

MARGARET ATWOOD'S "THE HANDMAID'S TALE"- A DYSTOPIA STUDY

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Abstract

The US conservative revival of the 1980s, which dealt a blow to the postmodern feminism movement, demanded the return to conservative principles, the acceptance of the Christian family structure through domestication of women, and control over their reproductive rights. As a result, limits on the fundamental rights that women have long fought for put their freedoms in jeopardy. On the political and literary stages, feminist responses to this topic have taken many different forms. A well-known Canadian author named Margaret Atwood took care to warn against the results of such practices. In this study, Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" will be interpreted as a dystopian novel that primarily addresses feminist issues such as infertility, political power, and the oppression of women in male-dominated societies. The narrative paints a gloomy picture of a patriarchal, authoritarian society that is based on religion and completely restricts the rights of women. In the story, the feminist dilemma is resolved when a woman's identity has been severely damaged, with little chance of recovery. This perspective on women's dismal future is deeper and broader. Therefore, this research will analyse the patriarchal system, its elements and traits, as well as how women's complicity in this dystopia's upheaval, are the main themes raised in this hypothetical scenario. Additionally, this descriptive analysis makes an effort to understand the ambivalence of the book and the author's tendencies to emphasize the feminist ethos.

Keywords: *postmodern feminism, oppression, women Identity, religion, political gender, violence,*

INTRODUCTION

The famous dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* paints a gloomy picture of the future and depicts how women will be oppressed, which will turn them into machines that produce children in the totalitarian theocratic state. The concept of a dystopia conjures up something utterly repulsive that smells of the hatred of modern civilization—the effort humanity has made to make this existence incredibly digestible. The phrases "utopian" and "dystopian" paint a horrifying picture of the so-called "present civilization," which inspires everyone to consider how impoverished the world is right now. We appear to be faced with difficulties when we speculate about a more intense and gloomy reality of life that is tied to the horrifying oppression of women and gender politics, violence, severe power politics, and widespread corruption in many facets of our socio-administrative system.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood envisions a dystopian society built on injustice and strife. Atwood has consistently maintained that the book does not contain any details or incidents that were not present anywhere in the

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world at any one point because it has long been assumed that it is a series of events that might or could not actually occur in reality. “So many different strands fed into ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’, group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the Lebensborn programme of the SS and the child-stealing of the Argentine generals, the history of slavery, the history of American polygamy... the list is long,” says the author of the book. “The list is long.”

Its clever strategy of first introducing the protagonist as a voice—almost like a sleepwalker who conceives fragmentary thoughts about his surroundings and flashing reminders of a prior existence—is what makes Atwood’s story so devastating. The protagonist’s voice changes frequently and subtly, but convincingly, in line with her growing comprehension of what is happening around her as the situations become more complex. The exploited and coerced victim is changed into a brave buddy who daringly rejects Gilead’s perverse rules. Additionally, Atwood deftly manages the timeline between the protagonist’s past and present, with these shifting flashbacks offering insights into a life that, while imperfect, was nevertheless brimming with vitality, inventiveness, humanity, and a sense of selfishness. The misogynistic system operates on the basis of force rather than choice, force rather than wishes, and fear rather than desire; the reader is successfully and unmistakably demonstrated at the conclusion of the book. In other words, Atwood delivers the violent shocks of a dark dystopian nightmare in doses, first and foremost through the narration’s distant and often incomprehensibly emotional voice, which emphasizes the austerity and seriousness enforced by the state. As the work comes to a close, the narrative voice adopts a wholly devoted emotional tone that deftly suspects the heroine’s fate. This manner of quantifiable and precisely timed Gilead revelations symbolically links it to the novel’s main theme: misogynous doctrine, no matter how initially innocent and trustworthy it may seem to be, must expose its savagely totalitarian character once it is given access to power.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A theologically ultra-conservative authoritarian society with rising sterility due to pollution and STDs is the setting of the book *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The government has established a new social class called sisters, women of reproductive age who are given to senior officials to bear children for them, in an effort to reverse the decline in childbearing. One of these maids, a woman named Offred, who was named for the commander to whom she belonged, is included in the story (hence the patronymic name Of-Fred). She would be declared a woman and sent to the colonies to work in farms or polluted wastelands if, after three years, she was unable to bear the commander a child. She narrates events from the time she lived with married man Luke and his daughter to the discovery of Gilead by religious fundamentalist men, her retraining as a servant, and her time spent with the commander up to the end of the story. A scholar lectures on the cassettes she recorded while working as a handmaid in the epilogue, which is followed by the final chapter.

The book tells what transpired following a coup that resulted in the deaths of the US president and the majority of Congress. An radical religious cult that controls the government renders the Constitution illegitimate and has editorial control over all media. The right of the extreme religious group to prevent women from handling money, property, reading, or writing is set to be curtailed. All divorce cases were declared to be invalid by the new US administration, which was given the moniker “republic of Gilead.” Therefore, the Republic of Gilead holds that any woman who is currently wed to a previously divorced adulterous and wilful woman who has declared her husband to still be married to her first spouse is a pervert. The book’s narrator, Offred, who was given the name Fred in keeping with Gilead Republic custom, claimed that she and her family were detained while en route to Canada, and she and her husband, Luke, were later split up. So, he gave his daughter to a loving family. Offred became a servant of the commander, the male head of the ruling class, after the Republic of Gilead granted her reproductive certification. The commanders’ wives and their offspring are intended to be borne by the maids. The custom is based on the biblical story of Rachel and Bileha, her servant who Rachel’s husband Jacob infuses in order to have a child “through her,” as Rachel wanted. On the Republic of Gilead, this is based. Female servants portray single ladies. The Commanders and their spouses are also brutally treated, whipped, and raped during rituals.

PROBLEMATIC STATEMENTS

The categories diminish people's uniqueness by lumping them together into a group, much as the patronym that does not refer to the servant by name but to the job she holds. When Offred considers deleting her name, she says, "I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your phone number, helpful only to others; yet what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter." As a result, Atwood is dedicated to a politics of recognition that opposes the liberal ideal of unbiased justice.

Atwood addresses the danger of losing such legacy in the dystopian imagination while acknowledging the challenges minorities faced under liberalism. Many feminists had to struggle even as feminism grew more and more postmodern in the 1980s because, in Hutcheon's words, "women must define their subjectivity before they can criticise it." Offred's existence is also based on her belief that reality outside of her society is a constant manifestation of unchanging ideals that a cultural consensus cannot override: "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light." The minority's point of view has only survived in this way. The Handmaid's Tale doesn't offer straightforward solutions and actually plunges its main character into an unknowable future. This resolution reflects feminism's stance in the middle of the 1980s. This book's readers can only be persuaded to stray from caution and defend freedom from dogma by outlining the potential risk of particular courses in that movement. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia's portrayal of women's behaviour, particularly during the warmer months. According to Aunt Lydia, women who dressed provocatively lured men to take advantage of them. According to Aunt Lydia, women who have been victims of crimes rather than male criminals are to blame for all crimes, not decent women who keep lying about them. Gilead's requirement for cooperation in indoctrination is significantly influenced by Aunt Lydia's propensity to criticise women, "The spectacles ladies used to make of themselves. No wonder these things used to happen when people were "oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, without even stockings on them."

Offred's doctor tells her at her routine checkup that most men are sterile, much like a commander. Offred is shocked to learn that male sterility is forbidden under Gilead's rules. Regardless of the health of the husband, the woman is to blame if a couple doesn't formally conceive. The law, which states that "there is no such thing as a sterile male any longer, not officially," is another illustration of how society uses women as scapegoats. The law states that there are only two types of women: those who bear children and those who do not. On one of his evenings, Offred addresses the Commander in his study with a warning. She behaves stupidly and tells him that she doesn't have anything to say about their new society when he presses her to do so. In contrast to deflection, which can keep him secure and speak about him, sharing her opinions may be harmful. As with the rest of Gilead, the Commander believes that women pose no threat because they have no distinct self-perceptions. "There's scarcely any sense in my thinking, is there? I say. It doesn't matter what I think. It is for this reason alone that he can communicate with me."

There is a lot of confusion in the handmaid's storey. Much of this revolves around the people and their way of life. Most of these characters are barely mentioned at the conclusion, and the only thing we know about them is that Offred has survived long enough to create the cassettes based only on his narrative. This Margaret Atwood book is a superb example of postmodernism and dystopian action because the plot, the dialogue, and the characterization not only capture the complexities and struggles involved in presenting reality, but also The Handmaid's Tale's fundamental narrative structure. As if Margaret Atwood hadn't given her readers enough focus for the most of her novel, she undoubtedly gave them a supplemental mention in the form of "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale" in the book's final section. Atwood recounted how Offred's story came to be written in the book.

METHODOLOGY

First, we will review all of the Internet bibliographies on the topics we want to focus on, including periodicals, reviews, articles, doctorate theses, etc. In Margaret Atwood's books and other works, dystopia and feminism are appropriately

interpreted whenever possible. Not every publication on the topic could be included due to time and space restrictions, but those that couldn't be are nevertheless included in the order in which they are available today. To put it another way, all of the texts will be scanned to see if they are relevant to the themes we study, read to demonstrate their relevance, and then reread critically and deeply, emphasizing key phrases or paragraphs, understanding the meaning of each section of the text, and noting the most significant and pertinent ideas the text seeks to convey.

The authors use the idea of gender and the issue of women in society, and this study's main topic is the gender viewpoint in literature. The ideals associated with gender have changed over time. This idea initially just emphasises the differences between men and women that lead to marginalisation, discrimination, subordination, and violence. In the modern world, gender is the study of justice and equality between men and women in a social interaction that acknowledges mankind and brings forward an agreement reached according to the belief those women's social issues is a state in which women are frequently victims. There are two main factors that frequently contribute to violence against women: cultural and structural factors. While structural factors refer to the perceived unequal treatment of men and women in society, cultural elements are the values and norms of a culture in which people determine and have control over all that belongs to and is performed by women. A side effect of this illness is depression. Women's issues are crucial because they might affect women's lives negatively and block human rights. There has never been a separation between the social problem of women and the issue of gender inequality and violence against women. Women specifically suffer from the issues that impact women. Reproductive rights, childcare issues, economic difficulties, job creation, the reduction of poverty, education, health, and religion are among the issues that worry women. The intertwined interests of two women give rise to the complexity of women's issues.

DISCUSSIONS

This study first contrasts utopia with dystopia. The *Handmaid's Tale's* dystopian perspective is then discussed, and finally, the suffering of the women in the dystopian society is examined. Essentially, dystopias are worried about power: power as a restriction on or distortion of human potential; power in its most extreme form. Dystopias show how power can be brutal and successful to the point of being fully dictatorial. Surprisingly, war or foreign threats frequently lurk in the shadows and give people a justification for combining home and external concern. Dystopias dramatise the ongoing conflict between individual freedom and community obligations: the individual despised having his own preferences replaced by the necessary, uniform decisions made by impersonal bureaucratic machinery. The dialectic dualities of emotion and reason, intuition and science, tolerance and judgement, kindness and cruelty, spirituality and materialism, love and power, and good and evil are enlarged in the realm of binary opposition. The list might go on. Dystopian civilizations, consumed and ruled by regression, appear to be perpetually static: the society resists change on the basis of coercion and rigid institutions and is halted in immobility. Thus, dystopias are more closely related to fear of the future than to innovation and development. However, they use the present as a point of reference for instruction and offer a subliminal contrast to the gloomy situation. To varying degrees, dystopias are basically ideological literature. They provide the reader to a range of thematic options that have been posed and pitted against one another. These texts do, however, necessarily reveal a particular philosophical and socio-political viewpoint.

The female perspective of Margaret Atwood's book sets it apart from previous dystopian fiction. Gilead's theocracy and actions are blatantly misogynistic. The slaves are reduced to the status of "reproductive vessels" by the state. "We are all for breeding purposes: We are not concubines, geisha girls, or courtesans," the state declares. On the contrary, every effort has been made to exclude us from that group. In order to conceal the prior identities of the handmaids, the state also changes their original names and assigns them that of their commanding officers, giving rise to names like Offred, Ofglen, and so on. The women merely become possessed objects and nothing more than attachments to the dominant men sexually.

The story begins with an explanation of the narrator's condition as a handmaid and what life was like for her and fellow handmaids in the Republic of Gilead. The fundamental tenet of the story is that people are oppressed in political organisations, and this is seen in the interactions between men and women. Offred, the protagonist of *The Handmaid's Tale*, experiences loneliness and alienation. She is held captive by a band of idiots in a repressive and archaic society. She plays a crucial position in this civilization as a servant, which performs the most important reproductive function on a sterile planet. The sisters, also known as "reproductive vessels," are either single or had invalid marriages at the time of the coup. On the premise that the woman is always infertile, they are given to males whose wives have not given birth. You are rescued if you are successful in having a healthy child within three attempts; if you are not, you are sentenced to work killing poisonous rubbish in the Colonies. The novel's specific problem is that, in the Republic of Gilead, it is impossible to maintain a distinctive person—in this case, a female person—within the confines of a stereotypical social position. The first chapter of the book contains the "shattering visions." The main character is separated from her family and country, has nearly deserted home, unusual clothing, and a new name: "Offered." The nature of her work significantly restricts her movement within the organisation, and she is unable to engage in casual conversation with other employees because doing so would put her in danger. Offred is confined, caged, and alone. Displacement is a crucial subject that Atwood clearly addresses in her writing. In order to facilitate both physical and mental defragmentation, the entire Gileadian terrain is seen, along with its descriptions. The exploitation of one woman by other women is likewise addressed in some part by the Gilead jail system. Gilead's third novel contains an intriguing chapter because Atwood seems to have changed her mind on the topic. Atwood chose to include *Tales* in *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to underline the fact that there are other instances of women oppressing other women. Serena Joy, Offred's mistress and the wife of Commander Waterford, is not well known. But what we do know is significant: She used to be the lead soprano on a Sunday morning Christian television programme and is devoted. She advocated for the sanctity of the home when her singing career was over and said that women should stay at home rather than work. Assimilation of the protagonist is demonstrated.

CONCLUSION

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood outlines a story of victimisation, women using sex to bear children, gender-based patriarchy, post-modern politics, and women's lives by introducing subversive laws or religion that can threaten their ability to live long lives. By setting the book in the near future, Atwood both paints a picture of a horrifying present scenario in which the situation for women has gotten so bad that there is no hope for improvement and plans for a future that will end the many injustices against women that exist in the male-dominated society. As a result, Atwood provides both a remedy and a warning for our civilization's repulsive problems and sadness. To better understand the complexities of postmodern civilization, reality and myth are merged. The social issue affecting women and how the social issue affects the qualities of women are two challenges in the book. The Republic of Gilead's government treats women unfairly in the book, which could cause problems for them in real life. You face difficulties like inadequate education, a lack of freedom, and sexual harassment. Their lives are restricted and regulated; everything must be done in accordance with the rules since their employment will only provide the privileged couple a child, and if they break the rules, they will be immediately sent to the colonies. The second challenge is the impact of cultural issues on women's personalities, which means that their lives do not allow for independence and that women only act in accordance with their biological makeup, which results in the birth of children in their bodies. Everything makes their lives riskier, less free, unhappy, and nearly fatal.

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