

MARGE PIERCY'S "A WORK OF ARTIFICE ": AN EXTENDED METAPHOR

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Abstract:

A Bonsai tree is an extended metaphor with a clear, distinctive theme illustrated by symbols representing definite parts of the society and human nature that we can identify with the poem "A Work of Artifice", by Marge Piercy. Through her poems and stories, she laments for women who allow themselves to be caught in the painful dilemma of being "adapted, adjusted, and accommodated" to match the style of every decade. This pattern rings especially true in her poem. Bonsai trees are subject to pruning, just like women they were restricted from reaching their full potential. Gardener is to Bonsai as society is to woman.

Keywords: Bonsai tree, Pruning, Gardener, Feminism, Society.

Introduction:

The poem 'The Work of Artifice' by Marge Piercy is about how women are conditioned to live a limited life and to be confined to the rules and regulations of a male dominant society. The central idea of the poem is the oppression of women and social restrictions that have turned them into bonsai. The poem is a clear depiction about the patriarchal system, customs and traditions followed in the society. A bonsai tree as an extended metaphor in her poem, Piercy comments on the way women are regarded by society.

A few centuries ago, women were not having the opportunities to learn, be educated and grow as they have today. In the patriarchal system, they could only be mothers, housewives, restricting themselves to be in the good looks of the man. The title of the poem is sarcastic in nature loaded with irony in woman's life. Artifice literally means clever or cunning devices, especially as used to trick or deceive others. When interpreting a poem, it is important to consider the context of the poet, when the poem was written, and what was going on in the world at that time. Piercy is an American woman born in 1936. The world around her was male dominant society.

Bonsai as a Metaphor for Women:

The poem explains how women are deceptively made to play roles and lead limited lives. The society deprives them of their moral rights and liberties, clips their wings and keeps them inside the cages avoiding them to fly away.

The bonsai tree

In the attractive pot

Could have grown eighty feet tall

On the side of a mountain

Till split by lighting

But a Gardener

Carefully pruned it.

It is nine inches high.

Piercy in the above lines tries to give a demarcation as how a bonsai tree is used for interior decorations, women were also expected to confine themselves to the interiors and do the household tasks. The women were expected to understand their limitations and remain tightly tied to their responsibilities or their roots. A bonsai tree is neatly pruned and tightly tied so it does not grow its real size. This metaphorical implication of the bonsai tree restricting its

growth is depicted in women's lives also. This protective "pot" the speaker has her "growing" it is a splendid guise that prevents her true self from being seen by the supposedly stereotypical views of society. The bonsai are miniature plants that do not need much watering and care. The women were also expected to love others but not expect care and affection in return.

They were anticipated to feel good about their assigned roles. The 'gardener' is metaphorically coined as 'society' as the gardener is the sole decision maker of the garden and sets rules for the plants, so also the 'society' imposes rules for the women living inside it.

Every woman is conditioned to understand the rules her society sets for her. She is tamed and taught to be 'cozy' in the small space assigned to her and be her husband's shadow and cannot act wild but be domesticated at a tender age. These lines illustrate the mindset of the society indicating a girl's journey begins from home and ended in her husband's home. Furthermore, the line 'small and cozy' represents how women are used to making into dolls. Moreover, the husband, like the gardener would be telling his wife that she is lucky to be in a home doing domestic things during the day because she is small and weak. It is this home that like the pot for the bonsai tree, protects her from the 'lightning strike'.

With living creatures

One must begin very early

To dwarf their growth:

The bound feet,

The crippled brain,

the hair in curlers,

The hands you

Love to touch.

The above lines are another implication were the speaker is trying focus on the transition from the tree to the woman showing that as with the bonsai tree the gardener must start early to keep it small and decorative. So also, the man or society begins early to tame women into unwilling oppression. Here the word 'dwarf' means either to stunt one's growth or to disparage a person and to make them small. This is what happens when the society of men use their social standards to prevent women from flourishing to their full potential. Using the metaphor, Piercy is trying to mock, like the gardener; the males can oppress the women and exploit their emotional as well as physical growth. In the physical sense, he can enjoy her 'bound feet', delight at the sight of her 'hair in curlers,' both of which are symbols of beauty.

In the spiritual sense, he can 'cripple her brain' by programming her to think as he wishes her to think, and mold her beauty as he desires her to be, and the way he wishes to accept her.

The last two lines of "A Work of Artifice" shed the last bit of light on the woman in the poem. There is one last part of her being that the speaker cannot take away from her: "the hands you/love to touch." Throughout the years, it had been said that one's hands reveal many things about an individual's life and times. Their trials, their troubles, and their triumphs can be seen in every path of life. Her hands were the one thing that kept her going. They embraced her faith in her strength and held on to her memories, her thoughts, and her feelings. Thus, she loved to touch the only thing left that was truly hers.

Conclusion:

Marge Piercy may have had several reasons for writing this poem. Her childhood was primarily lead by her mother and maternal grandmother. This made for considerable female presence in her life. She left for college at the young age of 17 and as a writer tried to make herself heard while dealing with, and staying involved in the many political activities of the past. She became involved in the Vietnam War struggles of the time and spent many years rather poor as she fought to get published. Her struggles in her own life most likely gave her a strong motivation to send her message to the audience.

This poem evokes creativity in promoting feminism and equality and uncovering the lies and social expectations in which women are forced into. The entire piece is a tie to female oppression and mistreatment through history. Foot binding, an ancient Chinese tradition, domestic mistreatment, which is an ongoing and quite timeless issue, and several other forms are seen throughout the lines.

The line "could have grown eighty feet tall" really stands out with the idea as to how women ought to be. Piercy really wanted to stress the potential that she sees in the female society. The fact that she says the bonsai tree is pruned to nine inches but had the potential to reach eighty feet tells one how strongly she feels women have been held back from great forthcoming.

The poem 'Work of Artifice' has vivid imagery of the bonsai tree illustrating the oppression of women, and the trickery and appealing nature of the gardener, keeping control of all things. With her strong words and their meanings, Piercy slowly unfolds a seemingly innocent poem into more complex statements. Thus, Piercy gives a clear depiction of how women are treated in her times and it also indicates as to how women are treated in some parts of the world under the carpet of modernism. An artifice is considered an artful trick.

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