

A Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* Based on Jasodhara Bagchi's Interrogating Motherhood: An Indian Radical Feminist Perspective

Maanini Jayal V.

School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT-Chennai, Chennai, India

B. Sivakami

School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT-Chennai, Chennai, India

Abstract—According to Jasodhara Bagchi (2017), "It is as a mother that a woman gains some agency". Contrary to popular belief, the womb is not an 'inert receptacle'; it can allow or prevent sperm invasion, but only when the woman can decide the same. The extreme onslaught of patriarchy and totalitarian supremacy in the Society of Gilead has resulted in the manipulation of motherhood. By proposing an alternate reality in which women's lives are controlled solely by procreation and gender roles imposed strictly and violently, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) investigates the nature of human existence, particularly for women, in a culture bereft of free will. The novel pertains to both historical and present social challenges, particularly those affecting women. Though there are several research studies on the novel's western feminist perspectives focused on women's identity, status, role, oppression, womanhood, and surrogacy, there is a lack of studies focusing on the Indian perspective of the novel. The present article focuses on the problems of motherhood, its connection with Indian society by analysing the major feminist concerns and the contemporary issues based on the novel. The study explicitly aims to analyse motherhood based on the feminist perspective of Bagchi's *Interrogating Motherhood* and bring together radical feminist theorising in the broad sense of conceptualising social reality from an Indian perspective. The novel reinforces marriage and motherhood's social and biological ideals and its role in depriving female agency. From the Indian radical feminist perspective, the novel reveals women's complicity in upholding male dominance.

Index Terms—motherhood, radical feminism, women, reproduction, male supremacy

I. INTRODUCTION

The only inevitable privilege that every female species has is the ability to procreate. Although childbirth is a biological imperative, women's responsibilities as mothers are traditionally 'malleable' from the moment of childbirth (Maroney, 1985, p.1). They fulfil different roles based on how the social and spiritual narratives identify them as a 'birth mother', 'biological mother' and an 'adoptive mother' (Krishnaraj, 2017, p. xi). All aspects of social systems questions a woman's motherhood caught in the onslaught of patriarchal tyranny. As Krishnaraj (2017) puts it, motherhood contributes considerably to the perpetuation of patriarchy through control over 'reproduction, sexuality, and sexual division of labour' (p. xii).

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a rich source of research in the field of women's issues related to reproduction and motherhood. As speculative fiction, written in 1985, the text reflects the problems of diminished reproductive freedom women face even today. In the novel, Atwood explores how the denial of motherhood affects and exploits women's autonomy, self-identity, and reproductive rights in terms of consciousness and existence. The novel takes place in Gilead, a theocratic dystopian country where most of the population is infertile, leading to a massive reduction in the birth rate, environmental degradation, and sexually transmitted diseases. Procreation and rigid gender norms govern women's life in Gilead. In a society devoid of free will, Atwood's novel explores the meaning of human existence, especially for women.

As Atwood claims, speculative fiction, either built on an alternate history or a vision of the future, offers a perfect setting for questions of otherness, repression, and supremacy, notably in the light of gender and race (Blake, 1992, p. 15). As a speculative genre, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers, in Atwood's terms, space "to solve the problem ... of burning issues which have now become more burning" (Bigthink, 2011) problems of human existence. Moreover, the genre exhibits humans' distinct ability to foresee future events, envision potential ramifications of current acts, and investigate alternative outcomes of past experiences (De Smedt & De Cruz, 2015, p. 2).

Due to society's pre-existing set of patriarchy-rooted ideologies, women's subordination and objectification, sexual exploitation, rape, preference for male offspring, and diminishing their significance in the workplace and at home result

in male-oriented language that devalues women's considerable contributions. Most media projections like advertisements, TV series, movies are an extension of patriarchal ideas and gender stereotypes rather than its disruption (Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015, p. 3). 'For most society', women's sexuality is a tool for producing children, preferably sons (Krishnaraj, 2017, p. x).

In India, feminist thought developed concurrently with social reform and women's rights movements (Gangoli, 2007, p. 6). In the 1970s and 1980s, while Indian feminism coexisted with western second-wave feminism, western feminism also influenced Indian feminism. Indian feminism raised issues such as "land rights; the nature of development; political representation; divorce laws; custody; guardianship; workplace sexual harassment; alcoholism; dowry and rape" in the local context (Chaudhuri, 2012). Many Indian feminists assert that the 80s and 90s movements' emphasis on legal rights and violence against women resulted in a limited and inflexible understanding of sexuality with the 'negative' aspects of women's sexuality associated with discussions of rape, infidelity, and reproductive rights (Gangoli, 2007, p. 73).

In the subject of feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale* works to establish a "new balance," creating new bonds while addressing such issues as reproductive rights, surrogacy, and women's roles in both the family and society (Miceli, 2018). By exploring the work of the patriarchal and theocratic totalitarianism and its motives in obfuscating gender, a radical feminist analysis of Offred and other women in the novel elucidates various ways in which the patriarchal system enforces its domination over female sexuality, socially accepted male-centric notions of motherhood, and its coercive control over women's reproduction, to undermine society's construct of gender. Furthermore, the novel depicts opposing representations of female agency that stretch the boundaries of motherhood while also stresses the challenges posed by controlling male fundamentalists.

The article analyses various aspects of radical feminist thinking in the novel relevant to the Indian context. The paper examines the function of motherhood in empowering women and the nature of being a mere "breeding object," signifying women's helplessness in the face of patriarchy's effective control. In the second part of the analysis, an investigation of the rules and limits employed to control reproduction and motherhood demonstrates 'motherhood as a major form of male dominance, but it becomes necessary to comprehend the specific methods by which this relationship between male supremacy and motherhood operates' (Bagchi, 2017, p. 19). The analysis helps to understand the radical feminist perspective on motherhood, which defines women as part of the reproductive realm. The male productive sphere's domination over the female reproductive sphere builds a perception of sexism. Furthermore, as this speculative genre is a creation of imaginations about what humans' lives might be like, *The Handmaid's Tale* as a work of speculative fiction provides a space to broaden the understanding of the problems of humankind, allowing us to examine all aspects of humanity and its resistance to domination (Gomez, 1993, p. 954).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Motherhood and Reproduction in Dystopian Context*

According to Nan Bowman Albinski, dystopian tales reflect the undesirable aspects of our society, such as violence, pollution, sexism, misogyny, ageism, and alienation (Davis, 1995). In feminist dystopias, women writers use these dystopian conventions and repurpose them to highlight the interplay between gender, hierarchy, biological reproduction, and women's rights by pushing patriarchy, technological advances, and women's subordination to its logical extremities and re-imagine feminist identities (Mahoney, 1994; Specchio, 2018).

Female reproductive freedom, or its absence, has been a significant theme in feminist speculative fiction. The dystopian societies depicted in these books horrify, agitate, and stimulate debate on women's issues (Fitch, 2015). In *The Dialectics of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone envisioned feminist futures to use technological advancements to liberate women from childbearing and patriarchal families. Firestone refers to several of the late 1960s technical breakthroughs as proof that someday technology will liberate women from the biological tyranny of reproduction (Firestone, 1972; Halbert, 2004; Weeks, 2015).

Neyar and Bernardi (2011) recognise the feminist augmentations of parenting and reproduction since the 1970s and its associated alterations in their article "Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction". The analysis exhibits that the feminist discourses have helped distinguish between biological and social motherhood. However, the invention of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) has ruptured feminist ideals of reproduction and motherhood. Female reproductive autonomy has not grown because of ART, contrary to pro-choice rhetoric. Further, the development of reproductive technologies has greatly instigated disparities among women of different classes, races and sexual identities (Sweeney, 2003; Peterson, 2005). Savvina and Lapshin's (2017) study show that reproductive technology in Indian culture is analogous to situations from cyberpunk science fiction, in which high technologies enslave people. These studies elucidate that reproductive technologies have provoked oppression across various spheres regarding women's bodily integrity, contrary to what Firestone perceived.

Furthermore, the depiction of reproductive politics in speculative fiction has undergone significant transformations throughout the years as a result of the advances in technology in the area of human reproduction. Starting with the theme of reproductive control in the wake of population expansion, speculative fiction has explored problems such as climate change and the exploitation of female reproduction due to infertility (Wilson, 2018). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explores this theme of infertility.

B. Patriarchy and Motherhood

Patriarchy has an integral part in maintaining women's subordination and regulating their bodies and sexuality. To uphold this patriarchy, men exert control over women's motherhood (Rothman, 1989; Roberts, 1993). "Motherhood and Sexuality: Some Feminist Questions," a review article by Ferguson (1986), discusses the theories on feminist concerns of how motherhood and female sexuality are intertwined with the structures of the socially and culturally constructed institution of sexual desire related to male domination. Roberts' (1993) study explores the role of racism and patriarchy in the subjugation of women as interconnected systems of dominance. Christ (2016) defines patriarchy as an integrated structure that includes male domination imposed by aggression, control of women's sexuality, and the system legitimised by religion. She believes that patriarchal society is not permanent or global but has emerged throughout history, inextricably linked to wars and other dominance. In her article, O'Reilly (2019) introduces 'matricentric feminism,' a mother-centred form of feminism that expresses mothers' needs and concerns as a foundation for feminist motherhood politics. The idea looks at how women are exploited as both women and mothers.

C. Motherhood and the Handmaid's Tale

Female concerns about reproduction, infertility, and parenthood are feminist nightmares and cultural calamity in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (Rubenstein, 2001). It symbolises a societal vision of reproductive justice intimately connected to the current cultural moment (Fleming, 2018). Also, *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates how the dominant viewpoint excludes mothers' narratives from the historical time since reproduction is regarded as a social need with inherent temporal limitations (Jung, 2017).

Bussy and Vun (2010) examined surrogate mothers' experiences, including their incapacity to provide informed consent, exploitation, and the dangers of commercialisation. The research analysed in the light of speculation offered by *The Handmaid's Tale* and the empirical data collected highlights the need to change surrogacy laws in Canada. Rahman's (2019) study on female identity in *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the significance of primary politics and technology advances in subjugating women's sexual identity and exploiting women's reproductive capacities to promote patriarchy's ideals. Through the analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the thesis offers possible speculation regarding the damaging consequences of patriarchy in women's lives if the current situation persists. Brandstedt (2020) examines *The Handmaid's Tale*'s portrayal of motherhood, the implications of forced conception leading to a lack of maternal love, and motherhood as a form of resistance against hegemony.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The article tries to address the following research questions:

1. How does patriarchy use women's sexuality to deprive their agency in *The Handmaid's Tale* from a radical feminist perspective?
2. What are the relevant Indian feminist issues that are reflected in the novel?

IV. METHOD

The textual analysis method is used to explore the novel's contents that allude to the Indian feminist context.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Masculine Control of Feminine Sexuality: Radical Feminism

Radical feminism aims to investigate the link between social inequality and sexual differences. It recognises women's oppression as primary political oppression. Women are classified as a subordinate class based on sex. Radical feminism also seeks to unite women politically to overthrow the sex-class structure. Radical feminists realise that women are in a constant struggle for power with males. Therefore, they "assumed that equality in an unjust society was worth fighting for" (Rhodes, 2005, p.27), and the source of women's subjugation is man, as he exercises male supremacy, primarily through his masculine control over the female body (Madsen, 2000). While numerous Indian feminists and thinkers admitted the influence of the west, their campaigns opposing male violence against women in India involved a deep and nuanced understanding of the problems of Indian society like rape, dowry and female foeticide (Gangoli, 2007, p.6). In both Indian and western contexts, radical feminism questions the role of male supremacy that oppresses women from all spheres of life. Notably, while early western radical feminist debates concentrated solely on men as the perpetrators of oppression (Thompson, 2001, p.133), Indian feminists recognised women's violence against women, especially regarding dowry, where mothers-in-law exploit perpetrate violence against their daughters-in-law. As a result, women in patriarchal societies who embrace contextually applicable gender stereotypes of women's behaviour – such as sexual conduct, servitude, appearance, relationship status, and motherhood - are 'rewarded' for fulfilling these standards. Consequently, women reinforce their position by disciplining those women who endanger or violate patriarchy's social standards or cultural stability. Therefore, when women subjugate other women in their family or community, they strengthen their position as "carriers of culture" (Gangoli, 2007, p.50). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood's depiction of Aunts in training the Handmaids foregrounds the participation of women in the perpetuation of patriarchy and as 'carriers of Gilead's culture. 'Intimidation, terrorism and fear' enforced upon the Handmaids force them to succumb to

Gilead's norms. From a theoretical standpoint, radical feminism opposes these strategies that keep women in a submissive role.

In recent years, feminist authors have sought to retrieve female perspectives, creativity, and concealed facets of resistance within households, female cultural worlds, and domesticity. However, the patriarchal ideologies of "chastity" and "virginity" – pedestals trying to secure the verdict of rapists at the expense of reinforcing the presumptions that subjugate and victimise women – remain a sharp contrast to feminist understandings of women's sexuality and bodily integrity (Gangoli, 2007, p. 94). For example, the relationship between femaleness and domesticity is expressed chiefly through the institution of marriage, and her role as mother and wife suggests the existence of an inherent affection, forbearing, subservient, and sustaining personality (Miceli, 2018). Offred's life shows that all these presumptions constrain female subjectivity in both mind and body by confining characters only to find happiness through their assigned roles. Society generally thinks that being a woman means searching for a relationship, marriage, and children. Still, Offred never strays from her prescribed roles, for even when she does find love and contentment, it only brings her deep suffering.

The speculative urge offers the opportunity to consider "what if?" which plays into the interest in altering society's perceptions of women. The genre also raises the question of how the average person can perceive their social role in a different light.

VI. DISCUSSIONS

A. *It Is as a Mother That a Woman Gains Some Agency: Interrogating Motherhood*

According to Kerber (1980), "motherhood was discussed almost as if it were a fourth branch of government, a device that ensured social control in the gentlest possible way" (Kaplan, 1992, p.23). Quoting this, Kaplan (1992) notes that the political role of women was carefully contained entirely within a household (p.23). Also, in the social construction of gender, society assigns a significant amount of importance to the biological differentiation of the role of men and women, in which the male as a sperm producer fertilise the egg carried by the female. These societal assumptions then result in the sexual underpinnings of gender that establish men's supremacy and women's subordination (Krishnaraj, 2017, p. x). As a work of feminist speculative fiction, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals these aspects that exert masculine control over feminine sexuality. It depicts a picture of what life might be like if ideological, scientific, and religious fundamentalists continued to wield power. The story portrays a world in which women have lost their freedom of choice and are dependent on the authority figures, mainly the Commander and his wife. The Republic of Gilead claims to protect women by categorising them into biological and social status. The gender norms of Gilead impose a particular way of life on these women, such as strict dress codes and activity schedules. The Aunts reinforce these norms to train the handmaids. As a dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* examines how far governments and societies would go to regulate people's behaviour. The novel also explores the pitfalls of religious extremism and the inequality of the sexes with severe implications.

The reproductive capability of the handmaids defines their only subjective position valued only until the moment of childbirth. Offred, restricted from personal, intimate, sexual, and independent activities, has only two choices: reproductive function and bodily existence. Caught up in her past and present life, she suffers from the double-edged life of freedom and oppression. Offred asserts,

"I'm happier than I was before. It's something to do, for one thing.
Something to fill the night, at night, instead of sitting alone
in my room. It is something else to think about.
I don't love the Commander or anything like it,
but he is of interest to me, he occupies space,
he is more than a shadow" (Atwood, 1996, p.168).

Dumped into the domestic space appropriate for reproduction, the reproductive domain of the handmaids ensures the reproduction of Gilead's lineage merely through procreation and by guaranteeing social reproduction by maintaining the existing social norms (Bagchi, 2017). As mere bearers of "viable ovaries," the handmaids, especially Offred, expresses her angst about pregnancy and motherhood. J. Brooks Bouson (2001), in his essay, *The Misogyny of Patriarchal Culture in The Handmaid's Tale*, observes that Offred's strong desire for pregnancy hides the hidden fantasy that forcing someone to get pregnant has a drastic impact on one's ability to take control of one's life and can put one's well-being in danger (p. 48). In the Indian context, underprivileged women suffer the anxiety of motherhood due to the lack of family support and financial independence during their pregnancy. Whether it is a natural or forced conception, women bear the sole responsibility of motherhood. According to Maithreyi Krishnaraj, only 10% of Indian women receive prenatal care. The handmaids exert their bodies throughout the "ceremony" and after, without any expectation of immediate recompense. As a child's mother, they don't 'own' the child even as a 'product' of their labour. Krishnaraj claims such plight as 'the tragedy of motherhood'. She further questions,

"If all labour creates value, why does not women's reproductive labour?" (Krishnaraj, 2017, p. xviii).

Each woman in the story perceives womanhood differently: First, Offred's mother, who exhibits independence and thoughtfulness; then, Moira, who represents spirited rebellion; and finally, Offred herself, whose former motherhood serves as a model of failure. Women in Gilead must aspire to traditional gender roles, such as those defined by male and

female stereotypes. The confinement to the gender norms indicates the text's relevance of male domination in Western and Indian contexts.

A significant portion of the narration depicts the complex interlink between power and mortality when Janine's child is born. If the mother produces a healthy child, she will be powerful and influential; she will face death if she cannot do so. The incident of the novel depicts India's preference for sons. The mother's agency comes from her role as a mother of sons. Bagchi, in *Interrogating Motherhood*, also highlights how the mother of sons determines a woman's position as a mother. The book depicts the predicament of motherhood trapped between 'power' and 'powerlessness' (Bagchi, 2017, p. xxi). Mitra Mirzayee, in her article, "Female Identity in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood", notes,

"While Gilead dramatically reduces the exploitation of women's bodies by mandating modest dress, it exploits their bodies for motherhood. Ceasing to be individuals with legal rights, they are reduced to resources" (Mirzayee, 2019, p. 119).

In Gilead, while the men constantly put the women down, the women themselves treat each other terribly. The Wives, the Aunts, and the Marthas are among the allocated woman oppressors in the novel, piled with interrelated events. These women take command to keep a check on one another, possibly out of spite, entitlement, or allegiance to the Bible's concept of male superiority. Despite the collateral damage that patriarchal oppression inflicts on women, they enforce male demands despite the rigid governance of patriarchal oppression (Privett, 2007, p. 265).

Offred's life exemplifies how ascribing gendered norms to the body and mind propagate women's oppression. As Bagchi (2017) notes, motherhood carries with it a connection to emotional and affective experiences as well as personal bonds integral to women's experiences in their day-to-day lived reality (p.1). Offred's short-lived motherhood in her past and the denied motherhood which comes out of the coercive sexual act turn down her agency to experience the primary emotion of womanhood. Also, addressing contemporary issues of motherhood, Fleming (2018) propounds, "In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the end of motherhood appears dangerously as a real biological possibility as infertility has become the norm but also the end of the social convention of heteronormative motherhood looms as a terrifying prospect for patriarchal systems" (pp. 28-29). Women's bodies reduced to mere sources of reproduction and repopulation due to environmental degradation hints at the future possibilities. Nevertheless, the novel underlines and compounds women's physical oppression, although women wield an extraordinary power of motherhood that men can never hope to emulate. Further, *The Handmaid's Tale* elucidates how the social and gender norms enslave women both mentally and physically.

B. Women's Subjugation to Societal Standards

Various feminist movements in India, particularly the fight for legal intervention on women's oppression, met significant resistance from solid patriarchal institutions like the family and prevailing social structures. Patriarchal institutions and religious ideologies mainly formed based on gender demonstrate the subordinate position of womankind (Gangoli, 2007, pp. 1&5). Acceptance of male-centric social ideals threatens women's progress. While the last section focuses on the debates within the feminist community about the gendered experience of motherhood in Offred's life, this part looks into the effects of social principles and values on gender norms by examining social standards and ideologies in reinforcing institutional gender expectations. The most prominent social framework which women succumb to is marriage and motherhood. As Bagchi points out that traditional and contemporary coverage of the concepts of family, marriage and motherhood support conventional patriarchal control over women by engendering gender ideals within them (Bagchi, 2017, p. xxii). To resolve the issues related to marriage and motherhood, addressing the gender ideals inherent in these frameworks is necessary, as they involve emotional and physical struggles. Women strive to maintain personal and social adherence to their prescribed role, establish a sense of individuality, and be free from violence. Women who transgress these roles succumb to domestic violence (Gangoli, 2007, p. 2).

C. Deprivation of Agency: Marriage and Motherhood

According to Lerner (1987), women's reproductive capability helped men treat women inferior. Slavery and servitude of women for reproduction was the earliest form of oppression. In the Indian context, marriage promoted as the primary eligibility to attain motherhood and fulfil the society's expectation to become a mother, especially for sons, put women under distress. Johnson and Johnson (2001) study shows that patriarchy develops power over women through violence. In India, the majority of women face violence in their marriages. Women's social standing, dowry, and the impact of western capitalism are some of the reasons. Apart from the patriarchal family structure that forces women to bear a child immediately after marriage, the commodification of women's wombs through surrogacy has a significant impact on the lives of economically backward women. The underprivileged women, in this sense, suffer financial, psychological and physical oppression. The findings of Majumdar's (2014) study of academic engagements with surrogacy concerning feminist rhetorics on motherhood, romance, and agency reveal that the theoretical and ideological frameworks proposed by previous surrogacy research are insufficient to address the current "transnational position of framing and positioning reproductive choice" (p.296). The paper also emphasises the need to focus on the interpretation of choice within the context of surrogacy.

Relating to these issues, *The Handmaid's Tale* questions the place of wives in the family and marriage institution and women's role in surrogacy. Though Offred did not marry the Commander, her role as a handmaid living under the same roof and Serena Joy's jealousy over her relationship with the Commander demonstrates the conventional marriage setup. Offred becomes the unappreciated outsider in the 'household'. The Handmaids have to fulfil only their reproductive

responsibilities. On the contrary, the scriptural depiction of the wife's maid does specific duties, such as preparing special meals and providing assistance to the wife. In other words, marriage in the novel conveys cultural importance rather than as a reproduction system. The relationship between the Commander and Serena Joy shows a marriage devoid of sexual attraction, love, affection, or household responsibilities. The hierarchy of women based on domestic roles and reproductive roles within Gilead's family construct establishes the manifestation of supremacy among them. For instance, though wives are the highest in the pyramid, they envy the handmaids for having a sexual relationship with the Commanders. In contrast, the handmaids who come next to Marthas envy the Marthas for controlling the kitchen space. As she passes the kitchen, Offred says,

The kitchen smells of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers; although my own mother did not make bread. It smells of me in former times, when I was a mother. This is a treacherous smell, and I know I must shut it out....the knife she uses is sharp and bright, and tempting. I would like to have a knife like that (Atwood, 1996, p. 53).

The desire for ownership of the domestic space denied to Offred and her past role as a mother establish the deprivation of agency. Offred observes,

"She envies me the walk. In this house we all envy each other something" (p. 53).

The jealousy exhibited by the women of the household represents the authoritarian use of marriage and family as a regulated order, restricting "women to the reproductive domain of 'home' and denying them access to the 'world'" (Bagchi, 2017, p. 2).

Serena Joy's dissatisfaction with sexual life and pointless imitation of household commitment like gardening and knitting indicates her marriage as a sign of prestige and recognition for feminine virtues, alongside the chaos of her personal life. Offred and Serena Joy's spitefulness, envy, and wickedness underscore the threats of validating the patriarchal norms. Gilead's exclusively masculine standards for defining womanhood and femininity disadvantage women of the household and demand them to safeguard these meanings of femaleness at all costs. In order to preserve these definitions, each woman fights fiercely for her domestic autonomy and dominance. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia's comment on the wives, "You must realise that they are defeated women. They have been unable ...". The contrived social responsibilities imposed on the wives questions their self-identity. While Marthas and the Wives submit to male supremacy, Aunts perpetuate them. On the other hand, the Handmaids, especially Offred, finds her agency by violating the household norms and developing a relationship with Nick and the Commander, though she does not love them.

Gilead's household enhances a dynamic of power, as Marthas, Wives, and the Handmaids characterised by their domestic roles force themselves to establish their significance within the household. Margaret Atwood depicts motherhood in a horrific light, as the handmaids bear the burden of coercive reproduction and pregnancy for the child they do not own. In addition, however, the Handmaids bear the physical and emotional burden of sexual exploitation—lack of agency both in personal and social life questions their self-worth and self-identity.

VII. CONCLUSION

Speculative fiction aspires to reflect various ways of life through a range of circumstances highlighting the problems of humankind and the remarkable parallels that characterise modern social challenges. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* elucidates the issues of feminine identity controlled by patriarchal totalitarianism and the impact of the social construction of gender norms of womanhood and motherhood on the life of Gilead women. The novel ascertains the problems faced by women in real life under the control of patriarchal structures. For instance, in India, motherhood standards set by the religious and social frameworks deprive women of exercising their agency. Also, as Bagchi puts it, 'the complex interplay between autonomy and the collaboration with ruling hegemony produces broad movements' (Bagchi, 2017, p. 1). Though most women submit to the system, the May Day organisation that functions against the totalitarian regime by helping women escape from Gilead gives the hope of liberation.

Further, the novel elucidates the effects of male supremacy on validating women's reproductive ability. As a bearer of submission and resistance, Offred submits to the social standards by fulfilling the Handmaid's duty and resists the hegemony through her secret relationship with Nick and the Commander. Atwood's portrayal of patriarchal domination based on biological destiny and religious conventions informs the perils of women's involvement in the upholding of patriarchal institutions and promotes the radical feminist understanding in resolving divergent discourses of femininity; in this scenario, Offred's life foregrounds the impact of intimidation and resistance towards it.

The novel also highlights the function of marriage and motherhood as a contrived system that oppresses women through biological and social ideals and explores the uncertainty of female existence. In the Indian context, the novel hints at the problems women face and may face in the future related to their reproductive rights. From the Indian radical feminist perspective, *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes women's participation in perpetuating male supremacy. The Aunts' domination over the Handmaids guarantees patriarchal motives of violence and oppression in Gilead. Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* stresses the means for identifying and combating totalitarian structures and rejecting oppressive institutions regardless of personal losses.

REFERENCES

- [1] Atwood, M. (2009). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage. (Originally published 1996)
- [2] Bagchi, J. (2017). *Interrogating Motherhood Theorizing Feminism*. Edited by M. Krishnaraj. Sage.
- [3] Bighthink. (2011). *The Challenge of Speculative Fiction*. YouTube. Retrieved June 21, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sETy7giC4AE>
- [4] Blake, M. R. (1992). *Speculative fiction and Mothering: Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* [Master Thesis]. National Library of Canada.
- [5] Bouson, J. B. (2001). The misogyny of patriarchal culture in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Modern Critical Interpretations: Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* (pp. 41-62), Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.
- [6] Brandstedt, N. (2020). *The Complexity of Motherhood in Dystopian Novels : A comparative study of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Lois Lowry's The Giver* [Bachelor Thesis]. Halmstad University, Sweden. Retrieved April 30, 2021, from <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hh:diva-44202>
- [7] Busby, K., & Vun, D. (2010). Revisiting *The Handmaid's Tale*: Feminist theory meets empirical research on surrogate mothers. *Canadian Journal of Family Law* 26(1), 13-94.
- [8] Chaudhuri, M. (2012). Feminism in India: the tale and its telling. *Revue Tiers Monde*, 209 (1), 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rtm.209.0019>
- [9] Christ, C. P. (2016). A new definition of patriarchy: Control of women's sexuality, private property, and war. *Feminist Theology* 24(3), 214-225.
- [10] Davis, M. L. (1995). *Sexuality and Reproduction in Dystopian Fiction* [Master Thesis]. McMaster University, Ontario.
- [11] De Smedt, J., and De Cruz, H. (2015). The epistemic value of speculative fiction. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 39(1), 58-77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12035>
- [12] Ferguson, A. (1989). Motherhood and sexuality: some feminist questions. *Hypatia* 1(2): 3-22.
- [13] Firestone, S. (1972). *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. USA: William Marrow and Company.
- [14] Fitch, D. (2015). *From The Handmaid's Tale to Bumped: Dystopian Fiction and American Women's Reproductive Rights*. Research Thesis. The Ohio State University, USA.
- [15] Fleming, J. M. (2018). *Away from the End of Motherhood: Sites of Haunting in the Social Imaginary in Lemonade and The Handmaid's Tale* [Research Thesis]. Digital Commons @DU.
- [16] Gangoli, G. (2007). *Indian Feminisms: Law, Patriarchies and Violence in India*. MPG Books Ltd.
- [17] Gomez, J. (1993). Speculative fiction and black lesbians. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18(4). <https://doi.org/10.1086/494852>
- [18] Halbert, D. (2004). Shulamith Firestone: Radical feminism and visions of the information society. *Information Communication and Society* 7(1), 115-135.
- [19] Johnson, P. S., & Johnson, J. A. (2001). The Oppression of Women in India. *Violence Against Women* 7(9), 1051–1068. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778010122182893>
- [20] Jung, S. (2017). Motherhood as boundaries of life in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Fifth Child*. *Margaret Atwood Studies* 11(4), 4-16.
- [21] Kaplan, E. A. (1992). The psychoanalytic sphere and motherhood discourse. In E. A. Kaplan(Ed.) *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*, (p.23). Abington, Oxon: Routledge.
- [22] Krishnaraj, M (Ed.). (2017). Foreword. In *Interrogating Motherhood*. Sage.
- [23] Lerner, G. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [24] Madsen, D. L. (2000). *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*. Pluto Press.
- [25] Mahoney, E. (1994). *Writing So To Speak: The Feminist Dystopia* [Doctoral Thesis]. University of Glassgow. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- [26] Maroney, H. J. (1985). Embracing motherhood: new feminist theory. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 9(1), 40-64.
- [27] Miceli, B. (2018). Religion, gender inequality, and surrogate motherhood: A new family arrangement in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In A. Carosso & E.S. Zehelein (Eds.) *Family Matters 2.0: Literary And Cultural Representations Of The American Family In Transition*,. Cosmo.
- [28] Mirzayee, M. (2019). Female Identity in the *Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. *World Scientific News*, 123.
- [29] Mujumdar, A. (2014). The rhetoric of choice: The feminist debates on reproductive choice in the commercial surrogacy arrangement in India. *Gender, Technology and Development* 18(2), 275–301
- [30] Neyar, G. and Bernadi, L. (2011). Feminist perspectives on motherhood and reproduction. *Historical Social Research* 36(2), 162-176.
- [31] O'Reilly, A. (2019). Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 10(1&2), 13-26.
- [32] Peterson, M. M. (2005). Assisted reproductive technologies and equity of access issues. *J Med Ethics* 31(5), 280-285. doi: 10.1136/jme.2003.007542.m
- [33] Privett, K. (2007). Dystopic bodies and enslaved motherhood. *Women: A Cultural Review* 18(3), 257-281. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040701612403>
- [34] Rahman, F. (2019). *Of the Mother and the Whore: A Depiction of the Contemporary Socio-Political Events and their Impacts on Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake* [Bachelor Thesis]. Barc University, Bangladesh.
- [35] Rhodes, J. (2005). *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency From Manifesto to Modem*. State University of New York Press.
- [36] Roberts, D. E. (1993). Racism and patriarchy in the meaning of motherhood. *Journal of Gender and the Law* 1(1), 1-38.
- [37] Rothman, B.K. (1989). Motherhood: beyond patriarchy. *Nova Law Review* 13(2), 481-486.

- [38] Rubenstein, R. (2001). Nature and nurture in dystopia: The Handmaid's Tale. In H. Bloom(Ed.) *Modern Critical Interpretations Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, (pp. 11-20). Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.
- [39] Savvina, O. and Lapshin, I. (2017). The impact of assisted reproductive technologies on modern society the example of India, In W. Strielkowski (Ed.), *Advances in social science, education and humanities research: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Humanities (ICCESSH 2017)*, (pp. 1127-1130). Atlantis Press.
- [40] Specchio, A. (2018). Eutopizing the dystopia: gender roles, motherhood and reproduction in Murata Sayaka's Satsujin shussan. *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 4(1), 94-108.
- [41] Sweeney, C. A. (2003). *Assisted Reproduction and Reproductive freedom: Whose Freedom and at What Cost?* [Doctoral Thesis]. Loyola University Chicago. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- [42] Tartaglia, S., and Rollero, C. (2015). Gender Stereotyping in Newspaper Advertisements: A Cross-Cultural Study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(8). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022115597068>
- [43] Thompson, D. (2001). *Radical Feminism Today*. Sage.
- [44] Weeks, K. (2015). The vanishing Dialectic: Shulamith Firestone and the future of the feminist 1970s. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114(1), 173-174.
- [45] Wilson, N. (2018). *Body Politics and Reproductive Rights in The Handmaid's Tale and The Carhullan Army* [Bachelor's Thesis]. Dalarna University.

Maanini Jayal V. is currently doing her PhD at VIT Chennai, Tamilnadu, India. She completed her under-graduation and post-graduation from Madras Christian College. She has great research interest, and her present area of research is Feminist Speculative Fiction. She is also interested in Regional Literature, Feminist Studies and Indian Writing in English.

B. Sivakami is working at VIT Chennai Campus, Tamil Nadu, India, as Assistant Professor of English. She has secured her PhD in English language Teaching at Bharathiyar University, Coimbatore, India and M.Phil in African- American Literature. She secured an M.Ed degree in 1997. She has presented many papers at various conferences and got her papers published in different journals. She has recently got her paper published in an International Journal of Language and Linguistics, a Scopus indexed journal. She has under her belt three and more than ten years of school and college teaching experience, respectively.