

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* - A Feminist Postmodernist Dystopia - An Overview

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Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale**, which is a typical dystopian novel, presents a gloomy future vision and repression of women leading down to the reduction of their image to child-producing machine in a totalitarian, theocratic state. The concept of dystopia connotes something which is extremely repulsive that smells of that rancour of modern society which mankind has created in the course of making this life extremely consumable. The term dystopia which is the antonym of utopia conjures up such an ugly picture of the so-called modern society which forces us to introspect and measure the degree of degeneration of the modern world. Our wisdom and knowledge in every walk of life seem to be challenged when we speculate about certain darker and starker realities of life that is related to the abominable exploitation of women and gender politics on one hand, atrociously ruthless power politics and deep-rooted corruption in several spheres of our socio-administrative set-up on the other.

This paper attempts to explicate Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale** as a dystopian novel focussing on some predominant feminist issues such as reproduction, anti-abortion, infertility, power politics, ruthlessness in theocracy, suppression of women in a male chauvinist society, exploitation of woman as a 'plaything' used for absolute sexual pleasure, 'as a two-legged womb,' and as a consumer object of the postmodern world to be enjoyed and thrown denying her even the basic human rights.

It is relevant to mention first the concept of dystopia as described by M.H. Abrams. The term 'dystopia' (bad place)... "has recently come to be applied to works of fiction, including science, which represents a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination" (218).

The Handmaid's Tale, a dystopian novel projects the culmination of the feminist issue where the identity of a woman has been dragged down to the nadir hardly leaving any scope for its retrieval. It is a deeper and more expansive vision of bleak future for women. As called by Lucy M. Freibert a "political-science fiction" (280), the novel is set amidst war and corruption, and devastating political power across the fictional republic of Gilead. It envisages a bleak scenario of a totalitarian state of theocracy reflecting abnegation of moral values.

As a postmodern feminist novel, **The Handmaid's Tale** also concentrates on the evils of political system which aggravates the women's anguished plight and despicable exploitation. Instead of playing a crucial role in the emancipation of women, the state Fundamentalist Christian coup in mid 1980s near Boston in Massachusetts, reverted to the brutal aspects of ill-treating women, disenfranchised them, denied their rights of education, confiscated their credit cards, destroyed homosexuals, religious sects, and abortionists. The government took extreme steps in the process of reform. In an innovative method of redress, old women, Jews, and non-whites were resettled in radioactive colonies. Linda W. Wagner Martin views the novel as the prediction of "the horrors of cultures so frightened by normal sexuality that it codified and prescribed all such procreation, and created hierarchies of life and death around it. It is a brutal horrifying culture" (4).

The protagonist Offred undergoes extreme torture, pain, anguish and utter humiliation, in the power of commander who keeps her for her fertility, much to the grudge and chagrin of his wife, Serena Joy, who is a gospel singer and conventionalist. The narrator in her diary records the following, the telling is in the form of a memoir, supposed to have been recorded in thirty audio cassettes, " ...approximately thirty tape cassettes, of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc", an information furnished in the " Historical Notes" of the novel, vividly portrays the vigilance, the dark, dismal condition in which she and her friends were kept. "There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen ..." (p.3).

Their almost personal incarceration are perspicuously and vividly narrated by the protagonist coupled with expectations for a relief. Freedom is denied to them, even to talk to their circle. "We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? ... with spaces between so we could not talk" (p. 3).

The protagonist recollection of her happy past, her husband Luke and her daughter vindicates the veracity of their carefree life in striking contrast to the present despondent predicament. Atwood envisions the patriarchal governing rules that restrict and bind women in society. There were rules in the training camps too narrowing down their prospects.

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew, don't open your door to a stranger, even if he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble.

Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into Laundromat, by yourself, at night (p.24).

She has to live a life, rather one can say she exists in the midst of her bisexual friend- Moira, her consoling friend Nick and sadists Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth. She has to swallow the bitter insults of Aunt Lydia, her sarcasm and her sadistic remarks without demur. "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (p.24). Simone de Beauvoir's comment asserting the subjugation of women in the **The Second Sex** lucidly illustrates the predicament of women in Gilead: "For him she is sex----absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is Absolute – she is the other" (84).

The narrator's movements are restricted; the double irony being that she is a handmaid to the commander's wife, where as the commander exploits her fertility, under the mean, calculated, awful vigilance of the aunts and Marathas who have no sympathy for her plight. True to her helpless predicament, she calls it "limping and mutilated story." What is most provocative is that, in the name of religion, in the name of Bible much crime and sin are perpetrated in society arrogantly converting laws for their advantage. Women are punished because since biblical times they are considered as transgressors. So they are made subservient to their husbands. "For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing ..." (p.207). Women are made to believe that they are unholy and unclean if they don't serve the purpose of their creation. Women are seen as still perpetrating Eve's vices persistently by Gileadean theocracy, the so-called state-in-religion or religion-in-state, so they are not trusted with any authority or power. But they have been charitably appropriated for breeding purposes, instead of terminating them.

Atwood explicates the formidable paradoxical relationship between sexuality and power politics. Michael Foucault writes:

To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounces itself. Its instrument: the threat of punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed, do not appear if you do not want to disappear. Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification. Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two non-existences (p.84).

The novel is a prognostication of the ruthless scenario of dogmatic, authoritarian and despotic form of repression in the name of religious values which is instrumental for the social isolation of women, depriving them of their basic human rights such as education, job, name and speech, reducing them to subservient gender roles of wives, wombs and whores. Howell remarks: "Atwood's feminist concerns are plain here but so too are her concern for basic human rights" (128).

Gilead which professes to have drawn its norms and tenets from Christianity, it ironically lacks human dignity in striking contrast to the Garden of Eden. Amin Malak comments on this paradoxical aspect of Gilead in "Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale** and the Dystopian Tradition" thus.

One of the novel's successful aspects concerns the skilful portrayal of a state that in theory claims to be founded on Christian principles. Yet in practice miserably lacks spirituality and benevolence. The state in Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear and terror in short, the usual terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states, instance of which can be found in such dystopian works as Zamyatin's **We**, Huxley's **Brave New World** and **1984** (9-10).

In a conflict between the state and the women, body is transformed into an object of repression, exploitation and containment. Offred bemoans in one place, her pitiable condition. "We are for breeding purposes...There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us; no room is to be permitted for the following secret lusts... We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (p.176). Women are given primary importance only on the basis of their reproductive capacity, which reflects the sick attitude of society. In the light of this context, Reshmi writes in "Ecofeminist Vision: A Study of Margaret Atwood's **Surfacing** and **The Handmaid's Tale**", "In the Gileadean patriarchy, a woman is denied the right to possess or to have control over her own body. Her body is segmented and her value is determined on the basis of her reproductive capability. In **The Handmaid's Tale**, Atwood suggests that the society of today where choices are too many may lead to a totalitarian future that prohibits choice" (65).

The dichotomy of freedom and security is at stake where woman is marginalized as merely a sexual being, relegating her intelligence to the back stage. She is thought of as exploiting herself and her body if she proves to have a higher intellectual calibre. Society subjugates women and curtails their freedom that engenders fear of security in them. The enslavement of women on the pretext of protection is an

indication of malevolent andro-centrism implacably showing their incapability to protect themselves. Aunt Lydia statement that “Men are sex machines... They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good.”(144) bears a didactic overtone teaching women to reassert their rights and gain self-esteem and confidence thereby redefining their roles in the society as against their subserviently submissive nature.

Gilead is translation of andro-centric system reflecting the gender-biased equations that have been the guiding principles of patriarchy in the guise of religious dogmas and traditional values. It is a backlash against feminists and concerted attack on artists and writers. Atwood emphasises her thought in her lecture, “An End to Audience”, which later became the central issue in **The Handmaid’s Tale**.

In any totalitarian take over, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers and journalists are the first to be suppressed... The aim of all such suppression is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that is why so much trouble is taken to silence it (350).

The Handmaid’s Tale shows the paradoxical situation in that it is a critique of authority on one side and on the other it is complicitous with that authority that feigns powerlessness in order to wield power. Offred possesses analytical intelligence; so, as a reader of the social signs in her environment, she narrates them in discourse of freedom and power which is normally considered as prerogative of men; yet she is in the handicapped position of a Handmaid. “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen is envy; Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another centre Motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal” (p.196).

There is a postmodern paradox in the incompatibility between Offred’s mastery of language and her position of subjugation that she occupies as a Handmaid. It can be argued that it is Atwood’s presumption that when such narrative intelligence could be subjugated and enslaved, anyone can be. It also surmises her speculation that the oppression that Offred experienced was evil of power wrought upon society. The voluble narrator speaking confidently and precisely about the silence she endured presents a prefabricated paradox to increase the macabre sinisterness of the situation. As she unfolds her story and manipulates the reader deliberately, she is perceived to be caught in the web of Gileadean power politics.

Women were forcibly denied access not only to press, freedom and pen but also food. Their food is indubitably sanctioned by the authority with the view point of keeping them healthy and fertile. Emma Parker comments: "One of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food" (354).

The Handmaid's Tale can also be read as a celebrated depiction of desperate coping mechanism by which endangered women survive, outwit, and undermine the coercive forces, devalued enslavement, self-abnegation, torture, death and outright genocide. Reading and writing are considered as punishable felonies in Gilead. Women are denied books, paper, and pens; even to scribble is a clandestine venture. Their arms and legs are chopped off if they are caught reading or writing; as such things are ruthlessly considered inessential for reproduction. Klarer points out in "Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale**." "Women from all classes of society... are excluded from any kind of written discourse. These measures aim at giving the male leadership all the advantages of a highly developed text-processing culture and of using these advantages purposefully against the women who are condemned to morality" (131). Women could not repudiate the law of government but only to submit which is ruthlessly bent on negating the existence of woman as a human entity. "We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance; you have to work at it" (p.53).

In Gilead private consciousness is all that is left which cannot be regulated by the state and Offred is still able to control her thoughts: "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will... There were limits but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object,..." (89). Coomi S.Vevaina comments: "The republic of Gilead justifies its sexist policies with the socio-biological theory of natural polygamy and legitimizes its racist and sexist policies as having biblical precedent" (224).

Offred tries to combat her situation in different ways. She feels trapped in an overwhelmingly excruciating dystopian society which curbs her freedom. She is enslaved by the government physically and psychologically because of her fecundity. Gilead takes all precautions to keep these women safe from any danger including the one committing suicide which will wreck the authority and subvert its plan. Offred tells: "I know why there is no glass, in front of the water colour picture of blue Irises, and why the window only opens partly and glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open yourself, giving a cutting edge" (pp.7-8).

Caught between the two important powers, power of the state and power of men, Offred is torn asunder, subjugation is the only remedy in such powerless condition, but there is some private awareness which is embedded within her which makes her introspect time and again. "I keep the knowledge of this (original) name like something hidden, some treasure. I'll come back and dig up, one day" (p.94). Jessie Givner says: "Indeed, the desire of the Gilead regime to remove name is as strong as the desire to remove faces. Just as the rules of Gilead try to eliminate mirrors, reflection of faces, so they attempt to erase names" (58).

Atwood, who has been a conscious observer of power politics in society, voices about power endemic in all spheres detrimental to the cause of women through the mouthpiece of Offred, thus: "May be none of this is about control. May be it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death. May be it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or lie down, legs spread open. May be it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it. Never tell me it amounts to the same thing" (pp.144-45).

In the beginning of the novel, Offred's weaving a "cautionary" tale shifting between the past and present in the first person, is a forerunner and warning to the future women to redeem themselves from the coils of tyranny of male chauvinism. The story telling method gives the protagonist abundant sense of relief, from a total abnegation of her inevitably helpless self a freedom, freedom of expression.

According to Howells, her narrative mode is a "gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it becomes the primary means for her psychological survival. In the process of reconstructing herself into an individual, Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead" (127).

Gilead is synonymous with tyranny, one which represses women with indomitable power, keeps them under strict vigil and suppresses femininity to utter humiliation. Amin Malak patly says that "the dictates of state policy in Gilead thus relegates sex to a saleable commodity exchange for mere minimal survival" (112). The worst thing that a woman would suffer from is her fear of being reduced to the level of an object to gratify men's lustful desire. So, Atwood's protagonists, as they are women and victimized for what they are, revolt against the system and their protestations crop up from the sufferings of themselves and torture of their bodies. The point is clear that the persecution of women in Gilead is not due to any personal grudge against them, but because they belong to a particular class, group or gender. Hence, femininity is always perceived as a constant danger to social order, and the belief prevailed

that the system can be kept intact only when women are kept under control. Therefore, Gilead's obnoxious rule and repressive ideology dehumanize the Handmaids by reducing them to the level of property.

Nevertheless, there is a gradual development of feminist consciousness in Offred. She says: "I'm tired of keeping silent" (p.275), which finds its culmination in her escape from Gilead. Howell comments: "Stubborn survival continually subverts the regime's claims to absolute authority, creating imaginative spaces within the system and finally the very means of Offred's escape from Gilead" (69). In showing such vivid consciousness of her victimisation, Offred occupies one of the four "Basic Victim Positions" delineated in **Survival** by Atwood. There is acknowledgement of victim's position but refusal to accept it as inevitable fate. Her story telling in the form of diary shows her resistance to silence, which is the law of the land. She subverts the authority which is the primary means for her psychological survival. The very means which is denied to her the freedom to speak out is used by her self-definition.

Offred, being a librarian in pre-Gilead, uses language as a liberty tool, to find her way out to freedom. Carol Beran observes: "Offred's power is in language" (94). She escapes on the Underground Female road to tell her story to the world. She shatters the reign of silence and emerges into the world of speech and liberty, thus inscribing herself into history. As Helen Cixons remarks: "...an act that will be marked by woman's *seizing* the occasion to *speak*, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression" (338).

Thus Offred questions the authoritarian power structures, and its patriarchal language, which is a repertoire of male discourse, in a subversive tone. Sharon Wilson comments that it is through Offred's tale, Atwood presents "a timeless vision of sexual (gender) politics in a fallen world" (95). Offred shows an indomitable will power and determination in her effort to escape from the obnoxious clutch of Gilead despite the struggle and torture that she undergoes as a handmaid. The convincing personality of the protagonist exhibits the optimistic belief of Atwood.

To sum up, in **The Handmaid's Tale**, Atwood delineates a story of victimisation, exploitation of female sex for procreation, gender politics of patriarchy reducing women to the point of zero, power politics of the postmodern world and consumer society playing game with women's lives through subversive rules and religious dogmas to thwart the women's lives in search of survival. By setting the novel in the near future, Atwood envisions a future which would rectify all the evils against women by the male dominated society, at the same time, depicts a picture of gruesome contemporary scenario where the situation with regard to women is getting aggravated

beyond hope and redemption. Thus, Atwood is providing a therapy as well as a warning for the despicable predicament and wails of modern society.

However, the novel also incorporates nationalist concern as well, besides presenting feminist polemic in equating Canada to female posture *vis-à-vis* America's male and raises the problem of Canada to a universal level. Atwood uses Canada as a metaphor for vulnerable state of mind, submissive to America - the sadistic predators and ruthless persecutors. The implication is that America's plundering instinct to the Third World countries and their neighbour does not spare a thought that Canada can be any exception to the outrageous manipulation planned by the ravenous America. Thus, the novel is raised to the level of a hallowed myth, though a chilling one. Reality and myth are coalesced to facilitate a better understanding of postmodern life in all its complexities.

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