

In the Name of Feminism: A Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margret Atwood is one of the most prolific and versatile writer, who is an immensely influential voice in the contemporary world literature. Atwood's representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women's bodies in art, the social and economic exploration of women, as well as women's relations with each other and men. *The Handmaid's Tale* a dystopian survival text explores themes of women in subjugation and the various means by which they gain admission to one social agency or other. In this novel Atwood continues her explorations of gender and identity as well as domestic politics. The novel tells the story of Offred - the patronymic she has been given by the new regime in an oppressive parallel America of the future and her role as a Handmaid. The Handmaids are forced to provide children by proxy for infertile women of a higher social status, the wives of Commanders. This paper focuses on the consequence of patriarchal control and "traditional" misogyny as well as to the matriarchal network, and a new form of misogyny: women exploring women as portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Key Words: subjugation, identity, handmaids, patriarchy, matriarchy

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman"- (de Beauvoir 283)

The women writers across the world, who emerged towards the close of the 20th Century, exhibit a thematic and technical maturity and they effectively communicate and have intensely apprehended "feminine sensibility". Margret Eleanor Atwood is a versatile genius of this kind. Atwood's work offers thematic diversity: Canadian national identity, relations between Canada and the United States, relation between Canada and Europe, the Canadian wilderness, environmental issues, biotechnology, human rights issues, and feminist issues, are come

prominent themes in her work. Atwood's representations of gender explore the social myths defining femininity, representations of women's bodies in art, the social and economic exploitation of women, as well as women's relations with each other and with man. Atwood's novels may be categorized in the following way: the three novels *The Edible Woman*, *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle* concerned with women and men, last; another three of her novels namely *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *Robber Bridge* are concerned with women and women, and *Life Before Man* is concerned with both. Atwood's first five novels, in particular, demonstrate the range and

complexity of her representations of sexual power politics, and provide a solid foundation for understanding the evolution of her feminist sympathies.

The Handmaid's Tale, her dystopian vision of America under a theocracy is a speculative fiction which explores themes of women in subjugation and the various means by which they gain admission to one social agency or other. The novel set in the Republic of Gilead, the biblically inflected nation created by Atwood, was not favorable for women. The brutality towards the women is the central theme of the novel. Gileadian society was a late 20th-century version of the United States as Atwood envisioned it developing at the time of its writing (1985). In this society, women feared physical and sexual violence, and despite long-running feminist campaigns (approximately 1970–2000 within the text), they had not achieved equality. Feminist campaigners like Offred's mother and Moira were persecuted by the state. Radical feminism had teamed up with Christian fundamentalism in campaigns against pornography. In addition, mass commercialization had reached a nadir of "fast-food" and "home delivery" sexuality. Women outside of prostitution in "the former times" were subject to a socially constructed vision of romantic love that encouraged serial monogamy in favor of men's social and sexual interests.

The Handmaid's Tale tells the story of Offred- the patronymic she has been given by the new regime in an oppressive parallel America of the future and her role as a Handmaid. The Handmaids are forced to provide children by proxy for infertile

women of a higher social status, i.e. the wives of Commanders. They undergo regular medical tests, and in many ways become invisible, the sum total of their biological parts. Bottom of Form Offred remembers her life before her inception in Gilead, when she had a husband, a daughter and a life. The discourse of Gilead only exists as means of maintaining power in the hands of men. The Commander, who is most likely to be dedicated to its values, is the worst offender of them all. He tries to justify Gilead to Offred, but at the same time he visits prostitutes and uses his powers to make Offred his mistress. Subsequently, he also cheats on his wife. The ambiguity about who is really running Gilead is noticed by Barbe Hammer.

We see no rulers in Atwood's fictional world, but everyone in it from Commander Fred to his domestic servants, from the doctor who inspects Offred to Offred herself is caught up in a network of surveillance and counter-surveillance. The novel constantly emphasizes the omnipresence of the scrutinizing gaze; the word "eye" is everywhere; the secret police are called "eyes," and the farewell greeting "under his eye" refers to the divine gaze but also testifies to the fact that everyone is indeed under the eye of someone else. (8)

There are no leaders who have absolute power, but all must, officially, adjust to the Gilead discourse and law.

The Handmaid's Tale was inspired by Second-Wave Feminism and the genre of speculative fiction. Indeed, blending these

elements was the genesis for Atwood's portrayal in *The Handmaid's Tale* of women exploiting women, and the consequent destruction of female solidarity. Preying on the social confusion and unrest stemming from the Women's Liberation movement the patriarchy of Gilead isolates women and then relegates them to the domestic periphery. Reacting to the increasingly strained gender relations of the liberal American culture that preceded it, the Republic of Gilead emerges as the new nation state. In Gilead, all men are *not* created equal: some men are second-class citizens and all women are third-class citizens. To be successful, the patriarchy of Gilead must re-assert male dominance. Women are seen as potentially threatening and subversive, and, therefore, require strict control. They are banned from employment and then forbidden to own property or access assets, rendering them virtual prisoners within their homes. Women's imprisonment paves the way for Gilead's institution of a caste system, which, as previously discussed, is superficially designed to simplify the lives of citizens by dividing them into classes with clearly delineated standards for behavior, dress, and responsibilities. However, as in all dystopian societies, this caste system is actually a tool of oppression, particularly for women.

The result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny, and "traditional"

misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order. The patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women through enforcing the division of domestic labor. The issue between the right of the woman to control her own body and the right to life for the foetus, is an important issue in feminist theory. In Gilead, this issue has been decided and women like Offred should forget any other state. "People's identity is supposed to coalesce with the coded concepts and the predicated state by which they are defined. Handmaids are supposed to merely think of themselves 'as seeds', as objects with a procreative function that should save the world from threat of sterility, as 'two-legged wombs' (Staels 457). As a result, the child is what is important and the Handmaid is only a tool. Women should no longer think that they decide over their own body. It is now a state controlled object. While Steals' description of what they are certainly is correct, the discourse of Gilead disguises this fact. The Handmaids are supposed to see themselves, not as objects, but as part of a sisterhood, which is something the 'Aunts' try to indoctrinate. Comparing this to the society "before", the resemblance is quite striking. The discourse here disguises the values men have about women, by claiming that female equality exists officially. At the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers (also known as the Red Centers), the Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids in the matriarchy of Gilead. The Aunts are entrusted with the crucial duty of training the Handmaids because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the patriarchal order. In full collusion with

the male leaders of Gilead, the Aunts stop at nothing to subdue and domesticate the Handmaids during their initiation.

In the first scene of the novel Offred remembers one of her first nights at the Red Center: "the lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their belts" (Atwood 14). In the semi-darkness of what was formerly a high school gymnasium, Offred and the other Handmaids-in-training mourn their lost culture, their lost lives, their lost freedom, and their lost selves. They are now a national resource to be protected and regulated. The Handmaids have lost their humanity; they are now nothing more than potentially productive ovaries. However, by calling the Handmaids "sacred vessels" and "ambulatory chalices" the Aunts attempt to imbue their mission and status with honor (Atwood 136). Indeed, the Aunts try to convince the Handmaids that Gilead has actually restored respect for women, who are now valued and appreciated because they are "holding the future in their hands" (Atwood 65). The Aunts represent themselves as motherly mentors to the Handmaids, guides on the path to successful assimilation into Gilead. They present the mission of Gilead as: "Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (Atwood 171). Staels points out that: "[i]n the *Handmaid's Tale* Offred retrospectively witnesses her personal victimization as a Handmaid in Gilead's theocracy. The totalitarian regime forces the inhabitants to submit to the power of one

(moral) law, one true religion, one language code" (475). The leaders of Gilead view the Handmaids merely as bodies to be used for the good of the nation. The patriarchy has twisted a prominent feminist premise into a tool that enables women to oppress each other.

The unspoken rules, which were discussed in the introduction, return in this passage from the novel; although assaults on women were not legal, the attitude among men in the society "before" resulted in women constantly having to worry about being assaulted and raped. The discourse contained male values about women that were degrading, and though the freedom for women is very limited in Gilead, the need of always having to take measures not to be attacked is a type of restricted freedom as well. The Handmaids are told stories about these conditions to justify their situation. They are told that "[m]en are sex machines [...] and not much more. They only want one thing" (153). Again the Gilead discourse returns to the fact that men cannot be blamed for their behavior since it is something "natural". The Handmaids are told that: "It's up to you to set the boundaries" (55). This is part of changing the "truths" in Gilead, just like the "truth" of sterility. Within the confines of the Red Center, abuse is predominately psychological. Humiliation is a favorite technique of the Aunts. Janine, another Handmaid-in-training, repeatedly suffers public humiliation. For Aunt Lydia, the sexual freedom women struggled to attain during pre- Gilead times was the source of their victimization. Women foolishly flaunted their bodies, tempting men to sexual

violence. An immodest woman is punished by God, according to Aunt Lydia, to "teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*" (Atwood 82). According to the Aunts, as spokeswomen for the patriarchy of Gilead, rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are consequences of women possessing sexual freedom and leading men on. If psychological avenues are unsuccessful, the Aunts use physical violence to control the women in their charge. Offred recounts a few instances of violence. Her friend Moira, a militant lesbian she knew before the days of Gilead, suffers the Aunts' wrath. Since hands and feet are unimportant to the Handmaids' reproductive mission, the Aunts target these areas for torture; one beating left Moira unable to walk for a week. Nevertheless, Moira continues to resist the Aunts' authority, the only woman in the Red Center who does so. Moira finally escapes from the Red Center. The manner of her escape—taking off her state-issued Handmaid robes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt—symbolizes her rejection of Gilead's attempts to define her identity.

Offred's technique of revealing the patriarchal male discourse is by describing Gilead using the language and "truth" of the new regime. The issue at hand here is whether this "truth" is portrayed from a solely critical standpoint. I would argue that Offred is aware of a different "truth" but presents it in a way that creates a hesitancy of whether she has been "affected" by the Gilead "truth". In other words, it is unclear whether Gilead discourse has led her to view its values as somewhat acceptable. An example of this is when she is at the doctor's

to test her fertility since her function as a Handmaid is merely to conceive a child. The doctor offers to impregnate her himself as her commander might be sterile. This is forbidden but the risk of getting caught is minimal. Despite this she hesitates:

'I could help you', he says. Whispers. 'What?' I say [...] 'I could help you. I've helped others' [...] '[t]he door is locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his.' [...] 'Most of the old guys can't make it any more [...] or they're sterile.' I almost gasp: he said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. 'It's too dangerous,' I say. 'No I can't.' The penalty is death. I put on my clothes again behind the screen. My hands are shaking. Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation. (70-71)

It is not likely that fear alone would affect Offred since if she does not get pregnant in three attempts with her commander she will be declared an 'unwoman' and sent to the Colonies. She shows no sign of hesitation based on the actual sexual act with the doctor. It would hardly be any different (or more disgusting) for Offred than the sexual act with the Commander. Thus, it is reasonable to say that it is actually the values of Gilead, or patriarchal discourse, which has intruded on Offred's way of thinking. This aspect has been described by Hilde Staels as "the discursive law of the theocracy". She distinguishes this from Offred's "personal, aesthetic discourse with which she counters the authoritarian speech

of Gilead” (456). Subsequently, despite the fact that the theocratic values have affected her, she also acts out of the “truth” of another discourse. As a result, she does not report the doctor for his sexual suggestion, something that a woman who knew no other values might have done. She might not have any real belief in the theocratic values, but they affect her life and actions none the less.

Sometimes she is aware that she acts according to the Gilead discourse, like when she goes to the store with Ofglen and they encounter some Japanese tourists.

Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before. I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. (38)

What used to be Offred’s way of dressing in the time “before” has now become something that is not done. She thinks it is wrong to dress in that manner and to wear makeup. She cannot help herself having that opinion. The discourse of Gilead is too powerful. However, she is aware of it and she knows that she actually does not want to think like that, yet it is unavoidable.

Furthermore, what is equally interesting is an issue that lies within the area of discourse, namely: knowledge. The one who is in control of knowledge is in control of

power and subsequently controls what can be said and claimed. This is power and Foucault concludes that “[t]here are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to” (*Essential* 331). Hence, the “subjects to”, or women like Offred, are not allowed to read in order to keep them from gaining knowledge. The televised broadcasting she is allowed to watch is state-controlled and broadcasts only government-friendly content and at the same time it does not reveal any negative news of the wars the republic is involved in and it does not show any news of an organized resistance, which is what Offred is most eager to know about. About the news she says: “who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none” (92). At the same time she has to fight against a part of her that wants to give in to the “truth” of the regime. She describes the propaganda-elocutionist: “He tells us what we long to believe. He’s very convincing. I struggle against him. He’s like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and a face job. At the same time I stay towards him, like one hypnotized. If only it were true. If only I could believe” (93). It is obvious that Offred is struggling with two different “truths”. She knows that what they say on television is probably false, but a part of her wants to believe it. It would be easier just to give in and accept that “truth”, just like it would be easier just to let the doctor

impregnate her, but she cannot do it. Yet, it would mean that she would regain control of knowledge, of power. Subsequently, Offred cannot provide the real "truth" in her story because she does not know it. Her "truth" is therefore limited to the discourse of Gilead, which shows the power of the regime.

The patriarchy has institutionalized adultery, under the guise of reproduction. Both Wife Handmaid/Mistress are required to co-habit the house and must collaborate in the procreative mission of the household. Conception is the focus of family life in Gilead. Ildney Cavalcanti discusses the dynamics of Gileadean households in his article "Utopias of/f Language." As Cavalcanti observes, households rely on "the monthly rape 'Ceremony' [which] follows the scriptural 'and she shall bear upon my knees,' and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. "It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead"(Atwood 176). The Ceremony is a socially condoned *menageatrois*. Offred reflects that "it has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena"(Atwood 105). As Offred lies on Serena's canopied bed, her arms restrained, and her skirt hiked up to her waist she reflects, "This is not recreation, even for the Commander" (Atwood 105). Hence, sex has become a rote duty for all parties involved. To endure the Ceremony, Offred must detach from her body. Detaching from her body enables her to detach from her

emotions. Offred learns to view the Ceremony as merely a part of her social duty. Serena, on the other hand, does not have the luxury of detachment. Her participation in the Ceremony requires her to watch her husband having sexual intercourse with another woman, an experience that is upsetting and insulting, to say the least. This disparity leaves Offred wondering, "Which of us is it worse for, her or me?" (Atwood 106). Serena always cries the night of the Ceremony, but silently. Offred believes Serena does so because, "she's trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us"(Atwood 106). The Ceremony illustrates Serena's failed intentions to establish domestic harmony by collaborating with the patriarchy. The culture of Gilead is based on fear and suspicion; women are rewarded for spying on and betraying other women. Gilead, then, is indeed a culture of female treachery.

The Handmaid's Tale comprises Offred's record of life within the matriarchy of Gilead. As she performs her rote duties, under the strict system of female control, she struggles to come to terms with her multiple losses: culture, family, identity, agency, and, most importantly, companionship. Though the Aunts insist that the household is a place of camaraderie, the domestic hierarchy thrives on mutual dislike and disapproval. There is no reprieve from the purposeful and lonely life of a Handmaid; nothing must deter her from her mission. Offred is allowed to attend a few social functions, such as Birth Day celebrations and women's Salvagings; these activities reinforce her role in Gilead. The Birth Day celebrations remind Offred of her duty to her household,

her Commander, and her country. The Salvagings remind Offred of the consequences of any failure to follow the rules and regulations of Gilead. All of her other activities are designed to keep her body in prime reproductive health: daily exercises on the floor of her bedroom, daily walks to market, and her scheduled baths. As Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen assert in their study of female leisure spaces in dystopian novels, this "strictly controlled access to leisure reinforces the Handmaid's enslavement" (Atwood 145). The Handmaids are doubly enslaved; first, by the patriarchy that developed and then implemented the caste system of Gilead, and second, by the matriarchal system instrumental to this new social order. Within this system of dual oppression the Handmaids are severely constrained. Daniels and Bowen describe their daily life thus, "they have no choice regarding the treatment of their bodies; no permission to select the individuals with whom they pass time; [they have] no control over their lives" (Atwood). Though Offred desperately wants to rebel and reassert her agency, the

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matriarchy ensures that she and the other Handmaids remain isolated and powerless within the domestic hierarchy that exhibits the most serious consequence of women placing their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women: the destruction of female solidarity resulting in the exploiting of women.

In the Name of Feminism the actual exploitation of women occurs. The feminism is actually mend for supporting women but when we go through Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* it leads to a real agency. In the work motherhood is exploited – Offred and all the women in red center are the victims. The cruelty towards them starts from the first day on Red center. Aunts harassed maids when they didn't cooperate. They lost their name, their costumes and all their identity. Only pregnancy makes the maids acceptable and after the delivery they are not allowed to see the babies. Handmaids are considered as two-legged womb. In the name of God the society misuses the women and the irony is that it is done by women also.