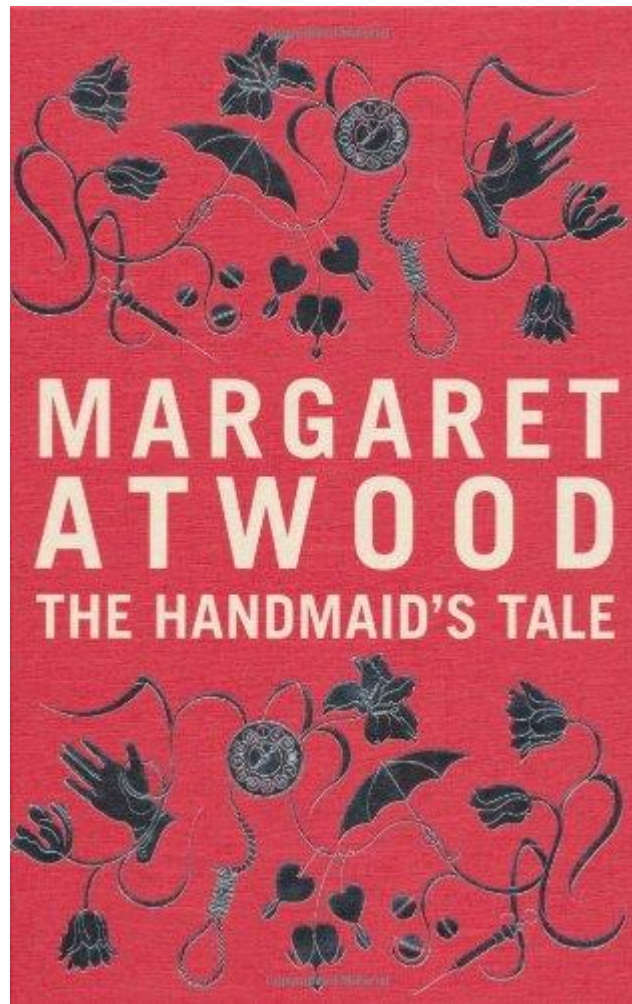


**Dystopic Vision of Margaret Atwood in  
*The Handmaid's Tale***

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**Abstract**

Atwood has written fiction about the future. Starting with *The Handmaid's Tale*, she has written five novels which come under that category. They are, apart from the aforementioned novel, *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, *Maddaddam* and *The Heart Goes Last*. She, as most of the readers of Canadian literature know, is an ardent lover of nature, which maybe

because she has come from a family which was living “in and out of the bushes”. (Cooke 22) Her father was a zoologist, mother a former dietician and nutritionist, and her brother is a neurophysiologist. Her fiction comes with harsh tone, instructing society to move onto safer sides in order to avoid devastating effects in the future. “Environmental awareness became an explicit theme in Atwood’s fiction during the late 1980s”. (Cooke 291) Starting from this period, she has produced a lot of works that are environment-conscious. These could be attributed to her visit to many places including Temagami in Toronto, where she came across acid-rain lakes and found out about the disappearance of black flies.

In the twentieth century, writers like George Orwell and Anthony Burgess were pushed by the social and political scenes of the time which made them bring out their fears and write about them. George Orwell’s *1984* is one such fiction where he satirizes such a muddled society. “Being deprived of free will and choice the individual has to obey and to live in this devastating environment. Dystopian literature refers mostly to the decadence of people reflected in acts of violence, sexual immorality and use of drugs. The protagonists indulge themselves in sin living only in the present”. (Dima- Laza 42) Many novels of Margaret Atwood including *The Heart Goes Last*, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and many other novels of various writers have a dystopian society as their settings. In this paper we shall see some of the attributes of the Dystopian vision of Margaret Atwood.

**Keywords:** *Handmaid’s Tale*, Margaret Atwood, Dystopian literature, decadence, violence, futuristic society

## **Introduction**

At about the age of eleven, Atwood started experimenting with words and her imagination. The results of those experiments are her novels, poetry and works of criticism. She has also written some short stories, short fiction and stories and poetry for children. Some of her works include: *The Edible Woman*, *Bodily Harm*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Cat’s Eye*, *Dancing Girls*, *Bluebeard’s Egg*, *The Circle Game*, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, *Up in the Sky*, and some of her latest works: The *Maddaddam* trilogy consisting of *Oryx and*

*Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *Maddaddam* and *The Heart Goes Last*, was released in September 2015.

Atwood says,

Fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves (Margaret Atwood in Cooke 275)).

“An anarchic and undesirable society, referring to a bleak future in which things take a turn for the worse and which displays images of worlds more unpleasant than our own may be called a dystopian society” (Dima- Laza 42) This is exactly what Atwood tells about in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. A totalitarian society, where almost all beings live under control, either controlled by others or controlled by their own thoughts, is what the futuristic novel is about. It is set in a place where most of the women have gone infertile due to radiation and the scarce population of fertile women is sent from one house to another in turn, trying to conceive a child for the childless Commanders who are considered the rulers of the society.

### ***The Handmaid’s Tale***

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is one of Atwood’s many novels through which she has brought out her concerns about womankind, through the horrific experiences of Offred, the protagonist. The horror is so very much that the reader cannot come out of it for long, after completing the book. Offred is a handmaid in Gilead, who is allowed to survive only because she can bear children to the Commanders whose wives have gone infertile due to the radiation. In the world of Offred and the other handmaids of Gilead, the once unimaginable happenings have become usual “Is that how we lived then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now”. (THT 109) Offred and her kind are restricted from almost everything. They are restricted from communicating with each other, expressing their feelings and the utmost restriction being the restriction of thought. They have nothing for themselves.

## **Restrictions on Handmaids**

The handmaids learn to communicate with their hands and eyes. But even these gestures are restricted by the Marthas. “To withhold information, or to spread unauthorized material is an act of treason for which the punishments are brutal and public”. (Hunter 98) Once Offred is asked by the Commander, in one of their secret meetings, what she wants. Her answer is the one which articulates the intensity of the handmaids’ struggles. She says, “I would like to know . . . whatever there is to know... what’s going on”. (THT 198) It is unimaginable, where a person who had had all the freedom that she had known from birth, is deprived of all of them at one point, and deprived of even the right that she ought have been given, is prohibited from knowing even the happenings around her: where have her daughter and her family gone? Are they even alive so that she may get a chance to see them? What is happening to the handmaid in the next household who is a facsimile of herself? What is happening in the house in which she lives? She even keeps secret her own name separate from the name given to her by the household of the Commander, which is Offred.

## **Women of Self-esteem**

Each of the handmaids must have been a woman of self-esteem. Almost all of them would have had a family who must have loved each of them. “Like other things now, thought must be rationed”. (THT 17) They have restricted themselves from thinking about their loved ones. Unlike what Dima- Liza has pointed out, “. . . people must have freedom to move, to speak and to express ideas and feelings” which distinguish them from machines (42); the Handmaids do not have any of these rights.

Women of Gilead are deprived of their jobs, families, comfort, freedom and so on; there are also women who are called “unwomen”(THT 20). These are women who cannot bear children. These unwomen are either sent to “the wall” to be hanged or to die of radiation. In their world, there is only “faith”. Neither “hope” nor “charity” is relevant in the lives they live. “I get out of bed . . . kneel on the window seat, the hard little cushion, FAITH . . .wonder what has become of the other two cushions . . . HOPE and CHARITY”. (THT 119)

## **Made to Believe**

The handmaids are made to believe that their position is of great honour, as if they are hypnotised. “Aunt Lydia said she was lobbying for the front. Yours is a position of honour, she said”. (THT 23) They are made to forget that they are deprived of their self-esteem. They are not even allowed to enter the house through the front doors.

Men too are not exempted from this. Helpers of sinners are punished as sinners. The Guards who help the handmaids in any way face the same fate as the handmaids. Atwood has shown the intensity of such sufferings when a society moves in a disorderly fashion.

## **Portraying Disastrous Effects of Men’s Behavior**

Not only *The Handmaids Tale*, many of her other novels such as *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood* and *Maddaddam* propagate the disastrous effects of man’s misbehaviour. Though she says she does not believe that fiction can make great changes in society, they at least discuss and “examine” the society, as she herself has said.

## **Advantages and Disadvantages of Technology**

Technological development, as everyone knows, has both advantages and disadvantages. Atwood’s futuristic vision combined with her imagination has brought out some fiction which describe the ill-effects when man goes against nature. *The Year of the Flood* is an example of this, where the lives of people who are against technology and those who lead a life akin to nature are highlighted. It is shown that the people who live closer to nature survive and “float above the Waterless Flood” (YOF 61) in the end of book.

“The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives”. (THT 109) These are some of the sharpest lines through which Atwood intends to put forth a warning to the society. Literature has always acted as a mirror of the society. A literary creation echoes the happenings of the particular time of the book’s origin and emphasizes the necessity for the people of the society to act accordingly so as to protect themselves from disasters. Dystopian

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novels are very important among these as they bring with them harsh notes that come as warnings to people. Margaret Atwood is a person who has great concern for the earth and its beings and it is explicit in her works of this kind. These authors like her, without any doubt, fulfill their task of warning the people against great disasters.

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