

**A Feminist Postmodernist Dystopia in Margaret Atwood's
*The Handmaid's Tale***

S. Rajalakshmi, M.A., M. Phil., B.Ed.

Asst. Professor

Department of English

Thanthai Hans Roever College (Autonomous)

Perambalur

Tamilnadu India

sriramarraji24@gmail.com

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a typical dystopian novel, presents a gloomy future vision and repression of women leading down to the reduction of their image to child producing machine in a totalitarian, theocratic state. The concept of dystopia connotes something which is extremely repulsive that smells of that rancor of modern society which mankind has created in the course of making this life extremely consumable. The term dystopia which is the antonym of utopia conjures up such an ugly picture of the so-called modern society which forces us to introspect and measure the degree of degeneration of the modern world. Our wisdom and knowledge in every walk of life seem to be challenged when we speculate about certain darker and starker realities of life that is related to the abominable exploitation of women and gender politics on one hand, atrociously ruthless power politics and deep-rooted corruption in several spheres of our socio-administrative set-up on the other.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Dystopia, Repression, Exploitation, Victimization

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a dystopian novel focusing on some predominant feminist issues such as reproduction, anti-abortion, infertility, power politics, ruthlessness in theocracy, suppression of women in a male chauvinist society, exploitation of woman as a 'plaything' used for absolute sexual pleasure, 'as a two-legged womb,' and as a consumer object of the postmodern world to be enjoyed and thrown denying her even the basic human rights.

It is relevant to mention first the concept of dystopia as described by M.H. Abrams. The term 'dystopia' (bad place) "has recently come to be applied to works of fiction, including science, which represents a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination" (THT 218). *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian-novel, projects the culmination of the feminist issue where the identity of a woman has been dragged down to the nadir hardly leaving any scope for its retrieval. It is a deeper and more expansive vision of bleak future for women. As called by Lucy M. Freibert a

“political- science fiction” (280), the novel is set amidst war and corruption, and devastating political power across the fictional republic of Gilead. It envisages a bleak scenario of a totalitarian state of theocracy reflecting abnegation of moral values.

As a postmodern feminist novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* also concentrates on the evils of political system which aggravates the women's anguished plight and despicable exploitation. Instead of playing a crucial role in the emancipation of women, the state Fundamentalist Christian coup in mid 1980s near Boston in Massachusetts, reverted to the brutal aspects of ill-treating women, disenfranchised them, denied their rights of education, confiscated their credit cards, destroyed homosexuals, religious sects, and abortionists. The government took extreme steps in the process of reform. In an innovative method of redress, old women, Jews, and non-whites were resettled in radioactive colonies. Linda W. Wagner Martin views the novel as the prediction of “the horrors of cultures so frightened by normal sexuality that it codified and prescribed all such procreation and created hierarchies of life and death around it. It is a brutal horrifying culture” (THT 4).

The protagonist Offred undergoes extreme torture, pain, anguish and utter humiliation, in the power of commander who keeps her for her fertility, much to the grudge and chagrin of his wife, Serena Joy, who is a gospel singer and conventionalist. The narrator in her diary records the following, the telling is in the form of a memoir, supposed to have been recorded in thirty audio cassettes, “ ... approximately thirty tape cassettes, of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc”, an information furnished in the “ Historical Notes” of the novel, vividly portrays the vigilance, the dark , dismal condition in which she and her friends were kept. “There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen ...” (THT 3).

She has to live a life, rather one can say she exists in the midst of her bisexual friend- Moira, her consoling friend Nick and sadists Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth. She has to swallow the bitter insults of Aunt Lydia, her sarcasm and her sadistic remarks without demur. “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia.

The narrator's movements are restricted; the double irony being that she is a handmaid to the commander's wife, where as the commander exploits her fertility, under the mean, calculated, awful vigilance of the aunts and Marathas who have no sympathy for her plight. True to her helpless predicament, she calls it “limping and mutilated story.” What is most provocative is that, in the name of religion, in the name of Bible much crime and sin are perpetrated in society arrogantly converting laws for their advantage. Women are punished because since biblical times they are considered as transgressors. So, they are made subservient to their husbands. “For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing ...” (THT 207). Women are made to believe that they are unholy and unclean if they don't serve the purpose of their creation. Women are seen as still perpetrating Eve's vices persistently by Gileade a theocracy, the so-called state-in-

religion or religion-in-state, so they are not trusted with any authority or power. But they have been charitably appropriated for breeding purposes, instead of terminating them.

The novel is a prognostication of the ruthless scenario of dogmatic, authoritarian and despotic form of repression in the name of religious values which is instrumental for the social isolation of women, depriving them of their basic human rights such as education, job, name and speech, reducing them to subservient gender roles of wives, wombs and whores. Howell remarks: "Atwood's feminist concerns are plain here but so too are her concern for basic human rights" (THT 128).

The dichotomy of freedom and security is at stake where woman is marginalized as merely a sexual being, relegating her intelligence to the back stage. She is thought of as exploiting herself and her body if she proves to have a higher intellectual calibre. Society subjugates women and curtails their freedom that engenders fear of security in them. The enslavement of women on the pretext of protection is an indication of malevolent andro-centrism implacably showing their incapability to protect themselves. Aunt Lydia statement that "Men are sex machines... They only want one thing. You must learn to manipulate them, for your own good." (THT 144) bears a didactic overtone, teaching women to reassert their rights and gain self-esteem and confidence thereby redefining their roles in the society as against their subserviently submissive nature.

The Handmaid's Tale shows the paradoxical situation in that it is a critique of authority on one side and on the other it is complicit with that authority that feigns powerlessness in order to wield power. Offred possesses analytical intelligence; so, as a reader of the social signs in her environment, she narrates them in discourse of freedom and power which is normally considered as prerogative of men; yet she is in the handicapped position of a Handmaid. "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen is envy; Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another centre Motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal" (THT 196).

There is a postmodern paradox in the incompatibility between Offred's mastery of language and her position of subjugation that she occupies as a Handmaid. It can be argued that it is Atwood's presumption that when such narrative intelligence could be subjugated and enslaved, anyone can be. It also surmises her speculation that the oppression that Offred experienced was evil of power wrought upon society. The voluble narrator speaking confidently and precisely about the silence she endured presents a prefabricated paradox to increase the macabre sinisterness of the situation. As she unfolds her story and manipulates the reader deliberately, she is perceived to be caught in the web of Gileadean power politics.

Women were forcibly denied access not only to press, freedom and pen but also food. Their food is indubitably sanctioned by the authority with the view point of keeping them healthy and fertile. Emma Parker comments: "One of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food" (THT 354). *The Handmaid's Tale* can also be read as a celebrated depiction of desperate coping mechanism by which endangered women survive, outwit, and undermine the

coercive forces, devalued enslavement, self-abnegation, torture, death and outright genocide. Reading and writing are considered as punishable felonies in Gilead. Women are denied books, paper, and pens; even to scribble is a clandestine venture. Their arms and legs are chopped off if they are caught reading or writing; as such things are ruthlessly considered inessential for reproduction. Klarer points out in “Morality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” “Women from all classes of society... are excluded from any kind of written discourse. These measures aim at giving the male leadership all the advantages of a highly developed text processing culture and of using these advantages purposefully against the women who are condemned to morality” (THT 131).

To sum up, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood delineates a story of victimization, exploitation of female sex for procreation, gender politics of patriarchy reducing women to the point of zero, power politics of the postmodern world and consumer society playing game with women’s lives through subversive rules and religious dogmas to thwart the women’s lives in search of survival. By setting the novel in the near future, Atwood envisions a future which would rectify all the evils against women by the male dominated society, at the same time, depicts a picture of gruesome contemporary scenario where the situation with regard to women is getting aggravated beyond hope and redemption. Thus, Atwood is providing a therapy as well as a warning for the despicable predicament and wails of modern society.

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