

# Possibilities of the Subject in Feminist Utopian Fiction

## “Woman on the Edge of Time”

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**Abstract**—The article offers an analysis of the social and existential experience represented in "Woman on the Edge of Time" by Marge Piercy. In contrast with classical utopias, this novel emphasizes a figure of a caring person who understands others and resists the mechanisms of total control over nature and human emotions. The development of the subject is revealed as a risky task of travelling beyond the ready-made identities and generally recognized concepts (first of all, binary opposites "normal" / "pathological") in search of authentic social relations.

**Keywords**—literary utopia; Marge Piercy; feminist subject; care; differences; life; nature

### I. INTRODUCTION

A classic literary utopia concentrates on transpersonal structures of social life rather than on the individual experiences of them<sup>1</sup>. Any inhabitant of utopia is a person in general, a spokesman for a certain functional system that works like a clock and engages everybody in productive activities [14]. The all-embracing sociality excludes any gaps between the inner time of subjective expectations and the objective requirements of institutional order as well as any chance for "the underground man" (F. Dostoyevsky) or "the stranger" (A. Camus), keenly aware of absurdities of human existence, to show up. A utopia is a totally reasonable society in the eye of a reasonable beholder.

Actually it's the reasonable beholder (a first-person narrator, a protagonist) who introduces traces of subjective experience into narrative. Upon his return home, the traveler feels a sort of nostalgia towards the country he left and a sort of sorrowful irony towards his native land with its ill-considered political and economic regimes [14]. Nevertheless, having achieved a universal position of a rational observer, the protagonist subdues his feelings and looks down on an imperfect kingdom from the proper

distance. He isn't trapped in his social world, but he relies on mental and geographical mobility to overstep its limits. The traveler is free to keep on travelling and is in agreement with himself wherever he is. The movement to and from utopia doesn't affect his identity.

A classic utopia doesn't tackle the problem of personal transformation. It resorts to general principles of regulating the communal living so as to exclude chaotic unpredictable movements and emotions. Everybody in the utopian space has no doubt about his/her place in the structure and has no difficulty leading a reasonable life (moderate, thought-out and expected). On the contrary, the feminist utopias of the second part of the 20th century is primarily interested in transcending the order where the common knowledge of social "places" precedes and determines self-awareness of the subject. Gender-dependent distribution of roles asserts a kind of a destiny ("that is a feminine lot", "this is a man's business), restricts the wide scope of human possibilities. It's the focal point of the feminist utopias of the time that women are being constantly deprived of their genuine feelings and thoughts while conforming to "reasonable" language and norms of human relations [2. P.14]. The power of reason based on gender distinctions (not descriptive, but repressive in their nature) has to be overcome.

This radical idea entails radical changes in the plot. After leaving "the reasonable order", the protagonist finds herself in the environment she perceives as a cognitive disorder. An encounter between gendered contemporaries and post-gendered (or differently gendered) utopians become an ontological shake-up for a "naïve" woman bound to her usual "place" in the system. The encounter is indispensable for her liberation from the "natural" views on reality and triggers the growth of criticism towards social alienation which is not quite obvious otherwise. Taking into account "the false consciousness" and inertia of a protagonist, no wonder that it is not a reasonable beholder of nowadays who departs to other countries, but utopian visitors who appear suddenly in front of a lead character, breaking her routine and initiating (or intensifying) her inner conflict between what it is and what it might be [16], [17].

<sup>1</sup> A paradigm for a classical literary utopia is Thomas More's "Utopia" (1516). Different types of literary utopias, their basic features are represented in the following works :[15, PP. 2-12], [8], [7. §21-24], to name only a few.

In feminist narratives, the borderline between utopian and non-utopian worlds lies in subjective experience (as the borderline between the moments of time, authentic and non-authentic intentions), not in objective space (as the borderline between a perfect «island» and imperfect populated universe [18]). That's why "the traveler" of feminist utopia can't be a mere "sightseer", a guest. She is a person in active search of her social and existential self, troubled by the status of her own being. "Woman on the Edge of Time" by Marge Piercy is one of the first works of this kind that opens up the potentials of the genre to encourage self-discovery connected with a new vision of social links and limits.

## II. COMMUNITY OF CARE

The main character of the novel, Consuelo Ramos, is a young woman who tries to survive and be herself in America of 1970s despite the gender and ethnic prejudices of the time. By coincidence (determined by the algorithms of unjust social differentiation), Consuelo finds herself in mental institution, "insane" and "criminal" in the eyes of authorities and relatives. She spends most of the time keeping silence and recollecting her life. Now and then those recollections are interrupted by hospital routine and is also intertwined with utopian scenes of Mattapoisett, a future community of 2137. Time travelling as mental shifts between realities helps the protagonist find the way to a different type of social relations, home-like and reassuring.

The absence of neglected or lost people is an intrinsic feature of utopias. In a classical utopia, nobody can be abandoned because everybody is a part of a working community with strict schedule of day-to-day occupations. In Mattapoisett, nobody can be abandoned because everybody is cared about, surrendered by subtle attention: «We want each other to feel...cherished?...It's a point of emphasis...»[16. loc. 3261]. Care is a sign of emotional generosity (the ability to share one's feelings with others) and communicative reason (the ability to recognize others as persons with their particular interests and worries). To care about a person means to see the best of this person, prompt his or her development. There's no trace of control or domination in this caring attitude which grasps and values individual's uniqueness. In utopian society, a human being is an event no matter what mistakes she did in the past. No negative identities are formed and fostered. That's why everybody in utopian community pays attention to Consuelo's sensitivity, capability to dialogue, eagerness to take care of others; all those features make her a worthy person, one of the family, regardless of her low status in her own society [5].

Care like this is an ideal for a social reality, where people can't care about everybody or give the same level of attention. Real care is dependent on many things, particularly on formal or informal relations between one another and doesn't guarantee a proper level of understanding. Consuelo is constantly worried about her little daughter taken away by guardianship authorities (who formally "care about" the welfare of the child). The protagonist herself is an object of medical care accomplished

by the doctors who are planning a surgery on her in order to control the intensity of her emotional life. Those who care are either absorbed in their desire to help, a sort of fixed idea, or indifferent towards persons they care about. People are good at caring about things to such an extent that they don't make a distinction between things and people: "How's Adele?" – "She's fine. She's got a new foxtail coat" [16. loc. 6534]. The semantic emptiness of contemporary communicative rhetoric becomes visible, as well as the loneliness of a person in a mass communication society with its deficiency of supporting words lost in a flood of information and business interactions.

Utopian care can't be reduced to an immediate feeling or a formal obligation. It's a result of a serious work, making efforts to understand others. A visitor from Mattapoisett, Luciente, emphasizes that idea while she speaks to Consuelo about their contact through space and time: "If we both work at it, we should hear better and better" [16. loc.969]. In this regard, an ideal of care in Mattapoisett corresponds to the ethics of care which appears in the beginning of 1980s<sup>2</sup>. In both views an ideal of care doesn't mean that feelings prevail over reason and a feminine principle – over a male one. Instead, it stands for ecological realism that prevails over illusions of ego- or ethno- centrism. In Mattapoisett, people are not utopian by their intentions that are similar to intentions of caring contemporaries. As B. Fisher and J. Tronto put it, those intentions are meant to "maintain, continue and repair our world so that we may live in it as well as possible" [12. P. 544]. The difference between those pragmatic approaches may lie in understanding what "our world" is. In utopia it is much more than just "a living space of ours" with a common territory, culture or ideology. It's not the concepts of "our space" or "our people" that determine the scope of care, but vice versa, it's a non-limited care as an active empathy with living creatures that determines a scope of "our world".

More care and understanding instead of more regulation and order is a trait of post-classical social imagination. The order gives rise to limits and closeness, the care – to open sociality. The community of 2137 is an expanding universe of interactions which are distinguished by their "inclusive" and not "exclusive" character. Making contacts with the past (time travelling), the future (thoughts about coming generations), various non-human animals (learning their languages), as well as responding to calls of those who suffer or need support – all those features are not extraordinary but delineate the common day-to-day activities and attitudes in Mattapoisett. Loneliness is nonsense for those who get accustomed to value their kinship links in small village as well as their interdependence with the big world that extends the limits of this or that society.

The future society created by M. Piercy is not so much a trouble-free community as a community where there cannot be *someone else's* problems (that one can afford to ignore). There's overall attention towards everybody: children who are not divided into "ours" and "not ours" (for example, after festivals wherever they fall asleep any person picks them up

<sup>2</sup> For more detail, see, for example: [1], [12], [13].

and takes home), adults who never feel abandoned, and the natural world in general. Interpersonal interactions are the main concern of the utopian future where they use communicative reason to gently restore any broken balance or provide support and inspiration whenever there's an opportunity. In this sense, the utopia indicates the advantages of society as a big family, nurturing and encouraging, as home where a person feels at ease and spirited, where his individuality isn't oppressed.

### III. BETWEEN DIFFERENCES AND DEVIATIONS

The community of Mattapoisett is a pluralistic reality where lots of freedom in self-expression and personal choice is welcomed, except the freedom to do violence against others. They acknowledge individual differences without any signs of reproach or reference to "normal" or "deviant" behavior. Ideals of liberation from normalcy permeate the sphere of intimate relations which tends to be under various forms of social control in reality (from moral criticism to medical judgments). In the utopia, nothing and nobody interferes with personal choice whether it is in favor of life without a partner (in this case there's no negative labels as "spinsters" at hand) or in favor of homo-relations. According to utopians, the question is what a person can do in life and how she/he is attentive to others instead of what his/her sexual preferences are. There are women and men in utopia, but there are no norms which prescribe people a gender-dependent type of behavior<sup>3</sup>.

In the relaxed atmosphere, where "all flowers bloom", nobody is afraid of being "abnormal", "ill", "obsessed" or "frigid" in the eyes of observers. There are no judgmental observers; instead, there are understanding, empathic neighbors. The only thing they can't accept is the will to possess a desirable object at any price which are desires that hurt. People in the utopia do experience strong desires, but at the same time turn passions into creative activities to explore new layers and horizons of human existence: "I want to be everybody and feel everything and do everything" [16. loc.2273]. A person of the future, according to M. Piercy, is an artist in the broad sense of this word: receptive of beauties and sorrows of the outward reality and at the same time original with her own messages she's heard inside. To be oneself in this context means to be different and not confined in habitual image or imposed identity. One should open to endless possibilities. There's no final word to describe a person. Even a personal name is variable in a life-long process of self-discovery, dependent on personal choice. In the utopia, a human being always goes beyond his/her actual being, making use of every chance to try and extend the self in a new role, profession or image.

However, with all their mobile and flexible intentions, people of the future never cease to be caring and affective during their communication with others. Variability doesn't engender light-mindedness; a widespread skill to transcend

the given reality doesn't entail the neglect towards simple life among others. The constant disposition underlies the multifaceted individual experience. This constant disposition is based not on reason alone (as in classical examples) but on common practice of mothering, available to everybody regardless of gender or age. Inasmuch as the deliberate labor is fundamental for a classical utopia, mothering as creation of the emotional links and ability to non-instrumental communication is fundamental for the utopia of differences<sup>4</sup>. The adults in Mattapoisett experience mothering as the result of their free choice and the greatest pleasure of life, uniting men and women of various involvements. The bias to individualization and various experiments, with what might be is counterbalanced with natural appreciation of what there is, concerns the understanding attitude towards everybody.

This heterogeneous continuum of interests, on the one hand, differs a great deal from a classical utopia of rational order where any individual voices common feelings and outlook. On the other hand, it diverges from any liberal society, by its impossible ultimate trust to human individuality with all its particularities, eccentric expressions, inventiveness. In Mattapoisett, there's no need in restraining, differentiating authorities since everybody listens to each other and hears them. Also, there are no authorities empowered to judge whether somebody is crazy or not. "Craziness" is a matter of personal choice based on self-understanding too. "Being" crazy is not an objective diagnosis made by medical experts but a personal decision to take a break in social communications, "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" [16. loc.1144].

In comparison with "real" society, a utopian space is highly decentralized and seems to shelter strange, if not "deranged", people, sometimes very similar to those Consuelo met at the hospital. Their community releases energies rejected or reproached in Consuelo's time, a particular form of "puerilism" (Johan Huizinga): an unserious attitude towards "serious things" (ranks, power, gender) and serious attitude towards "unserious" desires (a desire to be oneself). This inversion points out to a society of eccentric people accustomed to spontaneous, informal, kindling ways of self-expression. They are childish because they are direct and sincere, but they are mature because they are not centered on their egoistic wishes. Their centered on the original experience of a wonderful world in all its different possibilities. Besides, whatever impossible desires they have in utopia, a utopian person is always aware of what she wants (if not, other persons give her a hand in clarifying it). In this sense, an informal utopian space enriched by different designs and desires is opposed to real social space where desires are vague, oppressed and substituted by other

<sup>3</sup> In Mattapoisett the language of culture escapes gender-oriented words that make people attached to female or male roles. A word "person" and its derivative pronoun "per" are substitutions of "woman" and "men" as well as "his" or "her".

<sup>4</sup> The most serious shock that Consuelo experiences in Mattapoisett is the sight of a man who is going to breast-feed a baby. The idea of universal mothering arises from the thought that emancipation of women should start from the revolution in child-bearing and child rearing. Emancipating women from the biological necessity to mother annuls the gender-dependent types of social behavior [9].

ambitions ("I am eager to do this thing because actually long for something that is impossible to do").

As far as Mattapoisett is concerned, the best way of living here is to admit diverse ways of living. This point delegitimizes the ideological basis of the world where the main heroine is regarded as "insane", together with other people being too emotional, direct, too different and uncomfortable to deal with. A mental institution presents a distorted substitution of eccentric society. It is a space where various "inadmissible" differences are collected, examined and cured. Among this diversity, there are those who are demented and those who are regarded to be "demented" because of their originality, inability to make concessions or conform to established rules. Ultimately all of those incompatible, individual worlds have been narrowed down to a common denominator of psychiatric disorders which is to be "mended" and restored to a normal condition. The end is to cancel any excesses of self expression and put taboo on eccentricity, desires, and untamed individuality. Outspoken, unveiled subjectivity is diagnosed to be a disease. Medical treatment replaces the process of understanding: instead of solving the problems of the other, they helped the other be equalized and effaced. In this sense one of the patients compares his subjectivity with a thing out of order: "Like if it's broken, get it fixed. If it's crooked, get it straightened out. If it's kinky, iron it" [16. loc. 5411].

A mental institution is a part and parcel of a "disciplinary society", where a creation of self is seen as something outrageous and economically unproductive [10]. Those whose behavior is not up to some fundamental standards of the system are either isolated or corrected but never let alone without surveillance. A mental institution symbolizes an absolute captivity of human being, whose attempts to act on her own is cut short with shock therapy. Any conversation between a medical authority and a patient is not a dialogue, but an examination, an execution of power. A diagnosis of "insanity" deprives a person of her human status, renders her "doomed", inferior to the "sane", a bearer of problematic subjectivity. Her words and actions mean nothing, representing only a medical case.

The utopia opens up a sphere of a living space of lots of possibilities, where Consuelo can express herself, use her natural intelligence and be responsive and reasonable while keeping the status of being absolutely sane. Travelling to utopia is a kind of compensation for various prohibitions that prevents the protagonist from autonomous actions, movements beyond the limits of the established order. Travels to utopia draw attention from hospital regime with no personal choice to a space of freedom. In addition, it drastically change the common frame of reference, with "patients", who don't understand reality and need the guidelines, and "experts", who knows real things and on this ground run the patients' lives. Due to utopia the protagonist as well as a reader start to doubt the legitimacy of "places" and "powers" distributed this way [6.P.150]. Time travelling produces the act of reexamination of accepted knowledge and enables Consuelo to resist the process of "medical curing". That is normalization and devaluation of the individual self.

#### IV. BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

A post-utopian imagination pictures a triumph of life over any reified order with its distribution of places everybody has to bear in mind. The future community engenders a creative "disorder", erasing artificial distances and limits. It creates conditions for personal growth, including an open flow of interactions where children and adults, friends and lovers, human and non-human animals, those who work and those who study, representatives of different arts who are close to each other, and those not separated by disciplinary boundaries. However, the delight in endless possibilities springs up with thoughts about a limited character of human existence, its uniqueness and temporality: "We all carry our death at the core – if you don't know that, your life is hollow, no?" [16. loc.2920]. Despite the epicurean element in their routine, people from Mattapoisett resemble stoics in their attitudes. Death doesn't intrude into their daily existence as something alien to it. This is a natural (non-invented) limit which gives value and meaning to individual time against eternal change of provisional forms<sup>5</sup>.

The opposite of life is not a biological death, but an end of genuine possibilities of individual and social being. Death is the absence of authentic personal feelings of time, death, existence, when everything happens as if in a dream without human efforts to participate in events. No events occur in this state of mind. This psychological and existential fading culminates in a mental hospital where patients are either doped or devastated after shock therapy or lobotomy. Beside those extremes, the lack of subjective experience is a common feature of societies dominated by technocratic plans and preoccupations. The utopian way of life takes a stand against a technocratic civilization (anti-utopia) situated on the skirts of the utopian space and organized around the principles of total control over nature, body and emotional self. Technological construction is inflated there to such an extent that everybody is delighted to be like a perfect automat with certain functions to fight, make love, take pleasure. According to the plot, external enemies of Mattapoisett have emerged from contemporary technocratic tendencies to reduce complex vital entities to functional systems, predictable and under rational regulation.

Anti-utopian trends are bureaucratic procedures of solving human problems without noticing individual lives and deaths unseen behind the formal instructions<sup>6</sup>. Both the protagonist and the future society are under threat of being destroyed by technological reason abstracted from existential demands. The protagonist faces neurological surgery that is supposed to cure her, but it actually signifies a socio-psychological death of the person. The future society may disappear if it fails to resist the power of instrumental reason

<sup>5</sup> In Mattapoisett their approach to life and death is close to existential philosophy with its memory about individual death. But first of all it's based on the practice of mothering which lets people feel an ongoing unstoppable process of being as well as uniqueness of every creature.

<sup>6</sup> A conversation between hospital orderlies demonstrates a mass character of life and death, which are perceived as statistical phenomena needed to be registered in a proper way: "Don't know why the doctors want to cut up every crazy that checks out. When you seen one you seen them all" – "They got to put something on the death certificate" [16. loc. 2613].

that can be enhanced by many historical factors, including the proliferation of neurological surgeries like the one Consuelo undergoes. Both the protagonist and the future society exist in a life-and-death situation, though it's the protagonist who is able to influence the disposition of forces in today's reality, where life-asserting and destructive inclinations compete with each other. "The past is a disputed area" [16. loc.5093], - said a visitor from the future society, implying that existence of their world is not guaranteed. But it also means that subjective experience of the person is a "disputed area" and depends on her choice between alienating and human-oriented ways of thought/action. Furthermore, where exactly the line between those two ways lies is a question the protagonist should answer all alone.

One who is considered to be "insane" is one who is voiceless, powerless, and an object of treatment. Consuelo finds inner resources to act, surpassing her passive "nature" of a patient woman. In her resistance to authorities, she relies both on utopian future (transcendent reality) and nature (immanent reality in herself, other people, the environment). Nature in a broad sense as an energy of growth, and the will to live becomes an ally in the protagonist's fight for the authentic self. Nature opposes artificial limits as much as the educated feelings of utopians do. If a society elaborates forms and builds borders, natural forces crush or escape those social constructs that stand in the way, don't comply with disciplining rules and instructions. Feeling nature (and driven by it), the protagonist moves beyond the limits: first of all, at the mental level (travelling to utopia), then at the physical one (making her escape from hospital) and finally at level of moral and legal norms (having poisoned her doctors). The protagonist acts as if she is a real "criminal" and "insane", but, against the background of permanent violence towards the woman, her actions are those of a desperate animal who's corned and struggles tooth and nail.

Together with nature, which is permanently negated and violated yet ever prevailing, Consuelo demonstrates an extraordinary vitality after rape, forced hysterectomy, deprivation of parental rights, and humiliation in the mental institution. Being in almost deadlock, she nevertheless realizes herself on the battle front, fighting for her freedom to feel and share those feelings with others. In her radical confrontation with the system (where her feelings are ignored and regarded as "imaginary"), Consuelo may seem to become a witch (a manifestation of untamed nature) or the alien other who is unpredictable, inventive, plotting, and uses anything she has at hand (pretence, hypocrisy, holidays, flowers, poison) in order to break free and manifest her real self (wild, non-socialized) all of a sudden. However, her actions aren't inspired by an egoistic desire to revenge, declare about her wounded ego. Instead, she tries to fight against the so-called "natural" order of the hospital. Because if it is natural, there is no meaning in anything. Her self-expressions and movements at the limits of her possibilities show that total power of instrumental rationality (with its rejection of autonomous individual movements and intentions) is not total, has gaps for escape, openings for alternative projects.

The protagonist's final act of violence is the protest against the system, but it doesn't mean that protagonist longs for violence. The protagonist strives to be a subject with her right to think and make decisions, feeling as she likes. She also strives to assert the importance of other people, their hopes and expectations forced out to the margins of society or to the sphere of utopia. The action of protagonist is accompanied and motivated by her realistic awareness of limits, time deficiency, and her own incapability to do anything better than violence. As for Consuelo, her violence is not a way to liberation or an endless nomadic movement across the borders; it is an act of coming into real being, linked with personal suffering from the idea that it's impossible to act differently. This radical action reveals the absurdity of the world where a woman has to kill instead of nurturing is deemed "insane" while attempting to lead a thought-out life and claim the importance of simple things (care about others, possibility of self-development among thinking and feeling creatures).

## V. CONCLUSION

At the end of the story, the protagonist stays alone. Since the violent action is committed, the world of utopia has been out of touch, switched off<sup>7</sup>. Its silence (as well as its conversation) addresses readers' subjective experience. It may be interpreted as an end of utopian society (after the mistaken action of the subject) or an extinction of those utopian intentions in the subject which made time travelling possible. It may refer to the fact that a utopian desire to be the self (the subject) has come true, and there's no cause for the inner dialogue any more. The presence or absence of utopia at the end of the story makes no difference when the subject determines her position and attitude. The image of future society enriches the protagonist's experience, sharpens her vision, and becomes a part of her memory, but it never dictates what to do. The protagonist is fully responsible for the consequences of her decision. At the end of the story, Consuelo comes to understand the uniqueness of her situation when nobody can help and tell what to do. That situation is totally different from that in Mattapoisett, where they struggle for the sake of their sociality as it is manifested and seen by everybody. In today's society, the protagonist struggles for the sake of those who suffer from the actual social world, for something invisible, repressed, possible – "on the edge of time", at her own risk.

Utopia is a revelation of "unsettled", unsatisfied, creative subjectivity that can find no "place" among things of the world, and can express itself only in discreet moments of time when the "irrelevant", "out of order" intuitions are taken shape of an action, attitude, words meant to be heard<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> "She could no longer catch. She had annealed her mind and she was not a receptive woman. She had hardened. But she thought of Mattapoisett" [16. loc. 7124].

<sup>8</sup> As Northrop Frye writes: "Utopia, in fact and in etymology, is not a place; and when a society it seeks to transcend is everywhere, it can only fit into what is left, the invisible non-spatial point in the centre of space... 'here' [11. P. 347]. In this sense Tom Moylan refers to the utopian expressions: 'There can be no Utopia, but there can be utopian expressions that constantly shatter the present achievements and compromises of society

In Marge Piercy's novel, the subjective source of this revelation is undoubted; it is a painful experience of the woman in mental hospital. Nevertheless, it's not the pain that brings the subject into existence but the fundamental tension between the feeling of affinity and loneliness, home and threatening environment, open possibilities and closed finals. The tension engenders the movement beyond the "given" place in the universe. Though the story ends with a medical report on Consuelo Ramos, the protagonist resists the final words and diagnosis. Even if she keeps silence or has been silenced (as utopia has), her experience, fraught with realized and non-realized possibilities, talks and is open to interpretation.

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and point to that which is not yet experienced in the human project of fulfillment and creation" [14. P. 28].