

Question:

How does the poet's first political act assume a metaphorical meaning in her life?

Answer:

Marge Piercy was an American Novelist and social activist whose poems always deal with the issues of socialism and feminism. The poem 'Breaking Out' is no exception. The poem portrays the plight of a girl who being born as a girl is subjected to endless humiliations. It shows how desperately she wants to break away from the conventional norms of the society where in a woman is bound to perform various domestic chores on a perpetual basis. She has seen her mother do that. She pities her and even uses the metaphor of Sisyphus to describe her. However, never would she herself suffer the same fate. No matter how much she is beaten up, bullied, condemned, she will certainly find out an escape route, for there are things she ought to "learn to break".

The narrator sees the past incidents of her life in retrospection. She tells the readers about her "first political act" - something she did to change the existing power structure. As a social

activist, Piercy was well acquainted with the position of women in a patriarchal society. Women are dominated and subjected to perpetual drudgery. This first political act is actually the first step taken towards self-assertion by a girl who has long been victimized by the norms of a male dominated society. Like the small girl of the story “Girls” by Mrinal Pandey, the narrator of this poem is a non-conformist. She sees two doors that usually stood open, leaning against each other in a way that it seems they are gossiping - something attributed to typical women, whispering secrets into each other’s ears, making a triangular room, “a closet” with their leaned edges. This closet is symbolic of the confinement within which women in a male dominated society are compelled to stay.

There was a mangle that was used to iron even those clothes - “sheets, towels, my father’s underwear” - which required no ironing at all. It shows to what extent women in a patriarchal society are subjected to unnecessary drudgery. They are not only marginalised, but also tormented. To do unnecessary works over and over again tantamounts to accepting the

humiliation inflicted on them. This is something the narrator finds difficult to accept; she says, “I would never dust or sweep after I left home.” A vacuum is laid in a vertical position along with its filter bag stuffed with dust. The bag deflated with a such a roaring and turbulent sigh as if even it was tired of the housework of dust suction as much as the narrator is tired of household drudgery. She hated to see her mother remove the filth which accumulated daily due to factory emissions. When in school, she read of Sisyphus, the Greek king who was punished and had to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down, and to repeat this action forever, “it was her” she thought of: “housewife scrubbing on raw knees as the factory rained ash.” Her knees had bruised and chaffed, but she had surrendered to the endless drudgery.

The narrator remembers a wooden yardstick which was like an offspring of the rickety doors, equally poor in texture and quality. It had become dusty with chalk marks which were used by her mother to measure the length of the hem of her clothes. When she was considered mischievous by her parents, that

stick was the instrument of punishment. When she was brutally beaten, she would howl “as if noise could ward off blows”. Ironically, her mother’s blows were fierce, but her father struck her harder and longer. Her mother in spite of being a victim of this patriarchal society, failed to sympathise with her daughter’s plight. The narrator would turn her head in the mirror to scrutinise the wounds which looked like mountain ranges on a map, offering and showing her an escape route and the veins and arteries visible on her back were like roads. She would travel in pursuit of freedom from the stigma of patriarchal and biased society.

When she was eleven, after a beating, she took the ruler and smashed it into “kindling”. Looking at and holding the broken pieces, she could not believe it was she who had gathered the courage to break it, she who had always been intimidated by the ruler. She wondered, “How could this rod prove weaker than me?” It was not that she was not beaten again, but in destroying the ruler “that had measured [her] pain”, she realised that she was not a child any more. Rather, she was an adolescent who can

easily distinguish between right and wrong. It was not that she lost her innocence, but she had gained the power to retort, to defy.

The narrator's first political act therefore assumes a metaphorical significance. It is actually her first act of defiance, and she never wants to be Sisyphus like her mother. She wanted to be a free and independent woman, and for that, there would be other things she would have to learn to break. Breaking the ruler was merely the first step towards achieving the level of freedom she craved for.