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Utopian Feminist Visions

Marge Piercy

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My name is Marge Piercy. I am a poet. By now I have seventeen books of poetry published and seventeen novels, I am one of the most widely anthologized and quoted poets in America. I have also written a memoir, *Sleeping with Cats*, and sixteen novels. Among my best-known novels are *Gone to Soldiers* about World War II, *Braided Lives* about growing up in Detroit, *Sex Wars,* about the politically turbulent era after the American Civil War, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *He, She and It*, which are among my speculative novels – the ones I guess we are talking about today.

Isaac Asimov says, that all science fiction or speculative fiction is answering or dealing with the questions of "what if", "if only" and "if this continues." Basically, most of *Woman on the Edge of Time* is an "if only" book. The genre of the utopian novel, which *Woman on the Edge of Time* mostly is, is an old genre, which goes back to Plato's *Republic*. Most of the utopian novels were written by men and they are frequently very rational societies, in which everything is tremendously planned out, plotted out, often very hierarchical, usually with the social group from which the author comes being on top of the pyramid, and everybody else neatly arranged below it.

For the past, perhaps hundred, or hundred and ten years, women have been writing utopian novels. Except for, perhaps, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland,* which was a bit hierarchical, but not like the ones we have been talking about, and has no sex in it, most utopian novels that women have written are very different. They tend to much looser, more anarchical societies. They tend to be very concerned that the daily work of society should be as prestigious as the jobs that are now loaded with rewards. In other words, that helping to raise children, helping to heal the sick, helping to give birth, helping to die peacefully and gently, helping to socialize people, helping to negotiate between people, should be as prestigious as, in our society, taking money away from people is, or manipulating the stock market, or all the other things that our society seems to reward so highly: taking over companies and driving them out of business, that sort of thing.

Basically, women's utopias are very concerned with overcoming loneliness, because what is utopia? Utopia is what you don't have. It is the fantasies about what you lack and you feel you lack in society. So if you create a utopia in which everyone is concerned with raising of children, everyone shares the burden of doing the necessary and almost invisible work of the society, then you know that it was probably created by somebody who lives in a society in which women are penned up alone in little houses or flats with their children, going quietly crazy, feeling the whole burden on them. Whatever they are doing, it is wrong. Whatever they do, in fifteen years, some counselor will say to them, “It is your fault”.

In most feminist utopias, such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*, basically sex is never coerced. It is usually not a society in which people live in the couples we live in now. Serial monogamy does not exist, I think, in any of the utopias created by women. People often live together in larger kinship or social groups, in which they

can deal with the loneliness and the lack of communication, of community, that so many women experience. In some, sex is romanticized; in others it is much more promiscuous, much easier, but it almost always crosses the boundaries of what our society considers appropriate heterosexual activity. Feminist utopias are also concerned with safety. In one of Joanna Russ's novels, *The Female Man*, she says, that in her future society, a naked woman could walk around the equator, carrying a very large emerald and no one would ever bother her or show much interest.

Usually, there is pretty much classlessness. Usually, the problems of having enough have been dealt with. Nobody seems to be terribly interested in being filthy rich, but there is also no poverty. Things are pretty well spread around. That is characteristic of all utopias that women have created.

In the seventies, there was a great bursting forth of feminist utopias. In recent years, with women so much under attack and fighting to maintain the gains that we have fought for, there has been less energy for creating utopias. Now when I came to *He, She and It*, that is not an “if only” novel, it is not a utopian novel, it is more “if this continues.” It is a novel in which many of the things happening now have reached fruition: in which the ozone layer has gone, so you can't go outside unprotected, in which much of the rice baskets and bread baskets of the world have been either inundated by the rising oceans or turned to deserts, in which there have been terrible disasters, in which the great international corporations are the primary form of control and government. The election of officials is a kind of sport and gambling. All real decisions are made by the multinational corporations. There are really no nation states left. There are large corporations, in which the higher executives and middle management and techies live in domes and protected environments, and most of the population

lives in what they call “the Glop”, a megalopolis, which in the United States stretches from Boston to what is now Atlanta. It is densely populated, extremely polluted, basically lives on recycled garbage. There are some free towns in areas at the border of the corporations, and part of *He, She and It* takes place in such a free town called Tikva.

Tikva is an anarchistic town, a green space in the middle of a manmade desert. Like most places that women imagine, it is very loose: Everything is argued out; everything is discussed; everything is open in how decisions are made. There are many plants. My protagonist Shira comes from a matriarchal family. She was raised by her grandmother. She believes her mother to be a sort of fussy middle-age bureaucrat and, in the course of the novel, she discovers that her mother was actually a data-pirate and now is a woman dedicated to stealing information from the large multinational corporations and liberating it into the Glop; taking information and making it free and making it available, which is a very dangerous proposition, for which she could be killed at any moment.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, my time traveler is not a white man. It is a Chicana woman who has had a hard life, but she is what they call a catcher: a woman with an unusually open and receptive mind. And she is the person who visits the future, often as an escape from an agonizing present. When Connie first goes into the future she is extremely disappointed. Her image of the future is extremely mechanized, and when she arrives in a place in the future, which actually is a town in Massachusetts, it is a village. At first glance, it really looks to her very primitive. They are all peasants, goats and chickens running around and so forth. As she gets to know the place more, the more tedious work is all mechanized. The manufacturing is mechanized, but the agriculture

is not. The agriculture and the care-taking is all completely unmechanized. I am not a writer who is afraid of machinery per se, afraid of technology at all. I figure I wouldn't be alive without technology.

Woman on the Edge of Time was an attempt to make concrete many of the ideas I liked best in the social movements of the time it emerged: the women's movement, the new left, Native American movement, etc.; and, to make vivid and real those ideas, to make them flesh. *Woman on the Edge of Time* has a structure where all the people in the frame of the novel, in the present, have counterparts in the future. The counterparts are quite different from them, because I tried to imagine what people who did not grow up in a sexist, racist, competitive imperialist society would be like. How would these personalities be different? So that is the sort of game plan behind the mirroring of the characters in the present and the future of the novel.

Basically people in *Woman on the Edge of Time* choose their métier. There is a lot of necessary work that everyone shares. Just about everyone shares in child raising, as one of these three co-mothers, but it is not mandatory. The scut work is mandatory. Everybody has to do some of the physical labor, everybody has to do the things that hold the society together, everyone takes part in government by lot. Basically, I have always thought that choosing by lot was not a bad way to run things, but I have never been able to persuade other people of that. When I sat on a couple of boards that gave art grants, I said, “The fairest way to do it, to eliminate our own prejudices, is, read everything, drop out the bottom half, and then do it by lot.” That way the same people would not always get the grants because it feels safe. Government is for sale generally. If you have enough money, you can buy yourself a

governorship or senatorship or whatever. You just simply overload the media.

There in Mattapoisett, the government is chosen by lot and everybody serves for a year, when they are called upon. There are a lot of things that people choose to do and other things are chosen by lot. The different roles in the society are being passed around, some by people choosing them, some by everyone having to contribute to them, and other things by lot. Fairness is very important for me and I thought that was a fair way to run a place.

I was very struck a few years before I wrote *Woman on the Edge of Time* by a book about the Pawnee Indians, called *The Lost World*, written by an anthropologist, who interviewed all the remaining members after they had been uprooted. And, one of the things I learned from that book was that while they were what we would call primitive technologically, socially they were far more sophisticated than we are. They had ways of dealing with social problems that were far more sophisticated. For instance, let's say you feel lonely and neglected, as people so frequently do. Well, you would have a dream that it was time for you to do a certain ceremony, and you would say, it is time for me to do this ceremony, I have dreamt it, it must be so. Then for three days you should be the most important person in the entire village. Similarly the women who did the agriculture, when they came back from planting the fields, covered with mud, cold; it was spring; it was hard work; all the older men in the village would have to get up on top of the houses and sing for them, and greet them when they came back. Similarly, if somebody stole something from me, I would have to give him another present, because he would only steal, if he felt that he didn't have enough, and so you should be made to feel that you have enough. So they were sophisticated in social ways. Their constant aim was to keep resocializing people to

be good to each other, to maintain social cohesion and cooperation. That struck me as an extremely sophisticated society in that sense, and I was very impressed by that and thought a lot about that before I wrote *Woman on the Edge of Time*.

In both the novels, there is a great deal of emphasis on the education of children, on children being raised together, educated together by the community, by shared responsibility for the children. I think this is pretty common in women's utopian novels, even those like *He, She and It*, that isn't at all utopian but has a pleasant enough sub-society within it. Basically there is a lot of freedom given to children, freedom to learn, freedom to experience things. I see the difference between my own childhood, in which I was able to run loose a great deal, and now, where children are shepherded from one activity to another, usually by their mother, occasionally by their father. Children go from soccer practice to language skills, to the tutor, the singing group to god knows what, it goes on and on. I live in a village and here children still have far more freedom then they have in the suburbs, where it seems they have no freedom at all. I don't think it was bad for me to run wild as a child. Certainly I got into danger, but I also learned to get out of it. It is a very circumscribed and imagination-starved life that most children lead now. Their imaginations are programmed by the media, so that they have very little space in which to explore, except on the net, that is part of why they go on the World Wide Web so much. That is the one place in which they seem to have any autonomy and ability to explore.

In both of these books, I have been concerned with the education and socialization of children. In *He, She and It*, it is mostly the community where I am concerned with it, not the very hierarchical education that occurs in the multinational corporations. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, there is a lot more about the education

process. The children spend very little time in formal learning or taking tests. They spend a lot of time with adults. In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, all children have three mothers who may be of any sex. Those three are equally responsible for them until the age of twelve or thirteen, when the child decides he or she is ready to become youth. And when they do, they undergo an initiation process, and their co-mothers are not allowed to even speak to them for three months. They have instead other elders who answer questions, give advice, but who don't have the authority over them or the kind of intimacy that their co-mothers had. It's a liberation process that attempts to short circuit the agony of adolescence as we experience in this society, in which all children quite hate their parents and, at some point, want to murder their parents out of frustration and fury.

The reason why people write speculative fiction, in part, is because if you cannot imagine anything else, all you can ask for is more of the same, more McDonalds, more and bigger SUVs, more and bigger highways, more and bigger malls – that's all you can ask for because that is all you can imagine, more of the same, bigger. Part of the reason why people write speculative fiction is to suggest that there may be alternatives. The imagination is a very powerful liberating tool. If you cannot imagine something different, you cannot work towards it.

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