

THE HANDMAID'S TALE: A FEMINIST READING

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood (1939–) was born in Ontario, Canada, who is famous for depicting themes of betrayal and disloyalty through the creation of vigorous and vulnerably susceptible female characters, produces a vivid set of possibilities with the women of *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) remains one of Margaret Atwood's most popular works and marks a turning point from her earlier authentic fiction. It is a novel of such power that the reader will be unable to forget its images and its forecast.

In this present paper I am going to highlight Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a phrenic conception instigating novel about the ascendancy and governing of women by men. It presents a dystopia where liberation for women is restricted because of the incipient Christian government's extreme policies. This incipient society, The Republic of Gilead, is described by a woman called Offred. One of the infelicitous Handmaids under the incipient convivial order. In condensed but eloquent prose, by turns cool-eyed, tender, despairing, zealous, and wry, she reveals to us the dark corners abate the establishment's calm facade, as certain tendencies now in subsistence are carried to their logical conclusions and *The Handmaid's Tale* is, in fact, a rather tragic story where no woman is prosperous.

Key words: Margaret ,woman ,Offred, society, feminism

Introduction: Margaret Atwood, a poet, novelist and author of children's books has availed to define and identify the goals of contemporary Canadian literature and has earned a distinguished reputation among feminist writers for her exploration of women's issues. *The Handmaid's Tale* could be facilely catalogued as a feminist novel. A feminist reading seems to be the most conspicuous perspective to analyse the text. Feminism is indeed developed throughout the narration exhibiting how women are utilized in order to increment a political ideal. The Wives as well as the Handmaids are in accommodation of men. Totalitarianism is withal reprehended since the puissance in the novel is exclusively held by an elite of men, reinforcing the iniquity of women's treatment in Gilead. The sodality that one could make between the facts in the novel and history brings one to wonder whether the *Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel. Women must be raised to an equal level as men and their empowerment is indispensable for the development of a country. This incipient society, The Republic of Gilead, is described by a woman called Offred. She is a soi-disant Handmaid, a kind of breeding implement for the republic. The ideology and conceptions of this Christian regime are presented to us through Offred's first-person narrative.

Gilead: Gilead Future name for the northeastern section of the Cumulated States. In Margaret Atwood's vision of the future, the regime of the Coalesced States has been overthrown by a group of right-wing, conservative Christians bent on transforming what they visually perceive as a decadent society into a theocracy. Atwood draws on the culture of the Coalesced States in 1985 and extrapolates what might transpire if trends present in

that year were to perpetuate into the future. Women who have been divorced but who are proven to be fertile, such as the main character in the novel, are found culpable of the malefaction of adultery, and are given to the rulers of Gilead in order to provide children for childless couples. Atwood deliberately places Gilead in Incipient England; landmarks such as the library and the wall are limpidly taken from Cambridge, where Harvard University is located, Gilead, by contrast, is a country ruled by keeping people nescient. Atwood presents Gilead as a futuristic North America and remarks that, "In *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or which it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We've done it, or we're doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. The projected trends on which my failure society is based are already in motion. So, I think of *The Handmaid's Tale* not as science fiction, but as speculative fiction; and more particularly, as that negative form of Utopian fiction which has come to be known as the dystopia" (Moving 103).

The Handmaid's Tale: A "handmaid" is a female coadjutant, or a woman whose vocation is ser- vice. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a handmaid as an individual called "to accommodate anyone to hand"; that is, one who continually accommodates others in personal manner. It is additionally intriguing to descry that the hierarchy is not only applied between men and women but withal between people of the same gender. They are the most paramount in society and maybe the only ones that can genuinely capitalize on the oppression. Having children became very arduous. That is what the Handmaids are for. They are as their designation

verbally expresses, maids, which designates they have to accommodate their Commander or sometimes but infrequently, their Angel. One additionally better understands why Offred perpetually recollects her past is because it avails her survive the difficulties of being a Handmaid. The irony given to the denomination of the novel by Margaret Atwood can additionally limpidly be visually perceived. She utilizes the word "tale" to describe Offred's life as a Handmaid which seems ironical since one kens how awful her life becomes and how insecurely it culminates. Her life is the consummate antithesis of a fairytale and, thus, because of the laws of the Regime of Gilead. Albeit the story takes place in only one state of America .this novel will study equipollence between women and men is paramount in the society. The Handmaid's Tale could be facilely catalogued as a feminist novel. A feminist reading seems to be the most conspicuous perspective to analyze the text. Feminism is indeed developed throughout the narration exhibiting how women are utilized in order to increment a political ideal. The Wives as well as the Handmaids are in accommodation of men. . As the title. The Handmaid's Tale states, "It's the story of one woman under the [Gileadean] regime, told in a very personal way" (Atwood qtd. in Howells 141). In Offred, Atwood states: "you're dealing with a character whose ability to move in the society was limited. By the nature of her situation, she was very circumscribed. She couldn't communicate well with people. It was too dangerous. . . . The more limited and boxed in you are, the more important details become" (Interview, Hancock 216). From a structural perspective, The Handmaid's Tale confronts the reader with two different time frames, both of which are situated in the future. The main story, in the novel is told in the style of a personal journal which is set in the near future of the novel's publication in 1985, in the late twentieth-century.

Women in the Handmaid's Tale: The fact that women in the Handmaid's Tale are not sanctioned to abort reminds the reader of the Protestants or the Catholics that did not abide it for centuries.. Margaret Atwood's novel shows what the world could become if erroneous people acceded to power .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 fact that women in the Handmaid's Tale are not sanctioned to abort reminds the reader of the Protestants or the Catholics that did not abide it for centuries. Catholic Church still doesn't abide it which shows that this subject is still authentic and delicate. Margaret Atwood's novel shows what the world could become

if erroneous people acceded to puissance. The sodality that one could make between the facts in the novel and history brings one to wonder whether the Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel. They argue that women suffer disproportionately in social and ecological terms based on patterns of colonialism, racism, work exploitation and militarization" (Mellor 5-6).

Women are in an outlandish situation in which they are not sanctioned to come proximate to anyone. They have to live in isolation, leading a robotic life. They have to live only to accommodate men and to please them. They have to kill their desires and withal their identities. The protagonist recollects how they were bound to stringent rules in the gymnasium. The place which was denoted to be for regalement, regalement, and recreation was now utilized for training women about how they could lead their lives consummately subordinate to men. They were not even sanctioned to go to washroom liberating and they could do that only for fine-tuned number of times. Janine tells everyone in the gymnasium about how she was gang-ravished at fourteen and had an abortion. Others were made to shout by the trainers that it was her fault only because she led them on and God sanctioned such a terrible thing to transpire because He wanted to edify her an edification. Aunts had edified them that it had to be woman's fault only, even if she was gang-ravished by men. The only purport of training women by Aunts in The Handmaid's Tale is to edify them that they have to dedicate their lives for the delectation of men. The protagonist's life in the Commander's house has only one purport – to become enceinte by him. It is ostensible in the novel that men have thoroughly overpowered women and they optate to prove that they are superior and only their ascendancy would rule. The incipient regime promotes violence practiced by sentinels and spreads fear among people. The sentinels are called Angels, giving them a divine power additionally. They are apprehending many people against sundry erroneous charges. The designations of the handmaids have been transmuted. Now they are called by names which show that they are someone's property. . The protagonist had to leave her small daughter and now her name is Offred "The story of the control of the chaotic and deficient realm of "nature" by mastering and ordering "reason" has been the master story of Western culture" (Plumwood 74). The novel highlights the web of oppressions that plays various roles in a society. Women are treated far inferior than men, the wives of higher officials further dominate other women, and infertile women are withal made to live miserable lives. The imbalance and disharmony reflect the incapacity on the component of human beings in engendering a doting and caring

world. The emotions that dominate in such a society are fear, apprehensiveness, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction. Women have to idle away their time in useless activities because they are not sanctioned to participate in the consequential works and to take independent decisions. Handmaids have been sustained mainly for the process of reproduction. The rate of congenital abnormalities is so high that very infrequent babies turn out to be mundane or viable. This has been the result of abuse of nature and environmental degradation. The link between oppression of women and abuse of nature is prominent in the novel. Atwood has portrayed the picture of a dystopian society in which all the restrictions have been imposed on the liberation of women. Women have no right to give their opinion on the paramount or even picayune is paramount. . Amartya Sen comments upon this kind of restriction on speaking by women. He writes, "Even a very rich person who is prevented from speaking freely, or from participating in public debates and decisions, is deprived of something that she has reason to value. The process of development, when judged by the enhancement of human freedom, has to include the removal of this person's deprivation" (Sen 36). n The Handmaid's Tale, the girls have to get espoused at an early age, without optically discerning the face of the man they are going to spend their life with. Men relish and celebrate their victories – either military victories or the victories over women. They repress women and girls to magnify their political victories and puissance. Love is nowhere in the air; it has been enjoined. Men have organized the society without the sanction to love, in order to engender a disciplined society.

Women are required to live in the simplest manner. Atwood has highlighted the man's desire to position himself at the top and to engender a hierarchical structure by diminishing the status of everything else that subsists. The Commander in the novel relishes to diminish everything including Offred. The handmaids like her have been assigned the work of engendering children, like goods are engendered in a factory. The men at the top positions have diminished the aesthetics Nanda 101 involved in love, and giving birth. They have withal reduced the value of liberation that was once relished by women. The ascendance of nature is additionally a component of the same mentality. . It is against morality and society; it is wicked like the Other, like rebellious Nature, like the 'bad woman' " (Beauvoir 221). In the novel, females are not sanctioned to be inculcated their own husband. The control and abuse of women and girls give men the puissance to accommodate their fascinates. Men hold the all the decision making positions and they construct oppressive culture to control women in public and private

spheres. On one side, Nanda 103 women have to cover their bodies and hair and their liberation is consummately restricted and on the other side. As Offred describes events in her highly controlled life, she recalls times afore religious fundamentalists postulated political control, a period when she was a wife, mother, and librarian.

Atwood engenders a world which horrifies the readers and specially the women; depicting the plight of Gileadean women in general, where they are devoid of every right a person can cerebrate of Like women, nature is additionally ravaged to its optimum with the possibility of nearing extinction in the near future. According to Atwood and the ecofeminists, silence and powerlessness go together. By controlling what goes into the heads of Handmaids with the avail of the 185 Aunts—'the notice conception police' of Gilead, the ascendant entities wish. . Atwood remarks: "one character says, there is freedom to and freedom from. But how much of the first should you have to give up in order to assure the second? All cultures have had to grapple with that" {Moving 214).to control what comes out by way of speech and action. Atwood draws on eco feminism where women and the Others are equated on the prevalent grounds of being exploited by patriarchy just because they are taken to be more impotent and lower to men Handmaids are treated like brood livestock: tattooed like 'cattle brand' and are kept in line by the Aunts. Women community leaders repeatedly report that they have to endure arrogant, patronizing, and sarcastic military officials who try first and foremost to denigrate the authority and knowledge of the women challenging them" (Seager 32) Karen J. Warren opines, "I suggest that from an eco feminist philosophical perspective, it is important for all of us interested in finding solutions to the problems of environmental destruction and the unjustified subordination of women and other subdominant groups to take these connections seriously" (Warren 3). Women, in the novel, suffer from rigorous exploitation and are treated like animals. They are kept by elite men for their reproductive capacity and the infertile women are coerced to die. The handmaids have to live solitary and monotonous lives since they are restricted from having any kind of regalement or delectation. They are additionally accorded inferior status as compared to other women. The infertile women live in Colonies under prodigiously inhuman conditions. Marti Kheel opines that Nanda 85 "Women's fertility is also increasingly being exploited by the male-dominated medical establishment, which now routinely "harvests" women's eggs. The underlying idea behind both operations is the same—women's bodies and animals' bodies belong first and foremost to men" (Kheel 334).

The novel is thus based on the exploitation of women as a scarce sexual resource in a patriarchal society. Atwood states, "the woman in that book wear outfits derived in part from nun's costumes, partly from girls school uniforms, and partly . . . from the faceless woman on the old Dutch Cleaner box, but also partly from the chador I acquired in Afghanistan and its conflicting associations. . . . Would I have written the book if I never visited Afghanistan? Possibly. Would it have been the same? Unlikely " (Moving 274). The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* begins with a gloomy note as women are suffering in America (now called Gilead), due to their being women. Stains comments on the dystopian setting of novel by Atwood, "Society has returned to a constricted recreation of Puritan New England. Perhaps only a Canadian, a neighbor as well as an outsider to the United States, could create such an unsettling vision of the American future" (Stains 21). In the novel, men want to assert their supremacy by restricting the liberation of women. Any kind of perspicacious or gregarious liberation has been planarity gainsaid to women. This is the reason abast the unrest and stagnant condition of the country . Men are typically given a disproportionate share of meat, and men who do not eat meat are often viewed as effeminate. During warfare, it is considered especially important for men to eat meat" (Kheel 330). Women, in the novel, suffer from astringent exploitation and are treated like animals. They are kept by elite men for their reproductive capacity and the infertile women are coerced to die. The handmaids have to live solitary and monotonous lives since they are restricted from having any kind of regalement or delectation. They are withal accorded inferior status as compared to other women. The infertile women live in Colonies under astronomically inhuman conditions. . Marti Kheel opines that Nanda 85 "Women's fertility is also increasingly being exploited by the male-dominated medical establishment, which now routinely "harvests" women's eggs. The underlying idea behind both operations is the same—women's bodies and animals' bodies belong first and foremost to men" (Kheel 334). **Offred:** Offred is the main character of this novel. She is the person that the reader should call the heroine but, in this case, Offred does not authentically fit the description. She is not someone able to have her destiny in her own hands. She does, haplessly, not have the puissance to transmute her future at any time. She could be called a heroine because she is vigorous but she could additionally be called an anti-heroine since she rather abides things that transpire to her, she does not have the puissance to influence them. That is why she is such a fascinating character and to better understand her, one should first consider her life afore oppression and conspicuously her life afore she became a Handmaid.

Ideas for group Discussion: No other Atwood fiction has aroused the public debate that has accompanied *The Handmaid's Tale*, and thus it should elicit effervescent discussion in any group undertaking to read it

- 1) Why are women the special targets of the new social order devised in Gilead? What other special targets exist, and why? Why do race and gender hierarchies matter so much to the ruling elite of this world?
- 2) What is Offred's world view and how does it shape her behavior in the years before the revolution? What is she like at the start of the novel when she is introduced as a "handmaid?" How does her attitude about her situation change in the course of the narrative? What prompts those changes, and where do they lead?
- 3)responsibility for the nightmare that has overtaken them? How are those tensions exploited and institutionalized in Gilead to ensure that women will not organize to change their circumstances?
- 4) What role does Offred's mother play in her daughter's imaginative life? How does she represent the Women's Movement of an earlier era? In what ways is she satirized? In what ways is she vindicated? How might Moira be seen as an extension of the older woman — and how is she distinctly different?

Conclusion: After the analysis of the novel, one can limpidly optically discern that the *Handmaid's Tale* is a satire. Atwood mocks our society through this novel. She admonishes us exhibiting how not dealing with true quandaries could bring a situation kindred to the one in the novel .*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) narrates the story of women, who were politically, convivially, and economically controlled by men in the Republic of Gilead. Gilead was the incipient name given to U.S. after its take-over by military. The patriarchal ascendancy takes a very cruel and sinister form in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Women are in a peculiar situation in which they are not sanctioned to come proximate to anyone. They have to live in isolation, leading a robotic life. This novel defines Atwood's inditing potency. She is able to imagine in details things that one would never cerebrate of. After reading the *Handmaid's Tale*, it is arduous for the reader not to accede with everything she develops. She does it with so much zealousness and precision, that it becomes virtually infeasible to contradict her . She is certainly inclined to let the reader get a personal opinion on the manly postures one can find in the novel. Her purport is conspicuously to show how they should not be treated if one wants them to be accomplished and slaked. It certainly is a novel that inspirits ruminating on women's position in society. This book is potent and should, at least once in a lifetime, be read by every woman. This novel was authentically

fascinating to analyze because of all the different aspects in it. There is additionally something very perturbing in the novel and it is how women are sorted by colors corresponding to their gregarious position. It is as if religion or the color of the skin, which are today the human aspects that en hearten prejudices, were superseded by the color of habiliments. Through the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood wants to convey the message that rationalism takes the form of tyranny and people are made to suffer under oppressive rules. People are divided into classes – males and females; lower class males, Angels, and elite class, Economies, and Handmaids. e. But the emotions of love, comity, and kinship, are

proscribed and the liberty of personal life is restricted. Revolution by the lower classes is ineluctably foreordained under such circumstances. The brutal ascendance of women is additionally bound to engender unrest and revolt.

The Handmaid's Tale is, in fact, a rather tragic story where no woman is prosperous. Offred finds herself hiding in a safe house somewhere, and the only two societies she has ever lived in are both societies where women were in one way or another oppressed, be it by designates of sexual violence, language, erudition or puissance.

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