

WOMAN'S VALUES IN SOCIETY AS REFLECTED IN MARGE PIERCY'S "*BARBIE DOLL*"

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Abstrak

Boneka Barbie merupakan simbol kecantikan perempuan yang dibangun oleh kapitalis dan media demi meraih keuntungan. Akibatnya para perempuan tidak menyadari pengaruh negatif yang banyak ditimbulkan, seperti kesehatan, pembodohan, fantasi berlebihan, dan yang paling penting adalah eksploitasi perempuan. Pengaruh negatif inilah yang memicu berbagai kritik terhadap keberadaan Boneka Barbie. Marge Piercy adalah seorang penyair Amerika yang sangat keras mengkritik keberadaan boneka barbie lewat salah satu puisinya "Barbie Doll." Dengan menggunakan perpektif feminisme, artikel ini mengeksplorasi pengaruh sosial dan budaya yang melatar belakangi keberadaan puisi ini. Puisi ini dipengaruhi oleh gerakan feminisme di Amerika pada tahun 1960an.

Piercy berhasil membandingkan perempuan dengan Boneka Barbie dalam puisi ini dengan menggunakan perbandingan, simbolisme dan ironi. Akhir tragis seorang gadis yang ingin terlihat cantik seperti Boneka Barbie mengindikasikan bahwa kecantikan perempuan seharusnya tidak dinilai dari penampilan fisiknya saja, tetapi dari pemikirannya, pengalaman hidupnya, sifat-sifatnya dan juga kearifannya.

Kata Kunci: *Marge Piercy, boneka barbie, perempuan, masyarakat*

A. INTRODUCTION

Dolls like what we know today, in fact, have a very long history. Dolls have been found in Egyptian graves dating from 3000 to 2000 Bc. Dolls were also buried in Greek and Roman children's graves. Such a fact indicates that the dolls are religiously significant, and it seems that they were to serve them in the after world Freud (2006). Nowadays, a doll refers to what Hornby (1986:257), for instance, defines: it is (a) a model of a baby or a person, usually for a child to play with, and (b) (*slang*) for a pretty but a silly girl or woman. The first definition signifies that dolls tend to function as toys for children. As toys, the most famous name in doll collecting is "Barbie."

Inspired by the German doll named *Lili*, Ruth Handler, the co-founder of Mattel Company, created Barbie Doll, which was first introduced on March 9, 1959 at the New York International American Toy Fair. Soon after that, Barbie Doll became a great business of billion US dollars. Mattel Toys has claimed that approximately three Barbie dolls are sold every second all over the world (Howard, 2006). Barbie, then, becomes one of the icons of American popular culture.

In an article entitled "Games and Toys" Mergen considers the Barbie peculiar compared to other kinds of doll (Mergen, 2002: 733). This is most likely influenced by the publication of a book by M. G. Lord entitled *Forever Barbie*:

The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll (1994). The 'biography' of the Barbie proves that Barbie Doll is not a mere doll and it is more than just a toy; even it is sometimes called 'she', meaning a living figure. This 'living' doll with 'her' biography is one of the triggers of the controversies around the existence of Barbie Doll. Has been used to promote gender equality, as an example that woman 'can be anything', like doctor, model, politician, astronaut, fire-fighter, rock star, and so on; recently, Barbie's presence in the life of an American girl has been said to be a negative influence. Many groups say that young girls may set the doll as their model, leading to issues with body image and gender role insecurities later in life (<http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbie>)

There are two main debates on the existence of Barbie Doll: physical characteristic and woman stereotype, both are closely interconnected. The figure of Barbie Doll is unrealistically healthy and it causes in human being 'anorexia nervosa,' a medical term for 'form of mental illness, one of symptoms being unreasonable fear of eating which leads to dangerous or fatal loss of weight (Hornby, 1989:31-32). Besides, Barbie represents woman stereotype. The phrases in the 'teen talk' Barbie produced in 1993 saying "Math is hard," "Will we ever have enough clothes?" "I love shopping!" and, "Wanna have a pizza party?" is not the representation of woman at all, because it shows that all woman are stupid, crazy for shopping, and always have 'happy' life.

In brief, Barbie plays a significant role in constructing the image of woman in social life. This is well captured by Marge Piercy in her poem "Barbie Doll" through which she describes the existence of woman in the society. To grasp that idea, feminist reading of the poem is appropriate for unfolding woman's experience in "Barbie Doll."

B. BARBIE DOLL: AN ICON OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE AND CONFLICTING REALITIES

"Man-made images are *the American Reality*, what we have is a fusion of reality

and the popular image of it"

(Harold Rosenberg in Fiswick, 1974:52).

Based on Rosenberg's notion, it is noticeable that popular culture sells images to the masses, and so does Barbie Doll. Barbie Doll as an artifact of popular culture is used to sell image that women can be anything they want to be. The children playing Barbie doll can make the doll anything they want, such as: a doctor, a model, a fire-fighter, and so on, simply by changing the costume of the doll, and it will take only a minute. Even this does not only work on children but also on adult woman. In a convention of Barbie Doll collectors, a statement from a member comes out, "I can't afford a Mackie. I can't afford a Versace. But my Barbie can. And I can imagine myself wearing it" (Cullen, 2002).

That fantasy with which women live is a sort of worrying phenomenon but, unfortunately, at the same time embraced by children and women throughout the world. As a consequence, this unrealistic and stereotypical situation developed by Barbie Doll is often satirized by musicians and criticized by feminist scholars. The criticism is also very much related to the notion that Barbie is often used to refer to a "stupid girl" (Hornby, 1986:257). This kind of circumstances is well captured by Pink in her album "I'm Not Dead" in her single entitled "Stupid Girl."

"Baby if I act like that, flipping my blond hair back

Push up my bra like that, stupid girl!

Maybe if I act like that, that guy will call me back

Porno Paparazzi girl, I don't wanna be a stupid girl

Baby if I act like that, flipping my blond hair back

Push up my bra like that, I don't wanna be a stupid girl"

(Pink, "Stupid Girl", 2006)

Those are parts of "Stupid Girl" lyrics sung by Pink in her album entitled "I'm Not Dead." Through the angry and sarcastic tone, it

appears that she strongly criticizes American blond hair girls who act foolishly, such as 'flipping my blond hair back, push up my bra, and porno paparazzi girl. "I live in L.A., so it's obvious what I'm surrounded by ... I don't need to name names," Pink says in an interview held by an MTV reporter (Vineyard, 2006). In addition, she emphasizes that the song was inspired by the condition how vapid Hollywood can be and how young girls should aspire to more than their pop-culture role models represent. Who is she? She is the one acting like Barbie Doll, as clearly represented by its cover: Pink is parodying Barbie with a bouquet around her neck, to symbolize the 'dead' Barbie while 'she is not'. She lives in a real world, not in a plastic world, not in a 'Barbie World', not in a life as described by Aqua, a Danish-Norwegian dance-pop music group, best-known for their 1997 breakthrough single "Barbie Girl," as follows:

I'm a barbie girl, in the barbie world
Life in plastic, it's fantastic!
you can brush my hair, undress me
everywhere
Imagination, life is your creation
Come on Barbie, let's go party!

I'm a barbie girl, in the barbie world
Life in plastic, it's fantastic!
you can brush my hair, undress me
everywhere
Imagination, life is your creation
I'm a blond bimbo girl, in the fantasy
world
Dress me up, make it tight, I'm your dolly
You're my doll, rock'n'roll, feel the
glamour in pink,
kiss me here, touch me there, hanky
panky...
You can touch, you can play, if you say:
"I'm always yours"

(Aqua, "Barbie Girl," 1997)

One thing to draw from Pink and Aqua is 'the world of superficial life.' This world is represented by Barbie Doll, which is usually seen as an icon of Western childhood

(<http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbie>). Nevertheless, this is not necessarily the children's fault but the parents', especially the mother's. This is supported by a fact given by Dorothy Washburn in her study of more than 100 women and their dolls conducted. She found that most women consider their doll play as training for motherhood (Inge, 2002:118). The findings of the poll seem ironical because some feminists want to free women from domestic works. This ironical situation is best described in Gallagher's poem:

I Stop Writing the Poem

to fold the clothes. No matter who lives
or who dies, I'm still a woman.
I'll always have plenty to do.
I bring the arms of his shirt
together. Nothing can stop
out tenderness. I'll get back
to the poem. I'll get back to being
a woman. But for now
there's a shirt, a giant shirt
in my hands, and somewhere a small girl
standing next to her mother
watching to see how it's done.

The speaker in the poem is a house wife who can not free herself from the culture developed by the society around her which constructs the value that it is a woman's duty to do domestic jobs like 'folding the clothes.' She must stop doing something she likes to do or a career, such as "writing poem," for the sake of domestic job. Moreover, it is more ironical seeing the reality that such a thing happens to every girl around the world as reflected in, 'and somewhere a small girl standing next to her mother watching (looking at something very carefully) to see how it's done.'

The reality of woman's life is not like what is seen in the figure of Barbie, because, as an artifact of popular culture, the function of Barbie is," to entertain us, to cause us relax and escape the pressures of our jobs, our problems, and our personal relationships; ... every

situation has a happy ending.” (Inge, 2002: xxi). To have a clear comparison to the reality of the real life, the following are some accounts of the daily activities of a student-mother-housewife (written in the mid 1970s), entitled *Diary of a Student-Mother-Housewife-Worker*.

As economic necessities and their human aspirations have combined to increase their participation in the marketplace, women have found themselves more and more saddled with work burdens that belie claims of increased gender equality. Marion Hudson, a mother, a student at SUNY-Old Westbury, and a part-time employee, in reality never takes a rest even a minute in her daily life starting from 5.30 am until she falls asleep in the evening (Winston and Fox, 1998:300-301). From that comparison, it can be concluded that *the real reality in real life is not as simple as reality in the images of popular culture*.

Feminist has been very critical of a number of things in popular culture, one of which is the cultural representations which marginalize or stereotype women, the relative absence of women involved in cultural production and the relative neglect of women as members of the audience for popular culture (Strinati, 1995: 179). Therefore, what happens to women can not be separated from the social and culture value around them, as argued in the following discussion.

C. FEMINISM: WOMAN, LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

It is impossible to draw a single definition of feminism, but despite its diversity, feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women: that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position (Guerin, et.al, 1999:196). Most feminist believe that our culture is patriarchal culture; that is, one organized in favor of the interest of men. Feminism is initially political and social movement which later has also influenced literature and literary criticism.

Feminist literary critics try to explain how power imbalances due to gender in a given

culture are reflected in or challenged by literary text and they generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and re-evaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and literary criticism. Feminist critics therefore study sexual, social and political issues once thought to be “outside” the study of literature (Guerin, et.al, 1999: 197).

One of the outstanding feminist literary critics is Elaine Showalter. Based on Elaine Showalter's idea on feminist criticism as found in her text *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), Marge Piercy who wrote “Barbie Doll” in 1969 belongs to what she called the female phase or the third phase of the three historical phase of evolution in female writing. According to Showalter, feminist critics in this phase concern themselves with the developing a peculiarly female understanding of the female experience in art, including a feminine analysis of literary forms and techniques (Bressler, 1999:186).

To appreciate female writings, Showalter offers a perspective in criticizing literary work, that is *gynocriticism*. Through *gynocriticism* critics use four models concerning the nature of women's writing that help answer some of the chief concerns of feminist criticism: the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural (Bressler, 1999:191). In this article, the cultural model is used to explore the world of the cultural forces behind the writing of the poem analyzed. Through the cultural approach, the literary analysis of Marge Piercy's “Barbie Doll” will be on how the society in which female authors work and function shapes women's goals, responses, and points of view.

Marge Piercy is an American poet, novelist and social activist. She was born in Detroit, Michigan, to a family deeply affected by the Great Depression. She was the first in her family to attend college, studying at the university of Michigan. Winning a Hopwood Award for poetry and Fiction (1957) enabled her to finish college and spend sometime in France, and her formal schooling ended with an

M.A. from Northwestern University. Her novels and poetry often focus on feminist or social concern (<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/Marge-Piercy#biography>).

Written in 1969, Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" seems to be the representative of the spirit of the era. 1960s is the key year of the revival of the feminist movement in America which is known as the second wave of feminism. This feminist movement is greatly influenced by Betty Friedan's influential book entitled *Feminine Mystique* in which she charged that American women has been victimized by a set of ideas a 'feminine mystique' which permeated society and defined female happiness as total involvement in the roles of wife and mother (Chafe, 1972:227). These domestic images of women in society are developed greatly by the role of media as popular culture (Edwards, et.al, 1978: 332). As we know, although there are important biological differences between the sexes, our understanding and experience of the concepts "male" and "female" are much more the product of social and cultural than biological and physiological factors (Edwards, et.al., 1978:331).

This kind of condition is worrying, because according to Naomi Wolf, "women are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth" (Sternhell, 2006). This is also supported by Vincent (2002) who says that today's society has a high level of expectations concerning women and their beauty. Furthermore, despite all the advances of the Women's Movement, women are still expected to fit into a specific mold of "prettiness." If they fail to meet these standards they are cast aside and placed under a category of unworthiness called "ugliness." The society looks to the physical characteristics of its females and finds total disregard for their personalities, or qualities as human beings. And Marge Piercy's poem grasps the conceptual view of the role women play in a 'must be beautiful' society, and discusses the teasing,

loneliness, and the ultimate destruction that the 'social scene' plays in defining 'beauty' in women.

This 'beauty myth' is also developed by the industry like Mattel Toy Company by creating Barbie Doll once thought to be a feminist icon. But, as we know now, it is industrialization which gives rise to an atomized and anonymous mass which is ripe for manipulation, a mass market for the mass media which can only be catered for by forms of mass culture. These processes entail mass production industries and mass markets which both encourage the spread of mass culture. For this approach, the main determinant of mass culture is *the profit* its production and marketing can make from its potential mass market. If it can't make money then it is unlikely to be produced (Strinati, 1995: 11). This shows how industry plays a considerable role in developing the myth of woman for the sake of profit, as one of the characteristics of popular culture: media, mass and profit, without considering its dangerous effect to the women as depicted by Marge Piercy in her poem entitled "Barbie Doll."

D. WOMAN AS DEPICTED IN MARGE PIERCY'S "BARBIE DOLL"

As the best-selling doll, Barbie Doll is a model for women because it proves that the value offered is the same as what they believe they want to be. As we know that popular culture sells fantasy. But the question that might arise is "Is Barbie the ideal woman?"

In the poem, the title "Barbie Doll" underlines the theme of the poem: young girls are ultimately and fatally entrapped by society's narrow definitions of feminine behavior and beauty. This is in line with what Naomi Wolf has been concerned with. The irony comes up in the poem through the comparison of a young girl to a Barbie doll by the society.

The society has its own ideal of something because of the influence of popular culture and media. In this poem, Piercy uses Barbie to symbolize society's views of what the

perfect female should aspire to be. According to Cain (1996), Barbie's unrealistic body typebusty with tiny waist, thin thighs, and long legsis reflective of our culture's feminine ideal. Yet, Cain says further, less that two percent of American women can ever hope to achieve such dreamy measurements. This conflicting reality is examined by Marge Piercy using similes, symbols, and a fairy tale-like tone, to create a world the character within commit suicide instead of Barbie, the beauty symbol she is being compared to throughout the poem.

In the first stanza, the poem begins in a fairy tale-like fashion. The girl grows naturally and has a wonderful life (Piercy 1-4) and it seems that there is nothing wrong with her.

This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry
candy.
Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate
said:
You have a great big nose and fat legs.
(Piercy 1-6)

However, the first 4 lines contain some cultural construct towards women. The gifts given to the girl child to play with are ordinary but dangerous toys, as seen from feminist point of view, because 'dolls that did pee-pee' refers to motherhood, 'miniature GE stoves and irons' refers to domestic job women must do, and 'lipsticks the color of cherry candy' refers to some standard of beauty women should add to themselves to be beautiful. Those gifts are identical with being feminine and those symbolize the future gender role for all girls, which are, regrettably, introduced in their early life.

The happy tone of the 'natural life' of the young girl in the first four lines is stopped by the puberty phase of life. Such toys are played in the family life and it must end when she reaches her puberty. The puberty here represents something important because Freud says, "puberty, which brings about so great an

accession of libido in boys, is marked in girls by a fresh wave of repression..the fact of her castration..the wound of narcissism..like a scar, a sense of inferiority (Freud in Gilligan, 1982: 13). And the word 'magic' is also significant because puberty causes great changes in someone's physical appearance. As said in Encarta Dictionary (2006) puberty is a stage of physiological maturity: the stage in human physiological development when somebody becomes capable of sexual reproduction. It is marked by genital maturation, development of secondary sex characteristics, and, in girls, the first occurrence of menstruation. In the poem it is described as 'you have a great big nose and fat legs.' Moreover, her classmate who says so symbolizes the world outside the family, which is the society.

Seen from medical point of view, her appearance is a natural process and it is healthy as seen in 'She was healthy, tested intelligent,' even she is smart as reflected in 'possessed strong arms and back' and 'abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity'; those are natural biological process. Compared to Barbie, based on Barbie's measurements, if Barbie were a real person, she would more than likely be anorexic (Casey, 2004). But, according to the classmate or society, the girl's appearance *is not beautiful*. The society forces her to become like the value of a woman in the society, the one like Barbie Doll.

She was healthy, tested intelligent,
possessed strong arms and back,
abundant sexual drive and manual
dexterity
She went to and fro apologizing.
Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.
(Piercy 7-11)

In the last two lines, she struggles with the guidelines the society has set for an ideal woman. "She went to and fro apologizing" (Piercy 10) implies the sociological notion of face-work, the efforts of people to maintain the proper image and avoid embarrassment in public" (Schaefer in Casey, 2004). In other words, she apologizes for having above-

average intelligence. This shows that she is conforming to society's view that women are inferior to men. The society seems disgusted by her 'fat nose on thick legs' (Piercy 11). This shows how society does not see what is on the inside of a woman and what her abilities are. Instead, society judges her only by her appearance, just like Barbie doll, which is idolized by some girls but criticized by Pink.

In the third stanza, Piercy shows how the girl's story begins to suffer from society's expectations for a young woman.

She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle,
Her good nature wore out like a fan belt.
(Piercy 12-16)

The expectations society has for the female in the poem are obvious. In the first line, the speaker reveals that society advises the girl to 'play coy' (Piercy 12). In other words, the girl should be shy, quiet, and timid. This is exactly the way the creators of Barbie present their doll. Barbie could also be described as coy since all she does is smile, never saying a word. Even though a few models of the doll have possessed voice boxes in the past with pull strings that allow them to speak, most Barbie dolls are mute (Casey, 2004).

In line fourteen, the girl in the poem is compared to Barbie once again. The line in the poem tells the reader that the girl was encouraged to "exercise, diet, smile and wheedle" (Piercy 14). In other words, society encourages the girl to be in great shape, smile all the time, and charm people. One can see in line 14 that the girl in the poem is expected to be like a Barbie doll. After all, Barbie has an amazingly thin body.

Finally, the last line of the third stanza shows how the girl in the poem can no longer tolerate society's pressure to be like Barbie, the ideal woman. By comparing the girl's discouragement to 'a fan belt,' Piercy shows how the girl's despair is compared to an object. Fan belt is rubber belt transferring circular

motion to the cooling fan of an engine (Hornby, 1989: 309) which wear out because of overuse. In addition fan belts are also commodities-thingslike Barbie dolls themselves and, Piercy suggests, like 'women' (Casey, 2004).

The final stanza of the poem suggests the tragic and deadly ending of the girly being compared to Barbie doll.

So she cut off her nose and her legs
and offered them up.
In the casket displayed on satin she lay
with the undertaker's cosmetics painted
on,
a turned-up putty nose,
dressed in a pink and white nightie.
Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.
Consummation at last.
To every woman a happy ending.
(Piercy 17-25)

In this stanza, it is obvious that the female in the poem is being compared to a Barbie doll. This stanza is full of irony. The very person that the girl child could never be is the person 'appearing' in her casket, after a makeover by the undertaker. After the female's suicide, she is laid in a satin coffin. She is adorned with make-up, a putty nose, and a white nightie.

These are symbols Piercy uses to symbolize society's view of the perfect female, obviously Barbie-like qualities. It is ironic that society, symbolized by 'everyone' in the poem, says she is pretty. Even though she is dead, society finally views her as pretty because she now has an acceptable nose, even though it is made of putty. She is also accepted because she is wearing make-up and 'a nightie' in the colors that represent purity and femininity, pink and white. In line 24, it is obvious that only in the girl's death does society view her as perfect. The final line of the tragic fairy tale-like poem implies that the ending is a happy one. However, the irony is that *the ending is sad and shocking*. The 'happy ending' (Piercy 25) is ironic *because it is not happy at all*, not happy for her but for the society.

E. CONCLUSION

Marge Piercy has successfully connected the idea of "Barbie Doll" to the value of women in society. The social pressures on women to conform to particular ways of looking and behaving are so enormous that most women are unconscious with such situation. Some women who live and act naturally are culturally and socially constructed as 'abnormal and weird.' And the poem has proved this unconsciousness.

Everyone is almost forget that beside the broad world where the whole society lives, there is a small world inside a young girl. It is the world where she fights against the value of a woman set by the society. It is proven that her being different from the norms or value the society has driven her to her destruction. This cultural and social construct of women's value in society has become the commodity for the sake of profit without considering women's rights, like what capitalists, such as Mattel Inc., has done by creating Barbie Doll. Accordingly, despite the advance of feminist movement, women must keep being aware, not to be trapped by the myth of fantasy offering superficial realities in the society.

Quoting Christine de Pisan, an Italian-born French poet, beauty has nothing to do with physical appearance. If you ask whether woman possesses any natural intelligence, the answer is *yes*, it can be developed to become wisdom, and then it is most beautiful. This means that the value of the beauty of a woman is not what is seen outside, but what is within her: character, thought, experience and wisdom. Those are the qualities not found and reflected in the figure of Barbie Doll.

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