

Identify and Self-Search in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Shubhpreet Sandhu

PGGC, Sec 11

Chandigarh, India

dharamsandhu@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper attempts to capture the social status, domination of women by men faced by Offred, the protagonist of the sixth best seller novel by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. The famous fantasy fiction *The Handmaid's Tale* is written in the dystopian tradition. Through this novel, she has penned powerfully her social concern regarding the social status, domination, the mental turmoil and the identity crises of women in a male – dominated society and their consequent struggle to overcome this domination, repression and subjugation through many modes of escape strategies. This kind of struggle gives them power to speak against their situation and change their self to enable them to lead a dignified life in the same society. Six years before the publication of this novel, Margaret Atwood had commented on the writing of fiction in a way that seems to anticipate the novel. She comments “What kind of world shall you describe for your readers? The one you can see around you or the better one you can imagine? If only the latter, you’ll be unrealistic. If only the former, despairing, But It is by the better world we can imagine, that we judge the world we have”.

Keywords: Dystopia, Male-Domination, Self-Identity, Women's literacy

As a postmodern feminist novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* is concerned with the patriarchal system that dominated women. In this novel, Atwood captures the plight of a woman caught in

oppressive stereotypes from which she struggles to escape. In the words of Lirida Hutcheon. “In all her writing Atwood shows herself to be the tireless explorer and exposure of cultural clichés and stereotypes in particular of those that affect women. (p. 313) *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a cautionary and heart rending tale that dramatizes a futuristic totalitarian society where women are unable to get the basic rights. In other words the novel reveals the social isolation of women and the separation into rigid gender role of wives, wombs, workers, whores and how they are deprived of their primary human rights such as right to education, jobs, property, citizenship and even one’s own name and speech, Howell mentions, “Atwood & feminist concerns are plain here, but so too are here concerns for basic human rights.”(p. 128)

The narrator and protagonist of the novel is Offered who is the victim of such a prohibition ordinance. She reacts to its oppression in all its manifestations both physical and psychological. She narrates about her every day in the totalitarian state of Gilead where she is seen and used “as mere means of procreation.”(Klarer 131). She is appointed as a Handmaid to a leading official commander. She starts to live with him as a substitute for his old and infertile wife, Serena. In Gilead state Handmaids are treated as “two legged wombs” or “unintelligent matter in the reproduction process which is, like everything else in this dystopia, dominated by men. (Klarer 137)”. Offered is one of the fertile women and her job is to get pregnant by the commander, give birth to the child and then give it up so that the wife, Serena, and she can raise the baby as her own. In the Republic state of Gilead, social structure is rigid, oppressive and misogynistic. Offered describes life in Gilead as, “We learned to whisper almost without sound”. In the semi darkness we could stretch out our arms when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, and watching each other’s mouths. In this way, we exchanged names, from bed to bed. (p.14)

Women in dystopian state, Gilead face a double edged weapon and double alienation.

Offred is caught in the clutches of repressive and regressive Gilead. She narrates the story in first person narrative in the form of a diary. She gives us a poignant and first hand glimpse of her experience as she struggles between submission and retaliation, acceptance and rejection with no thought about her individual likes and dislikes. Being a fertile woman, Offred has to serve as Handmaid to the commander who is childless as a result of his wife's infertility. As Offred says: we are four-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices."(p.128) Offred is a patronymic slave name which describes her function, It is a tag that she wears to signify that she is the Handmaid "of Fred." This is done in order to erase her former identity and labels according to the names of her commanders Offred mentioned, "My name is not Offered, I have another name..... name is like your telephone number, useful only to others' (p.). Because women in Gilead are forced to give in to their masters' and are dished out set, predefined roles drawn by the Republic of Gilead. They are stripped of civil rights, no property, no education, no friendship, no free talks, and no free walks.

In the state of Gilead, women are completely controlled by the patriarchy. Infertile lower women seen either her to clean up toxic waste or to become "Marthas", house servants. They act as domestic slaves as they become weak and sick or cease working, they are sent to the colonies .They wear robes of dull green which signifies their earthiness. Then there are "Econowives", wives of poor men who perform diverse roles such as waiving, housekeeping and child bearing. They wear Red, blue and green striped skimpy robes. There is another category of women called Jezebels who work in clubs and other excitement outside in its own state sponsored brand of "Sex-prostitutes". The Aunts, police women of Gilead wear paramilitary khaki dress, and train the handmaids. Handmaids are forced to wear the scarlet robes signifying their adultery. Thus Margret Atwood's novel postulates a future culture in which such feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy, that divide women into rigid categories based on function".(Walker P69).

It is absolutely horrible living under this futuristic regime, Gilead. Life in Gilead is one of conformity, corruption, fear, terror and brutality which pictures life in terms of totalitarian. Offred is forced to spend time lonely and in solitude. She is rendered absolutely powerless and her identity stripped off. She is not free to do anything like reading, writing, freedom of expression, speech. She is deprived of even cheap pleasures such as coffee, tobacco, or alcohol to which ironically the authorities have access. She even cannot wear clothes or eat according to her taste. She is forced to suffer much injustice. Handmaid Offred is regarded as only a tool for reproduction. The commander who attempts to impregnate her once in a month has no interest in her face. She is given a bath by Martha around her arilation time. After that she waits for the ceremony. Offred explains, “I wait, washed, brushed fed like a prize pig” (p.79). This shows completely the feeling of dehumanization. But the male infertility is unthinkable in Gilead. As Offred says, “There are only women, who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law.”(P.57) Atwood tries to portray the futile life of women who are treated as un women under the totalitarian government. Alienation can be seen in every part of the novel. Women are seen as mere commodities rather than human beings. Offred tells us of Serena Joy, the commander’s wife,” she doesn’t speak to me, unless she can’t avoid it, I am a reproach to her, and a necessity”. (p.23)

Women are victimized under the state of Gilead. The hierarchy placed women at the non-human level. They are stripped of their belongings, families, clothing and most significantly their names. Although Offred is humiliated and embarrassed yet she is able to survive. She develops her feminist consciousness towards the slavery syndrome and with the help of her lover Nick, she escapes from Gilead.

The Handmaid’s Tale can be seen as a metaphor of the condition of women which has changed a little over the centuries. The forms of oppression and humiliation may differ at various periods in history but the fact remains that women have been and still are victims of

male-dominated society. Atwood emphasizes on the problems of women's survival and identity in a male-dominated society where her protagonist refuses to be a silent victim.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margret *Witches*, *Second Words: selected Critical Prose* (Beacon press, 1982) p.333.
- Atwood, Margret, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Bantan Ltd., 1986).
- Hutcheon, Linda Afterword in Margaret Atwood, *The Edible Women* (Toronto: The New Canadian Library, 1967);P 313.
- Coral An Howells, Margret Atwood (London: Macmillan Press Ltd.; 1996) P.128
- Klarer, Mario "Orality and Literacy as Gender supporting structures in Margaret Atwood's. *The Handmaid's Tale* ", *Mosaic* (Spl. "Media Matters : Technologies of Literary Production")28/4 (1995) p.131
- Walker, Nanay A. "Feminist Alternatives: Irony and fantasy in the contemporary Novel by women" (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1990) p.69.