

Madness and Woman: A Feminist Interpretation of Madwomen in *Woman on the Edge of Time*

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Abstract

American feminist writer Marge Piercy has, in her novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, depicted the unique experience of the “madwoman” Connie, who shuttles between the present and the future. Instead of focusing on the result of madness, Piercy highlights the process in which Connie is driven mad, and reconstructs the relationship between madness and woman through the depiction of Jackrabbit, another “madwoman” in the imagined utopian society of Mattapoissett. Through the sharp contrast between Connie and Jackrabbit, this paper questions and challenges the dominant rational social power. At the same time, it arouses people’s rethinking of madness and more attention to woman.

Key words: Madness; Madwoman; *Woman on the Edge of Time*

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INTRODUCTION

Marge Piercy (1936-) is an American novelist, poet and social activist as well as one of the most important exponents in the second-wave feminist movement. She is an extremely prolific writer whose science fiction *Woman on the Edge of Time* published in 1976 has been widely regarded as a classic of feminist utopia in the academic circle.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy depicts an American society that is full of violence and oppression. Under the guidance of utopian spirit, Piercy has artfully constructed in her novel two distinct utopian societies, which functioned as a powerful weapon, targeting the social diseases in the United States in 1970s. Since its publication of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, many western scholars have interpreted it from different perspectives. However, few Chinese scholars have given a systematic research on the madwoman in it so far. Therefore, based on feminist and sociologist theories, this thesis aims at exploring its social significance and directive function for a better development of women and all human beings through a careful study of the text.

1. MADNESS IN MODERN SOCIETY

What is madness? To what extent can a person be called mad? Who has the very right to define and declare the madness of the other people? And what will happen to the “mad” person? Some light can be shed on these questions in Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1964), in which the social nature of madness has been illustrated through the extensive elaboration of the relationship between reason and madness.

In this classic work, Foucault traces the evolution of the concept of madness through different phases and explores the construction of madness. Based on this, he makes the claim that madness is not an unchanging, natural phenomenon, but a cultural product and it depends on the society in which it exists. Various cultural, intellectual and economic structures codetermine how madness is known and experienced within a given society. On this account, it is society that constructs the experience of madness. So to speak, if there is no such history regarding that phenomenon as madness and then persecuting it, there is no history of madness. Just as Ma

(2002) pointed out, the reason why madness exists is not because it is a natural disease but the result of cultural construction...it is the result of another kind of madness—reason. The history of madness is the history that reason mercilessly suppresses and persecutes madness (pp.474-475).

Then, what is reason? In modern society, reason is “order, physical and moral constraint, the anonymous pressure of the group, the requirements of conformity” (Foucault, 1961, p.ix). In order to safeguard certain order, those in power or in a superior position, who usually serves as the embodiment of reason in a given society, will lay down a wide range of rules, regulations and guidelines for people to follow. Once a person does not live up to the prescribed expectation or deviates from the accepted norm, those “reasonable” people will stand up to judge and punish the “abnormal” or “insane” people by means of the discourse of reason, which is considered by Foucault as a will to power. In Foucault’s view, all kinds of madness in reality, either psychiatric madness or daily insanity, are merely the outcomes of supreme reason discourse, that is, the arbitrary judgment made by the rationalists who have the power of discourse against those inferior people. Thus madness “is more than a medical term which is applied to diagnose the unstable or abnormal states of mind” (Liang, 2008, p.10), but rather, it reflects the power relations between those in power and the powerless, between the sane and insane, and between those in the center and those on the margin.

When it comes to the discussion of madness, mental hospital or psychiatric asylums, the institution where mad people are judged and treated, cannot be unmentioned. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault gives a detailed account of the birth of asylums. According to him, “the entire existence of madness...was enveloped in...a “parental complex”. The prestige of patriarchy is revived around madness” (p.252). In modern society, mental asylums constructed in accordance with the family mode are under the charge of psychiatrists. The psychiatrists are “Father and Judge, Family and Law” (Ibid.) while the patients are children and kept under close observation because they are thought to be incapable of “knowing, willing and judging with the protocols of reason” (Sim, 1995, p.137). Moreover, the development of science covers up the sources of the power of this new father-figure. Having the authority of reason behind him, psychiatrist guarantees the value and correctness of what is goes on, and he could exercise his absolute authority on patients in the mental hospital. With such unequal rights for doctors and patients, it is not hard to imagine that oppression will occur when the discourse of reason tries to exclude difference. In this case, a lunatic asylum is more like a prison than a hospital. Acting as an institution of social control, mental-hospitals are an accomplice to incarcerate, control and punish the people who are labeled mad.

In the following section, the author will trace the process of madness of the main character Connie Ramos in *Woman on the Edge of Time* with Foucault’s theory of madness. Through the analysis of Connie, who is accused of violence and imprisoned in a mental hospital, the author tries to find out the factors contributing to her madness, thereby reveals the social reality behind Connie’s miserable experience of becoming mad to be mad.

2. A CUCKOO’S NEST THAT CANNOT FLY OVER

Woman on the Edge of Time begins with Connie’s second incarceration to the mental hospital to which she has been admitted before. With ingenious and clever conception, Marge Piercy weaves Connie’s present situation in the mental hospital and her past life together, giving the readers a detailed account of what happened to Connie through her whole life. The more one knows about Connie, the more one can find and feel that Connie is not mad at all. On the contrary, she is much saner than most people in the actual life because of her persistent quest for a better existence. She has always dreamed of becoming “someone” (p.46).¹ Unfortunately, she is born as a Mexican-American woman. The society has a specific expectation of what kind of person she can be, while any rebellion and violence will make her aberrant. So to speak, her fate is largely predetermined by the society. No matter how hard she tried, she cannot be “someone” she aspires. There seems to be an invisible hand over her head, controlling her life and dragging her back to the specified and “normal” track whenever she tries for a change. She is doomed to be “nobody”. The more she struggles against this fate, the more she suffers. Although she is labeled—rather than actually—mad at the very beginning, she could not escape the destiny of really being mad and could not walk out of the mental hospital any more. In this sense, Connie is much alike Randle McMurphy in *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, a 1975 American drama films directed by Miloš Forman, and the actual society to Connie is like a cuckoo’s nest that cannot fly over.

Then, what is the “invisible hand”? How does it work? And why Connie cannot avoid such tragic destiny in the actual life? You may wonder. Based on a close reading of the text itself, the author will answer these questions from three perspectives, actually, from Connie’s triple identity: Being a woman, an ethnic and an once-claimed mad person.

2.1 Gender Matters

First of all, a brief explanation is needed here. By “gender matters”, the author means that whether a person is a man

¹ Quoted from Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* published by Fawcett Publications, 1976. Hereafter, only the page numbers is indicated.

and a woman is very important. To be more specific, being regarded and accepted as a woman almost determines everything of Connie.

As a matter of fact, the issue of sex and gender has long been discussed by feminist and sociologist theorists. "Sex" denotes human females and males depending on biological features while "gender" denotes women and men depending on social factors. Based on this understanding, it is generally believed that gender is culturally constructed. Thus, women are not born. Rather they, as indicated by Simone de Beauvoir in her masterpiece *The Second Sex*, "become women" (Beauvoir, 1965, p.295). Then how does female become women? In Judith Butler's view, "gender is a norm that takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such and as a norm, but it also drives its power through the citations that it compels" (p.107). That is to say, gender is usually achieved through citation and reiteration of the norms or conventions of the "law", which is an embodiment of reason.

Under the patriarchal context, "reason...has been associated with the universe, the public and the male, whereas emotion has been associated with the irrational, the nature...and of course, the female" (quoted in Liang, 2008, p.10). This association reflects the close relationship of reason to men and men's desire to subordinate women. Regarded themselves as the superior gender and the embodiment of reason, men grant themselves the right to lay down gender norms and laws. According to patriarchal ideology, women are supposed to perform the prescribed roles as a docile daughter, a submissive wife and a devoted mother. Once a woman's performance does not live up to these gender norms, men will resort to the power of reason to exclude or punish her, labeling her insane and then incarcerating her. This social process shapes and even determines female/male identities, in which the gender norms function largely and profoundly on individuals as a compulsory force rather than an optional choice.

In this section, the author intends to elaborate how the fact that Connie is a woman brings oppression on her when she plays the role of a daughter, a wife and a mother.

Firstly, oppression comes from the relation with mother. To any woman, being a daughter is usually the first social role she plays. As she grows up, the existence of mother is of great significance. However, the mother-daughter relationship in a patriarchal society is rather complicated and seems to be much more complex, ambivalent, and ambiguous than any other parent-child relationships. To a large extent, the complexity is derived from the special situation of mother in a family. Just as Liu (2004, p.151) points out, on the one hand, mother is the major victim in a patriarchal family and should be the one who has the strongest wish for liberation; on the other hand, it is mother who helps maintain the development and reproduction of the patriarchal structure. Despite all the oppression and exploitation, women "have been socialized by male-centered, heterosexual-centered ideologies into

betraying their own daughters and preparing them for docility and servitude" (Brown-Guillory, 1996, p.9). Therefore, among all the family members, the primary contributor to the oppression on girls is more likely to be the mothers.

In the fiction, Connie's mother is Mariana. Here is something interesting. The name "Mariana" looks like the combination of "Marie" and "Anne", and the combination of these two names has also been popular with Christians because Saint Anne is traditionally the name of the mother of the Virgin Mary.² In this sense, "Mariana" is connected to "Virgin Mary". As is known to all, Virgin Mary is the most classic female image in western culture, and she sets an example of the patriarchal ideal woman for western women to follow. By certain coincidence, Mariana in the fiction also well represents a "perfectly" submissive female character in a patriarchal society. She devotes her whole life to serve her husband, taking care of her house, giving birth to babies, fostering the children, etc.. She "never sat down with her family" and always "ate afterward like a servant" (p.47). In short, "to suffer and serve" (p.46) is a true portrayal of her life. Nevertheless, Mariana has no resistance or compliant. It seems that she took the oppression and exploitation for granted. Although Virgin Mary is the most classic and enduring female image in the western civilization, she is also the most pernicious image male authors have imposed upon women. So is Mariana, actually.

When Connie is a teenager, she has already seen herself when she looks at her mother. She rejects the image in the mirror and wants to be free of everything her mother represents. She utters out the voice in her heart:

I won't grow up like you Mama! ...I'm not going to lie down and be buried in the rut of family, family, family! I'm so sick of that word, Mama! Nothing in life but having babies and cooking and keeping the house.... I'm going to be someone! (p.46)

Logically speaking, the bitterness and misery Mariana has experienced would make her better understand Connie's thought and help her daughter to avoid a repetition of her life. However, the internalization of patriarchal ideologies has already made Mariana believe in the rightness of her own oppression and accepts the "truth" of her inferior status. What is worse, she tries to transfer this feeling to her daughter. Facing Connie's resentment and aspiration, Mariana offers great disagreement rather than approval. She tells her daughter that "there's nothing for a woman to see but trouble" and "you'll do what women do. You'll pay your debt to your family for your blood." (p.46) Instead of being supported and guided but frustrated and hurt by her own mother, Connie could do nothing but retreat into marriage, giving up making any plans.

² More information about this can be seen from Wikipedia on line. Retrieved on May 6, 2012, from the World Wide. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marianne_\(given_name\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marianne_(given_name))

Deeply influenced by the patriarchal ideology that a woman would be more valued if she gives birth to a son, while “a daughter is a reflection of a mother’s incompleteness, particularly since wholeness is defined in terms of how many sons she produces” (Brown-Guillory, 1996, p.8), Mariana’s attitude towards her son is quite different from that toward her daughter. She treats sons as differentiated beings and gives priority to them. As Connie said to Mariana, “You don’t love us girls the way you love the boys! It’s everything for Luis (the oldest son in Connie’s family) and nothing for me, it’s always been that way” (p.46). Instead of self-examining, Mariana is annoyed by this accusation. She regards Connie as the daughters of the gangsters and even warns Connie that she would tell Connie’s father who had beaten Connie every week of her childhood. Here, Mariana emulates the discourse of the father and turns Connie into the object of attack. As the highest authority within the household, Connie’s father uses violence (the force of his fists) to rule the family and punish his daughter for her disrespect and aberrant behavior. When Connie is beaten by her father, Mariana never shows up to stop the beating. In this sense, she is complicitous in Connie’s subjugation.

From the above analysis, it is clear that by transferring her accepted feeling of inferiority to Connie, treating Connie differently from the sons and looking on passively when Connie is beaten, Mariana imposes great oppression on Connie in terms of both ideology and action. In this sense, Mariana unconsciously becomes the most conscious and loyal defenders of the patriarchal norms and the cruel persecutor on people of her same gender who has been considered as deviants.

Secondly, suffering results from the relation with male companions. Unable to pattern her life other than her mother’s in an exploitative society, Connie retreats into marriage to gain a sense of security. Ironically and tragically, her relationship with male partners is another resource of oppression imposed on her.

In her life, Connie has several love affairs with what most people, especially the authority figures, would call “unsuitable” men: Chuck, an Anglo boy who had got her pregnant and then run in fright; Martin, who is kind of girlish and who “died without reason” (p.214); Eddie, a womanizer and wife-abuser; Claud, a blind pick-pocket. Although Connie has high expectation of her marriage and male companions, things don’t turn out the way she wants.

Here, the author would like to analyze Connie’s marriage with Eddie and her relationship with Claud—the most telling and dramatic examples—to illustrate her suffering from male companions.

As mentioned before, Connie always longs to be “somebody”. For this dream, she fights and struggles against the society. However, she labors in vain. “Despair had stained her with its somber wash and leached from

her all plans and schoolbook ideals” (p.47). The cruel reality has made Connie painfully learn to be practical in the male-dominated world, learning to be dependent on man, cater to men’s expectation and be submissive to a man to survive:

She had hoped she was being practical at last with the steady man, the steady income. She had lied about her age to him. ... she had been twenty-eight, and she had pretended to be twenty-five. ... It had shamed her to lie, but she had done all those things she had always been told to do—the small pretenses, the little laughs. Her natural modesty subtly twisted by nervous fingers into something assumed and paraded. Anything to be safe. Anything belongs somewhere at last! (p.255)

Here, Marge Piercy illustrates the female existence of her time through Connie’s experience. Although the living condition of women has improved a lot since the first wave of women’s liberation movement, women are still excluded from the public sphere and discriminated in the workplace. Only few women can succeed and survive. Comparatively speaking, retreating into marriage and being submissive to her husband—exactly what a patriarchal society expects—are much easier for a woman like Connie. With no choice, Connie follows the example of every conventional woman to get married and give birth to a daughter. Connie thought she would live a happy life henceforth, but Eddie turns out to be a womanizer and wife-abuser. Apart from betrayal, contempt and ill-treatment, she gets nothing from this marriage.

From the text, we know that Connie is abandoned by her family members and terribly beaten by Eddie before meeting Claud, a blind pick-pocket. When she is in great despair, it is Claud who arouses her passion and gives her new hope towards life. This is highly ironic and sad. Generally speaking, husband and family members should be the dearest ones to a person. However, it is not the case for Connie. Instead, life is too hard and misery for her. She is so desperate for love and support that a wee bit of warmth can satisfy her, even though it is from a pick-pocket; even though she has to commit the crime of stealing. It is hard to distinguish whether Connie’s feeling towards Claud is love or not. To the author, she is more likely to hold onto a shoulder, a man’s shoulder, to lean on. However, Connie’s submissiveness to and dependence on Claud unexpectedly makes her end up with a suspended sentence as accomplice to Claud, an accusation of child abuse, the deprivation of her custody on Angelina and her shutting up in the mental hospital. If the pain she suffers from Eddie is direct, then the pain Claud brings to her is indirect and more devastating.

From the above analysis, it is clear that in the relationship with men, Connie is in an inferior position all the time. Connie’s being abandoned by Chuck, raped by El Muro and beaten by Eddie reveal male oppression on female. Although there is love and happiness in her relationship with Martin and Claud, they are too insignificant to be mentioned when compared to the

suffering, torture and humiliation she has experienced. Furthermore, those happy times are transient, and Connie can only attain them at the cost of her independent personality. In the power battle with men, Connie is doomed to be a loser—"She could have used some of her mother's resignation. When she fought her hard and sour destiny, she deemed only to end up worse beaten, worse humiliated, more quickly alone." (p.44)

Lastly, burden comes from being an angel mother. Connie's first-time incarceration in a mental hospital is the immediate consequence of the accusation of child abuse leveled against her. Connie has beaten her daughter Angelina badly and broken her wrist, which is not in dispute. However, what is less clear is the determination of her case—"Willful abuse for injuring the person or health of a minor child," they said, but they also said she was not responsible for her actions." (p.60)

On the one hand, if taking a systematic account of the specific circumstance, Connie's hitting Angelina is an excusable accident, though it indeed causes injuries to her child. From the perspective of a stander-by, Marge Piercy presents Connie's psychological activity which largely explains Connie's actions when she wakes up from the state of being a living dead, but only to find that Angie broke her 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. (p.62)

This passage clearly shows that what first flashes through Connie's mind is the urgent need to find Angie another pair of shoes so as to protect her from being barefoot. This is a mother's instinct, and it also reflects Connie's love towards Angie. With no doubt, the next question Connie needs to think about is how to get the shoes. However, this is really not an easy thing for her. Just the sight of the red tape drives her crazy, with anguish and rage welling up in her heart. The mixed feelings of being eager to protect her child and being angry about the child's unruly behavior torture the poor mother. Under such circumstance, Connie's hitting Angie is probably for the purpose of disciplining, but resulting in unexpected injuries.

On the other hand, the move from accident to deliberate harm is seemingly unquestioned by those who accuse and judge Connie. In the legal sense, whoever intentionally injures another person is to be sentenced to certain years in prison. If the accusation of "willful abuse" proves true and just, Connie must face the corresponding legal sanctions. Surprisingly, it is declared judicially that Connie is not liable for her actions. Having received good education, Marge Piercy certainly knows the general

knowledge of law, then why does she let Connie be shut up in a madhouse instead of a prison? And how does the child-abuse here link with mental insanity instead of legal punishment? A glimpse of the trial itself could offer some information:

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 hung all with tiny barbed hooks that stuck in her flesh 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. (p.60)

Here Marge Piercy presents, through Connie's case, the trial-force exerted on mothers who injure, for whatever reason, their children. It seems that the case rests not on whether Connie willfully abuses her child—of that, again, there appears to be no dispute to those in power—but on whether she understands her actions to be wrong and shameful. To put it another way, is she an evil woman who throws her child away from the pain of losing her man and then hits the child to vent her anger and sadness, or an mentally ill woman whose miserable experiences, including the death of a loved one, the mischievous behavior of her child and the temporarily uncontrolled rage, lead her to carelessly injure her child? Piercy uses the sharp contrast between "white" and "black" to manifest these two trial-forces Connie has to face, namely, medical judgment and legal trial. Obviously, the jury in the end decides on "sick" and Connie's actions are read in ways that confirm the dominant culture's opinion that she was sick rather than evil.

Actually, a number of critics have already noted that when women as mothers commit "inexplicable" crimes (Macpherson, 2007, p.114), they are frequently labeled mad and their actions are often considered deviant so as to protect the society's view of women. As to this phenomenon, Pamela Bridgewater gives a wonderful exposition:

"How could a mother do such a thing?" In some respects the question is a legitimate one, because it is reasonable to expect more information about such troubling situations. However, this question is superficial, albeit legitimate, in that it effectively limits the terms and scopes of the inquiry. In asking this question, we, the confused, shocked and detached public, only consider the woman's status as "mother" and the aberrant conduct of "such a thing." Further, the question renders the conditions surrounding the lives of the women and their children irrelevant non-issues. (p.114)

This explains Connie's case to a certain extent. Declaring Connie-as-a-mother evil equates to acknowledge that mothers may also harm children, which will challenge and even subvert the patriarchal myth that mothers are perpetual protectors of their babies. According to the

patriarchal ideology, “it is woman’s biological destiny to bear and deliver, to nurse and to rear children.” (quoted in Chodorow, 1978, p.11) And

The ideal mother has no interests of her own...For all of us it remains self-evident that the interests of mother and child are identical, and it is the generally acknowledged measures of the goodness or badness of the mother how far she really feels this identity of interests. (Balint, 1965, p.97)

That is to say, the biological fact that women bear children and lactate determines that women have to shoulder the responsibility of child care and put the children first no matter what happens.

Come back to Connie’s case. Although Connie hits Angelina with justification, brings her to the hospital immediately afterwards and feels regretful for a long time, yet “As a mother, [her] actions are disgraceful and uncontrolled” (p.60), according to those in power, and her actions betray the traditional images of a mother: love, comfort, protection and tolerance. In order to protect the established image, and then consolidate the dominance of patriarchy, Connie must be “mad”.

President Abraham Lincoln once affectionately said that “All that I am/all that I hope to be/I owe my angel mother.” Here, Lincoln compares his mother to an angel. Actually, women-as-mothers are indeed glorified and idealized as angels who will do everything for and satisfy every need of her children in a patriarchal society. Under such context, mothering experience often intertwines with suffering, confusion and self-doubt. A great number of feminists have noticed that there is a crippling sense of guilt among mothers who fail to provide enough care and protection to their children. The source of this guilt is the mystique of mother: On the face of it, a highly-praised angel, but actually a miserable prisoner. The halo of angel mother becomes the gorgeous veil of patriarchy, which covers the hideous nature of patriarchy and limits the development of women.

2.2 Color Kills

People of color, a term which “was introduced as a preferable replacement to both non-white and minority” and “emphasizes common experiences of racism” (Wikipedia), have formed a large population in the United States. However, as a class, they are ignored, insulted and oppressed by whites. Worse still, in a society where racial prejudice thrives in politics, economics, education, communities, and even popular culture, it’s difficult for people of color to avoid absorbing the racist messages. As a result, some people of color internalize the belief of white supremacy, which results in self-hatred and denial of their ethnic identification. In fact, “color” is not only an identity, but also a mark, which mirrors and ensures difference and diversity. Yet in a culture where such difference is not respected or welcomed, what “color” probably brings is pain, suffering and even death. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Marge Piercy subtly reveals

the devastating effect of internalized racism and the killing nature of “color” through characterization of some people of color.

The transformation of Connie’s brother Luis well demonstrates the great impact of internalized racism on people of color, specifically on the Puerto Ricans of color. Luis is the oldest and most important son in his family. In Connie’s eyes, Luis was like a “prince” and a “peacock” that had “the grace, the anger, the sore pride, the refusal to swallow insult” (p.363). Perhaps it is these unique qualities that make Connie feel close to him and adore him with her whole heart. Moreover, Luis had touched her heart with his tenderness although he was “Luis the street kid” and “Luis the young hoodlum” (p.363) in other people’s eyes. He could fight and stand up for her, and once he “[stole] a bright scarf from the dime store for her to wear Easter Sunday” (p.364). At that time, they were much alike and they were close to each other.

However, happy days do not last long.

The army had changed Luis. When he had come back, he had contempt for the rest of them. His anger and unruly pride had been channeled into a desire to get ahead, to grab money, to succeed like an Anglo. (p.363)

Piercy does not give any account of what happened to Luis during his stay in the army. What one can see is only his significant change. He changes his name “Luis”—clearly suggests his being of Mexican origin—into “Lewis” which sounds more like an “Anglo” (p.345). He starts the business of nursery and greenhouse, and dresses himself looking more “white”. He has “hardened” (p.364), even signing Connie into the mental hospital just in order to get rid of her. Although Luis’s father “had been scared he would go bad, they would lose him to the streets. None of them had guessed they would lose him to the Anglos, entirely” (p.364). This statement with light sarcasm is actually of great sadness and dreariness. According to Connie, this is the very result of being brown and thus being poor having done to Luis. To a great degree, the decided changes in him mirror the self-hatred and self-denial of brown Puerto Ricans, and their longstanding quest for whiteness, which is the equivalent of wealth, respect and privileges denied to people of color. Perhaps Luis has been accepted as white and become better off, but only at the cost of giving up his ethnic identity and everything related to this. He is completely engulfed by the stated preference for being white. From this perspective, he does not exist as a Puerto Ricans. The skin color has killed him.

Another case in point is Dolly. She was seduced to be a prostitute and earned money for her man Geraldo. After Geraldo left, she had no money and lots of debts. In order to survive, she soon got herself a white pimp. In Dolly’s view, it is all right to sell her body to make money, and it is nothing but purely business. She even feels gratitude to Vic, the white pimp, because “he brings good customers. Businessmen, buyers, salesmen” (p.220), and it helps her

make “four hundred dollars” (p.217, 219, 220) in one week. That is no wonder Dolly claims that a white pimp is better than a brother. On the other hand, in order to live up to the white beauty standards, Dolly has altered her physical appearance to look more “white”: She dyes her hair a fiery orange-red, takes drugs to keep skinny, wears sunglasses to hide her expression, and even lies about her family background. To her, to look Anglo is the only thing that matters:

I (Dolly) got to stay skinny, carita. The money is with the Anglos and they like you skinny and American-looking. It pays more if you look Anglo, you know. Sometimes I say I’m of Spanish mother and an Irish father, and that’s why I have the beautiful red hair. Even the hair on my thing, I dyed it red. (p.218)

As one reads this, one may feel funny and loathsome, behind which, however, one should see more. Who on earth should be responsible for the result that Dolly has become used to the life of a prostitute and has to change her appearance to cater to the needs of the “customer”? Herself? Perhaps. But it is a harrowing reality that Dolly is not alone in that world. And it is actually the society that should bear the blame. Having bought the mainstream notion that whites are superior to people of color without question, Dolly believes whites have high economic and social status just because they are whites, and it is her problem to born brown. That’s why she loathes and changes the physical characteristics that make her racially distinct. However, Dolly does not realize that the values established by the white society, especially the white aesthetic standards, are to shut people of color out. No matter what she does, she will never be accepted as a white in a both sexist and racist society. After selling her transformed body, Dolly is empty, with no health, no love and no soul.

Similar harm does not spare Connie. She has also internalized the racist messages, which influence and distort her psychology. Take for instance her first meeting with Luciente, which is believed to be a dream by Connie:

“What should I call you?” The voice had asked....

“Connie,” she had said. “Call me Connie.”

“My name is Luciente.”

Strange that she had dreamed in English...Strange that with someone obviously Mexican-American she had not said Consuelo. Me llamo Consuelo (p.36).

From the text, we know that Consuelo is Connie’s given name, in her own words, “Consuelo’s a Mexican woman, a servant of servants, silent as clay” (p.122). This interpretation partly reflects the lowest social status of a Mexican-American woman. Connie’s unwillingness to mention her given name mirrors her refusal of this image and maybe self-denial of her ethnic identity. Even facing with someone obviously Mexican-American, she is not ready to show her friendliness; instead, she is too eager to distinguish herself from the Mexican-Americans. Like

Luis, she prefers to be called “Connie” which sounds more like a white people. Besides, she adopts the language of English instead of Spanish, trying to conceal her Mexican origin or desperately show her superiority in front of a Mexican-American to maintain her psychological balance, because she can never do it in front of the white people, pathetically.

Worse still, she suffers more than Luis and Dolly do because of her attempt to be “someone” and her unyielding spirit. In a racist society, skin color not only distinguishes white people from non-white people, but more often than not, if not always, distinguishes higher class from lower class, wealthy people from poor people. This cruel reality makes Connie sense the “shame, the shame of being second-class goods” (p.35). With instinctive sense of life to struggle upward, Connie aspires to be “someone”, someone like middle-class white women. However, she cannot fight her way on her own into the world of white people like Luis does. The white-supreme patriarchal society cannot stand a Mexican-American woman to do such a thing because it is definitely a challenge to the established social system. Although she struggle to receive two years’ education in a community college, she is not accepted into the world of the whites. Sadly and sarcastically, the two years’ education makes her cannot ever go back to the traditional world of the Mexican-American woman again. She realizes her inferiority; but unlike Dolly, she cannot take everything for granted. To her, accepting the reality without doing anything is the last thing for her. Neither reconciling herself to the life of second-class citizens nor struggling into the world of whites, Connie is thrown to the edge of two worlds of the browns and the whites, suffering.

Apart from the above analysis, it is in some ways remarkable to note that the majority of patients in the mental hospital who have a name are non-whites. Perhaps this is just an unhappy coincidence, but to a certain extent it further proves the above argument that color of skin matters and kills.

2.3 Mental-Hospital Contributors

As mentioned above, *Woman on the Edge of Time* begins with Connie’s second-time incarceration in Bellevue, a mental hospital which “had records on her from before” (p.17). It is clear to all readers that Connie hits Geraldo with just cause and utmost provocation: After being released from the mental hospital, Connie pours all her maternal love for Dolly to compensate for the loss of her own daughter Angelina. To Connie, Dolly is “her closest one now, her blood, her almost child” (p.20), she cannot bear the loss of another child again. However, no one in the mental hospital believes her explanation; no one wants to know her story; no one cares about what really happened to her. Actually, the doctors do not even bother to listen to her or speak to her, because she was a madwoman before. According to the “rational” people’s

understanding of madness, once a madwoman, always been a madwoman. A mad person is forever deprived of discourse power. Thus, no matter what he/she says, it is unbelievable. Thus Geraldo “would take no chance that they (the doctors) might not accept her (Connie) as a crazy woman” (p.17). This cruel reality makes Connie realize that a “bargain had been struck. Some truce had been negotiated between...men” (p.31). Her condition is discussed between “man to man, pimp and doctor” (p.19), with her voice being neglected and unheard.

Being “a body checked into the morgue; meat registered for the scales” (p.19), Connie receives inhuman treatment from the staffs who treat her like a bag of garbage. What is worse, she could not complain because they took it as a sign of sickness. Although Connie is given an interview in the mental hospital, the doctors only look at the records rather than at her during the interview. And no matter how well she performs, “they trap [her] into saying something...to make [her] life into a pattern of disease” (p.26) and place her in a no-win circle. From this perspective, “The mental hospital had always seemed like a bad joke; nothing got healed here” (p.194). It exists as the accomplice of the patriarchal society to suppress and punish those who dare to deviate from the established rules. As is Foucault argues,

Ultimately, confinement did seek to suppress madness, to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it; the essence of confinement was not the exorcism of a danger. Confinement merely manifested what madness, in its essence, was: A manifestation of non-being...by confinement, madness is acknowledged to be nothing. (pp.114-115)

It is the non-being of madness that determines the mental patients being subject to the psychiatrist who could exercise his absolute authority over patients with the banner of straightening things out. To this so-called end, a great variety of therapeutic treatments have been given to the mental patients, which are clearly illustrated in Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*. In the fiction, Marge Piercy also demonstrates many cruel and violent treatments granted to the mental patients through Connie’s eyes and feelings. For example, being neglected by the medical staffs, even with the basic biological necessity of pissing unsatisfied, being prescribed pills or tranquilizers that harm the patients psychically and psychologically, being thrown into seclusion as punishment for any rebellion in the mental asylum. Among all the diverse treatments, electrical shock and implantation of chip into brain are more horrible and more inhuman than others. They are frequently described by many contemporary writers, such as Elizabeth Packard, Ellen West and Sylvia Plath (Liang, 2008, p.15).

As to Connie, she was not lucky enough to be spared from these ill-treatments. With her the readers can experience the mental hospital where she is faceless and invisible to the attendants, social workers, doctors and

almost every medical staffs; where whatever she says and does is received and recorded as aggression, as bad patient behavior, until suddenly she is valued as a potential subject for a frightening neuro-electric experiment on which five thousand monkeys have already been “used up” (p.220). On the one hand, she has helplessly seen Alice, another woman patient, “turning into a toy, a puppet, a laboratory monkey” (p.232) after taking the operation. On the other hand, through the demonstration held on Alice, the nature of the extremely violent operation has been revealed: it is performed to turn the patients into machines so they will obey the doctors, by which the white male doctors could “make history” (p.205), earn themselves fame and wealth—the real purpose of them.

With no means to defend herself, Connie unfortunately but inevitably follows the steps of Alice, becoming another guinea pig to have the “dialytrode” (p.200) set in her brain. Because of this, Connie becomes “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 (p.279).

In order to maintain the last dregs of her identity, Connie has to fight against the machine set in her brain. She pretends to be Ms. Model Patient, wearing a smiling mask to cater to all expectations of the doctors. Having begged her brother and the doctor for several times, Connie finally gains herself a change to be let out on Thanksgiving, but only to find that she is locked in her bedroom when she is not watched by others. With no chance to escape, Connie steals some poisons when she is asked to work in Luis’s greenhouse. In Connie’s opinion, the poison is a powerful weapon, grabbing at it means grabbing at power. With power, Connie succeeds in killing the doctors by putting the poison in their coffee, and succeeds in being mad finally.

Foucault holds that

the physician could exercise his absolute authority in the world of the asylum only insofar as, from the beginning, he was Father and Judge, Family and Law—his medical practice being for a long time no more than a complement to the old rites of Order, Authority, and Punishment. (p.272)

Thus, it is evident that the existence of psychiatrists is to maintain the order and authority of a patriarchal society. Within the mental asylum which is constituted in the family mode, the “minority status” (Foucault, 1961, p.271) of the mad person determines that they have no say on their body as well as on soul. Under this situation, patients, especially women with rebelling spirit are forced to go mad.

Through a close reading of the text, the author traces the process of Connie’s going mad to be mad, and analyzes the factors leading to her tragic ending in this part. Based on the above analysis, it is clear that Connie is driven mad as the result of the multiple external

oppressions of sexism, racism, class discrimination as well as psychiatrists.

As is known to all, women's social status has been greatly improved after the two major feminist movements, and women's problems purely based on sex today is not as prominent and severe as before. However, Marge Piercy's participating in some social movements and the progress of feminism have already made her realize that the issue of women is far more a gender issue, but also a complicated social and cultural problem. In order to make this point clear, Connie is represented as a woman, an ethnic and a once-claimed mad person at the same time in the novel, which helps to make the contradictions more acute, the conflict more fierce and the problem clearer, thus bring great shock to the readers. Just imagine what will happen if Connie were a man; if she were a white people; if she had never been incarcerated in a mental hospital before; if... Perhaps any change in those factors may results in a different ending. Nevertheless, there are no ifs. The three kinds of disadvantaged role of Connie interact with each other, co-contributing to her madness.

To make it further, with this realistic setting and mode, Marge Piercy intends to present the story of Connie, which is in no way an individual case, as a universe experience for the women in 1970s America. In a way, Connie's madness is the inevitable outcome of the irreconcilable clash between individual desire and societal demand. Therefore, Connie's tragedy is not only hers, but also the tragedy of the entire society. Her madness is an indictment of the patriarchal notion on what is a woman. It is an indictment of a system that insists so blindly on defining Ramos as violent and dangerous that it eventually makes her that way. It is also the best evidence and the most powerful indictment of victimization of women, especially women of color, in a white-supreme patriarchal society.

3. REDEFINING AND RECONSTRUCTING MADNESS

In her construction of the utopian society of Mattapoissett, Piercy also deals with the subject of madness through the description of Jackrabbit, who has been mad twice. In this world, how madness is viewed and what would be done to the mad people are totally different from that in the present day society. The meaning of madness is deconstructed and reconstructed in this futuristic world.

Jackrabbit once gives a detailed account of his own madness in the novel:

I had a warring self in me when I was thirteen. The things I wanted, I didn't think I should want, so I put them out of myself to plague and threaten me....I tore so, I saddened I'd gone through my naming. I wanted to return to the children's house, with my mothers ready to fuss when I called them. I had begun to train as a shelf diver, but I didn't want to do that; at the same time I couldn't feel what I want... I did believe the ocean was

trying to drawn me, because I felt swallowed by the training...
(Then) I went mad with fear. (p.122)

From this passage, we can generally know how madness arises in the future society. Contrasting to the factors contributing to Connie's madness, there is no external social oppression exerted over Jackrabbit. His madness purely resulted from his inner conflict and imbalance. From Jackrabbit's own statement, we can see that he wants something which he doesn't think he should have, and this tears him. If being interpreted with Freud's theory about the self, Jackrabbit's madness simply derives from the contradiction between his id and superego. According to Freud, the id is a set of chaotic instinctual trends and it just wants instant self-gratification, whereas, the superego is the idealized ego, which aims for perfection and plays the critical and moralizing role. Necessarily, the superego sometimes works in contradiction to the id. If the id does not conform to the super-ego, inner conflict and the sense of guilty will arise. Moreover, under the guidance of his superego, Jackrabbit's desires are depressed by himself. Going on like this, he couldn't feel what he wants. However, this feeling suffocates him. Hence, he "went mad with fear". Based on this analysis, we can infer from Jackrabbit's experience that madness in the futuristic society is just a kind of mental illness, and a natural and personal phenomenon as well, having nothing to do with any external social pressures.

In Mattapoissett, madness is a disease like catching cold or having a fever. In Luciente's words, "we all lose parts of ourselves" (p.66). Unlike the people in Connie's time who feared madness might prove contagious and who thought "all the time that (the mad people) might suddenly go berserk and start climbing the walls or jumping out the window" (p.124), people in Mattapoissett think that going mad is "getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind" (p.66) and it is they themselves who make the choices to go mad. As is questioned by Luciente, "How can another person decide that it is time for me to disintegrate, to reintegrate myself?" (Ibid.)

Based on this understanding of madness, people in Mattapoissett take a positive attitude towards the mad people and provide a humane and effective treatment to cure them. Look at Jackrabbit's experience in the madhouse:

In the madhouse I met Bolivar and he was good for me in learning to say that initial "I want, I want." I had played a lot as a child with paints and with holies and I felt... most alive then. (p.122)

As mentioned above, Jackrabbit's madness is, to a great extent, the result of his inner desires being repressed and unsatisfied. So Bolivar teaches him to say sentences beginning with "I want". From the linguistic point of view, the pattern "I want" is often used to express one's desires for something. Therefore, with the action of uttering his inner desires out, Jackrabbit's suppressed

emotions have been relieved, so he feels “alive”. Upon this, Jackrabbit draws a conclusion that “I had to follow my comp (means inclination or tendency) through and even push it” (ibid.). This shows the respect for individual desires and the ultimate concern about individuals in this futuristic society.

With “madness” being redefined, madhouse in Mattapoissett becomes “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.” (p.66)

Form the above analysis, we can find that the non-sexist, communal community of Mattapoissett is constructed after a deep contemplation of the social evils of the contemporary American society where Connie lives in. And Mattapoissett is Marge Piercy’s answer to the question of how to deal with the so-called social evils of madness. In this futuristic society, the problems Connie has confronted are resolved. Under Piercy’s pen, all people in Mattapoissett are respected and loved, and they are all equally treated, regardless of their gender, race, or other differences. In a word, as an egalitarian society which especially comes to women’s rescue, Mattapoissett accepts and even welcomes precisely the “madness” that have marginalized Connie in the actual world, which powerfully questions and even deconstructs the dominant knowledge of madness in a certain society.

CONCLUSION

As analyzed above, madness is an important issue taken up by Marge Piercy in the novel. It cannot be overlooked if one wants to fully understand Connie’s tragedy. On the one hand, in terms of narration, madness is an important thread that weaves Connie’s personal experience together. On the other hand, madness functions as a magnifying glass, placed under which the social evils can be seen clearer. As mentioned above, being an outsider to the mainstream American society, Connie’s victimization becomes particularly vivid when she is wrongly diagnosed as a mad woman and incarcerated in a nightmarish mental hospital which serves as the microcosm of the society in which she lives. It is safe to say that Connie’s madness is not caused by personal reasons but the complex social

power mechanism. With genius imagination, Piercy depicts another madwoman in the futuristic society of Mattapoissett and offers her answer to the problem of “madwoman”. Through the sharp contrast between Connie and Jackrabbit, one can rethink the relationship between madness and women, and pay more attention to women’s living situation in a society.

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