



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Literature

## Mechanisation of women in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

KEYWORDS:

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Margaret Atwood, the Canadian feminist writer published her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985 that foreshadows the future of women, a doomed future. This novel remains the outstanding success of Margaret Atwood's career and is the novel that made her an international celebrity. The novel's predictions seem to be true as women face a different form of exploitation in the present world. The newspapers are filled with the terrible obliteration of women who are denied of being human beings. Their bodies are thrown on the roads, railway tracks, and forlorn places just like wastes. Who denies their rights? Is it the patriarchal world? The handmaids in the novel represent the womenfolk predicted by Atwood.

Atwood sets her dystopian world in a futuristic United States at the beginning of the twenty first century in the Republic of Gilead. Gilead is a totalitarian regime run on patriarchal lines, derived from the Old Testament, seventeenth century American Puritanism, and the American New Right ideology of the 1980s. This dystopian world is presented through the recollections of the protagonist Offred who is victimised. Through her eyes, the structure of Gilead is described. Offred remembers the fall of United States and the creation of Gilead. The president was shot and the Congress machine-gunned; then the army declared a state of emergency, telling everyone to remain calm. 'Islamic fanatics' were falsely blamed for the execution of the entire government. The constitution was suspended, slowly the newspapers were censored and soon everyone had to carry an identity pass. Offred and other women lost their jobs and women could no longer legally work or hold property. Their bank accounts were transferred to their husbands or the nearest male family member, thus destroying the financial independence of women. With the loss of her job, the protagonist felt stripped of her independence, perceiving herself as a doll in her husband's hands. Thus with a back-story of protests and uprising, the totalitarian regime of Gilead came into existence with the support of religious fundamentalism. Other religions are not tolerated and those who do not conform are quickly executed by the state or shipped to areas of the former US known as "colonies" which have dangerously high levels of radiation.

The dystopian society of Gilead segregates people according to their class, caste and gender. Men are classified mainly into four categories. The first is the Commanders of the Faithful who constitute the ruling class. Because of their high status, they are entitled to establish a patriarchal household with a wife, a Handmaid if necessary, Marthas and Guardians. They have a duty to procreate, but many may be infertile, as a possible result of exposure to a biological agent in pre-Gilead times. They wear black to signify their superiority. The other men are Eyes, the internal intelligence agency whose job it is to discover those violating the rules of Gilead, Angels who fight in the war and Guardians who are soldiers. Men who engage in homosexuality are declared "Gender Traitors" and either executed or sent to the colonies. The men are normally clad in military or parliamentary uniforms.

In Gilead, there are six main categories of women who make up mainstream society. Wives comprise the top most social level permitted to women. They are married to the higher ranking functionaries. Wives always wear blue dresses, in a sartorial reference to the traditional depictions of Virgin Mary. Daughters are the natural or adopted children of the ruling class and they wear white dress until marriage. Handmaids are fertile women whose social function is to bear children for the Wives and their dress is red in colour. There are other women like Aunts who train

and monitor the Handmaids, and who wear brown dress; Marthas, the female servants in green dress; and Econowives who have married low ranking men and who use multi-coloured dress in red, blue, and green to reflect their multiple roles. Apart from the six main categories, there are about two marginal categories of women called "Unwomen" and consist of sterile women, widows, feminists, lesbians, nuns and politically dissident women. The second, Jezebels are prostitutes and entertainers available only to the Commanders and their guests. In this totalitarian society, the sameness of both men and women leads to collectivism where each individual is just a part of the whole, and are deprived of their individuality.

The theocratic government ruling over the Republic of Gilead distorts religion to justify that their oppression of Handmaids, through the recourse to what they claim as Biblical precedent. The need of Handmaids is justified by referring to the story of Rachel and Leah from the book of Genesis. Leah, Rachel's sister and the first wife of Jacob, was fertile and was blessed by God: but Rachel, Jacob's second wife was thought to be infertile. Rachel and Leah compete in bearing sons for their husband by using their handmaids as proxies and taking immediate possession of the children they produce. Another example is the use of the lines from Genesis that states "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, in sorrow thou shall bring forth children". The ability to bear children is conflated with the possession of spirituality and worthiness. The official vocabulary of the regime incorporates religious terminology, such as the names Marthas, Angels, Guardians of Faith, etc. All stores have biblical names like Milk and Honey, Loaves and fishes and even the automobiles have biblical names like Behemoth, Whirlwind and Chariot. The dictatorship of Gilead is enforced upon its subjects from behind the mask of religion.

Handmaids are the most dehumanised and the most victimised group in the dystopian world of Gilead. Gilead legitimises and enforces the class of Handmaids out of the dire necessity to overcome fertility crisis among the ruling elite. Due to AIDS, syphilis, environmental toxics, etc many of them are sterile, their wives barren and the children born were not healthy. Thus the birth rate which is dangerously low among the ruling elite has led to the establishment of the class of Handmaids. They are to be recruited for the Commanders. The state reduces them to the slave status of being mere "breeders" .As Offred says: "We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (146). Women who are not viable in terms of childbirth are not really women at all according to the founders of this theocracy. These 'Unwomen' are sent to colonies where they are doomed to death in being entrusted with the process of cleaning up the radioactive wastes. This inhuman treatment of women reveals Gilead's complete disregard for the actual lives and subjectivities of its female citizens.

Attempts have been made by Gilead to obliterate all sense of individuality and identity of women. It strips the Handmaids of their original names and assigns a new name to them which merely indicates the male to whom she is assigned to, as in Offred, Ofglen, and Ofwarren. As Offred says: " my name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it is forbidden" (94). Their personal identities are effaced in Gilead and they are now mere material possessions of the Commanders. Every time the women hear their names, they are reminded that they are nothing more than a property which has no rights of their own. In Gilead, women are alienated from their own bodies by the

elaborate apparel they have to wear. In their red gowns, Offred considers herself, "a distorted shadow, a parody of something. Some fairytale figure in red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A sister dipped in blood" (19). Barbara Rigney, commenting on the Handmaid's red gowns, argues that these women are "personifications of a religious sacrifice, temple prostitutes" (qtd. in Hamill 525). As an individual they are invisible in Gilead.

Offred's room is a prison in which all means of defence, or escape by suicide or flight have been removed. Their rooms are without mirrors, glass windowpanes, hooks. In the Handmaid's room, "They have removed anything you could tie rope to" (17). Even the right to commit suicide has been taken from them. In Gilead, "Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries" (17). Women in Gilead is prohibited from the outside world by the severe restrictions on their freedom of movement. They are forbidden to read and write. The only word they have given Offred to read is FAITH, embroidered on the cushion. For minor offences like reading, their arms and legs which are seen as inessential for reproduction are ruthlessly chopped off. When she sees the bookshelf of the Commander, Offred feels a different kind of emotion as she describes: "Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden. I try not to stare" (147). Instead of lettered signs, pictures of meat and fruit are marked for them to shop because, they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for them.

Women may not be raped by strangers in Gilead but they must submit to state sanctioned rape by the Commanders. There is no space for sexual desire and love. Offred feels emptiness that "there's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere" (113). Gilead reduces the people to a dehumanised status without humanly feelings and this regime insist on childbearing for the continuation of this dehumanised collective. Aunts tell them to "think of yourselves as seeds" ..., "let's pretend we're trees" (28). Even their prayer must be for children as 'Oh God, obliterate me, make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled (204). There are 'accepted greetings' and 'accepted responses' among Handmaids like 'Blessed be the fruit' and 'May the Lord open'. But in a society that focuses on procreation, sexuality is restricted. Here, pornographic magazines and films are forbidden and masturbation is a sin. For Gilead only the fertility of women matters, while no one considers the sterility of the man.

Gilead is a prison for all women. Most women in this new society experience very little freedom due to the fact that they essentially belong to their male Commanders and must submit to their will. Even Serena Joy, wife of the Commander is powerless in the world of men. In pre-Gilead, she was a gospel singer and a spokesperson but she "is now become speechless" (56). Serena can only take out her frustration on the women under her and she creates a space through gardening as it is "something for them to order and maintain and care for" (22). Everyone in Gilead is under the constant surveillance of Eyes who catch those who disobey the laws. Offred and other Handmaids are conscious about it. It is evident when Offred and Offglen encounter a group of Japanese tourists and their interpreter. Since many of the interpreters are Eyes, Offred and Offglen are weary. The tourists ask 'Are you happy'; Offred replies that 'we are very happy' because "sometime it's as dangerous not to speak" (30). It is to be noted that both Offred and Offglen marvel at the women's exposed legs, high heels, and polished toenails that they wish to do. Their each and every movement is under the eyes of Eyes in Gilead. Even in this dystopia Aunts like Aunt Lydia insist that women are better off in Gilead and free from exploitation and violence. In Gilead, no one whistles at women as they walk; no one touches them or talks to them. This is what Offred explains as "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (34). Individual freedom has been denied and everyone has been drafted into the service of the state, yet the only people benefitting from the new order are the male elites in

society.

Gilead turns women against women. Within the hierarchy of women, they were often envious of one another instead of being supportive. The Econowives resented the Handmaids because of what they perceived to be a pampered, care-free way of life. The Wives resented them for stealing away the sexual attention of their husbands and the Marthas resented them because of their responsibilities to take care of the Handmaids.

Even in this terrible world of Gilead, there are people who are not under the complete control of the state like members of 'May Day'. Women like Offred's predecessor, Offglen and Moira tried to escape and though they failed Offred puts her hope in them. Offred comes to know that her predecessor at Commander's house committed suicide and had scratched a coded message in a cupboard: "Noilete te bastardes carborundorum" that means "Don't let the bastards grind you down". Offred communicates with this unknown inscriber. Another example is her friend Offglen whose attempted escape ends up in her suicide. The story of Moira is another inspiration for Offred. Moira defies the power of the Aunts and escapes from the rehabilitation centre only to reappear in the brothel scene at Jezebel's where she satirises male sexual fantasies. Offred says that "Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us. She was with us in secret, a giggle" (143). Even there was communication among Handmaids by defying the vigilance of Aunts as:

"We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi darkness we could stretch our arms, when the aunts were not looking and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip read...In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed: Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June" (13).

By touching each other, they are realising their need to establish human connections, their urge for care, love, community and for the human touch which have been denied to them.

Offred claims her own space by her refusals, she refuses to forget the past, and she refuses to believe in the absolute authority of Gilead just as she refuses to give up hope. She lives with hope that "Every night when I go to bed I think, in the morning I will wake up in my own house and things will be back the way they were" (209). Offred gets a chance to develop a relationship with the Commander and they do many forbidden things together. He lets her look at a magazine named Vogue that was banned in Gilead. She reads Dickens in his room; he gets her some hand lotion and finally even takes her out one night onto Jezebel. When the Commander, in the new found intimacy of scabble and reading, asks her what she wants, she answers: "I would like to know". She realises that "To him I'm no longer a usable body" (172). She is brutally awakened to the hypocrisy and hollowness of the whole system when she is confronted with the fact that the Commanders use the service of prostitutes, thus subverting a system that they themselves established. Even Serena Joy allowed her to have a relation with Nick, the Commander's driver. The link with Nick helps Offred in her final escape from Gilead.

Offred escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the Underground female road to tell her tale of victimization. The manuscript of Handmaid's tale is a reconstruction from voice recordings of Offred on cassette tapes. Offred insists that "it is also a story I'm telling in my head" (51), and she stresses that "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction". She thus unlocks her inner feelings and bitter experiences in Gilead. It is another way of creating a female space. The epilogue of the novel that is supposedly placed about 200 years after Offred, presents the male point of view of the woman's story. It is mainly by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto. Instead of seeing Gilead as tyrannical, Pieixoto and the conference attendees belittle Offred and her tale. Her miserable life is thus distorted by the scholars. In history, there are many other women like Offred whose miserable life has been buried and thus become unknown to the world. 'Her story' will be made into 'His story'. But, in fact, her reconstruction is a resistance against patriarchy and totalitarianism. As the French feminist Helene Cixous

described in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa", by writing herself woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display... 'Write yourself .Your body must be heard' (qtd. in Howells 137). By writing herself, Offred liberates herself.

The world depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is indeed a prediction of the doomed future of women. Women in Gilead are destined to live like machines, without rights, feelings and emotions. Atwood predicts a future where patriarchy rules to the extreme together with the religious fundamentalism. Gilead proves oppressive in its restrictions. The classification of people according to their functions, the dehumanised life of Handmaids, without the rights to read, write, speak, feel and even to commit suicide, the restrictions on sexual desire etc creates the dystopian world of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. This story is critical of both of its past and present and it can be a warning of the dangers which our society may experience in the near future if the present trends continue.