

DYSTOPIA AND SUFFERINGS OF WOMEN: MARGARET ATWOOD'S “ THE HANDMAID’S TALE”

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Abstract

The feminist movement in the postmodern age was backlashed by the US conservative resurgence in the 1980s, called for the restoration to conservative values and the adoption, via the domestication of women, of the Christian family order and control of its reproductive rights. Accordingly, the liberties of women were jeopardised by restrictions of their basic rights, which they have been fighting for so long. This issue has brought out various feminist replies on both the political stage and on the literary one. Margaret Atwood, a notable Canadian writer, took care to warn of the effects of such policies. This study aims to interpret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" as a dystopian book that focuses on certain mostly feminist questions: reproductive rights , anti-abortion, infertility, political power, oppression of women in men's civilizations. The storey offers a bleak picture of a dystopian, authoritarian, patriarchal society built on religion and completely reduces the rights of women. The novel presents the completion of the feminist question when a woman's identity has been pulled down to the bottom, leaving little possibility for recovery. It's a deeper and broader view of women's grim destiny. So, this research to analyse further the primary issues highlighted in this hypothetical narrative: patriarchal system, its aspects and characteristics as well as women's acquiescence in the upheaval of this dystopia. Moreover, this descriptive analysis attempts at deciphering the ambivalence of the book and the inclinations of the author more toward the feminist ethos.

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1. Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale, a classic dystopian tale, offers a bleak future view and oppression of women, which leads to the reduction in the totalitarian theocratic state of their image into a child-producing machine. The idea of dystopia denotes something highly revolting, which smells the resentment of contemporary civilization made by humanity in making this existence highly consumable. The words utopia, dystopia, gives us a horrific picture of the so-called current civilisation, which encourages everyone to look into and evaluate how degraded the world is today. We seem to be challenged by speculating on some darker and stronger reality of life related to the appalling oppression of women and gender politics, brutality, harsh politics of power and broad corruption in many sectors of our socio-administrative system.

Margaret Atwood creates a dystopian society founded on oppression and discord in The Handmaid's Tale. Because the book has long been believed that it was a succession of events that could or could not truly happen in reality, Atwood always said that it did not include any detail or incident that wasn't anywhere in the world at any one moment. The novel is Inspired by historical and contemporary occurrences of real life, “So many different strands fed into ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’, group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the Lebensborn program of the SS and the child-stealing of the Argentine generals, the history of slavery, the history of American polygamy . . . the list is long”.

What makes Atwood's novel so poignant is its brilliant methodology of first presenting the protagonist as a voice, almost as a sleepwalker who conceives fragmentary views about his surroundings, and flashing reminders of a past existence. As the situations get more detailed, the voice of the protagonist is transfigured continuously and imperceptibly, but convincingly, in a complete, with her developing understanding of what is occurring around her. The victim, so exploited and forced, is transformed into a determined friend who daringly defies Gilead's twisted canons. In addition, the timeline between the protagonist's past and present is skillably controlled by

Atwood with these changing reminiscences revealing insights into a life, although not perfect, nonetheless filled with energy, creativity, humanism, and a feeling of selfishness. The reader is successfully and clearly shown at the conclusion of the narrative that the misogyny system works on the basis of force rather than choice; force, not wishes; fear, not desire. In other words, Atwood administers in doses the aggressive shocks to our sensitivities of a bleak dystopian nightmare, first of all via the remote and even incomprehensibly emotional voice of narration, which underlines the frugality and seriousness enforced by the state. As the work finishes, the narrative voice takes a completely committed emotional tone that skillfully suspects the destiny of the heroine. This method of measurable and well-punctuated revelations of Gilead symbolically connects it with the central significance of the novel: misogynous dogma, no matter how seemingly harmless and trustful it may be at its first conception, must reveal its ruthlessly tyrannical nature once it is allowed access to power.

Literature Review

The Handmaid's Tale is a novel based in the Republic of Gilead, authoritarian society founded on a theological ultra-conservatism, with increased sterility owing to pollution and STDs. In order to reverse the drop of childbirth, the government has set up a new social class: sisters, women of reproductive age, who are handed to top officials to bring children for them. The narrative is told in the light of one of these maids, a lady named Offred, named for the commander to whom she belonged (hence the patronymic name Of-Fred). If after three years, she could no longer give the commander a child, she would be considered a woman and banished to the colonies to labour in farmland or polluted wastelands. She recounts events throughout the text from the times she lived with Luke (a married man) and his daughter, when religious fundamentalist guys came up and found Gilead, her re-education as a servant, her life with the commander, until the conclusion of the narrative. The concluding chapter follows an epilogue in which a scholar lectures the cassettes she recorded when she was a handmaid.

The book provides details of what happened after a coup that killed the US president and most of Congress. The government is controlled by an extreme religious sect, which in short makes the Constitution invalid and controls the publications. The fundamentalist religious organisation's right to forbid women from interacting with currency, property, reading or writing is about to be limited. This new administration in the US nicknamed the "republic of Gilead" and then proclaimed all divorce cases null and void. The Republic of Gilead, then, believes that any woman currently married to a past divorced adulteress and wilful woman and has now proclaimed her husband still married to her prior wife. Offred, the narrator in the novel who was named Fred after the Gilead Republic tradition, revealed that while she was on a trip to leave to Canada with her family she was arrested and got separated by Luke, her husband. His daughter was thus given to a devoted family. After the Republic of Gilead certified Offred's fertility, she became a servant under the ruling class male, the commander. The maids' purpose is to give birth to the commanders and their wives. The practise is based on the biblical tale of Rachel and her servant, Bileha, who is infused with Rachel's husband Jacob to get a child "through her," as requested by Rachel. This is based on the Republic of Gilead. Servants portray women living alone. They are also subjected to whipping, ritual rape and brutal treatment of the Commanders and their spouses.

The book comprises of 15 parts with 46 chapters and a concluding portion named "historical notes." This tale is now interlaced with flashbacks which illustrate how Offred's current predicament has developed and how her interpersonal interactions are dynamic. The section Historical Notes imitates a conference on Gilead studies. The following chapters have been taken from a collection of discovered cassette cassettes and the effort to verify the material given.

The major theme in this book is feminism. Offred's mother and Moira reflect feminist beliefs. For instance, Offred's mother fought for rights of women, an event that shamed little Offred in the past. Based on her present circumstances under Gilead, Offred recognises that she has taken her rights for granted. Before Offred took over the Republic of Gilead, he was not identified as a feminist; but

Moira did. Moira suggests that a women-only society would relieve many of the difficulties facing women.

Problematic Statements

Like the patronym that does not belong to the servant, but to the position that she occupies, the categories reduce individuality of people by reducing them into a group. Offred takes into account of the losing of her name: "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter". Atwood is thus committed to a politics of recognition that stand against the liberal ideal of blind justice.

Atwood looks at the dystopian fruit of this especially restrictive utopian ideal in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the Red Center, in which the handmaids are indoctrinated, old cruel pornographic clips are displayed, "Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then". There is neither pornography nor objective images of women in Gilead; a feminist goal has been realised by society. Atwood therefore questions that a political or philosophical framework is legitimate and restricts freedom of achievement of its purposes. Atwood considers in *The Handmaid's Tale* a society where the structures which ensure only hierarchy have collapsed. The attachment of women to nature is honoured via reproduction, and the rigid idea of unchangeable rights is changed. The utopia is based on the notion that "men and women" do not take advantage of such controls. The one advantage that female utopians have over their males is that they never tried their claims.

Atwood acknowledges the obstacles faced by minorities under liberalism but examines the risk of leaving that heritage in the imagination of dystopia. Although feminism became more and more postmodern in the 1980s, many feminists had to fight with, because, in the words of Hutcheon, "women must define their subjectivity before they can question it". Likewise, Offred's existence rests on her idea that a reality outside of her society is a permanent expression of unchanging principles which a cultural consensus cannot eradicate: "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light". This is the only way the point of view of minority has sustained. *The Handmaid's Tale* does not provide simple answers and really concludes with his heroine into an uncertain destiny. This resolution represents the viewpoint of feminism in the mid-1980s. Only by describing the potential danger of certain routes in that the movement can this book lead its readers to detour from caution and to protect freedom from dogma. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia's depiction of the behaviour of women, especially in warmer seasons. Aunt Lydia hypothesises that ladies enticed males to take advantage of them when they dressed provocatively. Aunt Lydia says that crimes are not committed by good women who keep covering themselves up, but that the women who have been the victims rather than the males who are the offenders are all to blame. Aunt Lydia's tendency of criticising women plays a significant part in Gilead's required compliance in indoctrination, "The spectacles women used to make of themselves. Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder these things used to happen".

When Offred sees her physician for her monthly exam, the doctor says that most guys are sterile, like a commander. Offred is surprised to see that in view of the Gilead guidelines male sterility is prohibited. The responsibility for a couple not conceiving officially lies with the woman irrespective of the health of the guy. The legislation is another example of the usage of women as scapegoats by society, "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law."

Offred makes a vigilant declaration to the Commander in his study during one of his evenings. When he urges her to say what she thinks of their new society, she acts stupidly and tells him that she doesn't think much. Sharing her views might be harmful, while deflection can keep him safe and speak about him. The Commander feels that women are not a risk, like the rest of Gilead, since they have no unique notions of themselves, "There's hardly any point in my thinking, is there? I say. What I think doesn't matter. Which is the only reason he can tell me things."

The commander reminds Offred about the hardship of women before Gilead as he points towards Offred's old beauty mags. He argues that the mothers of Gilead have enhanced the life of women since they don't have to deal with their attractiveness or how to acquire a male again. As those in authority in Gilead, the Commander views women as one-dimensional, exactly like in his fashion magazines, "We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery."

The storey of the handmaid is full with uncertainty. Much of this encircles the people and their lifestyles. The end provides us very little information about most of these individuals, and we only know that Offred has survived long enough to produce the cassettes on the basis of his account. This book by Margaret Atwood is a fantastic illustration of Postmodernism and Dystopian activity, since the storyline, the dialogue and the characterisation not only reflect the ambiguities and the struggle inherent in presenting the reality, but also the very story-telling structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*. As if Margaret Atwood didn't offer her readers sufficient attention for the most part of her book, she surely supplied her in the latter part of her book a supplementary mention, 'Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale.' In the book, Atwood explained how Offred's storey got to us in its actual writing.

Methodology

Firstly, we will study all the bibliographies discovered on the Internet on the issues we wish to concentrate on, such as magazines, reviews, papers, doctoral theses, etc. Dystopia and feminism are read appropriately, where feasible, novels and other publications on Margaret Atwood. Because of certain space and time constraints, not all publications on the subject may be included, but are noted in the present state of the art. That is, all of the texts will be a) scanned to test the relevance of them to the themes we study; b) read to prove their relevance; c) re-read in a more critical and deeper way, emphasise important phrases or paragraphs, grasp the meaning of each part of the text and write down the most important and relevant ideas the text seeks to convey.

We will next attempt to sum up all the thoughts gathered and see how they are interrelated. The fundamental concept and the subjects were organised in a hierarchy and the next step was to apply them to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The universe in which the tale, the social structure, the people and their activities take place. To reach our goal, we focus not only on the experience of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but on additional female categories such as women, aunts, marthas, jezebels, and unwomen. Moreover, power dynamics are studied in terms of the roles of women and men in Gilead.

The major subject of this study is the gender viewpoint in literature, and authors employ the notion of gender and the societal problem of women. Over time, the idea of gender has experienced a change in values. Initially this notion highlights just the disparities that contribute to marginalisation, discrimination, subjugation and violence between men and women. Today, gender is the study of justice and equality between men and women in a social relationship which recognises mankind and sets forth an agreement achieved with it. The idea of women's social issue is a state in which women are commonly subjected to victims. Violence against women is often caused by two elements, namely cultural and structural reasons. The cultural element is the ideals and customs in a culture in which people are the ones who decide and have control over everything that belongs and is performed by women, while structural aspects are the perceived unfair position of both men and women in society. Depression may occur as a result of this condition.

Women's problems are highly important in women's lives since it may be a problem in women's lives and obstruct human rights. The social problem of women, in particular, addressing violence against women and gender inequality has never been separated from the issue of women. Women's difficulties are problems that affect women directly. Women's concerns include reproductive rights, childcare concerns, economic challenges, job development, the decrease of poverty, education,

health and religion. The complexity of women's concerns stems from the interests of two women in one another.

Discussions and Results

Firstly, this research describes utopia and dystopia. Secondly, it discusses the dystopian approach of the *Handmaid's Tale* and lastly, it analyses the suffering of the women in the dystopian setting.

In essence, dystopias are concerned about power: power as a ban or distortion of the potential of humans; power in its ultimate form. Dystopias reveal that authority works effectively and cruelly to its optimum totalitarian extent in extreme terms. Interestingly enough, war or foreign dangers frequently lie behind the scenes, and provide the excuse to combine exterior anxiety with domestic anxiety. The constant battle among individual choice and societal obligation is dramatised by dystopias: the individual resented the substitution of his own will by the obligatory uniform choices taken by impersonal bureaucratic machinery. In the area of binary opposition, dialectic dualities such as emotion and reason, creative mind and logic of mathematics, intuition and science, tolerance and judgement, goodness and cruelty, spirituality, materialism, love and power, good and evil are expanded. The list may continue.

Dystopian civilizations, eaten and controlled by regression, seem continuously static: the society opposes change based on compulsion and inflexible institutions and is stopped in paralysis. Dystopias are thus not linked to innovation and development, but to future dread. However, they utilise the present as an instructive reference and provide an implicit alternative to the dismal setup. Dystopias are fundamentally ideological books to different degrees: they invite the reader to a variety of thematic alternatives, which have been posed and polarised against each other. However, these books inevitably disclose a certain philosophical and socio-political perspective.

A critical utopia seems to be the *Handmaid Tale*: Atwood attacks Liberal America but also reveals Gilead's utopian oppression. Utopia, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, is filled with freedom and individuality. In the conclusion of the book, the speaker reflects on the following: "there was little that was truly original with or indigenous to Gilead: its genius was synthesis". Feminist politics were always characterised by freedom, but it was particularly significant as feminist demands went from equal treatment to equal recognition. Each character in Atwood's work is classed in a demeaning and restrictive way. Colour-coded social rank and women of Offred's household are conveniently inventoried: "One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green ...".

Margaret Atwood's novel differs from other dystopian novels on the basis of its feminist perspective. In his theocracy and practise, Gilead is overtly sexist. The state degrades the slaves to the position of "reproductive vessels.", "We are all for breeding purposes: We aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category". The state also removes their original names and identifies them with their Commanding officers' names to obscure the former identity of the handmaids, thus the names Offred, Ofglen, and so on. The women just become possessed items, only attachments to those guys who dominate sexually.

However, not all of Atwood's female characters are supportive, nor all male characters are demonic. The Aunts, a sadistic elite of collaborators who deliver torture lectures, are among the church-staunchest state's supporters; these renegades develop become passionate converts, taking masculine ideals at the price of their feminine impulses. One of them, Aunt Lydia, paradoxically works as an anti-feminism spokesperson; she advises the servants to give up and become non-persons. On the other side, Nick, the chauffeur of the Commander, works with the underground network for women and men to rescue and sabotage women. In addition, Atwood's protagonist yearns incessantly for her old life of marriage to Luke, now assumed dead. Therefore, although Atwood powerfully criticises the misogynous worldview which may cause great human misery, it refrains from judging a whole gender, as the culprit of Gilead's horror.

The storey is narrated from a framed view point: a lady compelled to remain in the "Republic of Gilead" kept a recorded newspaper, a transcript of which was written and released after the passing of the Republic of Gilead. The afterword establishes the structure of a historical society that discusses this document and comments on the Gilead time in history. The protagonist is an average woman—a single mother, married to a divorced guy, and a single child's mother, a daughter. She is physically caught as she attempts with her husband and kids to flee from the nation. Atwood blends a lot of components into the novel: feminist rage, religious intolerance, racism, disrespect for the elderly, environmental damage and religious patriarchy over the bodies of women that form part of its backdrop. The work is therefore a kaleidoscope of our recent literary and social/political scene.' The Handmaid's Tale is a fiction novel trying to envision what type of values may develop if environmental degradation made the majority of human beings infertile. With its unique voice, its incredible first-person enunciation, biblical overtones, and glowing metaphors the book touches the reader.

The storey opens with the exposition of the narrator's situation as a handmaid and what life was like in the Republic of Gilead for her and other handmaids. The core premise is the oppression of people in political organisations, which is obvious in the interaction between men and women. The heroine of The Handmaid's Tale, Offred, feels alienated and lonely. She is imprisoned by a gang of follies in an oppressive and retrograde culture. As a servant, she has a key role in this society, which has the most significant reproductive role in a sterile planet. The sisters, "reproductive vessels," are women who were either unmarried or those whose marriage at the time of the coup was seen as invalid. They are allotted to men whose women have not had children on the presumption that the lady is always sterile. If you manage to have a healthy kid within three tasks, you are rescued; if you fail, you are condemned to the Colonies to kill poisonous trash. The unique dilemma of this storey is that it is impossible to preserve a distinct person a feminine person in this instance — inside the limits of a stereotypical societal position in the Republic of Gilead. The book presents the "breaking visions" in the opening chapter. Isolated from her family and nation, the heroine has an almost barren place, unique clothes, and a new name is given: "Offered." Her freedom of movement in the company is limited and she is severely restricted by the nature of her position; she cannot converse freely with others; it is too risky. Offred is caged, imprisoned and isolated. Displacement, an essential topic, is obvious in Atwood's literature. The full Gileadian terrain and its descriptions are seen so that both the physical and mental defragmentation. The Gilead prison system also addresses to some degree the exploitation of one woman by other women. This chapter of the novels of Gilead is fascinating since Atwood appears to have changed viewpoints in this subject. The addition of Tales in The Handmaid's Tale was the choice of Atwood to highlight how women may oppress women, and there are additional cases. Serena Joy, the wife of Commander Waterford and Offred's mistress are not too acquainted. All we know, though, is important: She is devoted and was formerly the main soprano on a Sunday morning Christian television programme. When she finished her singing career, she pushed for the sanctity of the home, who recommended women to stay at home rather than work. The protagonist's assimilation is shown.

Conclusion

In summary, Atwood describes a storey in The Handmaid's Tale of victimisation, women's use of sex for child-breeding, gender-based patriarchy, the politics of the post-modern world and society, and women's life by introducing subversive regulations or religion which can thwart their life-long survival. By placing the book in the close future Atwood plans for a future that will cure the male-dominated society's many injustices against women while also showing a picture of an appalling present scenario, in which the situation regarding women has worsened beyond hope or redemption. So Atwood offers both a treatment and a warning of the disgusting difficulties and mourning of our civilization. Reality and myth are combined to make it easier to grasp all its nuances of postmodern society.

There are two difficulties in the book like the social issue of women and the influence of the social issue on the characteristics of women. The first difficulty is that the government of the Republic of

Gilead is unfairly treating women in the book which may be problematic in their lives. You have challenges like not getting proper education, distant from freedom and sexual harassment. Their lives are confined and controlled, everything done should be in accordance with the regulations, since their employment will only provide the elite couple with a kid and if they do not follow the rules, they are promptly transported to the colonies. The second difficulty is the effects of societal difficulties on women's personalities, meaning that their lifestyles do not provide freedom and women only behave according to the biological nature that produces kids in their bodies. All things make their life riskier, not free, miserable and almost dead.

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