WOMAN THE PRETTY SEX: AN ANALYSIS ON MARGE PIERCY’S BARBIE DOLL AND WHAT ARE BIG GIRLS MADE OF?

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Abstract: Women are convinced to improve themselves to be physically ideal females. Yet, not every woman has these images, and this condition turns into a perfect market. The commercialization of female beauty trigger criticisms, some of which can be found in Marge Piercy’s poems including “Barbie Doll” and “What Are Big Girls Made of?”. In these poems, Piercy criticizes ironic condition of women who strive for perfection. For that reason, this paper aims at deliberating Piercy’s poems to explore the problematical relationship between women, their body and society. Since the researchers study poems to observe the image of woman, and the data are in form of words, it can be inferred that this research uses a qualitative research method, which is document analysis. The findings show that these poems criticize the consumer culture that makes women its market. The two poems show that an ideal woman calls for not only the idyllic physique but also suitable, stylish outlook. Over the years, women have agonized from the procedures of becoming gorgeous as expected by the society. This conclusion is significant with the idea that the image of the beautiful woman purposes as an icon or symbol for the beliefs and values of the core culture.

Keywords: Marge Piercy, stereotypes of beauty, body modification

Being a woman is arguably the most important item in consumer culture. Consumer culture emphasizes that having the “right things” will lead to psychological benefits: popularity identity, and happiness. People need products and services not only to meet their basic needs such as food, clothing, or housing, but also to express their existence. Goods is marketed as tools for the consumers to reach the material good life and body perfect so that they can be their “ideal” self (Dittmar, 2008). Although the body is important to both men and women, appearance, beauty, and the perfect body have long been central to the identity of many women and girls. They are socialized early into learning that their bodies should are objects to be looked at and evaluated by others as well as be used to attract others (Thompson et al., 1999; Frederickson & Roberts, 1997, cited in Dittmar, 2008). Countless numbers of products like cosmetics and clothing are made to meet what the women may need or want. Many of these products and services are intended to create a woman that has the images mostly favored by the society. There are also surgical treatments to correct someone’s physical features. Out of over 9 million surgical and nonsurgical cosmetic procedures performed in the US in 2011, 91% was carried on female patients. The salon industry makes about $60 billion in annual sales, and it is said that there are cosmetologists than elementary school teachers or lawyers. In addition, research by Vaseline in 2011 has found that British women have an average of eight skin care products but only regularly use two of them. (American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2012; Professional Beauty Association and Nail Manufacturers Council; and the Daily Mail, 2011, cited in thefemalefactor.com).

Physical attractiveness is generally considered important for women. There has also been an existing idea of what constitutes the ideal female beauty. A beautiful woman is believed to have fair skin, slim body, and straight hair. “Ultra-thinness” is perceived the body perfect for women (Dittmar, 2008, citing Wiseman, Gray, Mosimann, & Ahrens, 1992).

Despite what the society expects, not every woman is able to meet such images of the ideal woman. In terms of appearance alone, not every woman is as beautiful and thin as the women seen in the commercials are. Consequently, they try to compensate for their lacking by putting on cosmetics or undergoing surgical treatments, so that they can get
the status of a woman and can feel good about themselves. More women suffer from anorexia, bulimia, and compulsive overeating. A survey in the United States indicated that a majority of women claimed that getting fat was more terrifying than dying. A woman who ignores her physical appearance would be “stigmatized as unfeminine or socially unaware” (Gimlin, 2002).

Some criticisms emerge against the stereotypes of an ideal woman and the force on women to adopt the stereotypes. The criticisms can also be found in literary works, like in those written by Marge Piercy, an American poet that has been said as not fitting “any image of what women were supposed to be like” for her sexuality and ambitions (McManus, 2012). Piercy had a very difficult time as a young woman, getting divorced when she was 23 and living on part-time jobs. Yet, at that time she was clear about her vision as a writer, that she would write “fiction with political dimension” and about “women she could recognize, working class people who were not as simple as they were supposed to be” (McManus, 2012). Many of Piercy’s poems, therefore, are about women. Therefore, this paper aims at discussing Piercy’s poems “Barbie Doll” and “What Are Big Girls Made of?” to explore the problematic relationship between women, their body and society.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE
Cultural Stereotypes of Beauty

Most women are eager to meet the stereotypes of beauty, but these stereotypes may be dangerous since people will possibly enthusiastically sacrifice their identity for this ideal image. Furthermore, stereotypes may also take away all individual differences to create a uniform type.

According to Caputi and Nance (1992), the society believes that women are the pretty sex. They are expected to regard themselves as ‘works of art’, so they an ‘obligation’ to shape their bodies and decorate their appearances as artistic look. Fashion, consequently, becomes a ‘master’ in which the women are enslaved by their obsession for life. A woman who, according to the beauty stereotype, is overweight, hairy, aged or ugly is then seen as potential market and mystified to be capitalists’ commodity. Advertisements persuading women to be slim, hairless, forever young, and beautiful are found everywhere. Breast augmentation and implant surgeries have reached new heights and created more concerns. Many women even think that their small breasts are a disease which they want to get rid of (American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, cited in Caputi and Nance, 1992).

Another stereotype is a beautiful woman must be submissive to her man. Being physically perfect is not always enough for most women to be called as perfectly beautiful. It is widely believed that when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, admires and worships him, and is eager to serve him, she becomes beautiful to him (Morgan in Caputi and Nance, 1992). It then becomes the evidence of a stereotype stating that being submissive is the role of women. Because of this stereotype, men, as women’s partner, must be older, taller, larger, stronger, and more experienced.

The third stereotype according to Caputi and Nance is that the image of the beautiful woman becomes an icon or symbol for the beliefs and values of the core culture in the society. The heroes in consumer culture are no longer the mighty, the creators of kingdoms, the authors, and highfliers but the beautiful movie actors and singers. They have a role in producing innovative values of appearance and physical performance by exposing fresh consumer culture standards and images of the glamorous celebrity’s standard of living (Featherstone, 1991).

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research attempts to reveal data related to the problem and to analyze them to discover concepts not by using statistical procedures but by interpreting (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data are in form of description or words rather than in numbers. One type of qualitative research is content or document analysis, which is applied to written materials to identify their specified characteristics (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Since the researchers study Marge Piercy’s poems to observe the image of woman they present, and the data are in form of words, not numerical data, it can be inferred that this research uses a qualitative research method, which is document analysis.

According to Wolosky (2001), the basic step in reading poetry is understanding the words. It is because words in poetry are selected and organized for a (or many) reason. In order to understand deeper meaning of poetry, the reader needs to study why each particular word is put into each particular position, why that word is used, what the word is doing there, and how the word fits into the poem (and into what the poem is doing). Poetry has intense “figurative power”, which means a poem does not show a literal meaning; it always points towards the possibility of further meanings. Formal contexts (and their
social-historical situation) can be used to establish meanings of the diction, which will help readers establish a meaning of the poem.

The researchers have observed twenty-one poems by Marge Piercy in PoemHunter.com’s Classic Poetry Series (2004) and identified two poems – “Barbie Doll” and “What Are Big Girls Made of?” that potentially comment on the notion of beauty ideal for women and their efforts to attain that image. Those poems are chosen as the material object of this research.

The research procedure covers several stages. First is collecting the data. The researchers read the poems many times to collect data of images of a woman presented in the poems. The data collection was carried out in July–August 2014. Next, analysis on the figurative language and context of the poems is carried out in order to understand the meaning of the poems better. The data are analyzed to find how they conform to Caputi and Nance’s cultural stereotypes of beauty. The last stage is making conclusion on the findings of the research.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Barbie-like Beauty

Marge Piercy’s “Barbie Doll” is an influential poem in which ‘Barbie’ is taken as the focus of the poem. The Barbie doll originated from a German comic character named Lilli. In the comics, Lilli was “witty, irreverent and sexually uninhibited”. The doll version was sold as a toy for adults. Lilli was presented as a curvy, blonde-haired girl with heavy make-up. Since Lilli dolls were also as popular among children as among adults, in 1959 Handler, a co-founder of the Mattel toy company of the United States introduced the adaptation, which was name Barbie. In one interview, Handler said that “Every little girl needed a doll through which to project herself into her dream of her future…. If she was going to do role playing of what she would be like when she was 16 or 17, it was a little stupid to play with a doll that had a flat chest. So I gave it beautiful breasts.” (Latson, 2015)

Barbie is every girl’s favorite toys, especially because it has a flawless physical appearance including a tall and slim body. It has become a cultural icon of beauty, which people, especially girls identify as the beauty ideal. Exposure to Barbie dolls causes an increase in girls’ body dissatisfaction, but this negative effect is specific to Barbie and not observed after exposure to dolls with a body size that resembles the average U.S. woman (Dittmar, Halliwel & Suzanne, 2006).

The poem “Barbie Doll” suggests that Barbie should be not the standard of female beauty. The poem describes the girl as “healthy, tested intelligent/possessed strong arms and back/abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity” (“Barbie Doll”, 7-9) and suggests that this girl is perfect although she does not look like Barbie. The girl is also depicted as the one who also does what other girls typically do such as “presented dolls that did pee-pee/and miniature GE stoves and irons/and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.” (“Barbie Doll”, 2-4). These lines reinforce the condition of the girl that she is normal and no physical or mental conditions are incorrect with her. On the other hand, the poem also shows that society usually expects women to fit into one standard of beauty, Barbie. A friend calls out this girl for having “a great big nose and fat legs.” (“Barbie Doll”, 6) This comment is purposed to make the main character to be aware of her appearance. This description shows that there is a perceived idea in the society that women are the pretty sex (Caputi and Nance, 1992). The girl in this poem, is expected to regard herself as ‘works of art’ thus being acceptable by the society.

Since her early years, a woman has been made aware of her responsibility for the body perfect. The words “magic of puberty” (“Barbie Doll”, 5) is used to toughen the swift alteration of being adolescence; it is when girls start to be alert of their ‘must-ideal’ physique. As stated by Caputi and Nance (1992), when women are into the stereotype that women are the pretty sex, they have an ‘obligation’ to shape their bodies and decorate their appearances into an artistic look. That is why it is told in the poem that her neighboring individuals never see her excellence of being intelligently outstanding. It strengthens the belief that intelligence is not a priority for a girl. What is more important is being ‘pretty’. Therefore, the main character in this poem is then advised to be an ideal woman—from the society’s point of view, “She was advised to play coy/exhorted to come on hearty,/exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.” (“Barbie Doll”, 12–14). She has to slim down although she is a healthy girl. Not only that she has to compromise her physical look, she also has to act shyly because the society appreciates a woman who is gentle, timid, and charming rather than an expressive or active one that the girl is as a teenager in the beginning of puberty with the overflowing physical energy.

This poem ends dreadfully as the girl “cut off her nose and her legs/and offered them up.” (“Barbie Doll”, 17–18). Ironically, when she is lying in a coffin, everybody says, “Doesn’t she look pretty?” (“Barbie
These last lines can be interpreted in two ways. The first is that lastly, the girl is depressed, and she kills herself by cutting her big nose and fat legs. Her dead body is now lying in a coffin, wearing a plastic alteration of a nose, and seen by the society as a perfectly beautiful girl. It is ironic that the girl has to sacrifice her life before being accepted as an ideal girl. It is other people who will enjoy her perfect beauty, but she herself cannot. The second possibility is that finally the girl follows what the society wants for an ideal girl by doing such treatments to correct her big nose and fat legs. The girl may not be literally dead, but she replaces her real self with the "ideal" self that the society prefers. Therefore, in the second interpretation, the girl is figuratively dead. In both interpretations, at last the society is satisfied for the winner is consummation.

"Barbie Doll" is not decorated with much figurative language. The language used here is unassuming and obvious. Yet, this poem clearly depicts the unpleasantness of a girl who does not have an ideal body according to the social order; consequently, she chooses to follow what the public requests. Piercy created a character that is forced by the society to follow the social standard of beauty. The poem also highlights the stereotype that a beautiful woman should not be dominant but submissive instead. Here, society for imposing the stereotype of beauty that seems to overlook other excellence that a woman may have.

**Updated Beauty**

The "perfect" body images for women have changed. For example, in 1960, fresh-faced, girlish, and trimmed look was in trend, so clothing called for small bust and hips. In order to keep up with the fashion trend, women had to work their body. There was a record of amphetamines used for weight loss. On the contrary, just a decade earlier the "hourglass" shape was in, so weight-gain supplements were advertised for lighter women who wanted to get a fuller figure (Hart, 2015).

What make an ideal woman? While "Barbie Doll" tells of a girl's negative body image and how she strives for the perfect one, "What Are Big Girls Made of?" comments that female beauty is about not only having the perfect body shape but also keeping up with the fashion style that goes along with it. The poem begins with a simile comparing a woman to a sedan. Cars are manufactured and have undergone "retooling", "refitting", "redesigning" over the years in order to keep it updated and satisfying. Women also have to undergo changes and redesigning to keep up with time and stay desirable.

The construction of a woman:
- a woman is not made of flesh of bone and sinew
- belly and breasts, elbows and liver and toe.
She is manufactured like a sports sedan. ("What Are Big Girls Made of?", 1 - 5)

"What Are Big Girls Made of?" tells about a woman named Cecile, who used to be a popular girl in college. She moved or danced well – there is a simile comparing her movement to that of a satin eel, suggesting that her movement is fluid and flexible – and had beautiful body.

Cecile had been seduction itself in college.
She wriggled through bars like a satin eel,
her hips and ass promising, her mouth pursed in the dark red lipstick of desire.
("What Are Big Girls Made of?", 8 - 11)

In early 1960s, red lipstick was popular, but several years later, pale lips and pastel colors were in trend (Woman's 1960s Makeup: an overview, 2014). In late 1960s miniskirts and long hair were popular among women as it is reported by Marinova (2013) that "Janie Lambert, 61, remembers the late 1960s as more colorful and vibrant…the bright colors and bold patterns, stripes and polka dots, miniskirts, long hair and pale lipstick". It seems that in "What Are Big Girls Made of?" that after many years have passed, Cecile is still using the same fashion style as the one she did in college. However, what is fashionable that year is miniskirts and pale lipstick, not the outdated knee-tight or dark-red ones that Cecile is still wearing. The fashion trend has changed but Cecile fails to keep up with it. Once she was a beautiful woman, but not now. She is not wanted by the society anymore because she does not meet the fashion requirements, and it is her fault that she is not aware of the changes. So she "was out of fashion, out of the game/disqualified, disdained, dis-/membered from the club of desire." ("What Are Big Girls Made of?", 19 - 21). Fashion always changes and it is women's duty to follow the trend.

The poem shows that fashion trend has a long history. It recalls the "fantasy wrought of silk and corseting" ("What Are Big Girls Made of?", 25) that was famous in the 18th century French fashion. According to French Fashion 18th Century Style
(2014), women in French used to wear floating dresses under which they wore corsets or rigid clothing to accentuate the hourglass shape of the body and petticoats to increase the size of the dress. The necklines were cut low to show the breasts. This clothing causes discomfort and pain because the woman is “forced into shape/rigid exoskeleton torturing flesh” (“What Are Big Girls Made of?”, 41-42). When a woman is wearing a corset, the corset ties her belly tightly that the waist becomes very small compared to the hips. (The poem shows the contrast proportion of hips and waist with hyperbole that “Paniers bring her hips out three feet each way” (“What Are Big Girls Made of?”, 26).) Tightly laced corset could reduce lung capacity, irritate skin, and weaken back and chest muscles (Goldberg, 2015). Yet women in the 18th century were forced to wear corsets in order to have the ideal body.

Also, as small feet are considered beautiful, women have to have tiny feet that are “encased in a slipper/never meant for walking” (“What Are Big Girls Made of?”, 31-32). Feet are supposed be used for walking, but it may be tiring to walk with tiny feet especially if the feet are too small to support the body. Tiny shoes are also uncomfortable for a long walk. However, a woman’s feet are not meant for walking but are ornaments to complete the woman’s perfect look. So although having small feet or wearing small shoes can be painful, she has to do it because she has to look beautiful. Foot binding and tight lacing are some examples of female body modification, similar to car retooling and redesigning that is mentioned earlier in the poem.

Furthermore, a woman also has to wear decorated hairstyle that needed a lot of hard work and care, and such hairstyle with the accessories can be very impractical.

On top is a grandiose headache: hair like a museum piece, daily ornamented with ribbons, vases, grottoes, mountains, frigates in full sail, balloons, baboons, the fancy of a hairdresser turned loose.

The hats were rococo wedding cakes that would dim the Las Vegas strip.

(“What Are Big Girls Made of?”, 34 - 41)

The description on the hairstyle is consistent with the trending hairstyle in the 18th century. French Fashion 18th Century Style (2014) describes it as follows.

At the beginning of the century, the [hair]style “Fontange” was set, where the hair was piled on a woman’s head and often decorated with various objects, such as feathers, jewelry, fruits, birds, etc. After 1720, the dominant hairstyle was the “sheep’s head”, a more natural style with short loops and some large strands of hair on the neck. In 1770 in France, Marie-Antoinette, a true icon of fashion until the revolution carried the hairstyle of a peacock’s tail in the Dauphine, instead of the hair loop, thus marking the beginning of the era of wigs.

The poem may sound exaggerated when it says that the hair is ornamented with “mountains” and “baboons” (although the records say that the hair ornaments did include various objects like fruits and birds), yet such a hyperbolical description is a sarcastic comment on the excessiveness of the hairdo that a woman should wear every day. Moreover, the poem states that the hairdo is made and selected by the hairstylist. The woman may participate in choosing the hairstyle, but it is more likely that she leaves the decision in the hands of the hairdresser, who knows the fashion better and knows how to maximize her look. However, headache is an expected result of putting so much weight to a woman’s head all day every day. All in all, the poem shows that the fashion that a woman wears from head to toe – the tight corsets, tiny slippers, and complicated hairdo – inflicts physical pain as well as limit the woman’s mobility. However, women have to endure these discomforts and impracticalities because they are what the popular fashion is and as women, they have to keep up with it if they want to be considered beautiful.

“What Are Big Girls Made of?” further states that it is we, the society, who set the standard of beauty for women and expect them to comply with it. The common standard says that beautiful means slim, beautiful, and young (Featherstone, 1991). A woman has to exercise hard regularly and go on hearty diets. Everyone needs to eat but a woman should not, and while it is natural to grow older, a beautiful woman must not age. This poem points out that being beautiful can mean defying human nature, and women have to go through all these processes to be and stay beautiful. The poem ends by questioning “When will a woman cease / to be made of pain?” (“What Are Big Girls Made of?”, 82-83) This metaphorical statement adds another definition of a woman in addition to her similarity with a sports sedan, that it is the painful, continued processes
of manufacturing that creates the product named woman.

The criticism continues by contrasting humans and animals—cats and dogs. It is easy for people to underestimate animals because they are not sophisticated creatures like humans are. Yet, the poem shows that these animals have one trait that men do not possess, which is to like and accept each other for what they are without having to alter themselves or the others in order to be likeable.

A cat or dog approaches another, they sniff noses. They sniff asses. They bristle or lick. They fall in love as often as we do, as passionately. But they fall in love or lust with furry flesh, ("What Are Big Girls Made of?", 56-61)

The standards of beauty are forced onto women and women become the objects as well as consumers. They want to live like the stars in advertisements, which are not real. Physical appearance and performances become the standard of living by which someone is judged. If the person does not meet the standard, the person is not considered a valued part of the society.

The last stanza asks that a woman should not look at their bodies as science projects, gardens to weed, and dogs to train and should not be made so. These similes show that forcing women to conform with the ideal image of women in consumer culture is basically dehumanizing them into non-living objects or animals. The poem voices demands that people should start to accept each other as what they are and especially to encourage women to have self-acceptance and to love themselves naturally.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The study findings show that these poems by Marge Piercy criticize the consumer culture that makes women its market because they are always expected to be thin, beautiful, and feminine. “Barbie Doll” clearly shows the stereotype saying that women are pretty sex, and when they do not have the ideal body, they are not ideal women regardless of their potentials (health, intelligence, and skills) as an individual. “What Are Big Girls Made of?” criticizes that the consumer culture sells the images of thin, beautiful, and young woman to women as their biggest market. The two poems show that an ideal woman requires not only the ideal body shape but also appropriate, fashionable outlook. Over the years, women have suffered from the processes of becoming beautiful as expected by the society. This finding is relevant with the notion that the image of the beautiful woman functions as an icon or symbol for the beliefs and values of the core culture. The poems emphasize that setting standards of beauty has negative effects on women, and limiting human values to their physical attributes is basically inhumane.

This study focuses on exploring women’s struggle in dealing with negative body images. Further research on Piercy’s poems may look for the possible motives behind the construction of the beauty standards and why it becomes so prevalent in the society. Since all people are subject to consumer culture, it is also possible for future researchers to investigate what perfect body images are expected from men and whether the obsessions towards the body ideal has similarly profound effects on the life of men as it does on women’s.

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