

**THE QUEST OF THE FEMININE: A POSTMODERN FEMINIST
ANALYSIS OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S
TALE***

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Abstract

The woman in this novel represents a fraction of the minority in the real world, yet it posits the relevant conjecture of contemporary extremism. The Handmaid's Tale provides the readers with a construction of the female self within a system of utterly annihilating patriarchy. A woman's rogue journey away and yet into a hopeless dystopia has never been iterated. Hence, the ontology of this paper probes to analyse the narrator of Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as a distinct voice of the woman at many intersections, building the foundations for many more to come and stand on the shoulders of an era-defining movement.

Key Words: *Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, Feminism, Intersectionality, Dystopia, Utopia.*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is an explicitly political novel which became an immediate bestseller when published in Canada in 1985 and the United States in 1986. The novel emerges from the long traditions of Utopian fiction, particularly the anti-utopia or dystopia, which has become a common feature of this century given the political and literary landscape. Atwood also joins the ranks of the writers of specific nature who converse about the feminist potential in these Utopias and dystopias and thus, it is the objective of this paper to analyse the narrator of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a distinct voice of the marginalised, through the lens of feminism and deconstruction.

Innumerable critics of *The Handmaid's Tale* have chosen to describe the narrator as a heroine, a developing consciousness, or an emerging woman. The reader comes to understand what Simone de Beauvoir meant when she introduced the concept of one rather than being born a woman who actually "becomes a woman" with the construction of Offred. (Beauvoir, 15)

Some have looked to the pre-Gilead period (the present) as a happy (or tolerable) alternative to the Gileadean nightmare, while others have interpreted the Gileadean society as, in part, a by-product of cultural feminism. Needless to say, a few have found hope or assurance in Gilead's obvious demise before 2195, the date of the epilogue's academic conference. But these interpretations are unseated by a close reading of the text and attention to its dystopian context, which demonstrates the need for sustained political, and feminist consciousness and activity among women by constantly examining what may happen in their absence.

As the title suggests, *The Handmaid's Tale* consists primarily of a story told into a tape recorder by a Handmaid in Gilead in the late twentieth century. Appended to the

narration is a concluding epilogue, the partial transcript of an academic conference in 2195 on the (by then) defunct Gilead, in which the keynote speaker, Professor Pieixoto, reports finding, transcribing, and arranging the tapes and presents his interpretation of them. Atwood's text arises several cracks in the power structure- a love affair, and the purported existence of an anti-government movement, and escape or change seems possible. Therefore, the narrative utilises many fundamental elements common in dystopias but the author ensures the scope of a quest in her protagonist. (Stirling, Johnson, 73)

The Handmaid's Tale presents totalitarian politics and repressive laws. Gilead is always at war with external enemies (and, according to its evening news, always winning); it faces scarce natural resources; those who do not fit the society's norms are re-educated, expelled, or executed. Like *Brave New World*, Gilead is a hierarchical society with highly differentiated roles, status rankings, and activities, but Gilead is also a distinctive novel that follows a typical dystopian plot: in the face of a powerful regime, the narrator follows the dystopia's norms; then, some possibilities for resistance only when grafted onto patriarchal attitudes and imposed it throughout society. Gilead is devoted to reproduction- white, Christian, misogynist, stratified reproduction specifically. Fertile women are rare (men by patriarchal definition are not infertile), and Commanders, the rulers of the society, want children. If a Commander's wife is unable to bear children, a fertile woman must be brought in to be impregnated by him, by force if necessary. These women are the Handmaids, trained in indifference, self-abnegation, and service, prepared only for pregnancy, their status and purpose made evident by their uniforms and their names (formed by "Of" plus the first name of their current Commander). To legitimate and enforce the Commanders' power and their exclusive access to Handmaids, Gilead's infrastructure requires a highly developed, complex structure of power, system of indoctrination, and division of labour, which is executed with the combined force of younger men and older women trained as the *Aunts*. Though not a seamless and frictionless dystopian system the Commanders break Gilead's rules at Jezebel's, the power elite's whorehouse, and, as Offered comments, "everyone's on the take" (235). The reader must pay close attention to the construction of different 'types' of women in this establishment. Beauvoir's theory is coming to quite a literal plain with the negation and reconstructive nature of these processes as Gilead's power over their subjects is extensive and intense.

"Yes, Ma'am, I said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, the voice of a monotone, the voice of a doll. She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implementation. Only with their hands." (Atwood, 56).

The reader must read the aforementioned paragraph and think about the idea of an education. Taking de Beauvoir's concept and relating it with Foucault calls *Discourse* opens up a new window into the very complex dynamic of the author of the text itself- Margaret Atwood. Foucault defined 'discourse' as the context of speech, representation, knowledge, and understanding, as it defines what can be said, studied and the processes of doing so. Here, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, one observes how Gilead created specific discourses of religion, sickness and rationality and used those concepts to subjugate and form a new hierarchy of women. They not only divided men into Commanders and workers, but women into Wives, Aunts, Marthas, and

Handmaids for the upper classes. For the lower classes, the word used was “Econowives”. The priest used the discourse of religion, of sin and salvation to preach particular norms of behaviour in domains like marriage, sexuality, family and charity. The physician used the discourse of sickness and health to prescribe particular kinds of lifestyles- healthy eating, having intercourse in certain positions etc. And the psychiatrist constructed particular kinds of behaviour as “deviant” through the discourse of rationality.

Offred tries to retain some sense of herself as a person and as an individual differentiated from others, but that self breaks down inexorably, and in the most minute detail. At first, she vigorously and confidently refuses to call the room she sleeps in "mine," because it has no key for her to assure her privacy and exclude others and because it is at best a transitory way station for her (2:11). But eventually she labels it "mine" (8:65) precisely when her private life is being compromised. Then she joins herself in the false and splintered community of the Commander's household. She sees as "ours" (20:149) the house of the Commander and Serena Joy. (Napikoski) Eventually even her skin becomes "ours," as the Commander watches her putting on the skin moisturiser during one of their late-night furtive meetings (25:203). Finally, near the end of the tapes, she accepts Gilead: "Everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in. . . .They can do what they like with me" (45:368; and 41:348-49). The de Beauvoir theory holds a clear shine in this exact moment when the Subject has broken the ‘other’ to the point where she no longer wishes to fight back. She simply and very objectively accepts her fate.

The narrator has a horrendous ordeal, in an equally if not more, horrendous world. The notion seems to be devised as a response to a drastic decrease in birth rates. Men in power have taken complete control of women, in body and mind, just not the soul. Their entire aim is to insure an increase in the declining birth rates. The woman's individualism is repressed, and the men also prevent any physical freedom. The women are owned by the state (reminding the readers of the literal saying- women come with the house), by the men and by corruption; their bodies become nothing more than a means to provide new life. They are degraded to a state of sub-human existence; they are no longer people, as Atwood writes,

“But who can remember the pain, once it's over? All that remains of it is a shadow, not in the mind even, in the flesh. Pain marks you, but too deep to see. Out of sight, out of mind.” (Atwood, 175).

Atwood suggests that the women here are merely reproductive organs, ones that can be bought and discarded without thought, mercy or conscience. This is reinforced on every level; the language particularly delivers Atwood's intentions on a revealing scale. The names are a mark of the oppression; the protagonist is called “Offred.” She is of Fred, as in, she belongs to him. The women are assigned names that are not their own; they are dubbed with the disgusting title of “Handmaiden,” taken and justified from the Bible. And by leaving their names behind or rather stripped off of them, they are left with very little of their former lives. The women are left to simply be objects to be used, controlled and destroyed at the slightest hint of nonconformity in such an absurd system.

The culture created in the entire text is evocative of one that could exist. The way the men attempt to justify its existence is nothing short of terrifying. They make it sound perfectly normal. Well, not normal, but an idea that could be justified to a people. Not that it is justifiable, but the argument they present has just enough eerie resemblance to a cold, logical, response to make it seem probable in its misguided vileness. The totalitarian elements provide an image of a people that will endure anything if they're provided with a glimpse of liberty. The small degree of liberty the Handmaids think they have doesn't exist: it's an illusion, a trick, a shadow on the wall. They're manipulated into believing it and become frenzied in the face of it. It is the ultimate means of control in its nastiness.

Therefore, this paper concludes that all the forces of Gilead use not only the discourse of physical and legal power of the state but also the mental subjugation of the subaltern to suppress a specific feminine self of the woman. It is that 'self' that they fear and, subsequently, the 'self' they shall stomp on. Offred presents the reader with a bleak and yet an essential narrator; a woman who has known freedom and liberty, rights and privileges of gender and sexuality, who has been with men other than her husband, and someone who knew what it was to be loved; she goes from all that to being quintessentially a sex slave. Her dark and intelligent narration, while she explores what stays of her truer or more real self amongst this new version, is what provides the foreground for papers like these to analyse the subjugation of the marginalised. This is where Atwood's awe-inspiringly power of persuasion resides. By portraying such a bleak situation, she is not only able to fully demonstrate what life could be like if we suddenly followed the misogynistic views of the old testament with fierce intensity but also paint what the world would look like if Women were to have no power whatsoever. This is reinforced by complete cultural destruction and a lack of any form of self-expression for the literal half of a society's population. They would not be able to read or write and they would not be able to speak their minds. It would even go as far as to condition and instil in them the wrong message so powerfully, that they cannot completely form a single independent thought. Toad fuel to the fire, the women in this novel, know no difference. Sure, the narrator of this remembers her past, but she's not allowed to. She is blatantly and repeatedly forced to repress any sense of individual sentiment. The woman in this novel represents a fraction of the minority in the real world, yet it posits the relevant conjecture of contemporary extremism, and why this is exactly the reason for the constant contact with the feminine.

Works Cited

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