that the electrodes or neurotransmitters put in the heads of inmates can control their mind and violent impulses, thus making the inmates get along with the society: "Poor impulse control has brought this subject into repeated scrapes with society. The very lack of control that has stunted her development, we can provide her" (215). Besides, they believe the implantation of the neurotransmitters is, as Trainor points out, preferable in terms of "cost effectiveness" because "it will be cheaper to control patients with remotely operated neurotransmitters implanted in the brain than with long-term incarceration in institutions." (Trainer 37) As a victim of their surgical experiment, Doctors choose Connie whose violent impulse, they believe, should be controlled. That is, Connie becomes part of a new pilot project in which neurotransmitters are surgically placed in her brains to control her behavior. Connie knows the nature of the operation which she is supposed to have: "Tomorrow they were going to stick a machine in her[Connie] brain. She was the experiment. They would rape her body, her brain, herself. After this she could not trust her own feelings. She would not be her own" (304). Connie realizes that the operation will deprive her of her own identity and self, making her a kind of living dead who cannot have her own thinking. Doctors' operation, however, is not confined to placing the electrode in the brain: on Skip who is a homosexual, the doctors performed an operation called "amygdalotomy" (288). That is, the doctors coagulated part of Skip's limbic brain to restrain his "sexual inversion"; and in the brain of Sybil who was "persecuted for being a practicing witch" (86), doctors, after drilling her skull, fitted "a stereotactic machine", a "metal disk … with tubes and a miniature dialysis bag attached" (308), which will make Sybil "a walking monster with a little computer inside and a year's supply of dope to keep her stupid." (308)

The ultimate purpose of their surgical operations is to control and manipulate the inmates in terms of mood, emotions, and body. Though mental doctors and psychiatrists believe that surgical operations help the inmates get along with the society by controlling their impulse, the operations actually make the inmates a machine which is totally at the mercy of doctors, agents of the governing class in a symbolical sense. The doctor, who placed microminiaturized radio under Alice's skull, unwittingly admitted this fact:

"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 reactions 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." (221)

The function of the Complex of the future dystopian society and its agents is, in several ways, very similar to that of the mental hospital and its doctors. To control its residents, the future dystopian society makes people live only in an assigned flack (flack in this novel refers to the level of the building) of the Complex, a building of hundredths levels, according to their social class: the ruling class occupies the top flack, and duds (it refers to the lowest class in this society. Connie, an absolute social underdog, is naturally regarded as a dud) are assigned the lowest flack (level) of the Complex. Almost all of the flacks except the top flack where the ruling class, the riches, occupy, are windowless, and their residents are always watched. The Complex, in this sense, is like an immense prison or the psychiatric hospital where every movement of its inmates is watched. To tighten vigilance, the riches choose some people adequate for their purpose, and train them into SD(Secure Digital) men, Assassins, and SG (Secure Guard) whose main role is to monitor and watch those who do "(sub)versive acts or talks." (325) Their surveillance, however, is not confined to the behavior of the people. The riches, through their agents, even try to check people's thinking and emotion, so that whenever their agents find someone suspected of having an "impure" or "irregular" thought, they put him/her in the Secure Center called "securcenter" (325), and scan his/her mind to check his/her true thoughts. The residents of the future dystopian society are in this way under complete surveillance, like the prisoners in a panopticon or rather like the inmates of the mental hospital where Connie is incarcerated. The riches, to further their control over the population, employ super-cops who execute their laws, while monitoring people's feelings by the sensing devices they always carry. The riches also maintain "armies of genetically engineered fighters" (325) who are employed in fighting the war against rebels who may challenge their authority. The most frequently-used way to suppress the possible resistance of the residents who may feel constraint under the strict control is to use psychotropic drugs which can control the moods and emotions of the residents. Whenever people have physical or emotional needs, they resort to a drug specially manufactured to meet their needs. For example, a drug called Rapture makes its taker feel "float" (315), giving a sense of ecstasy. So whenever people need sleep, waking, passion, soothing, etc., they just need to take the pill called "sleeper", "wakers", "passion", "soother", etc. In short, the residents of the dystopian society are dependent upon drugs which give the illusion of providing them with what they need. Consequently, they feel that they have everything they need, if only provided with the pills, while forgetting they live constrained and controlled lives enforced by the ruling class, the riches. The function of the drugs, which prevent the residents of the flacks from making any resistance by giving them the illusion of euphoria, is almost the same with that of the surgical operations on the brain, since both drugs and operations make it impossible for the residents or the inmates to rebel against the ruling class, by putting their bodies and mind (emotions and moods) under complete control. Hence the future world, which controls the people through super-cops, SD men, Assassins, and various kinds of drugs, can be said to be the developed version of the present world which controls social underdogs like Connie through mental doctors and various operations on the brains. In a word, the mental hospital is the control agency and the mirror of the tyrannical society. Consequently, it is not surprising that Connie, before having another operation, lobotomy, finds in the asylum "flacks of power" (the riches in the future world) as well as mental doctors, since the future dystopian world dominated by the riches is actually the same with the present world which its ruling class control through the mental hospital, the control agency and mirror of the tyrannical society. Therefore, when Connie finds the riches in the asylum, she realizes that war is unavoidable to prevent the arrival of the dystopian world: "War, she thought, I'm at war. No more fantasies, no more hopes. War." (368)

III.

The travel to the dystopia is a turning point for Connie because the travel makes Connie realize the tyranny of her society. Connie, thus, becomes aware that she is living at an important time in history, and is in a pivotal position; her actions and decisions will determine the course of history, "by her[Connie's] choice and involvement, the outcome of a war between society could be changed" (Jang 196). In short, Connie realizes that she is "on the edge of time", and that, if she does not do anything to change the present world, it will become the dystopian world which she witnessed or imagined to witness. So instead of

thinking about running away, which, she realizes, cannot be a solution, Connie determines to fight to prevent the lobotomy operation that is planned for her and other inmates, because the fight, she believes, is the only available way to put an end to the tyranny of the present world which might repeat itself in the future as seen in the dystopian society. Poisoning of the mental doctors and psychiatrists is the way she chooses for her fight, because "the team of psychiatrists, representing the bureaucratic, totalitarian state, that manipulated her like a guinea-pig" (Khouri 56), will make the world a hell mirrored and embodied by the mental hospital as well as the Complex.

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