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## Female Identity in *the Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood

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### ABSTRACT

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a story where women's rights have been revoked, and thus women are back in gender roles taken to the extreme, with no rights, no opinions, and no cosmetics or beauty products of any kind. A once independent woman is turned into an object, a 'vessel' whose sole purpose is to bear children to save the population. It is a dystopian nightmare which subjugates and subdues women to the point of sexual slavery, language impacts and indoctrinates them in a psychologically-damaging manner, and denies them the basic freedoms which most women in Western civilization take for granted (Porfert 1). The aim of this paper is to arguing the representation of feminist dystopia and the issues related to female predicament, their submissiveness to men in the novels. It will draw a final picture of women's struggle for freedom. It has been asserted that woman's identity is pushed aside and even erased in the patriarchal social structure of theocratic states.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, the Handmaid's Tale, Dystopia, Female Difficulties, Submissiveness, Oppression

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood born in, Ottawa, Canada, in nineteen thirty nine, is an active and known writer who devoted her life to writing so many books, all of which are related to the environmental, human rights, and feminist issues throughout her career. The novel indicates the

limitation of individual freedom and human rights through which Gilead government becomes powerful. As Harold Bloom says “the novel...is a study of power and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within the kind of regime” (77). Atwood's best-known work is her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* which attends in “Dystopian fiction” includes works that depicts fictional societies to indicate warning against the negative consequences of the reformation of human societies. Her novel won the author the Booker Prize in Britain, the Governor General's Award in Canada, the Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Prize, and the Los Angeles Times fiction prize in the United States. Because of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood is described as “the most distinguished novelist under fifty currently writing in English” (qtd. in Howells 1).

*The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel presents the feministic subject where the identity of a woman has been destroyed in a hard situation, leaving any chance for its retrieval. It is a deeper and more expansive vision of bleak ending for women. As called by Lucy M. Freibert a “political- science fiction” (280), the novel is set amid war and corruption, and destructive political power across the fictional republic of Gilead. It refers somehow to a bleak scenario of a totalitarian state of theocracy reflecting freeing from moral values. In fact, Atwood's definition of politics accommodates her abiding thematic concerns: her scrutiny of the relations between men and women, which has always been taken by the author as a form of power politics, her engagement with the question of Canadian national and personal identity, and her wider humanitarian concerns with human basic rights and their protection (Howells 6-7). In this novel, the most fascinating parts are undoubtedly the ones in which Offred portrait the city and its aspects. One can then notice the extended contrast between Gilead before oppression and the Gilead she is describing. Also, there is something very confusing in the novel and it is how women are sorted by colors interrelated to their social position. It is as if religion or the color of the skin, which are today the human aspects that inspire prejudices, were replaced by the color of clothes. Margaret Atwood, with this detail, certainly wanted to indicate the irrelevance of our Prejudices.

Religion also, has an important role in the new, oppressive Republic of Gilead. Gilead may even remind religious fanaticism. The Handmaids' clothes, for instance, could be associated to the clothes a woman wears in some extremist groups of the Islamic religion. The fact that women in the novel are not permitted to abort recalls the reader of the Protestants or the Catholics that did not endure it for centuries. Catholic Church still does not endure it which signifies that this issue is still actual and delicate.

In fact, the novel discussing the evils of political system which intensifies the women's anguished plight and despicable exploitation. Instead of playing a crucial role in the abnegation of women, the state Fundamentalist Christian coup in mid 1980s near Boston in Massachusetts, reverted to the harsh aspects of ill-treating women, disenfranchised them, ignore their rights of education, seized their credit cards, destroyed homosexuals, religious sects, and abortionists. The government took extreme role 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”.

The goal of this paper is to analyzing the representation of feminist dystopia and the matters related to female predicament, their submissiveness to men in the novels. It will draw a final picture of women's struggle for freedom.

## 2. FEMALE DIFFICULTIES

Margaret Atwood's novel is a dystopian fiction, set in what used to be North America, that center around a female character in a totalitarian society; a world of oppression and constant surveillance, completely consumed by government control and manipulation. The novel presents the world which wrong people acceded to power. Even though the story takes place in only one state of America, it nevertheless can be connected to the rest of the world. If a situation like that truly happened, it would spread very easily. The dystopian genre flourished in the nineteenth century primarily as an antithesis to utopian literature. *The Handmaid's Tale* is considered a highly feminist vision of dystopia, a society in which women's rights have been completely revoked and women are forced to contribute to their own oppression by conforming to very strict gender roles and restrictions, but at the same time enforced sexuality. According to Gregory Claeys, 'dystopia' is often used ... to describe a fictional portrayal of a society in which evil, or negative social and political developments, have the upper hand, or as a satire of utopian aspirations which attempts to show up their fallacies ...' (107). The novel explores a reality in which our society has developed in a negative direction, away from the ideal utopia, exploring problems that were relevant at the time they were written. Atwood imagines a dystopia where environmental issues are at the core of the changes in society, as climate change and pollution has rendered a large part of the population infertile. Lois Feuer writes in her critique of *The Handmaid's Tale* that reviewers of the novel "invariably hailed it as a "feminist 1984" and, like many handy tags, this one conceals a partial truth". Barbara Ehrenreich writes,

Almost every thinkable insult to women has been tested and institutionalized at one time or another: foot-binding, witch-burning, slavery, organized rape, ritual mutilation, enforced childbearing, enforced chastity, and the mere denial of ordinary rights to own property, speak out in public, or walk down the street without fear. For misogynist nastiness, it is hard to improve on history (33).

She mentions that women driven back to servitude and there is no individuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

### 2. 1. Offred, a Victim of the Oppression

The narrator is a Handmaid assigned to the family of a high-ranking commander. She loses her identity and original family, and she is renamed "of Fred" (the commander's first name), or Offred. She is cared for by the family in exchange for having sex with the commander. In an elaborate ceremony required by the society, Offred lies between the legs of Fred's wife during the act, making her resemble a substitute womb for the wife. This ritual enacts a literal translation of 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).

The leaders of Gilead have found scriptural justifications for their treatment of women. As a thirty-three-year-old Handmaid, Offred had one role in her society, one function to perform: produce babies. As Ferretter writes in *Louis Althusser*,

The science of historical materialism tells me about the material reality of my existence in the complex set of forces and relations of production that comprise the capitalist mode of production. Ordinarily, though, I do not think of my life in these terms. If I am in business, I might think of my life as a kind of competition, in which I need to be more shrewd, intelligent and hard-working than all the others. (78)

She is not someone able to have her destiny in her own hands. She does, unfortunately, not have the power to change her future at any time. She could be called a heroine because she is strong but she could also be called an anti-heroine since she rather puts up with things that happen to her, she does not have the power to influence them. This latter interpretation was that which enlivened her household world within the Christian theocracy that was America in the early twenty-first century. Hers was the Gileadean society. Offred speaks as a character who has partially become accustomed to this new world. She is aware that it came about because of the social chaos of American democracy. There was too much violence. At least this is how the United States is viewed from the perspective of Offred's authoritarian society. She is afraid of being punished for her independent thoughts. Offred also mentions her studies at the university. This proves that she is rather smart and is able to understand how wrong everything is as the oppression takes place. Her description of her life while she was a student shows the contrast with her life as a Handmaid. Her personality completely changed since she was a rather open-minded, well-adjusted woman and she was later forced to become someone withdrawn and sad.

She has a friend, Moira, who represents everything that Offred would like to be. Moira is described as someone rather open-minded and free and this description follows her character throughout the novel. The fact that she is bisexual strengthens even more the feeling that she is someone confident. She is represented as someone who is ready to fight for her beliefs and that is why Moira represents strength and hope for Offred. What is interesting to consider in Moira's destiny is that, like Offred, she is punished, but not for the same reasons. Moira is sent to the Red Center because she is bisexual. Like Offred, Moira is to become a Handmaid but her strong character makes her fight against what appears to be fatality as she decides to escape the Center. Because she escapes, she is an exception that proves to Offred that it is possible to fight oppression. Offred also remembers fragments of their friendship, before oppression. Every fragment has a specific purpose, either to give her strength or to make her laugh or, often, to give her hope. Moira is outspoken and rebellious. She does not accept the subjection of women for a moment or believe that any class of people has the right to rule others. Offred is wistful about the past. While describing her past, Offred remembers the big steps she made in her life when she married Luke and when she gave birth to her daughter. These were the happiest times of her life and here is how she describes these moments:

Lying in bed, with Luke, his hand on my rounded belly. The three of us, in bed, she kicking, turning over within me. (...) I'm not frightened. We're wide awake, the rain hits now, we will be slow and careful. If I thought this would never happen again I would die. (113)

It is hard to recall, however, when her present is so filled with her duties as a Handmaid. Eleonora Rao in her book *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* notes that Moira is one female who “survives intact the programme of conditioning into the acceptance of female guilt and evil imposed on the handmaids at the Centre” (20). She is surprised when the Commander takes an interest in her proposing they attend a costume party and then making sexual advances to her. In the Republic of Gilead, Handmaids such as Offred are only meant to be procreators that is, they have sex with their masters only for the purposes of childbearing. The Commander obviously chafes under the rigid, puritanical regime, and he looks to Offred to relieve his frustrations, even though he is breaking the very rules that he is pledged to uphold. Offred uses the Commander’s attentions to win a few freedoms for herself, realizing that to the Commander. She is merely a plaything and that he cannot be trusted with her real inner feelings. She must also be cautious because Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife, would surely have Offred punished if she were to discover that Offred and her husband had a sexual relationship outside of their officially sanctioned mating sessions. Offred finds her true lover in Nick, who is also employed by the Commander and his wife. Nick risks certain death if his liaison with Offred is discovered, yet the couple are compelled to express their humanity by carrying on their secret affair. In each other they find an outlet for expressing all those emotional human needs that their society represses by restricting both males and females to prescribed roles.

Serena Joy is also a very important character in the *Handmaid’s Tale*. What is interesting about her is that she is, or at least she used to be, an anti-feminist. Serena Joy wanted women to become who they became when the new Republic of Gilead was founded: housewives. She thought that it was the perfect position for a woman. For her, a woman does not need to be anything more important than that. It is enough that she is a good housewife, takes good care of her house and children. The only problem with Serena is that she does not fit her own description since she does not have the possibility to bear children. Therefore she is not considered as a good wife by society. That explains why she is so frustrated throughout the novel. Atwood seems to want to prove through this character the shallowness of our prejudices as far as women are concerned since, even today, a good wife is sometimes defined that way. She seems to be willing to show who a woman would become if she tried so hard to be this kind of wife. Christine Gomez comments,

In Gilead, where women are defined as mere functions to serve man, the average woman is incarcerated in position two. The wife, decorative in function and dressed in blue, the daughter, silent and submissive, dressed in white, the Martha, middle- aged housekeeper in green and the Handmaid in red personifying the child-bearing function, all accept their victim positions as something inevitable, dictated by Biology and decreed by History, at a time when Caucasian birthrates had declined steeply (86).

The novel shows the ruthless and dogmatic picture of religious society which religious values are announced to isolate women even from the basic human rights. Body in this society is the device distorted to the wishes of leaders. Offred is a woman trapped in a horrible reality from which no immediate physical escape is present. Even suicide is off limits (Gulick, 72).

Reshmi writes in “Eco feminist Vision: A Study of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing and The Handmaid’s Tale*” that “In the Gileadean patriarchy, a woman is denied the right to possess or to have control over he own body. Her body is segmented and her value is determined on the basis of her reproductive capability (qtd in Mouda, 4).The dichotomy of freedom and security

is at stake where woman is marginalized as merely asexual being. Society subjugates women and curtails their freedom that engenders fear of security in them. Upper class men, besides the opportunity to sire children, are assured their women are well controlled, kept rigidly in place. Each woman is allowed to do only one thing: Marthas perform housework; Handmaids reproduce; Wives raise children and provide pleasant company; Jezebels have non reproductive sex; Aunts train Handmaids. Kept occupied by and allowed to do only one thing, no woman can venture into men's territory: producing goods by working outside the home, or, information through writing. Poor men have Econowives, who "are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can" (Atwood, 24).

They produce nothing significant; they probably cannot reproduce either, or they would have been conscripted by the government. The only Econowife pictured with a child is mourning an unbaby (Atwood, 44). The use of women as tools in industrializing domestic work requires that both genders internalize a new perception of women. In order to sustain the political system, women must be taught to regard themselves as commodities. This perspective, enforced on Offred at the Red Center, is evident in her self-descriptions: "I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape," she says, because "I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource" (Atwood, 65). In order for women to be citizens of any nation, they must possess a clear legal identity as individuals with rights. This is impossible in Gilead, since "the right to human dignity for women entails the cessation of the commercial exploitation of their bodies in advertising, and preventing the exploitation of motherhood by the state or religious bodies" (Martin, 32). While Gilead dramatically reduces the exploitation of women's bodies by mandating modest dress, it exploits their bodies for motherhood. Ceasing to be individuals with legal rights, they are reduced to resources. The "freedom from" that Aunt Lydia espouses is really just freedom from violent crime or rape not sanctioned by the government (Atwood, 24); violence or coerced sexual intercourse perpetrated by the Wives, Commanders, and government officials is sanctioned. "Freedom from violence" is a ruse that protects a woman only as a reproductive device owned by others.

Offred's fate is not entirely clear because the novel ends with an appendix that reveals that Offred's narrative has been discovered by a later society one that apparently has restored something like the equality of the sexes and individual liberties that Offred desired. From the perspective of the appendix, then, Offred's narrative becomes a kind of Old Testament, a record of the human quest for self-expression and redemption. Offred is, in some respect, a rather weak person.

There are several examples of other women in the novel who have not been nearly as affected by the "truth" of Gilead as Offred. They are active and determined not to live by the rules of the Gilead discourse. Luce Irigaray, claims that man's "social existence, his economic structures and his sexuality are always tied to the work of nature" because only through nature can he produce anything lasting ("Women", 185). Women specifically mothers are thus "essential to [the social orders] (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general)" (185). Women, according to Irigaray, "maintain the social order without ... chang[ing] it" (185). Before Gilead, however, women not only reproduced, but were involved in the production of goods, technology, and information. Offred worked and supported herself, as had her mother, who raised Offred alone. But men felt threatened by women production outside the home. Thus, as Offred tells Luke, the government decreed that "Women [couldn't] hold property anymore" (Atwood, 178).

Because they could no longer own property, they became possessions themselves. Offred's mother was involved in the feminist movement in the society "before", burning pornographic material and marching in support of women's right to abortion. She was frustrated about Offred's lack of interest in the women's movement and her habit of taking her rights for granted. "You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are" (131). Offred's mother fears the consequences of slacking in this area, a fear that would prove to be justified, and after the creation of Gilead she is sent to the Colonies. Furthermore, Offred's fellow Handmaid, Ofglen is another woman who is seemingly much braver than Offred. Ofglen is involved in the resistance and she is the one who pushes their relationship beyond what is generally accepted among Handmaids. She gives Offred information about the resistance and wants Offred to pass on information received from her Commander, which is something Offred does not dare. When Ofglen hangs herself instead of being arrested by "The Eyes" (the secret police in Gilead) Offred is relieved since Ofglen then cannot reveal anything about her. "She did it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later" (298).

According to Barbara Hill Rigney in her book *Margaret Atwood*, "the control agency in this novel is, not the commanders, but the 'Aunts', who run their re-education centres with cattle prods, torture techniques, and brain washing slogans" (118). The Aunts have very clear goals that they want to accomplish with their training of the Handmaids. The first is to delete the women from history: "All official records of the handmaids would have been destroyed upon their entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center" (387). The second goal is to teach women how to betray other women. The Aunts are women charged to teach the Handmaids how to be obedient and submissive.

They are also highly respected in society because they are considered wise women. Marthas, on the contrary, find themselves very low in the social ranking. Their role is exclusively to take care of the house: to cook and clean. Marthas are almost non-existent but not as much as the Handmaids, that are below everyone in society. These Handmaids are, ironically, the most important part of this story. They are also a part of the following very important characteristic of Gilead. Atwood intentionally created the Aunts as powerful females in a dystopia. In a radio conversation with fellow writer Victor-Levy Beaulieu, she said that the character of Aunt Lydia "is based on the history of imperialisms. For example, the British in India raised an army of Indians to control the rest of the Indians...So, if you want to control women, you have to grant some women a tiny bit more power so that they'll control the others" (Atwood and Beaulieu, 78). In a BBC World Book Club radio program last year, Margaret Atwood stated: "I think the Aunts [in *The Handmaid's Tale*] have quite a bit of power...Naturally, they would have to answer to a top level of men" (4 Aug 2003).

## **2. 2. Gilead regime**

In *the Handmaid's Tale*, in Gilead, birth rates have plummeted as a result of widespread contamination of the air, water, and earth. Also, Christians, sickened by divorce, pornography, and abortion, outlaw all three. They also take away a woman's right to own property or have money of her own; everything is in her husband's name. Women who have been divorced but who are proven to be fertile, such as the main character in the novel, are found guilty of the crime of adultery, and are given to the rulers of Gilead in order to provide children for childless couples. Gilead is or more exactly becomes a city of oppression. Christine Gomez rightly comments:

*The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the future, in the Republic of Gilead, which occupies part of the territory of what was once the U.S.A. This is a dystopia which carries existing patriarchal tyranny and the victimization of women to an extreme. According to Atwood, everything in the book is true and has been already accomplished in some form in some society (85).

The regime in Gilead uses two main devices to control women. Firstly, they use a certain type of language to maintain the oppression of women. Secondly, they use actions or violence, which represent a more direct and harsh type of oppression. By combining these two the regime maintains its control of women in Gilead. Judith Harlan in her work *Feminism*, says that feminists seek access to education, economics and politics, as well they seek a change in control over reproduction, sexuality, violence and society (79). From the first page, as the narrator begins describing the gymnasium, one can feel that terror and uneasiness are very present feelings among its inhabitants. Karen Stein also in her article "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*" describes the dystopic Gilead in this manner: "In the guise of a re population program, Gilead reads the biblical text literally and makes it the basis for the state-sanctioned rape, the impregnation ceremony the handmaids must undergo each month" (qtd in Johnson, 68).

According to Žižek, the Bible, here, provides "discourses that aim to produce false consciousness" in Gilead's citizens. They misrepresent "salient facts about the current political state of play" by placing one specific interpretation of the Bible as the ultimate truth by the help of belief machines (qtd in Jafari, 389). Gilead does not want women to be aware neither of the situation nor of the problems in the Government. In fact, they are no longer allowed to read because it could encourage them to have their own opinions. Female press, especially, is dangerous because, in general, these kinds of papers deal with free women who can dress or live the way they want to. One understands that this kind of press does not follow the rules established by the Government according to whom women have to be submissive. Atwood deliberately places Gilead in New England; landmarks such as the library and the wall are clearly taken from Cambridge, where Harvard University is located.

The irony in this location is twofold: In the first place, Massachusetts was first established as a theocracy by the Pilgrim Fathers, who applied a strict interpretation of the Bible to all aspects of life. Indeed, it was the Puritans of the seventeenth century who were responsible for the Salem witch trials and subsequent burnings.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margret Atwood describes societies where women are used as Instruments by the males. Women are utilized merely for breeding purposes and considered as nothing more than machines of reproduction. In these bleak dystopia spaces, women are forced to live by submitting to the males, who are always on the dominating side, and behave in pre-determined patterns. The value attributed to the women is based on their ability to perceive a child, a society in which women are considered non-essential, once they lose their fertility and elderly women are forsaken to experience a slow death in Colonies.

The Gilead regime shows the negative aspects of the society "before" to justify the hard situation for women, especially for Handmaids like Offred. They want to signify that women have lost their freedom and their right to decide over their own body by claiming that the

conditions for women were worse before, with the sexual violence. The society of the Gilead has founded based on the society which was labeled as “before” gets some of the opinions from it but changes some to its own wishes. Regrettably, taking women only as “wombs” to produce more children through the language of Bible and multimedia materials put a heavy effect on submission of the women and it is also easy for the men or at least one pole to gain and preserve their power.

Offered also shows her feminist side in this novel. She puts her female characters into situations in which everything that makes them women is taken from them. She proves that a woman becomes nothing as soon as her rights to possess or to make her own decisions disappear. In Fact, all of her female characters, in this novel, are unhappy. She puts on paper everything that could make a woman desperate and applies it to "*the Handmaid's Tale*" women. How pleased one should be with the evolution of women's role in society since the evolution is for both men and women's sake.

Brisha in his work claims:

In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood brings the clear picture of the new republic which throws away the U.S. Constitution and establishes the Republic of Gilead in which women are viewed only as reproductive machines. This is because of the low birth-rates due to environmental crisis such as various nuclear plant accidents, leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles, toxic waste deposital sites and the use of chemical insecticides etc. ... (1)

Since childhood, we have been taught to act according to the determined patterns. We have been taught about ideal behaviors. Boys are supposed to be strong and brave while girls are gentle and obedient. Therefore, gender stereotypification strengthens social status of both sexes and gender hierarchies: for instance, women are generally perceived as more dependent' and 'faithful', yet men are described as more 'possessive' and 'qualified'.

Certainly, every women and men do not fit into these stereotypes, but the ones living against the expected behaviors are likely to be judged in a negative way.

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