
Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and An Untold Tale of Subjugation and Eschatological Reality

Dr Shyam Babu

Assistant Professor, Regional Campus, The EFL University, Lucknow

ABSTRACT

Publication Info

Article history :

Received : 05-06-2022

Accepted : 17-11-2022

DOI : 10.30949/dajdtla.v18i2.3

Key words:

dystopia, emancipation, power, rape, violence, bizarre reality

Corresponding author :

shyambabueflu@gmail.com

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) is a dystopian novel that opens us to the bizarre reality of women's custodian rape and violence. Things look quite strange and alarming due to women's oppression which results in a traumatized experience. This is overtly a political novel and tries to spotlight the sense of ineffable life that is miserable and also self-revealing. The novel narrates the story of Offred, a handmaid a sinister handmaid. She was forced to become one due to the rise of fanatic power in the states of America. America is now the Republic of Gilead, where everything is controlled by dominance, oppression, and bigotry. It is, glamorized as a fantasy that impinges on our real life. The novel lends itself to solicit the feminist cause which leads us to an eschatological reality. Briefly, it tells a tale in the most personal sense about the complicity, fidelity, and betrayal, in the political setup in the contemporary United States.

As the novelist, Atwood builds up fine gossamer of imaginative tale out of a deep love for nature, libertine feminist activism and inclination of science, etc., and perhaps an awful condition we are struggling to tackle but all in the future time frame.

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939-) one of the most prolific living writers of the Commonwealth nations, has produced a huge corpus of writings ranging from a novel, and short stories, to autobiographies to memoirs, etc. Her writings are as wide as deep. She was born with an inspiration to write, and she grew with the potential to become one of the most amazing Canadian writers today. Needless to say, Atwood's career beginning from the 60s to the present encompasses the Commonwealth era to contemporary postcolonial times. The trajectory of narratives likewise has infused political, cultural, social, and ideological imperatives which compel the readers to believe, sometimes revolt, and often identify with the conditions we read and hear.

As an activist, feminist, and writer Atwood's preoccupations have been primarily women and their struggle: women in her fictional worldview are triumphant and survivors as well as modern loners. She has also a deep fascination for nature which she inculcated from her father who was an entomologist. She would go along with her father often to Quebec and Ontario, the locations of her father's academic visits where she wonder stuck with the flora and fauna of nature and her stunning beauty. These personal experiences have catapulted her creative propensity towards the objects, persons, and situations we encounter in society and she portrays them in more informed contexts.

The Handmaid's Tale as a Refurnished Story of Identity, Power and Destitution

"Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (*The Handmaid's Tale*, 95)

The above hymn is in the form of blessings that mandates that every woman in the novel (or

anywhere else) should be productive. This conservative, Christian dogmatic postulation obviously under a new state regime or Gilead (presumably a state-run of White fanatic male only) interpolates that woman is always fertile and hence must produce children at any cost. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986) is a very complicated work, a kind of dystopia novel that deals with the futuristic reality of women's custodian rape and violence from the fanatics who have been ex-army officers and warmongers of yesteryear. The traumatized experience of women creates a sense of ineffable life bereft of all normal human values.

The novel narrates the story of Offred, a handmaid who is not a conventional handmaid but a sinister handmaid. As time passes by we discover Offred is forced to become such sinister due to the rise of fanatic power in the states of America, the Republic of Gilead. It's a political state that is ruled by dictators, who believe in (male) power, control, and oppression. Essentially, the story has been told by Offred, the chief protagonist of the novel. The story smoothly fluctuates between the past, the bygone good days to the tough time of the present, which she had spent with Moira, another character of the novel. It is, therefore, a fantasy, nature fiction, and a solid document of a feminist cause that leads us to an ineffable reality we find difficult to accept or believe. *The Handmaid's Tale* thus traverses not only genres but also the boundary, of realism, experimental and avant-garde. It is, however, commonly accorded as a dystopian fiction for spotlighting the perpetuation of power, rigid norms, and violence onto women subjects.

Loosely described, 'Dystopia' is a genre that is known for its antipathy or bleak picture of our condition. Tom Moylan describes the dystopia as "opens in the midst" of a terrible "elsewhere" (cited in Margaret Atwood: *Feminism and Fiction*, 158). She, however, is quite cognizant of this fiction indebtedness and maintains that (*The Handmaid's Tale*) is "a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (*Modern Critical Views*.) Atwood as an activist writer was inspired to write a dystopian novel due to the political events took place during the 80s in the USA. There is an echo of the Rise of Christian right in America in the 1970s and 80s, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. It was thus broadly a well-documented response to the sexual liberation movement that happened in the early 60s and 70s. As a dystopia novel, it unravels the bleak future/reality that America has turned into due to its deep-seated Euro centrism, belief in solo power, and Colonial ideology. Atwood herself observes about *The Handmaid's Tale*, "it is an imagined account of what happens when not uncommon pronouncements about women are taken to their logical conclusions." A well-known American literary critic, Harold Bloom maintains that "*The Handmaid's Tale* emerges from the strongest strain in Atwood's imaginative sensibility, which is gothic. A gothic dystopia is an oddly mixed genre, but Atwood makes it work" (2).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* women bear most atrocities in the hands of men. It is, of course, due to a biased inbuilt perception in men, that they are powerful and superior to women. Women are forcefully married to a divorcee who lived in former America. All women in America have been trained to become handmaids of the Commanders. The Commanders being the powerful men now have the reign of the Republic of Gilead. Their wives live respectably at home as ideal women. They found it quite natural to rear, sew and look after the garden for the happy life of their spouses. They are the Marthas, elderly ladies who have gone through the menopausal stage and are the ones who cook and do domestic jobs. The 'econowives' who are poor and practically segregated are not considered humans at all. The handmaids are the ones who are gone through medical checkups each month, are given the appropriate food, and are kept under constant surveillance. They are persons who act as Bilhah by lying on Rachel or the Commander's wives' knees and the Jacob or the Commander, every Night of the Ceremony is supposed to rape the Handmaid to make her pregnant. The women of the Republic of Gilead are sadly suffering from an inability to conceive and the young population has decreased drastically. This was one of the reasons why the former American state was overthrown by the

fanatic organization which is now the Republic of Gilead and now it has plans to rectify that. And the state is doing so at the cost of women.

We see in the novel how the women are made to believe that it is because of their unholy ways that God is showing his wrath. The unholy ways are the usage of contraceptives, their freedom, and living for themselves. One can see that both the scientific and moral reasons for this catastrophe that has engulfed the state, are all fabricated, and imposed upon women folk. It is further revealed that it was the men who had become sterile due to the infiltration of a chemical that was the result of the wars.

The identities of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* throw light on their subjection and interpellation. The handmaid who is treated like a prized pig, which is fed, bathed, poked, and prodded into every month but not treated like a human, shows how the handmaids have just become bodies to give birth. We see that pain in Offred's narrative when she says:

...and we would sit at Rita's kitchen table, which is not Rita's any more than my table is mine, and we would talk about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get into. (71)

Her longing for a dull but familiar chat with elderly women shows her loneliness and alienation. Her personality is covered by that 'red cloak' signifying her ability to bleed and ovulate and her white wings shroud her face. These are the symbols of her estrangement from society and her self. The constant fear of Offred, which is not even her real name as it means 'of Fred', Fred being her current commander, shows the loss of her identity. The window of her room which doesn't open entirely, only a little to let some air in, shows the dominance of other forces in her private life. The fact that her door has no lock shows that the idea of an individual and their privacy is completely abolished for women, especially the handmaids, in the Gilead society. The handmaids are not allowed to drink, smoke, or even have sugar, coffee, or any other forms of caffeine to not hinder their chances of conceiving. Even the way they greet, "Blessed is the day" and the response ensues – "May the Lord open". The greetings above conspicuously show how the identity of the handmaids has been created and circulated for the public (male) to devour and enjoy.

We see Offred getting suffocated and even paranoid in the novel. Her worry that the state (Gilead) has intruded so much in her life that it will reach the depths of her mind and soul. It shrinks, revolts, and rebels in her inner being. She wishes to live. She wishes to survive. And to do so, she tries to subdue those thoughts of rebellion inside her. We see that taking a toll on her. She fears every look, every glance, every utterance of hers and the others. Her walking partner Ofglen is an object of constant terror to her and even Ofglen mistrusts her. This mutual distrust and prevailing paranoia among the handmaids are the results of the decline of their rights and power. As a result of which a deep sense of prejudice, negativity, and insecurity captures their imagery.

Not only the handmaids but the status of other women too reduced to a minimum and their existence is "essentialized" and "marked". We see the Commander's wife Serena Joy who was formerly an activist, now sitting at her lonely and sewing clothes and gardening. She is going through the trauma of seeing her husband with another woman. She is no longer connected with her husband. They seldom talk. She is truncated to a walking mannequin, to be an ideal woman with no life inside her. We see her internal breakdown through her habits, like smoking incessantly, tapping her foot restlessly on the carpet while talking to Offred, not even looking in his face, and not speaking much to anyone in the house at all. She knows according to the ideals of Gilead she is supposed to bear it all with grace and even be thankful as Rachel was, but she couldn't. We also witness the same fate of other Commander's wives', their breakdowns and inner agony through the conversations of Marthas who narrate the anecdotes of the wives trying

to stab the handmaids or even trying to poison them. This narrative of distrust and enmity brings out a completely dystopia world view of life we are surrounded by or would be encountering sooner or later.

We see that though women in the Republic of Gilead have multiple identities according to their station and roles in society, they are all subjected to marginalization, trauma, and mental, physical, and emotional abuse along with being reduced to mere shadows. Offered through her flashbacks of before and after the fall of America presents before us the comparison and the decline in the condition of women. The literal snatching of the baby from Offwarren's lap who was lucky enough to bear a child and then making her try for another Commander again shows the reduction of the handmaids' existence to mere bodies. The constant anxiety of Offred and the other handmaids to get pregnant is reflected in the novel when they glance hungrily at Offwarren's belly when she enters the shop. The very fact that the handmaids have started looking at themselves as merely bodies, show a disturbing shift in their psyche that may be referred as the "cognitive slavery", if it is to be said. This echoes high-pitched patriarchal power on which the Republic of Gilead is founded.

The mood of the novel is redolent with tensions and the overwhelming weight of weariness and daily boredom. Offred thinks about committing suicide but keeps herself alive in the hope of seeing her daughter again. Her dilemma while entering the Commander's office when called upon and her surprise in not finding the Commander wanting to rape her, shows how the women of Gilead have no hope, no security, and a ready acceptance for the worst which is quite bizarre and eerie. The way Offred discloses her rape to the readers is quite appalling:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. (100)

She is not using any adjectives. She is merely stating. We see this eerie acceptance in the next lines when she says,

Copulating too would be inaccurate because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choices but there were some, and this is what I chose. Therefore I lie still and picture the unseen canopy over my head. I remember Queen Victoria's advice to her daughter: Close your eyes and think of England. But this is not England. I wish he would hurry up. (100-101)

Offred wishes to keep her mind blank just like her prospects. She wakes up every day, goes through her routines and normal chores, and lives her dreary life. The drastic shift that her life has taken makes her go back and forth in her memory to remember the older and pleasant times: time which never seems to come again. She at times remembers her daughter and tries to picture her face in her memory. At times, she even tries to tell herself that everything is all but a dream, unreal and so sweet to miss.

It is quite clear in the novel that the subjection of women is very natural and normal phenomenon. The perpetuation of violence is striking to see through one scene wherein Offred asks the Commander to let her peruse a magazine. The Commander is quite amused to see that when asked for anything, she asks him for a mere magazine. The fact that reading in itself is a crime and that Offred was doing so undercover shows the pathetic condition of women. It is evident to note that before the fall of America, women's conditions were at par with the women of today's times, independent and more better empowered. Before the fall, women could earn, work, get educated, and live life the way they wanted. After the fall, their condition deteriorated and they became objects in the hands of powerful to play. This picture may be correlated with the prevailing condition of Afghanistan. Recently, a video came out on YouTube showing pictures of Afghanistan before the reign of Taliban. The pictures were taken around the 70s showing women in music stores, streets, parks, and museums. They were attired in the fashion

of those times wearing skirts, and pumps, with their hair cut in pixie, bob, and other prevalent fashions of those times. They looked happy in those pictures. Even the Medical profession in Afghanistan had more women than men in the 70s and 80s. This would be quite unbelievable for the generation born in today's era.

The Handmaid's Tale through its flashbacks is trying to give a very poignant message that the ideology of 'the other' can take hold over any nation and that the situation happening in Gilead could happen in any developed country be it America or any other nation. The oppression of women should be stopped before they become an incurable disease in the manner in which it happened in the Republic of Gilead. In the novel, women are victimized, violated stifled, and objectified beyond recognition. Marthas, the wives, and the handmaids too are controlled and enforced with (male) desire. Even the aunts who occupy a position of power are systematically controlled by their spouses. Stillman-Johnson aptly observes, "Atwood's narrator tells a very personal tale of understanding and ignoring, activity and complicity, fidelity and betrayal, in the political settings of the contemporary United States and the future dystopian society of Gilead" (2). Atwood as a storyteller devises a strategy to unravel the tensions in the story and thus problematizes the women's subjections. She has used the 'double voice' technique to gauge the oppression of women subjects as articulated by Alice M Palumbo. She further observes, "Atwood has made constant use of the double voice, depicting characters at war with themselves and their environments. Through intertextual allusions, alterations in narrative point of view, and the use of the unconscious, Atwood shows how the self is constructed from contradictory impulses, some more societally acceptable than others" (30).

We find that Serena Joy, a former activist being reduced to a housekeeper. We see Aunt Lydia, formerly an advocate exercising great power, being subjected to punish other women for her own survival. We see that there is tension among all the women. Everyone is distrustful or disdainful of the other. The handmaids don't trust each other for fear of being addressed by the Eye or the spy in the shape of a handmaid. These women are miserable beings who cannot hate their fellow Commander's wives; instead, they hate the handmaids. The Marthas are disgusted and abused by the handmaids. They don't wish to fraternize with them. One thing is very obvious here. That is to say, the structure of power operates in the form of patriarchal subjugation of women when they are disentangled from each other.

And this is why the state of Gilead ensures that this division among women due to power dynamics, and prejudice should remain rooted in 'latent' form. Perhaps, here we sense double voices; of liberation and subjugation almost seamlessly. This tale-tell strategy has been used to bring out this contention. Moira, who is one of the major characters, is introduced to us through Offred's flashbacks. She has been an active rebellion and we see that during her training at the Rachel and Leah Center the heavy punishment that she endured and how she made her ultimate venture to Jezebel's which is the secret club for the Commanders, from whence she would be sent to the Colonies- the toxic and highly radioactive space, show no hope for women in the Republic of Gilead. We see how the change in Offred's psyche has taken place when she says casually, "They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds about things like this."

The fact that it seems shocking to her to see women dressed in fashionable clothes shows how an ideology of dominance can work as a slow poison to dominate our minds. She has grown so used to her and other women's situations that the old ways of freedom come as a shock to her. She feels foreign and estranged from the woman who stands in front of her, which is ironic since she used to dress the same way. How the Republic of Gilead has worked on her psychology and is slowly making her its slave is what one can gather from this scene. How it is slowly erasing her personality and her ideas from within shows her subjection. And this is why a lot of women became true believers and Offred being aware of that, fears everyone, including herself.

The women of Gilead even though in different identities, are subjected to injustice and brutal physical (sexual) violence. Their identities are shown and created to be 'ideal women' in a very parochial manner. They are supposed to perform the orchestrated role they are assigned. They are thus doomed to live a life of oblivion due to the Gilead's (un) realistic vision of "white, Christian, misogynist, stratified reproduction" (Stillman-Johnson, 3) that perhaps control the whole world.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage, 1996
- Bloom, Herald. Edited and Introduction. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Bloom's *Modern Critical Views*. Infobase Publishing, 2009.
- Hooker, Deborah. " (F)orality, Gender, and the Environmental Ethos of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*". *Twentieth Century Literature*. Fall, 2006, Vol. 52, No. 3 (pp. 275-305). <http://www.jstor.com/stable/20479773> [https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The Life and Achievements of Margaret Eleanor Atwood Essay|Bartleby](https://www.bartleby.com/essay/The-Life-and-Achievements-of-Margaret-Eleanor-Atwood-Essay|Bartleby)
- Stillman, Peter G and S. Anne Johnson. "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*". *Utopian Studies* (1994) Vol. 5, No. 2. pp: 70-86. Pen State University Press. www.jstor.org/stable/20719314
- Stillman, Peter G, and S Anne Johnson. "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*". *Utopian Studies*, 1994, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1994), pp. 70-86.
- Tolan, Fiona. *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*. Rodopi, 2007