



ROLE OF WOMEN IN MARGARET ELEANOR ATWOOD'S "THE HANDMAID'S TALE"

Dr.B.V.V.Padmavathi
Assistant Professor
V R SIDDHARTHA
ENGINEERING COLLEGE
Kanuru
VIJAYAWADA-520007
bvvpadmavathi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The primary study of this paper is on position of women in Atwood's "The HandMaid's Tale." Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, inventor, teacher, and environmental activist. She has published 17 books of poetry, 16 novels, 10 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 editions in poetry and fiction.

Atwood's works encompass a variety of themes including gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and "power politics". 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 individuality and independence.

The novel focuses on the journey of the handmaid Offred. Her name derives from the possessive form "of Fred" handmaids are forbidden to use their birth names and must use names derivative of those of the male, or master, whom they serve.

The novel reveals the strange new world of Gilead. In Gilead, the women have no power or freedom; they are forbidden from reading, going outside except for grocery shopping, not allowed to vote, hold office, or do anything that shows that they are independent. Instead, women are subjugated to becoming instruments of birth.

Keywords: women, freedom, identity, politics, subjugation.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, inventor, teacher, and environmental activist. She has published 17 books of poetry, 16 novels, 10 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 editions in poetry and fiction. Atwood has won numerous awards and honors for her writing, including the Booker Prize (twice), Arthur C. Clarke Award, Governor General's Award, Franz Kafka Prize, and the National Book Critics and PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Atwood is also the inventor and developer of the Long Pen and associated technologies that facilitate remote robotic writing of documents. A number of her works have been adapted for film and television, increasing her exposure.

Atwood's works encompass a variety of themes including gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and "power politics". Many of her poems are inspired by myths and fairy tales which interested her from a very early age. Atwood is a founder of the Griffin Poetry Prize and Writers' Trust of Canada. She is also a Senior Fellow of Massey College, Toronto.

"The Handmaid's Tale" explores themes of women in suppression in a patriarchal society and the various means by which these women attempt to gain individuality and independence. The novel's title echoes the constituent parts of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a series of connected stories ("The Merchant's Tale", "The Parson's Tale", etc.). The novel focuses on the journey of the handmaid Offred. Her name derives from the possessive form "of Fred"; handmaids are forbidden to use their birth names and must use names imitative of those of the male, or master, whom they serve. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark." (p.88)

"The Handmaid's Tale" is structured into two parts, night and other various events. This novel can be interpreted as a double narrative, Offred's tale and the handmaids' tales. The night sections are solely about Offred, and the other sections (shopping, waiting room, household, etc.) are the stories that describe the possible life of every handmaid, though from the standpoint of Offred. "They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word undone. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then" (p. 25). In many of these parts, Offred skips between past and present as she retells the events leading up to the fall of women's rights and the existing details of the life that she now lives.

The novel discloses the strange new world of Gilead. Once the United States of America, Gilead was formed by a military rebellion that shot the President and members of Congress, suspended the Constitution, and put a Christian Theocracy in the place of a democratic government. Desperate to deal with a shrinking birth rate caused by pollution, chemical poisoning and decreasing fertility, the government of Gilead creates the Handmaids, women with viable ovaries who are placed in the households of high ranked officials whose wives cannot bear children. "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And so on and so forth" (p. 88). This is a prayer that Offred and the other handmaids are forced to say. The republic uses religion as a form of propaganda. They pray for the ability to have kids, which is what they are brainwashed into thinking their only purpose is. Like Rachel and Leah in the Old Testament, these Handmaids are expected to bear their Commanders' children in place of their wives. Caught up in a world of constant surveillance, strict regulation, and extreme punishment, the novel's protagonist, Offred, attempts to get through each day while holding on to the belief that she will someday be reunited with her husband and daughter.

The Place of the Individual in Society

One of the queries asked by “The Handmaid’s Tale” is whether the needs of society should be allowed to trump the rights of the individual. “It isn’t running away they’re afraid of. We wouldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge” (p 8). Atwood reminds us that there are different levels of freedom. In Gilead, there isn’t even the freedom of choice on life. Life is mandatory in the republic. As the Historical Notes annoy, the Gileadean society was facing extreme pressures. Their population was lessening, and they were going to disappear if severe actions were not taken. The segregation and mobilization of women with viable ovaries is a solution that makes the best use of available resources, but there are at least two serious problems with such methods. Fundamentally, the Gileadeans are acting under the idea of Utilitarianism: they are attempting to do what they think is best for the greatest number of people.

One of the foremost problems with this reasoning is that as a theocracy, the Gilead regime's reasoning is not always as coldly logical as it needs to be in order to solve its problems. The Gileadeans fix on that fertility is always a problem in the woman, never in the man, as was the case in the Bible. As a result, the regime dissipates many fertile handmaids on clearly infertile Commanders. This reasoning drives handmaids to violate the sexual ethnicity of the new society and make use of doctors or other accessible men to get pregnant. “I almost gasp: he’s said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (p. 61). In order for the Gileadean society to effectively fix their birth-rate problem, they need to take a more scientific perspective on the issue. Ultimately, the Gileadean leaders place their religious beliefs over the rights of the individual or the endurance of the group.

Role of Women in Society

In Gilead, the women have no power or freedom; they are forbidden from reading, going outside except for grocery shopping, not allowed to vote, hold office, or do anything that shows that they are independent. Instead, women are subjugated to becoming instruments of birth, “We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. There is supposed to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is to be permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no footholds of love. We are two-legged wombs, that’s all; sacred vessels, ambulatory -chalice” (p. 136)

The most important themes, and one that re-occurs in many of Atwood's novels, is the exploration of relationships between women. Though the protagonist, Offred, lacks the freedom to actively form new relationships and finds it painful to spend too much time remembering past ones, her relationships with her mother, her friend Moira, her shopping partner Ofglen, and Commander’s wife Serena Joy slowly reveal themselves over the course of the novel. What Offred finally shows to the reader is her pattern of understanding herself through her observations of the women around her. Offred cannot think about her relationship with the Commander without thinking about Serena Joy. They are a triangle not just because of the strange nature of their imposed sexual union, but also because of Offred's awareness of their innate similarities and connections. Atwood may be suggesting that whether or not such things are culturally imposed, women in society inevitably feel connected to each other simply because they are women. Offred's subtle reactions to Serena Joy and Ofglen stand in a marked contrast to the Aunts' declarations of female solidarity, and their prediction of a future where women will happily work together to fulfill their different functions. “The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.” (P.23). In the world of “The Handmaid’s Tale” the connections between women bear little resemblance to friendship. Even when the women are also friends, their connection goes far beyond their personal relationship. To Offred, Moira is a heroine - perhaps even a role model. Her bravery and

willingness to take risks serves as a reminder of what is possible. "Moira had power now, she'd been set loose, she'd set herself loose. She was now a loose woman" (p. 133).

Similarly, the women grow angry at the Salvaging when they no longer read out the crimes of those to be executed, because those crimes were a reminder of what they, as women, were capable of. "The crimes of others are a secret language among us. Through them we show ourselves what we might be capable of, after all. This is not a popular announcement" (p. 275) .

Feminism

While Atwood is widely viewed as a feminist writer, "The Handmaid's Tale" presents a complex view of feminism. First of all, Atwood stresses in many interviews that the extreme nature of Gilead is a result of the conservative and feminist viewpoints simultaneously being adopted during the time that she wrote the novel. Moira is the novel's mouthpiece for many of these ideas, and when Offred remembers the arguments they had, she is reiterating many of the ideas that influenced the novel. The most important idea was Moira's belief that living solely with women would solve many of the problems women were currently facing. In many ways, the new social order in Gilead is supposed to provide for a society of women. Most women have very little contact with men. Women are expected to support each other in times of birth, death and sickness. Women teach other women about the new regime. Within a household, women work together to fulfill the different functions of their gender. Of course, the utopian ideal of this community is far from the reality. Atwood seems to be suggesting that one of the flaws in the feminist community is the belief that women automatically feel loyalty towards one another.

Offred's mother serves as a mouthpiece for a different sort of feminism. Offred's mother marched for abortion rights, the banning of pornography, and many other women's issues before the institution of the new regime. When she was young, Offred remembers being embarrassed by her mother's activities. "I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said her to once. I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting"(p.75). Her mother would lecture her for being ungrateful and complacent about her rights. Only post-Gilead does Offred realize how complacent she truly was. Offred didn't realize that her job or her right to own property could be taken away. She now understands how the lack of rights changes one's perspective.

One of the qualities that make Offred so representative of women in general is that before Gilead, she was the kind of woman who didn't consider herself a feminist. She feared feminism would alienate her from men. She did not like it when her mother argued with Luke, trying to get him to admit that the only reason he cooked was because of feminism. Now Offred understands that feminism only forces women to recognize their natural alienation from men. It is the feminine itself that creates this alienation. This distinction becomes clear when Offred loses her job and is afraid to ask Luke whether he prefers the new order. Atwood explores feminism from several perspectives, and though she clearly considers its flaws, Offred ultimately seems to realize its importance.

Gender Conflict

Offred becomes more and more aware that as a man, Luke is on one side of the new regime, and she is on another, despite the fact that she believes he loves her. The Commander tries to explain to Offred why the new regime is better for men, and essentially admits that in order for it to be better for men, it must be worse for women. One of the most obvious questions is whether these feelings were simply repressed in the old society, or whether they were created by the new one. Would the Commander think the new regime

was better if his survival was not bound up with his support of the new regime? Does Luke actually prefer the new way of life? Before he understood the new laws about divorce, how did he feel about the new laws curtailing the activities of women? Offred never asks, so the reader never knows the answers to these important questions.

The overarching question is whether gender conflict exists at all. Is there actually more conflict between men and women than between women and women or men and men? Though there is little discussion of the relationships between men in "The Handmaid's Tale", relationships between women are not necessarily superior to those between women and men. Offred finds herself arguing with her mother and Moira about those very things. The different categories of women after the regime change serve only to widen gaps between women. Some wives literally try to stab Handmaids to death, angry about their very existence, while perfectly aware that they can do nothing about it. In general, relationships between men and women are not shown in an even remotely positive light. The exception is the relationship between Offred and Nick: the strength of that relationship lies in Nick's sacrifice of his own safety in order to be with and help Offred. She finally prays "Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that is what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice. I'll give up Nick, I'll forget about the others, I'll stop complaining. I'll accept my lot. I'll sacrifice. I'll repent. I'll abdicate. I'll renounce" (p.286). Atwood may be suggesting that all relationships are difficult: those between genders, and those among them.

REFERENCES:

1. Armbruster, J. "Memory and Politics — A Reflection on "The Handmaid's Tale," Social Justice 17:3, 1990, pp146–52.
2. Atwood, Eleanor Margret. *The Handmaid's Tale*, McClelland & Stewart Ltd, Random House of Canada, Canada, 1985.
3. Callaway, Alanna. "Women disunited: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a critique of feminism," San Jose State University, Retrieved 28 March 2016.
4. Davidson, Arnold, "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*". In Van Spanckeren, Kathryn (ed.), *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988, pp. 113–121.
5. Gruss, Susanne, "People confuse interpersonal relations with legal structures," An Interview with Margaret Atwood. "Gender Forum" Archived from the original on 27 April 2016, Retrieved 28 March 2016.
6. Hines, M. E., Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale: Fundamentalist Religiosity and the Oppression of Women," Angelo State University, Retrieved 28 March 2016.
7. Nally, Claire. "How *The Handmaid's Tale* is being transformed from fantasy into fact". *The Independent*, Retrieved 18 June 2017.
8. Neuman, S. C., " 'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*". *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 75:3, 2006, pp.857–868.