

Caste, Gender and Nation Compared with the Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Introduction

This paper presents a view on Caste, Gender and Nation compared with the novel, "THE HANDMAID'S TALE" written by the great writer Margaret Atwood.

Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, inventor, teacher and environmental activist. She has published seventeen books of poetry, sixteen novel, ten books of poetry, sixteen novels, ten books of non-fiction, eight collections of short fiction, eight children's books, and one graphic novel, as well as a number of small press edition in poetry and fiction. Atwood and her writings have won numerous awards and honors. Atwood is also the inventor and developer of the Long Pen and associated technologies that facilitate the remote robotic writing of documents.

Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood originally published in 1985. It is set in a near-future New England, in a Totalitarian state resembling a Theonomy which has overthrown the United States government. The novel focuses on the journey of the handmaid Offered. Her name derives from the possessive form "of Fred"; handmaids are forbidden to use their birth names and must echo the male, or master, whom they serve.

The Handmaid's Tale explores themes of women in subjugation in a patriarchal society and the various means by which these women attempt to gain individualism and independence. The novel's title echoes the component part of Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales which is a series of connected stories. The Handmaid's Tale is structured into two parts, night and other various events. This novel can be interpreted as a double narrative, Offered tale and the handmaids' tales. The night sections are solely about Offered, and the other sections are the stories that describe the possible life of every handmaid, though from the perspective of Offered. In many of these sections, Offered jumps between past and present as she retells the events leading up to the fall of women's rights and the current details of the life which she now lives.

The Handmaid's Tale won the 1985 Governor General Award and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987; it was also nominated for the 1986 Nebula Award, the 1986 Booker prize, and the 1987 Prometheus Award.

Caste, Gender & Nation

Caste

The leaders of independent India decided that India will be democratic, socialist and secular country. According to this policy there is a separation between religion and state. Practicing untouchability or discriminating a person based on his caste is legally forbidden. Along with this law the government allows positive discrimination of the depressed classes of India. The Indians have also become more flexible in their caste system customs. In general the urban people in India are less strict about the caste system than the rural. In cities one can see different caste people mingling with each other, while in some rural areas there is still discrimination based on castes and sometimes also on untouchability. Sometimes in villages or in the cities there are violent clashes which, are connected to caste tensions. Sometimes the high castes strike the lower castes who dare to uplift their status. Sometimes the lower castes get back on the higher castes.

In modern India the term caste is used for Jat and also for Varna. The term, caste was used by the British who ruled India until 1947. The British who wanted to rule India efficiently made lists of Indian communities. They used two terms to describe Indian communities Castes and Tribes. The term caste was used for Jats and also for Varnas. Tribes were those communities who lived deep in jungles, forests and mountains far away from the main population and also communities who were hard to be defined as castes for example communities who made a living from stealing or robbery. These lists, which the British made, were used later on by the Indian governments to create lists of communities who were entitled for positive discrimination. The castes, which were the elite of the Indian society, were classified as high castes. The other communities were classified as lower castes or lower classes. The lower classes were listed in three categories.

The first category is called Scheduled Castes. This category includes in it communities who were untouchables. In modern India, untouchability exists at a very low extent. The untouchables call themselves Dalit, meaning depressed. Until the late 1980s they were called Harijan, meaning children of God. This title was given to them by Mahatma Gandhi who wanted the society to accept untouchables within them.

The second category is Scheduled Tribes. This category includes in it those communities who did not accept the caste system and preferred to reside deep in the jungles, forests and mountains of India, away from the main population. The Scheduled Tribes are also called Adivasi, meaning aboriginals.

The third category is called sometimes Other Backward Classes or Backward Classes. This category includes in it castes who belong to Sudra Varna and also former untouchables who

converted from Hinduism to other religions. This category also includes in it nomads and tribes who made a living from criminal acts.

According to the central government policy these three categories are entitled for positive discrimination. Sometimes these three categories are defined together as Backward Classes. 15% of India's Population is Scheduled Castes. According to central government policy 15% of the government jobs and 15% of the students admitted to universities must be from Scheduled Castes. For the Scheduled Tribes about 7.5% places are reserved which is their proportion in Indian population. The Other Backwards Classes are about 50% of India's population, but only 27% of government jobs are reserved for them. Along with the central government, the state governments of India also follow a positive discrimination policy. Different states have different figures of communities entitled for positive discrimination based on the population of each state. Different state governments have different lists of communities entitled for positive discrimination. Sometimes a specific community is entitled for rights in a particular state but not in another state of India.

In modern India new tensions were created because of these positive discrimination policies. The high caste communities feel discriminated by the government policy to reserve positions for the Backward Classes. In many cases a large number of high caste members compete for a few places reserved for them. While the Backward Classes members do not have to compete at all because of the large number of reserved places for them compared to the candidates. Sometimes in order to fill the quota, candidates from the lower classes are accepted even though they are not suitable. Sometimes some reserved positions remain unmanned because there were few candidates from the lower classes causing more tension between the castes. Between the lower castes there are also tensions over reservation. In the order of priority for a reserved place of the Backward Classes, candidate from the Scheduled castes is preferred over a candidate from the Scheduled Tribes who is preferred over a candidate from the other Backward Classes. As stated earlier Other Backward Classes are about 50% of India's population but only 27% of the Other Backward Classes are entitled for positive discrimination according to central government policy. Some Other Backward Classes communities are organizing politically to be recognized as Backward Classes entitled for positive discrimination.

The Scheduled Tribes who are seen as the aborigines of India got ownership and certain rights over Indian land. Many communities in India claim also to be aborigines of India and they are claiming the same rights as the Scheduled Tribes. The caste identity has become a subject of political, social and legal interpretation. Communities who get listed as entitled for positive discrimination do not get out of this list even if their social and political conditions get better. In many cases the legal system is involved to decide if a certain person is entitled for positive discrimination. But with all this positive discrimination policy, most of the communities who were low in the caste hierarchy remain low in the social order even today. And communities who were high in the social hierarchy remain even today high in the social hierarchy. Most of the degrading jobs are even today done by the Dalits, while the Brahmans remain at the top of the hierarchy by being the doctors, engineers and lawyers of India.

Gender

Females of our country have faced the discrimination for ages now and still continue to exist in various forms. Any denial of equality, gender and opportunity on the basis of gender is gender discrimination. Nature doesn't discriminate men from women. But women worldwide have been the victim of inequality not only in terms of social and political rights but also on grounds of employment opportunities. The male dominant society of India makes its women habitual of this discrimination. As a result, most women fail to understand their own rights and freedom. There are many spheres of life where women are denied opportunities. Discrimination against females starts with their birth and continues through their lives. An unborn girl child is aborted with the help of sex determination techniques. A girl child who is born is seen as a burden on her parents or family and not given equal treatment as boys of the same family ever since birth. She is not given proper nutritious food in some cases. As she grows, she is either denied of right to education and in some cases, it is limited to elementary level. Her health and well-being is not given due attention and concern. She is married at an early age and this puts an end to any possibilities of growth and a good life in most cases. The discrimination doesn't end here but continues with the expectations of giving birth to a boy. The vicious cycle of female discrimination starts here. Almost all women face some incidents of eve teasing, some are unfortunate to be assaulted sexually and raped. Marriage of a woman becomes more perplexed if she faces dowry threats, which sometimes cause deaths also. With such a deprived living, how can we expect the standard of living of women to rise and their presence be felt at international level?

Women, both illiterate and partially literate have limited access to health care and job opportunities and remain confined to the bounds of their household chores, raising children and looking after families. A good education or qualification does not bring women at par with the men. They are still deprived of many work opportunities as men are believed to be more capable than their female counterparts with similar qualifications. The notion that women do not have caliber and intelligence to take up managerial positions or high-profile jobs is another proof of the discrimination against women in our society.

According to 2011 census, the female literacy rate was 65.46% compared to 82.14% for males. The underlying thought that educating women is of no value as they will only serve their husbands and family in future makes the parents unwilling to spend on girl's education. Women are not able to enjoy equal status in society as men and have very little say or authority. The grant of equal rights by the Constitution does not bring any significant change in their position and respect in the society. Law and property rights are also enforced inefficiently and inheritance is usually the sole right of sons and not the daughters. Even though laws are now enforced for the rights of women on parental property, not many people are aware of it and the social structure is such that daughters do not usually insist on their property rights.

Society favors men and gives them higher authority and this makes women vulnerable to crimes like rapes, eve teasing, sexual abuse etc. Though the number of women officers is

growing, yet the number is not comparable with men holding higher ranks. The discrimination against women is not only hampering the growth of women at social, economic and personal level but also significantly lower female-to-male ratios impact the growth in both agriculture and industrial sectors. Thus, gender discrimination also impedes the country's growth. While women are the most common sufferers and remain suppressed due to social pressure, there are some disadvantages that men have over women as laws favor women in certain cases. For instance, in case of adultery husband can be jailed for his unfaithfulness towards wife.

Even though some changes had been done in our society, Women has to come across some difficulties in their surroundings such as Natural gender difference, In work place, In the criminal justice system, In Television and film, variations by country or culture, and even in Homes too. Now-a-days women's are permitted to go for jobs, but not everyone. This has to be change at least in future. Each and every women should shine in every field that of equal to men.

Handmaid's Tale

Atwood creates a dystopic future in which the population has becoming threateningly infertile and women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities. Patriarchy takes on a new extreme aspect one that oppresses in the name of preservation and protection, one in which violence is perpetrated by the language of ownership and physical delineation. In this nightmare society women are unable to have jobs or money, and are assigned to various classes: the chaste, childless wives, the housekeeping Marthas, and the reproductive handmaids who turn their offspring over to the wives. The Tale's protagonist, offered, so named to denote the male master to whom she belongs, recounts her present situation with a clinical attention to her body, now only an instrument of reproduction, A counterpoint is provided through moving glimpse into her past life memories of sensual love for her lost family. The population is kept in check through fear. Torture is commonplace, spying and denunciation are encouraged, and there are frequent public executions. The society is strictly hierarchical, women are subservient, and most people are infertile due to pollution and sexually transmitted diseases, hence the need of official breeders for the ruling elite.

Offered is in her mid-30's and is running out of time before being send to the colonies to clear up hazardous waste. She is considered a debauched woman because she was married to a divorced man when the coup occurred. The new regime does not recognize divorce meaning offered is officially an adulterous. Her growing despair with her existence permeates the book. Fred is Offered's current commander, and as a leader of the regime, he feels he can bend the rules: instead of confining his contact with Offered to the monthly insemination ceremony, he seeks out her company, even giving her material to read, which is forbidden to women. His wife, Serena Joy, is desperate for a child, so dangerously arranges for Offered to have sex with the chauffeur, Nick. Offered learns from another handmaid, Ofglen that there is an underground rebellion. When Ofglen is found out she commits suicide rather than betray other members of the group, thus buying precious time for Offered to escape. The story ends with the offered being

taken away. An epilogue then explains that the events of the story are part of symposium on Gileadian Studies in 2195 and hints that a more equitable society followed the Gileadian Theocracy.

Critical Notes

According to the novel “Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood, it is clear that women were in discrimination and they are treated as slaves. During that period the Totalitarian (high authorities) American regime strips women of their rights and forces those who are fertile to become handmaids to bear children for wealthy men and their barren wives. They use maids for reproduction. They would send to commanders after checkups done by the specific doctors. By this it is clear that women are under men. Here we can also notice that the women’s are picked up as handmaids and send for the ceremony it can be compared with caste, because instead of having relationship with high class people they chose maids because no one is there to question on behalf of them. And the nation was undeveloped during that time.

The sexes are strictly divided. Gilead's society values reproduction by white women most highly. Women are categorized "hierarchically according to class status and reproductive capacity as metonymically well color-coded according to their function and their labour. The Commander expresses the prevailing opinion that women are considered intellectually and emotionally inferior to men. Women are segregated by clothing, as are men. With rare exception, men wear military or paramilitary uniforms. All classes of men and women are defined by the colors they wear, drawing on Colour symbolism and psychology. All lower-status individuals are regulated by this dress code. All "non-persons" are banished to the "Colonies". Sterile, unmarried women are considered to be non-persons. Both men and women sent there wear grey dresses. The Handmaid's Tale was well received by critics, helping to cement Atwood's status as a prominent writer of the 20th century. Not only was the book deemed well-written and compelling, but Atwood's work was notable for sparking intense debates both in and out of academia. Atwood maintains that the Republic of Gilead is only an extrapolation of trends already seen in the United States at the time of her writing, a view supported by other scholars studying The Handmaid's Tale.

Conclusion

That Atwood's novel remains as foreboding and powerful as ever, largely because of its basis in historical fact. This novel had helped to describe about the caste, gender and nation.

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