

Gender Roles and Misogyny in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract

Among the postmodern feminist writers, Margaret Atwood is an internationally prolific, acclaimed, highly talented woman writer. Her feministic ideology brought her fame and critical acclaim. It is unique in that the writer did not intend to project herself as a feminist and even hated her works being labelled feministic. She saw the suffering of women and portrayed it in her works with genuine concern. The present paper argues that Margaret Atwood's feministic vision is somewhat anti-men. However, it is instead a critique of gender roles and misogyny, reinforcing and perpetuating women's subservience against their will.

Keywords: postmodern feminist, feminism, gender roles, misogyny, feministic vision

1. Introduction

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b. 1939) is a renowned Canadian novelist with many impressive poems, novels, short stories and children's books to her credit. She has contributed to literary criticism and penned impressive essays. She has been an environmental activist and won various honours and prestigious awards. Her works focus on various issues ranging from gender equality to climate change. From a literary perspective, her feministic vision holds considerable relevance and significance.

Margaret Atwood's powerful fiction projects a feministic concept that cannot be interpreted or reduced simply as feminism. It goes far beyond the label of feminism and its traditional implications. It encompasses a realistic view of women's status and struggles to survive and protect their individuality, self-identity, and womanhood. It brings out the valuable contribution of women and stresses their fundamental rights to liberty and equality. Through her works, Atwood criticizes the stereotypes of gender, gender roles and the restrictions they serve to impose on women. Consequently, her feministic vision or ideology becomes all-inclusive and gains global significance.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is influenced by second-wave feminism, dystopian fiction and religious fundamentalism. It is set in Gilead, a totalitarian patriarchy in a time when nuclear contamination, toxicity, chemical weapons, fertilizers, pesticides and other reckless acts of man waste the entire planet. Atwood discusses the reasons behind writing such a novel: "to make my future society, I proposed something a little more complex [than the twentieth-Century dictatorships]. Bad economic times, yes, but also a period of widespread environmental catastrophe, which has several results: a higher infertility and sterility rate due to chemical and radiation damage (this, by the way, is happening already) and a higher birth-defect rate, which is also happening." (Slawomir Kuznicki 22)

In Gilead, the birth rates of humans had plummeted significantly. Even when some partly sterile women gave birth, their babies had severe defects and had to be killed. Rich men keep fertile women as handmaids to reproduce and fulfil their sexual needs. Some women make themselves infertile to avoid becoming handmaids, and others join the resistance and fight the decisive state in vain.

Following the deterioration of gender relationships in the liberal culture of the former state, the Gilead had emerged as a new nation with its own rules, classes and roles for both men and women. In the new nation, all women are treated as subhumans with no identity or individuality. The ruling patriarchy oppresses women in all possible ways and controls them for survival. They covet fertile women, isolate them from the rest and use them as property. Women are seen as a potential threat to the patriarchy, so they are strictly watched and controlled. They are refused any chances of education, employment and self-reliance. They cannot own assets or use them like the elites. They are kept as slaves within the four walls of the house to be used as objects of pleasure and reproducing machines. Kelly Garbato rightly states, "By far, the most pervasive theme in *The Handmaid's tale* is misogyny and the oppression of women; in fact, female oppression The Republic of Gilead is so ubiquitous...Every facet of society works in concert to control Giliadean women; their

subjugation is total." (easyvegan) Sexuality is strictly meant for procreation and not for pleasure—marriages of handmaids before the emergence of the new order were considered illegal.

The Gilead has its hierarchy, which divides women into wives, handmaids, maids and econowives and designates each a particular lifestyle, role and dress code. It had a powerful rank of matriarchy called the Aunts to control women. The matriarchy trains fertile women to be handmaids as they are crucial to the continuity of the elites. However, the handmaids could not even open their mouths to speak freely. They were utterly oppressed and kept as slaves by the elite.

Offred, a 33-year-old woman, the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, is forcibly separated from her family and kept as a handmaid for the elite Commander. When the novel begins, she remembers living with her family in an old, unused gym. She is abducted by the Gilead and separated from her daughter and husband, Luke. Her mother, a feminist and an activist, disappears under strange circumstances. The captured women are kept in a heavily guarded place and watched by the strict women called the Aunts. Offred's only duty is to bear children for the Commander and do his household tasks.

It is five weeks since Offred was brought to the Commander's place as a handmaid. She always thinks of using her body to lure a guard and use him to escape from the place. However, she wears red clothes and a white headdress that covers her entire body and face. Her head cover controls her vision and allows her only a glimpse of the outside world. Sometimes Offred thinks of killing herself, but deep inside, she wishes to live in the memories of her past and her daughter and husband. Her household duties allowed her to go outside and buy necessities for the Commander's family using tokens. In the kitchen, she derives some comfort from the maids Cora and Rita, who wear green robes. Offred dreams of having a friendly chat with the maids over a cup of coffee, but she knows well that it can never happen. All women in the Commander's house are isolated and have to stick to their places and roles.

Upon arriving at the Commander's house, Offred glanced at Serena Joy, the Commander's wife. Serena Joy was dressed in blue robes and smoking a cigarette. Later, Offred learns that the Commander's wife's name is inaccurate. Serena had been a speaker and a singer once and delivered anti-feminist speeches highlighting the role of women in the household. Radical feminists had made attempts tried to kill her, but such incidents may have been set by Serena herself to gain publicity and fame. Serena speaks to Offred in a business-like fashion and tells her about her duties in the house.

Serena and Offred shared a complicated relationship. Being women, they lived restricted lives and stayed within their spaces; each had their fears and intentions. They have specific roles to play and must wear dresses of particular colours to differentiate themselves. Serena wore blue robes to symbolize purity, and Offred wore red robes that denoted sexuality. The maids, on the other hand, wore green robes. The wives had certain liberties, including gardening, knitting, and running the household as the elite's real partner. The handmaids went for walking and shopping trips and produced and mothered children for the elites they were designated to. Although the women have different roles, they do not see in any case come together as a sisterhood. This is because the roles are so designed to keep them apart. The infertile wife feels humiliated in the presence of a fertile handmaid as she has to share her husband with a handmaid. However, she cannot do anything

about it as it is necessary for the continuity of the elites. This resentment makes the wives scorn the handmaids and treat them with hate. They exercise all possible authority over the handmaids to establish their superiority and belittle the value of the handmaid in the household. The econowives spit at the sight of handmaids, and wives frown at them when they see them on the streets. The women hate each other, strip themselves of their individuality and identity, and become social and functional stereotypes. The wives treat the maids unequally as they are both infertile and belong to lower social classes. In addition, ageing wives Serena Joy harbours hatred towards handmaids as their role in the household is weakened and taken away. This is why Offred feels more threatened by Serena than by the powerful Commander, who is the true master of the house. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts ... "gynocentric misogyny and traditional misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order." (Dr. Muktha Manoj Jacob)

During an event named the Ceremony, the handmaid sleeps between Serena Joy's spread legs and has to watch her making love with the Commander. During such Ceremonies, the entire household gathers in one place for the event. The handmaid's value as a tool of procreation makes the people of all the other roles secondary. The powerful Commander and his wife could not control the handmaid's essential role of producing offspring.

During her role as a handmaid, Offred develops a closer relationship with the Commander. She begins to meet him secretly and illegally as she cannot refuse his requests. Such visits can quickly spell disaster for a handmaid like Offred, but she has to risk it as she has no other choice. During one such visit, the Commander presents her gifts and tells her that he is drifting away from Serena and needs her more. He reveals that the previous handmaid had killed herself when his wife came to know about his secret affair with the handmaid. The Commander does not commit another such suicide and asks Offred to make things better for her and him. To Offred's surprise, Serena Joy offers to arrange secret meetings with Nick to help her become pregnant, as she believes the Commander could not produce a child. Offred is alarmed, but she has to accept her offer. It is illegal and risky, yet she cannot refuse Serena Joy's offer, making her unhappy. In return, Serena allows Offred to look at her daughter's photograph and smoke a cigarette.

For handmaids like Offred, their inner life of imagination offers some peace and helps them to remain sane and cope with their mechanical and meaningless existence. As Offred's mother had pointed out to her, "Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations." (Margaret Atwood 283) The handmaids have to adjust to their roles by reliving their past in their heads. Such fantasy moments give them a false sense of control and the illusion of liberty. The women who resist the Gilead are punished by hanging, and those who disobey are shifted to hazardous and toxic colonies. The handmaids who are fertile and indispensable are returned to Red centres, where they are re-educated and regulated by the matriarchy of Aunts like Lydia and Elizabeth. The women of Gilead have to stick to their roles and are not given any choice. Handmaids like Offred have no sense of independence and have lost control over their lives. They are only allowed to give birth and mother children but cannot choose their men.

To further suppress women, the Gilead had strict rules that prohibited women from reading and writing or owning material possessions. The handmaids can perform their roles and see other maids while they go on shopping trips. They are stripped from their families and blood relations and have to live with the elites as fertile objects of sexuality and procreation. The status of a handmaid is

determined by her ability to bring forth healthy babies. Pregnant handmaids are seen with eyes of envy by other women like wives and maids. However, the handmaids do not wish for such false social status. As women, they long for liberty, self-identity and individuality. In this respect, Aunt Lydia's words have far-reaching implications. She differentiates between two types of freedom for women, "There is more than one kind of freedom ... 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." (Margaret Atwood 34)

Aunt Lydia of the Red Centre differentiates freedom for women to make choices and freedom from violence and crime. She implies that the former liberal society had died because it had much freedom to make choices but was not free from violence. She insists that women must sacrifice some 'freedom to' to enjoy 'freedom from' state of living.

Offred recalls how women turn against women and blame and make fun of other women. In the Testifying Janine event, a handmaid who had suffered an abortion confesses that she was raped and sought an abortion. The other women do not console her, but they accuse her and make fun of her for crying. Women's roles are planned so that each outweighs or belittles the other, thus keeping them apart at all times. Misogyny prevails at all levels among the women in the Gilead society as it is designed in such a manner.

Offred is valued in her world because of her fertile body, which can reproduce. Although this imparts value to her it strips her of her liberty. She cannot choose other roles as there is none to choose but disobedience. However, disobedience will only bring her pain, suffering, torture, and even death. So she has to comply and play her role as a slave. During this process, she learns the difference between love and sex. She feels the longing for Luke and her lost daughter is love and that she feels for Nick is sex. Now, Offred is denied love and given only sex, which she does not want.

Sometimes Offred is allowed brief periods of idleness and freedom. At such times, she realizes how limited her life is. Her role as a handmaid forces her to live only as a slave. She gets up, goes on shopping trips, rests in her room alone, sees no one, and talks to no one. She feels like burning the Commander's house, killing the man with some sharp instrument, attacking his wife, and running away from the house with Nick. However, she knows well that she cannot go far away as the Eyes watched her, and the Angels controlled all her movements in the town. When Offred develops intimacy with the Commander and Nick, she finds some relief and liberty equal to that of a wife. When the novel is about to end, she escapes in a black van with the help of Nick and other members of the resistance group.

In the last section, titled 'Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale', it transpires that Offred survives and makes it to England. The section is a presentation at a conference by professor Pieixoto, who studies historical events that happened in the past. He and his colleagues transcribe and sequence the story from thirty tapes belonging to the Gilead times.

2. Conclusion:

In the new order of Gilead, Women's existence is predefined by strict hierarchical roles and dress codes. They do not have any rights and cannot make any choice of their own. They are valued for their fertility and servitude. The infertile and low-class women serve as econowives, maids or

Marthas. The Aunts are entrusted with the handmaids' indoctrination, regulation and training. The wives live with the commanders and manage the handmaids. The hierarchy of the Gilead, with its gender roles, creates misogyny, wherein women hate women and try to control and suppress each other. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny and "traditional" misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order.

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