

Agony of Wives and Handmaids in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Hitesh Karan
Research Scholar
Jiwaji University
Gwalior- 474011 INDIA

Abstract

In this paper, I intend to explore how the protagonist ("OF FRED", since she belongs to Fred) of 'The Handmaid's Tale' endure such malice in her public and private life. Offred and many others like her are subjected to unwarranted physical, emotional and mental cruelty in the name of God. Society had twisted the words of God because most of the society is rendered infertile (Men are sterile, and Women are barren) and now they need breeder and hence comes fertile women who become the property/slave of the wealthy women who wants to have babies but can't. Atwood here is focusing on victimized females and asking us a question what would happen if women's rights reverted or taken away? I intend to explore the need for females to expand their own discourse, which shouldn't be radical or extremist with the help of this text.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood. *The Handmaid's Tale*, First and second wave feminism, feminist backlash, barren, fertile, sterile, bearer, sexually immoral, simulacra, slavery, subjugation

Introduction

Margaret Atwood, a Canadian author, depicts a dystopian society where men are sterile, and women are barren, but the need of a child is a need above all else. So, this society started doing ungodly things in the name of God. This society is a theoretic society and they know nothing just the survival of the human race. For that they need breeders, hence comes fertile women. They started capturing fertile woman's aka The Handmaids. They are being sent to a RAD center where they are processed by 'Aunts'. These so called Aunts brainwashed them in the name of the God that they are here to fulfill the wish of the god; to replenish the Earth by producing child to the commander of the Republic of Gilead. If they start to toe the line, well and good but if they don't then these Aunts who are there to take care of these Handmaids starts torture them in the worst possible way. If these Handmaids made a slightest mistake, they have to lose a body part like if a Handmaid raised her voice, her tongue will cut out. If a Handmaid caught reading, she will lose her hand. This is the world showed to us by Margaret Atwood. In a way Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the same influence which we have seen in *Huxley's Brave New World* and *Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:9 September 2019

Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on *Paradigms of Marginality in Literature - Exploring the Nuances*

Hitesh Karan, Agony of Wives and Handmaids in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

231

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with the survival of women's in a male dominated society. Male always wants to dominate his house, his society, and his world and here I'm saying 'his' because every male thinks the same. Each and Every Man wants to be the king of their own world. When some of these men started to think and work together, we get a theocratic society. In *The Handmaid's Tale* there is a group of Men's, who works like that and we know them as Commanders of the society. These Commanders makes the policies for a theocratic society; what's best for the society and what's best for them. These men started to impose policies which resulted in subjugation of women's in the society.

An Indian Poet and Feminist, Dr. Pawan Karan, once said that a woman's freedom start with the money she has in her purse. According to him, for ages men remained in power because they had never let money slip through their hands. If a woman wants freedom, she needs the money for it but man has dominance over it and that's the reason she isn't free. That's exactly what happened in the totalitarian and a theocratic government aka The Republic of Gilead; they started cutting women's rights in the society and by that started making them their property/slave. At first in The republic of Gilead, commanders passed a decree that women can't work at all; neither in public sector nor in private sector. That's was the first step of men towards a male dependent society. If a woman can't work, then she has no money and if she has no money, she has no freedom. Second step was to remove all the women's owning-ship weather by inheritance or self-owning. Women's in Gilead can't own a single thing on their name. That will either be transferred to her husband or her father or anyone else for that matter just not to the women.

Margaret Atwood herself divulges that she writes speculative fiction (the scene which will become true in not-so-distant future. She once said "I didn't have to invent a lot" in *The Handmaid's Tale*. All the things "I transposed" was always here. I just mold that "to a different time and place, but the motifs are all historical motifs" (Bouson, 1993: 136). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel which depicts a futuristic world; United States of America which has become a totalitarian and a theocratic state and now it is known as The Republic of Gilead which is run by religious extremist; where we see profane technological developments but with puritanical fundamentalism or practices. As a research, I found out that we are living in a world that Atwood imagines. If we look closely in the world in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale* we can see, Women are given little to no right in Gilead, same as in countries like Pakistan where women's rights are nonexistent and many other countries where women are subjugated by men.

Women in Gilead belong to the men and that's the cruel reality there whether it was the 'Marthas' who serve in the household or the 'wives' serving to their husbands' commandants. The 'Handmaid' serving as breeders, the women of Jezebels' serving as prostitutes for the Commanders' pleasure, or those who were thrown in the Colonies serving society, there was

apparent slavery in Gilead. Even the lower-class men *aka* drivers, were slaves as well, with no given freedom. Everyone becomes a slave for the betterment of the society.

The novel begins with our female protagonist who is unnamed, recounting her time; when it all began to crumble in her life, she starts running for her life and the life of her family. She is running from the government who has passed the law of capturing all the fertile women in the state. She was running with family and trying to cross the border through Maine but couldn't do it and at last she is captured with her daughter and the husband was killed by the government. Here forth the life of subjugation, slavery, torment, torture and excruciation begins. Here the life in Agony begins of our female protagonist OFFRED (because she belongs to Commander Fred). The name Offred provides us numerous nuances like, offered or afraid. The use of birth names in Gilead is "forbidden" and must remain "buried": "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (*The Handmaid's Tale*: 84). But, in reality, she was a Handmaid, who will serve her Master.

When she was identified as fertile woman, she was to be sent with many others to the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center *aka* Red Center where her indoctrination begins under the supervision of Aunt Lydia, who is in charge of brainwashing these girls by using the biblical sermon from the Old Testament. In Gilead, Handmaids have to obey the Men and the Aunts (who take orders from men). Women are alive only to serve a single purpose that is to have the babies of the high-status military officers. Handmaids are voiceless, childbearing vessels. These women are chosen by the Gilead for their latent embryonic ability to bear children at a time when sterility is severely high and live births have reached perilously low levels. Although the women's biological function is privilege, she becomes marginalized as a human being. Main aim is to find healthy, fertile women who can produce offspring for that imperative group of men *aka* commanders who got status, power and influence. Their posting begins when they are indoctrinated by the Aunts. Handmaids were sent to their commanding officers where they take the name of their masters like Offred, Ofglen, Ofryan and Ofsteven. They take the name and become property/slave of the commanders.

Offred was sent to Commander Fred who is sterile and wife Serena who is barren like most of the society. Once a month every handmaid has to lie with their respective commanders in order to get impregnated by their Masters. They have to be impregnated while lying between the knees of their Commanders' wives; if they become pregnant with commanders, their child becomes theirs. Once breastfeeding is concluded, their connection to the toddler will be terminated, and she will move to another house to become impregnated again. Handmaids don't want to lie down but doing it, and the wives who are traumatized by this sickened act, still performing for the sake of a child. This whole practice is called Ceremony because it has to look like biblical otherwise how they can get their wives onboard with such a sickened and aghast act. That was one of the most

dismayed and disgusted things I read in the novel, but anything is possible in the name of God in any religion. This is when you find out the real agony of the wives, the angst she feels. It is evident that when the religious decrees are proliferating, there is no way of declining it because there is no political process that can be used to dispute it. That's how Gilead works by creating propaganda whether it's a terrorist attack or a religious one.

The central idea of this ceremony comes from the Old Testament, in which Rachel says to Jacob

“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no Children, Rachel envied her sister, and said unto Jacob, Give me Children, or else I die.” And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of thy womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have Children by her”. (Genesis, 30:1-3).

In Gilead, "Anatomy is destiny" (Coad, 2001: 54); those Handmaids who can't get pregnant would not have any value to the state. They can either join 'Jezebel' (if they are pretty) or they can join 'The Unwomen' where all of the infertile or defiant women being sent to clean up nuclear waste in an area called the Colonies. Moira defines colonies as

“The other Colonies are worse, though, the toxic dumps and the radiation spills. They figure you've got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to”.

Gilead is a repressive and highly alienating structure of society, especially for women. In Gilead a woman did not have a right to speak in the society *aka* freedom of speech went into garbage. This is alike for every woman: commanders' wives, handmaids, marthas, jezebel and the unwomen. Men torture them in worst way possible like sleeping with handmaids because they have fertile ovaries, making their wives watching this aghast act. If they can't produce a child, they will either be sent to jezebel or they can join unwomen. Men are free in this society bounded with no regulation at all and they have created this society with the help of God by twisting the words of Old Testament.

In the Republic of Gilead, position and purpose are clearly conveyed by the cloths and the color of it. The Commanders' wives wear 'Blue' color, having the highest rank among women. The Aunts wear 'Brown' color; they are the brainwasher of the society, training girls to become a sex-slave. The Marthas who wear 'Green' are the housekeepers and the Unwomen wear 'Gray'

because they are infertile or old women who clean up toxic waste in the Colonies. The Handmaids wear 'Red' emblematic to blood, birth, sex and life.

Conclusion

Atwood asserts: “*The Handmaid’s Tale* does not get a single detail that hasn’t happened in the past, it shows parallel reality, either in current conditions or former facts” (McCombs 284). Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* has shown us a world where nothing else matters other than the survival of human race. For that Gilead can go to any distance. Gilead has become a military state under martial law purview. President is dead and now Commanders have taken over the state. In Gilead, no one is having any kind of freedom except commanders and the commanders are the religious fanatics who will impose every kind of law on women’s just to have them subjugated. In Gilead we see women are kidnapped in the name of the god and then they are subjugated, tormented, tortured, and harassed in the worst way possible. Gilead cut them off, from their jobs & the basic rights a woman should have. In the end they just become voiceless, childbearing vessels for the state. Every Woman in Gilead is subjected to different types of beleaguers. The protagonist once confesses in the novel,

We didn’t wake up;
“That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary.
There wasn't even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on”
We didn’t wake up.

The female identity in *The Handmaid’s Tale* depends entirely on the form of a patriarchy society. Women’s bodies are nothing but malleable objects. All the women in Gilead have to move in pairs i.e. they have no privacy. Only privacy they got is when the visit fertility doctors; other than this, nothing at all.

Through *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood brings the nightmarish world into light where commanders and the handmaids follow patriarchal custom from utopian and dystopian world illustrated by writers like Plato, More, Huxley and Atwood herself.

Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid’s Tale*. London: Vintage Publishing, 1996.

Alotaibi, Nuha S. "Distorted Shadows: Power And Subjugated Women In Margret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science Volume 23.Issue 2 (2018): PP 35-39.

C. Indu. B. "Flowers of Survival: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (April. 2013): PP.07-09.

Chaudhary, Zoya Jamil. "Comparative Study of Feminist Voice: The Handmaid's." Journal of Research (Humanities) (n.d.).

Dr.D.L. Jaisy. "An Eco-Feminism: A Study Of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." Research Journal of English Language and Literature Vol.6. Issue 2 (2018).

Hodson, Jennifer Leigh. American Trends and American Fears: An Analysis of the Women's Movement and the Religious Right as Envisioned in Margaret Atwood The Handmaid's Tale. 12 1997.

Hussein, Ali Madhlum. "A Study of Woman's sufferings in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and Lutfiyya AlDuliami's." International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS) Volume-2.Issue-4 (2017).

Hydrick, Morgan. Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again:” Burke’s Perspective by Incongruity and the Shifting Image of the Handmaid. n.d.

Kouhestani, Maryam. "Disciplining the Body: Power and Language in Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Novel The Handmaid's Tale." Journal of Educational and Social Research Vol. 3.No. 7 (2013).

Otto, Diana T. "Sexual Oppression and Religious Extremism in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." 2002. teachersinstitute.yale.edu.