

The Dystopian Scourge of Women in Gilead Society as Portrayed in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract—*The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's most renowned dystopian novel, is one of those works whose memorandum appears to transcend period. It has been analyzed to demonstrate the presence of various layers of feministic and dystopian cultural concepts in the novel. A qualitative investigation of secondary resources reveals that the situation of women in the novel is portrayed as a reproach to the patriarchal construction of the contemporary world. The women characters in the novel position as testimonies of the subjugation that unescapably concentrates them, helpless against a societal and political organisation that interprets the position of women as a reproductive machine. According to Atwood's novel, by representing the repercussions of the revolution in the United States through the fake theocracy and totalitarian law insists, women must serve the commanders of Gilead society for sexual and biological reasons. Infertile women and working slaves should both serve as servants to the elite couple; the Handmaids addresses both historical and contemporary cultural issues, particularly those affecting women. This study further points out the oppressive, matriarchal position and sexual cruelty, diminishing the autonomy of women.

Index Terms—dystopian culture, oppression, theocracy, gender politics, patriarchal society

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, and has since been acknowledged as one of the prominent works representing a dystopian society with the new world order. The novel revolves around the portrayal of a theocratic and totalitarian state, the Republic of Gilead, which has taken the place of the United States of America, where gender roles are made prominent by dividing society into males and females. The Handmaids are required to reproduce for the elite strata of the Gilead community. These little circles of Handmaids are subjected to lead a wretched life of indignity and ignominy under the surveillance of the High Commander. Offred, the protagonist of the novel, shares her daily life, and gradually *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes a tale of rebellion and a quest for freedom and identity. However, such a simple synopsis of the novel does it no justice as each turn of the page promises new information about Gilead and their new world order that is responsible for enslaving the women to a subservient position.

The study specifically focuses on the feministic persecution concepts present in the novel and their true significance in demonstrating a world that falls under the unquestioned authority of patriarchy. The novel, in a way, addresses second-wave feminism, marking the thin line between what may be perceived as utopia and what is dystopia (Malak, 1987, p.10). The loss of intellectual property and individual freedom confines Offred and other women of the Red Centre under the illusion of betterment (Joannou, 2001, p.145). The ideologies spread by Gilead offer the promise of salvation from violence and rape against women and consider the confinement of women under the control of male Commanders as the right order of the world. Hence, the study aims to investigate all the elements of feminism in the novel and present an overall feministic concept that can illustrate the novel accurately.

"I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born" (Atwood, 1996, p.72). These words efficiently eloquent what a woman's life implies in this twentieth-century dystopia. Women acquire independence as mothers, says Bagchi (2017). The uterus, contrary to common opinion, is not an "inert receptacle," and it is capable of either admitting or rejecting sperm invasion depending on the woman's will. As a consequence of the Society of Gilead's totalitarian patriarchy and male dominance regime, motherhood has become weaponized.

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For instance, the modern family unit is dependent on the monthly rape ritual, known as the "Ceremony," which is modelled after the biblical representation "she shall carry upon my knees," which necessitates the attendance of the Commander, the Wife and Handmaid, and is horrific in nature. It is a summary of how women in Gilead are treated in society as a whole: with contempt, as objects, and as property (Cavalcanti, 2000, p.166).

II. OBJECTIVE

The objectives of the study are: i. to investigate the representation of feminist elements in the novel, ii. to demonstrate the relationship between feministic concepts and the dystopian society of the novel, iii. to elaborate on the nuances existing in the social and political system presented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and iv. to analyse the position of women and their quest for freedom in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study has followed a qualitative approach to fulfil the objectives of the study. Analysis of various secondary materials gathered from university libraries and a targeted search on online databases has been conducted. The qualitative approach has helped the study to methodically analyse various elements of feminism and feministic concepts present in the novel. The inclusion-exclusion criteria for a systematic sampling method have also been adopted to maintain the reliability and validity of the study.

IV. MOTHERHOOD AND REPRODUCTION - A DYSTOPIAN PERSPECTIVE

The Nan Bowman Albinski argues that certain negative features of modern societal problems like "violence, pollution, sexism, misogyny, ageism, and alienation," are reflected in dystopian fictions (Davis, 1995). According to Mahoney (1994) and Specchio (2018, p 94-108), feminist dystopias draw attention to the complex relationship between gender, social rank, the ability to reproduce biologically, and the rights of women by taking patriarchy, technology, women's subjugation to its rational extremes and re-imagining women's identities as feminists.

Reproductive rights for women or the lack thereof, is a common topic in feminist science fiction. These works' depictions of dystopian nations are terrifying, infuriating, and provocative when it comes to discussing the status of women in society (Fitch, 2015). Shulamith Firestone, in her book *The Dialectics of Sex*, proposed feminist futures in which women would employ technology advances to free themselves from motherhood and patriarchal households. There were a few technological advances in the late 1960s that Firestone used as evidence that technology would one day liberate women from the oppressive biological pressures of reproduction (Firestone, 1972; Halbert, 2004; Weeks, 2015, p.173). In an article, *Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction*, Nayar and Bernardi (2011, p 162) acknowledge the changes brought on by the feminist enhancements of the 1970s that there has been a focus on parenting and reproduction. The research shows how feminism has contributed to defining biological motherhood apart from motherhood in a social context. However, the development of Assistant Reproductive Technology (ART) has shattered feminist conceptions of parenting and reproduction. Contrary to pro-choice claims, ART has not increased women's autonomy in reproductive matters. Disparities among women of various socioeconomic backgrounds, racial compositions, and sexual orientations have been exacerbated by the advent of reproductive technology (Sweeney, 2003; Peterson, 2005, p.280). According to a research by Savvina, (2017, p. 224) the use of reproductive technology in Indian culture is comparable to dystopian scenarios from cyberpunk literature, in which advanced technologies are used to control and subjugate human beings.

Contrary to Firestone's assumptions, these studies show that the spread of reproductive technology has prompted the oppression of women's physical integrity in a variety of contexts. There has been an increase in the representation of reproductive politics in speculative fiction, and it has been changing over time with advances in reproductive technology. Speculative fiction has tackled issues like the exploitation of female reproduction relating to infertility and the changing climate. Though there have been campaigns against population explosion, infertility treatments are also on the go (Wilson, 2018). Atwood never fails to examine the issue of infertility in the text.

V. POLYGAMY OF PATRIARCHY AND MOTHERHOOD

The dominance of men over women besides the control of women's bodies and sexuality are two of patriarchy's fundamental functions. The patriarchy is maintained when males dominate reproduction among women (Rothman, 1989; Roberts, 1993). Ferguson's, (1986) review article, *Motherhood and Sexuality: Some Feminist Questions*, delves into the feminist ideas of concern surrounding the intersection of motherhood and female sexuality with the social and cultural constructions of the institution of sexual desire in relation to male supremacy. Roberts' (1993) research examines how white supremacy and male patriarchy contribute to women's subordination. According to Christ (2016), patriarchy is a system in which men aggressively assert their dominance over women, men regulate the system and women's sexuality is justified through religious authority. She explains that, Patriarchal society is neither universal nor inherent, universal nor innate, nevertheless rather, it takes developed over time in response to various forms of authority and violence. O'Reilly, (2016) offers "matricentric feminism," a mother-centred kind of feminism which conveys mothers' wants and

apprehensions as a basis in support of feminist motherhood politics. The concept investigates the double exploitation of women as individuals and as caregivers.

VI. MOTHERHOOD AND CRITICISM

Feminist nightmares and cultural disasters collide over women's worries about reproduction, infertility, and parenting (Rubenstein, 2001, p.14). As such, it represents a social vision of reproductive justice that is intrinsically linked to the present cultural moment (Fleming, 2018). Because reproduction is seen as a communal requirement with intrinsic temporal restrictions, the stories of mothers are ignored by the dominant culture, as seen in the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Jung, 2017, p. 5). In a 2010 study, Bussy and Vun looked at the realities of becoming a surrogate mother, including the challenges of providing informed permission, the risks of exploitation, and the potential for commercialization. Evidence from both theoretical perspectives presented through the novel and practical research shows that Canada's current surrogacy regulations need to be updated.

The importance of general politics and technological advancements in enslaving women's sexuality identities and manipulating women's reproductive capacity to strengthen patriarchy is highlighted in Rahman's (2019) research which primarily discusses the subject of female identity in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This article, which is based on an examination of *The Handmaid's Tale*, makes speculative claims about the harmful effects of patriarchy on women's lives if the status quo is not changed. Brandstedt (2020) analyses the character of mothers in *The Handmaid's Tale*, considering how a lack of maternal love stemming from forced pregnancy is shown in the novel and how motherhood may be used as a weapon against oppression.

VII. PATRIARCHAL POWER AND SEEDS OF OPPRESSION

This novel is set in a new world located in New England where the political and social power is under the totalitarian authority of Gilead. Gilead represents the patriarchal power of the society that indicates the possibility of tyranny if not protested (Lafren, 85). In essence, Atwood draws attention to the oppressive system of the new world that relies on a yet devastating past. The overthrow of the democratic government was established in Gilead amid corruption, pollution, violence against women, and a dreadful decline in the birth rate. Atwood presents a dystopian society that readily oppresses women under the illusion of providing them protection against violence and crime. The seeds of oppression are sowed by Gilead not only by an illusion of protection but also through fear and hegemonic supremacy.

Offred's life is with full of the acts of violence and oppression that women had to undergo to survive in the new world. A society that is ruled by theocratic ideologies exploits gender inequality to survive and thrive. In other words, without the fear of oppression and violence, the patriarchal power is unable to oppress the women of the society. Gilead is quick to present traditions and laws that separate the old life of these women to take away their identity (Stillman et al., 1994, p.78). Therefore, society in general as presented in the novel reflects the possibilities of oppression that can occur in the real world as well.

VIII. SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN IN *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Women's position in the novel is portrayed merely as a political instrument, to be used as a machine for reproduction. Atwood weaves the narratives around her support of the First Wave Feminism that recognised the value and individual authority of women (Neuman, 2006, p.860). Women have been treated as nothing more than objects for reproduction, always under the supervision of the Eyes that threatens their life at the tiniest of indiscretion. Women's rights for reproduction have been under the feminist agenda for centuries, striving to obtain authority over their own bodies (Calvi et al., 2020, p.63). Authority over the question of reproduction is considered a step further towards attaining individual identity. Patriarchal society uses gender politics to exercise authority over women, without acknowledging their choices as an individual.

The women are presented with limited freedom in this new dystopian society. The restrictions of Offred's existence are prominently represented through her relationship with her Commander and Nick simultaneously. The women are not allowed to gain information, therefore restricting their intellectual potency to further oppress them (Cooper, 1995, p. 49).

The oppressive nature of patriarchy as presented in the novel starkly criticises the faulty historical traditions. As the protagonist is faced with various difficult decisions in life she begins to reflect on the hopelessness of her position. Physical and mental freedom both are restricted by the traditional totalitarian government dividing the society into two distinct parts: the oppressor and the oppressed within such a society the existence of an individual has no freedom of expression and those who dare to rebel against it are met with a tragic end.

Including sex in the Ceremony serves to reinforce pre-existing gender roles in society. In this kind of sexual encounter, the woman is expected to take a submissive role while the man take charge. According to Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist, the goal of prohibitions prohibiting intercourse in a patriarchal society is to reinforce men's power over women and keep women in subjection. Consequently, she draws the conclusion that these laws "operate by generating gender" (Andrea Dworkin, 2007, p.189). When it comes to sexual relations, men are the actors and women are the props. Both sexes' sexual conduct during the Ceremony is indicative of their respective social standing. In this civilization,

women are expected to be subservient while males have greater power and are more likely to survive. Furthermore, the Ceremony now includes more overt reinforcement of these positions. The Handmaid sits idly while the guy is always on his feet. He is the one with the power to take initiative, while she's stuck in a perpetual state of passivity.

Another religious practice that Gilead has adopted is confession. Its primary function is to provide evidence that the Handmaids' previous behavior was socially unacceptable. The rules and regulations of the totalitarian regime are superimposed upon women to build a new society that can encounter the issues of a declining birth rate. However, the question of the declining birth rate is presented as a question of whether it is the autonomy of women to reproduce or not (Urquhart, 2018, p.14). Therefore, the position of women as oppressed and subservient to the patriarchal political and social system illustrates the inability of women to acquire the power and autonomy that is their birth right.

IX. GILEAD'S TOTALITARIAN RULE AND ITS IMPACT

The novel is depicted from the perspective of Offred whose recollections found tapped in a cassette after the fall of Gilead that are found and analysed by a professor. Throughout the novel, the Handmaids are forced to live in restrictions under constant fear. The fate of rebellious women in the new world order is presented with violence and uncertainty (Ketterer, 1989, p.211). In essence, the power struggle is muted by the constant threat of the totalitarian government. The life of women in the dystopian society is lived as sexual objects to fulfil the demands of the state by producing children. Ideological conditioning of the handmaids has made them subservient and complicit that regards rape as a 'Ceremony' to be participated in without questioning (Montelaro, 1995, p.240). The presentation of rape in the novel, presented as 'the Ceremony' further degrades the identity of women. Authority over the body is entirely obliterated and the role of women is structured around their ability to reproduce. Cataldo develops the view of a critical dystopia in *Breaking the Circle of Dystopia: Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*, where she analyses the author's writing style and notes that "Atwood intentionally blends different genres into the dystopian skeleton, such as fairy tale - as is clearly detectable even in the title—the history, the autobiography, the realistic narrative, and even the epistolary novel" (Cataldo, 2013, p.158).

Joining the rebellion against Gilead leads to prostitution, death, or exile disturbingly generating immense fear among the women, and increasing their helplessness in the system. The wives of the commander who wields more authority than the handmaids portray a faulty matriarchal system as well that is also under the operation of patriarchy (Kiss, 2020, p.59). However, the willingness to oppress shown by the wife of the Commander, Serena Joy, reveals that the role of women in a patriarchal system is equally damaging as the patriarchal rule alone. Therefore, the portrayal of women in a society that views women as instruments for reproduction creates a dystopia that is unable to provide freedom. In other words, freedom is granted to the men of the society whereas gender inequality has taken an important role in constructing a society that rejects the authority of women.

Fulfilling the political agenda of reproduction is further illustrated by the corrupted nature of the leaders of this new society. The Commanders participate in multiple sexual relationships with the handmaids justifying their actions through corrupted ideologies. The social upheaval of second-wave feminism is where the identity of women is redefined beyond the constraints of social and cultural codes (Mitra, 2019, p.120). Women expect to serve as an instrument for the advancement of civilization, willingly renouncing the scope of freedom and self-expression. Therefore, the position of women as mentioned in the novel takes a critical turn when the characters seek to rebel against the established patriarchal government of Gilead. The horrifying conclusion of the rebels further demonstrates the issue of having autonomous power. The exercise of hegemonic power over the female population of the country in the guise of furthering civilization takes central focus in the novel.

The relationship formed by women in this new society is monitored by the wives of the Commanders. The bonds of family and domesticity are broken down in the novel to establish a theoretical totalitarian society (Relf, 1991, p.132). Concepts of feminism present in the novel not only appear on the societal front but also on the psychological front of the women characters. The women characters are left to wonder in fear whether their conduct is in line with the established traditions of Gilead. The inability to demonstrate compliance leads to horrific circumstances for the handmaids and the essence of freedom is restricted to them. The dystopian society is in constant conflict of interest with the concept of feminism, denoting the root inequality stemming from the lower levels of patriarchy. In essence, the inability to gain autonomy over their own lives drives the oppressed population of the state to rebel against the dominant power.

The power struggle between the oppressed working class and the dominant power, as mentioned in Marxism can be seen here in a different light. The struggle for a societal order demanding equality is present, however, the oppressed class consists solely of women. The political power vested in the hands of the patriarchal and theocratic males constitutes a society that rejects the existence of women as living beings (Herrera, 2019, p.186). The vehemence of this statement is found in noticeably found in the plot of the novel as the women characters are forced to live as instruments of sex. Their capacity to reproduce is marked as the point of measuring their value as human beings living in a society. The stark relationship between a disturbed political foundation and notions of sexism is ever-present in the novel (Dopp, 1994, p.45). The portrayal of such a dystopian society by the author has revealed a pointed criticism against the nature of patriarchy and even distorted matriarchy residing in the dominant society. The criticism against the established Gilead society is marked further by its fall at the end of the novel. However, the lack of address regarding the position

of women by the Professor indicates the inability of the society, at any point in time, to truly understand the precarious position of women.

X. REPRESENTATION OF FEMINISTIC CONCEPTS IN A DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY

The novel presents the portrayal of a dystopian society that is under the dominance of totalitarian and patriarchal power, rendering the women population of the society powerless. The elements of feminism present in this society are essentially under the control of the dominant power. The utilization of women as a political instrument demonstrates the oppressed position of women and the uncertainty of their existence. The question of women's liberation is thwarted by the complexity presented in the novel in terms of preserving their lives or fighting for freedom. The handmaids, exposed to sexual oppression and exploitation are sanctioned by the state, appropriating the act of rape and violence against women (Cooper, 1995, p.49). Therefore, the disturbing condition of women in the new world order established by Gilead provides an insight into the complexities of gender oppression and gender politics.

During this period of political instability, feminist pioneers questioned 12 widely held social beliefs. In a 1792 publication, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* Mary Wollstonecraft challenged the stereotype that women are inherently emotional. In an essay Mill (1869) fought against biological predestination, a concept popularized by the Victorians. Also, Anthony challenged the constitutionality of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause (1873), which addresses the concerns of the suffrage of women. These three ground-breaking feminists represent the humane concern that fuelled the fight for women's suffrage. The term "feminism" was officially adopted as the name of the movement seeking racial and gender parity in politics and the economy in (1895). After the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in the year of 1920, the rise of the women's movement lay inactive for the next forty years, marking the end of First-Wave Feminism (Hole & Levine, 1971).

The novel further addresses the differences in privileges enjoyed by the Commanders and the Handmaids. The Handmaids are trained in the new ideological doctrines that surmise their existence to basic activities of reproduction to serve the state (Minico, 2019, p. 38). Without the possibility of reward or individual freedom, women have been held prisoner against their will, to forego 'the Ceremony,' rejecting the humiliation and exploitation faced by women in the name of tradition. The constant struggle for survival and existence is marked by the psychological turmoil of Offred as she suffers from uncertainty. The life which she desired drives her to accept the fate that the author does not reveal at the end. Yet one is left with a tragic feeling associated with the fate of those who dare to go beyond the orders of Gilead.

The concept of feminism is further entwined with politics and language and information. The intellectual abilities of women are suffocated to prevent questioning (Foley, 1990, p.57). Such acts have been common in the history of Christianity's Old Testament itself when women were not allowed to read and gain knowledge. The language used is also mostly "we" instead of "I", thus creating a deliberate barrier in the path of forming an individual identity (Hogsette, 1997, p. 269). The inherent politics of the dystopian society has been represented as a force to degrade the position of women. Therefore, the continuous struggle between the feministic concept and the dystopian society is ever-present in the novel indicating that the position of women may only be uplifted with a violent struggle against the dominant power.

XI. POSITION OF WOMEN AND THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM

The oppressed position of women and the quest for freedom has been represented in the novel in various forms. Each character of the handmaids is connected to the idea of women's liberation. The role of women in the novel has been degraded to the status of reproductive machines. The male-dominated institutions and traditions imposed upon women whose primary role is to reproduce for the state deliberately destroys the autonomy of women over their bodies. The position of women in such a degraded state is further illustrated by the cruelty women show against women (Roozbeh, 2018, p.17). The women characters that are in-charge of advocating for Gilead traditions are shown in the light of extreme cruelty and strictness against the freedom and individuality of women. The exclusion of women is therefore furthered by the matriarchal authority, indicating the separatism politics employed by Gilead. Aggression against women is portrayed as a viable option for solving problems such as the decline in birth rates in the state.

The women characters in the novel are further brainwashed by ideological training that is imposed upon their minds, idealising the new rules and regulations of the world. A distinct influence of patriarchal elements is seen on the female identity in the novel. The futility of the life of the women character in the novel forces them to acknowledge the importance of liberation. Despite the uncertainty of fate that awaits them if the rules of Gilead are broken, they still strive to quest for their freedom. The rise of class consciousness among the handmaids and the inability of Offred to accept it readily portray the imposition of fear on their minds (Moradi et al., 2015, p.77). This further indicates that the rise of class consciousness is necessary to unravel the fabric of Gilead. Therefore, it can be stated that the position of women despite being heavily oppressed and violated in the quest for freedom is simultaneously existent in the narrative.

XII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The topic chosen for the study has provided ample feminist elements and concepts within the narrative of a dystopian society that portrays the position of women and questions the authority of patriarchy. However certain limitations have

been faced in the process of research as the position of Atwood cannot be obtained clearly in terms of feministic concepts.

The limitations of the study can be marked as the inability to incorporate the vast knowledge existing on the topic. A specific area of focus should have been more beneficial for the study.

XIII. CONCLUSION

The paper analyses various feministic concepts present in the novel. The potency of gender inequality in the dystopian society of the novel uses women and their bodies as political instruments to gain supremacy. Women now have little choice but to accept their subordinate role in today's male-dominated consumer culture. The female gender is seen as "other" or "second sex" (Beauvoir, 1949). They are nothing more than a commodity for the satanic pleasure of men. Feminists around the world work to eliminate cultural obstacles and eradicate power dynamics that are skewed against women in order to ensure that all people are afforded the same rights. Women authors are working to expand the boundaries of their gender in literature and beyond. Atwood's celebrated feminist novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is a symbolic representation of sexual slaveries, The subjugation of women and the erosion of their sense of self in a male-dominated, chauvinist society the struggle to forge one's own identity, and exploitation in a consumer society in which the female body is viewed as a commodity.

Atwood accomplishes her goal of spreading her writing's message to the suffering masses, the public, and sensible people by her keen observation and characterization of women's characters, depicting the destructive maelstrom of male dominion. Atwood makes it clear in this work that a woman's pain and subjection to men will continue if she submits to male dominance without any means of fighting back. The presentation of such a powerful and complicated concept within the novel brings forth the ambiguity of social and political structure that is inherently patriarchal, present in Gilead. The strength of women is questioned as to the extent or intensity of their quest for freedom relies on their ability to accept the uncertainty, death violence, and a life of prostitution that awaits them. Therefore, it can be concluded that the position of women is in a constant struggle against the patriarchal power that dominates society. Furthermore, the oppressive position of matriarchy is also discussed in the study to illustrate the critical position of women in such a society.

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