

Depiction of Gileaden Women in Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to explore the traumatic condition of the Giledean Society and its women. Margaret Atwood in his work *The Handmaid Tale* encompasses the 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 Offred. Handmaids are forbidden to use their birth names and they must use names of the male, or master, whom they serve. In Gileaden society, the women have no power or freedom, they are restricted from reading, going outside except for grocery shopping, not allowed to vote, not allowed to earn money on their own or permitted to work, which shows that they are not independent. Instead, women are subjugated to becoming instruments of birth.

Keywords: Women, Freedom, Subjugation, Patriarchal Society.

Women in literature have been portrayed as paragons of passive sufferers. One of the most significant challenges that women have faced for almost centuries is subjugation. It is usually a common issue in patriarchal society where women are expected to serve their men as well as to their thoughts and ideas. Women's freedom of rights and thoughts are being questioned by society which leads to eradicating the entire growth of women empowerment. The Stereotyped conventions on women make her life worse even in the 20th century. In this aspect the article focuses on the practical application of women in Giledean society.

The term Gilead is derived from the ancient historic, biblical name in the northern part of the region of Transjordan. 'Gilead' is used in the Bible to refer to the entire region east of Jordan River. In modern day Gilead is situated in Jordan corresponding to Irbid, Ajloun, Jerash and Balqua Governorates. Gilead means Monument, heap of testimony, site of testimony. Humans are here to testify about the virtues of the name Gilead.

The role of women in Gilead is a religious patriarchy that is shaped under Biblical ideas of gender. While high-class men are assigned to be commanders and they are able to participate, socially, politically and economically in Gilead, but the women in Giledean are assigned to be more domestic and subservient. In the Giledean society women's life is so subjugated for survival because their basic fundamental rights are also banned.

The women of Gilead are being oppressed in that society whereas women do not have any freedom on their own. They were totally restricted in all the way; they are helpless in their country because they are totally exploited by men. Women bodies are used as political instruments through their political enslavement. Gilead is all about a group of communities where totalitarian conservative and religious extremists control over the country. They totally abolished the existing democratic and egalitarian

society. Especially women in the Giledean society are assorted and segregated according to their roles and activities that they should perform. The traditional epigraph shows that Gilead is a fundamental Christian theocracy.

According to Giledean society, it is governed by Commanders who are attorneys of the new Christian government's with extreme policies and a neo-puritan ideology that dominates in all aspects of lives.

Marlynnne Robinson(1943) examines the Giledean Societies Women's position as "These people who can see right through you never quite do you justice, because they never give you credit for the effort you're making to be better than you actually are which is difficult and well-meant and deserving of simple notice".(98)

The main goal of Gilead is to build a better future with us. The foremost reason for writing particularly about the Giledean society by Canadian writers was to furnish their societies ethnic values and cultural diversity. According to Canadian writers, they needed to warn America from severe hazards of sin and corruption. So they began to revolt through their dynamic works. Their powerful works battled against the social and political issues of America.

The Predominant Women writers in Canada have given new heights to Canadian Literature. After 1840 Canadian Literature was shaped by the women writers and they became the center of Canadian Literature. Some remarkable writers of Canada have extracted the dreadful problems of Dystopia. Among them, a few immense writers of dystopian literature such as Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Margaret Lawrence, Lucy Montgomery, Carol Shields, Miriam Toews and Eden Robinson had shown their identity.

Carol Shields (1935-2003) was one of the American born Canadian novelists and short story writers and she was the gifted writer famed for her masterful depictions of ordinary life. She won numerous awards for her works. *The Stone Diaries* (1993), *Larry's Party* (1997), *Various Miracles* (1985), *Unless and order of Canada* (2002). Alice Munro (1931-2024) was another notable women writer of Canada and winner of the prestigious Nobel Prize. Munro's have revolutionized the architecture of short stories and paved the way for the author's category in literature. *Dance of Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) are some of her famous works.

Eden Robinson (1968) is an indigenous Canadian writer. She also won notable prizes. *Monkey Beach* (2000), *Blood Sports* (2006) and *Son of a Trickster* (2017) are her renowned works. Among them Margaret Atwood (1939) is another gem of Canadian Literature. If anyone is talking about Canadian Literature then it is not complete without Margaret Atwood's works or poems. Atwood was the one who can find a variety of themes in her works. She has won numerous awards for her brilliancy in writing. *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Cat's Eye*(1988), *The Edible Women*(1969), *Life Before Man*(1979) and *The Blind Assassin*(2000) are her incredible novels .

Dystopian literature explores the darkest aspects of human mind and human nature. This literature is one of the best Genres to understand man's barbarous act to his fellow men. It echoes our own past, present and future. Dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia. It is totally contrary to that utopian society would be either completely unplanned or a planned terrifying and awful society. Lauren Oliver in her interview states about dystopian with Joyce Lamb that "Dystopian novels help people process their fears about what the future might look like; further, they usually show that there is always hope, even in the bleakest future"(Interview)

The history of dystopian literature would be traced back to the reaction to the French Revolution of 1789 and the prospect that 'mob rule' would produce dictatorship. In the twentieth century dystopia gained its

popularity due to prevailing social and political climate. One of the most prominent representatives of that Genre is Margaret Atwood.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born on November 18, 1939 in Ottawa. Atwood is a Canadian novelist, poet and literary critic. She has published 18 books of poetry, 18 novels, and 11 books of nonfiction, nine collections of short fiction, eight children's books, and two graphic novels. The best known work of Atwood is 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood has won several awards and honors for her writing, including two *Booker prizes*, the *Arthur C. Clarke Award*, the *Governor General Award*, the *Franz Kafka Prize*, *Princess of Asturias Awards*, and the *PEN center USA Lifetime Achievement Awards*. A numerous of her works have been adapted for film and television.

The Handmaid's Tale deals with women's social and political position in the Giledean Society which is based on totalitarian patriarchal theocracy. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explores the nightmarish futuristic society known as 'Gilead'. Atwood portrays *The Handmaid's Tale*, where women are subordinated in their settings based on Giledean law and women were strictly conservative of the Commanders within the community.

In the Republic of Gilead, women have been subjected to sexual oppression and they are forced in quick manner. The women are forbidden to fight back. They are virtually cut off in all aspects of social and political life. The only reason for this sudden imbalance between men and women's fertility rates has declined drastically due to pollution and sexually transmitted diseases in Gilead. The fertile women are assigned forcibly to wealthy and powerful men known as Commanders for Procreation. Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a future dystopia and domineering theocratic city by using the Space in a unique way in her novel. The Space in the roles of women inhabit is narrow, barren and desolate.

The story is narrated by Offred, the central protagonist of this novel describing her present life but she recalls her in an expository situation. Offred's real name is never revealed, because she is subjected to a strict and dehumanizing existence and also restricted with personal autonomy as well as read and write. Offred's life revolves around monthly rituals of attempting to conceive a child with her commander, under the vigilance of government's enforcers, the Eyes. Atwood recites the position of women that 'We still think of a powerful man as a born leader and a powerful woman as an anomaly' (Atwood)

Throughout the novel, Offred reflects on her past life and gradual erosion of her rights. As Offred channels this dystopian world, her story is a pitiful exploration of the loss of identity and freedom. In this regime Offred is involved in a dangerous underground movement aiming to overthrow the oppressive authorities. Her journey is full of risks and suspicion, as she tries to regain control over her life and find a way to escape to a better future.

Atwood's inspiration for the Republic of Gilead came from her study of early American Puritans while at Harvard which she attended on an account of Woodrow Wilson. On those days the buildings that have been occupied by the government. The main building at Harvard University is totally occupied while Atwood was studying literature on the American Puritans. It was one of the influences to write this novel.

The situation of Offred in this novel is stated by Atwood as "a rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze". Offred describes women's position as "a maze in the Giledean society wall where the Offred and Ofglen sometimes went on shopping trips. Handmaids can leave their houses without direct supervision of Commanders; they can only go as far as the walls of the city" (*HMT* 143). Offred after that comes to understand that though it seems like a kind of freedom to be able to go

different places, on their own as ‘maze’ but it was not liberty they are just as much prisoners as in a jail cell.

The Handmaid’s Tale is narrated thoroughly with all the powers belonging to men. Therefore, Gileadean society is based on social injustice. In that Gileadean society, women have no rights and they are used to choosing their dress code. It displays men's dominance over women. Atwood establishes women’s dominance in sexual identity, named Handmaids. Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* the Handmaids are used as a tool for reproduction where Offred miserable situation is elucidated, while they were used up by men in their society:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (HMT 73)

In the Republic of Gilead, women lost their independence in making their own decisions to have a child or not. So Handmaids are completely deprived of their motherhood because they have no rights to keep their own children along with their family. Handmaids became reproductive potential tools. Atwood exemplifies that:

‘It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because of what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many’ (HMT 134).

Gileadean commodity treated women under two groups. These two groups are the wives and the Aunts. They too are equally oppressive like the Handmaids.

Margaret Atwood takes us to such a world, where women are the child- delivering machines and the world seems no longer than the one they used to live in. This book is narrated by Offred, our protagonist, whose real name is June. She once had a daughter, a mother and a lover but now she only owns one thing now - the night. Her days are shared with various other characters like- the Marthas, the Wives, the Commander and the other Handmaids who are supposed to travel together for ‘safety – purposes’.

In all, Atwood's writing takes us to a whole new world which she imagined in 1985. Such a world is impossible to imagine today. By Claire Fallon disclose the statement,

‘Margaret Atwood’s new novel is being greeted as the long-awaited feminist dystopia and I am afraid that for some time it will be viewed as a test of the imaginative power of feminist paranoia [...] As a dystopia, this is a thinly textured one. [...] But if Offred is a sappy stand-in for Winston Smith, and Gilead seems at times to be only a coloring book version of Oceania, it may be because Atwood means to do more than scare us about the obvious consequences of a Falwellian coup d’.(*The New Republic* 2017)

The wives of Gileadean society, forced to have a relationship with other women instead of being jealous towards their husbands, sex with the following women to increase their fertility. The Aunts are equally oppressive than wives because they want to train the Handmaids. The Aunts are supposed to teach their sexuality is perverted and use various methods to inflicting fear through physical punishment or repeating official propaganda.

Moira was the best friend of Offred while they were studying in University. Moira worked as a feminist publisher and published many books against birth control and Rape oppression. In her past life, she was

against social issues and fight for the oppression but in the Giledean society, she was forced to do the illegal activism, while Moira was caught by the Giledean authorities and forced to work as a prostitute.

Aunt Lydia postulates that when women dressed provocatively, they invited men to take advantage of them. By saying that crimes wouldn't happen to nice women who cover themselves up, Aunt Lydia places all the blame on the women who are the victims rather than on the men who are the perpetrators. Aunt Lydia's practice of blaming women performs an important role of indoctrination in Gilead's mandated conformity. The Republic of Gilead, says Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. 'This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves'. (HMT 222)

When Offred goes to the doctor for her routine monthly checkup, the doctor offers to try to impregnate her, explaining that most men like the Commander are sterile. Men are not blamed for the infertility, only women who are barren. This shows that Gilead takes any opportunity to reduce the status of the woman. His observation shocks Offred, as Gilead statutes outlaw suggesting the possibility of male sterility. Responsibility for failure of a couple to conceive officially falls on the woman regardless of the man's state of health. The law represents another example of society's use of women as scapegoats.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, In *Vox* (2018), Christina Dalcher (1968) envisions a near-future United States where women's voices have been silenced. The U.S. government declares that women cannot speak more than a hundred words a day. Adult women are barred from holding jobs, while girls are no longer taught to read. Dr. Jean McClellan, a neurolinguistics, refuses to accept these conditions. The narrative tracks her journey as she rails against the misogynistic regime — for the sake of herself, her daughter, and women everywhere.

Leni Zumas's (1972) *Red Clocks* (2018). In this ferociously imaginative novel, abortion is once again illegal in America, in-vitro fertilization is banned, and the personhood Amendment grants right of life, liberty and property to every embryo. Like Atwood, Zumas powerfully chronicles the female experience of motherhood and confronting the patriarchal policing of women's bodies. Award-winning author Louise Erdrich (1954) explores female agency and self-determination in her acclaimed work *Future Home of Living God* (2017), the exact scenario happens in this novel that US government send pregnant Women into Panic by giving menaced with confinement and threat of martial law creeps across the country. Cedar the central protagonist, unfolding catastrophe hits close to home, while she was four months pregnant and she feels compelled to seek out her birth mother on the Ojibwe reservation. This time of troubling change Cedar learns more about her identity and baby's origins and must take care to avoid the prying eyes of informants.

One more speculative fiction by Naomi Alderman (1974) the winner of Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction *Power* (2016). In this novel where the men realize that they have lost control and the day of girls begins but where exactly does this new power dynamic lead? Where the patriarchal cowers before women.

In *When She Woke* (2011), award-winning author Hilary Jordan (1963) presents a gripping dystopian reimagining of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* that "holds its own alongside the dark inventions of Margaret Atwood and Ray Bradbury" (*The New York Times Book Review*). Roe v. Wade has been the central protagonist, the narrative is set in a near-future America where overturned the separation of church and state is abolished, and criminals are "chromed" instead of imprisoned, their skin given a bright hue to reflect the class of their conviction. One more character in this novel Hannah,

a Texas woman who is compared with Handmaid's tale Offred chromed red for murder after having an abortion, must navigate this cruel and hostile world. As she searches for sanctuary, she also finds herself on a path of transformation, questioning her faith and the brutal fanaticism of her homeland.

The two major authors of Canadian literature published their novels in 1970's in the same year. The two prominent women writers in that year Margaret Atwood's *Sufacing* (1972) and Margaret Lawrence's *The Diviners* (1974), novels which highlight the influence of postcolonial situations and reflections of the important female characters appear quite similar.

Conclusion

The Giledean theocracy which legally controls the women's reproductive freedom where morally and politically is not fair, due to this issue Offred and other Handmaids have suffered directly through Giledean state's desire for controlling women's fertility. Even, Offred is not independent in her sexual desire which has been subdued and obstructed. Finally, she was taken away to an uncertain fate under the Giledean regime. So Atwood has given a warning for the new generation not to take rights for granted. The researchers observed the root causes of the issues can be regulated by proper awareness through education and laws of Government.

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