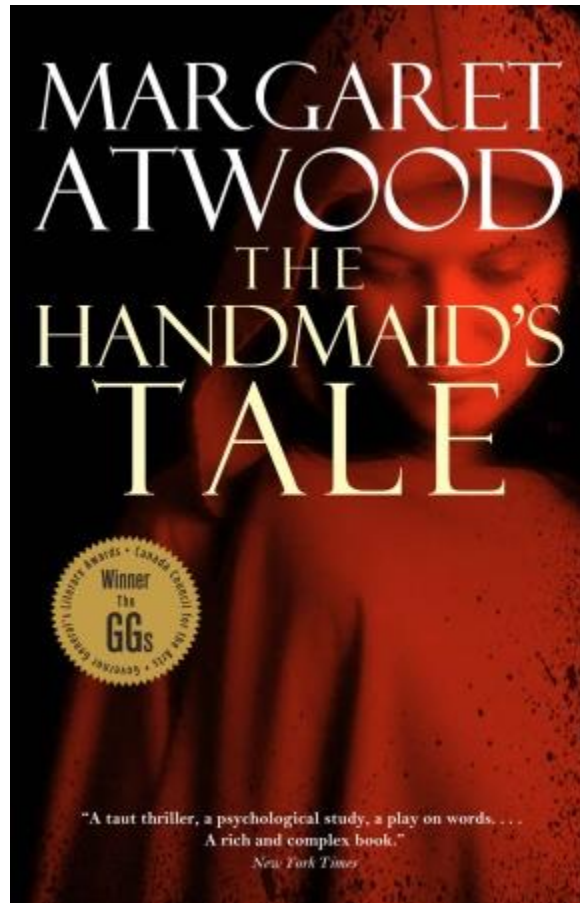


Portrayal of Marginalized Women in Atwood's
The Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is a widely acclaimed feministic writer of Canada. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a highly provocative, dystopian fiction that points out the subjugated condition of women under patriarchal dominance. She stresses the loss of female identity in a male dominant society. This is Atwood's futuristic novel which portrays emotional and physical marginalization and coercion of women in a totalitarian regime called Gilead. Atwood in her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has depicted the later period of twentieth century in which she portrays the end of the American regime. She shows that in the twentieth century the rule of

United States of America has been eradicated by the Republic of Gilead, a more oppressive regime, a monolithic theocracy. Though Gilead makes an assertion to provide a better society for human survival, its main desideratum seems to be to re-populate the state in which sterility has become a norm as the aftermath of a proliferative use of sexual and surgical machines for abortion, chemical pollution and of overuse of harmful radioactive products at large. This paper tries to show how Atwood has exposed the terrible oppression that women undergo in many totalitarian regimes in the world.

Keywords: Oppression of Women, Totalitarian Regime, Theocratic State, Coercion of Women

Women – Procreative Vessels Only?

In Gilead male patriarchal authorities have been luxuriating in all divine rights and their only armament of the rule is ‘women oppression’. Atwood has shown female marginalization and subjugation by the absolute patriarchy of Gilead in the form of different leaders as ‘Commanders’, ‘Angels’, ‘Eyes’, and female ‘guardians’ - who are there for prolonging the unjust treatment of women. In this theocratic state women are merely reduced to the status of child-bearing machines. They are merely procreative vessels for Gilead.

The Handmaid’s Tale

The story of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the story of a woman who is intercepted by Gilead police while crossing the border to escape to Canada from this despotic rule; along with her husband and her little daughter. She was brought to a ‘Red Centre’ where all handmaids are being drilled to become good handmaids and to accept the theocracy of Gilead - as the secure state for women. This is the centre where their catechism is being done by Gilead by showing films of female atrocities during the American regime. Gilead will be where “women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees,women being raped, beaten up, killed” (HT 128). They are told that their ability to procreate is of paramount importance because disease and radioactive pollution have led to a catastrophic decline in the birthrate of the Gilead. Handmaid does not know what exactly has happened to her husband and where her daughter is? She is sent to Commander Fred’s house to bear a child with him and being called as Offred.

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Subordinated and Subjugated

Women's position in Gilead is subordinated and subjugated because they are not allowed to keep their own names which are generally considered the major source of someone's identity. Their names have been obliterated from their memories by using some psychological treatments. The memories of the handmaid's daughter and her husband are very weak. In her mind she feels "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden.....I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried". (HT 94) These are often being addressed after the name of their commanders to whom they are assigned for child bearing as for Fred 'Offred' and for Oglen 'Ofglen', for Warren 'Ofwarren', etc. These handmaids are the marginalized section of the Gilead as they are disunited in different categories.

Categories of Women

The first category is of 'Handmaids'; this category is very substantial because it emblemizes a fertile lot which can repopulate Gilead. As Lucy M. Freibert in her essay "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," describes "Sexual duties fall to the red-clad Handmaids, drilled in self-denial and renunciation and reduced to fertility machines" (Freibert 281).

The second category is of the wives of elite class commanders.

The third are the 'Marthas'; these are the adolescent and negligent young women who cannot produce children but work as housemaids.

Fourth are the 'Unwomen' who cannot produce children and sent to the colonies to clear the nuclear toxic waste because of their old age.

Fifth category is the wives of the upper class menials called 'Econowives' who can enjoy certain kind of freedom, provided they are fertile. There are 'Aunts' in Gilead to control the handmaids in the 'Red Centre'. All men are free from this categorization in Gilead. No man is

sterile in Gilead; only a woman can be infertile or barren. She does not have her own identity, and she is being identified by her commander only.

Under Supreme Surveillance

This marginalized section of Gilead's society is always under supreme surveillance. They are being watched by the 'Eye', the secret police of Gilead. There are different checkpoints on the roads and Angels, men in uniform, deployed in front of the Commander's house to keep a vigilant eye on the Handmaids and each and every movement of theirs. "The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us" (HT 14). Handmaids are not allowed to talk even with each other. They are supposed to be silent in their lifetime: lying "in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk" (HT 13). These Handmaids are the passive objects who do not have the freedom to express their feelings or emotions. They are supposed to curb their desire to talk. "There is a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances". (HT 17) Talking to each other is a severe crime in Gilead because it suggests rebellion against it.

Dress Code

In Gilead theocracy, marginalization is clear from the dress code for women, but men are free to dress according to their craving while women are prohibited to use colorful dresses. Handmaids are given the red gown as a symbol of their reproductive function with white wings so that they cannot see others or will not be seen by others. "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood.....The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen" (HT 18). The housemaids are allowed to wear green gowns "Martha's dress, which is dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before" (HT 19).

Blue color is for wives of commanders; they wear blue gowns and maintain the gardens in the commanders' houses and for whom to attend public functions like Prayvaganzas, Salvagings and 'ceremonies' along with the handmaids are mandatory. "The blue-clad Wives of the Commanders preside over their homes and gardens, and attend public functions such as the Prayvaganzas, Salvaging and childbirth" (Freibert 281). The brown color dress is for 'Aunts', who keep vigilance over the handmaids in the 'Red Centre'. 'Econowives' have to wear blue,

green, and red striped dress. Gray color is for the 'unwoman' who are sent to the colonies to clean up radioactive spill. "The gray-clad Unwoman, those who refuse to cooperate with the system, work in the colonies, cleaning up the city ghettos, toxic dumps" (Freibert 281). The future of the widows in Gilead is unknown or in limbo.

Effect and Purpose of Colour Coding

Such color coding of the dress does not let women mix with each other. Women seem disunited in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the Housemaids are jealous of the red gown because it shows them their inability of reproduction. Rita, a Martha, does not behave well to the handmaid in the commander's house because of her envy of the handmaid: "Her face might be kindly if she would smile. But the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for" (HT 20). Even the Commander's wife also expressed her dislike of Offred because of her fertility power: "She didn't step aside to let me in, she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come in to the house unless she said so" (HT 23). Other envies which the handmaids have to face are from the 'Econowives' as they do not like the importance being given to the handmaids irrespective of their status. Stephanie Barbe Hammer in her essay "The World as it will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*" says "After all, Atwood's narrative focuses specially on men's domination of women by means of other women" (Hammer 39). Aunts in Gilead are kept to tame Handmaids so that they cannot think of rebellion. Stephanie Hammer further says, "The sadistic aunts are frustrated older women who brutalize their younger, fertile charges out of jealousy and fear" (Hammer 41).

Objectification and Dehumanization of Women

In this novel Atwood shows the objectification and dehumanization of women as they are being sent to the colonies to clear the nuclear waste if they cannot bear a child. It is women who are given the 'conditioned life' as each handmaid will be given only three chances to get pregnant; if she does not get pregnant in her three chances she will be declared as 'unwoman' and unwoman has no right to live in Gilead. Secondly, if they produce a deformed baby called 'unbaby', women are responsible for the unbaby not the harmful radioactive pollution and man.

“Go to the Colonies, Rita said. They have the choice. With the unwoman, and starve to death and Lord knows what all?” (HT 20).

Transgressive Patriarchal Dominance

In this novel Atwood shows transgressive patriarchal dominance over the women. The use of different electronic devices is common in *The Handmaid's Tale* to control women such as surveillance cameras in the shopping malls and electric prods in the hands of 'Aunts'. “Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled, they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their belts” (HT 14). The Handmaids are not given any financial help. Their jobs have been snatched and their bank accounts have been sealed. They do not have any financial independence. Intense gender inequalities are projected by Atwood by exhibiting the demoted status of the women. Women are shown as the second class citizens in the novel. Because of such patriarchal suppression women feel disassociated from their body. As K. Reshmi in her “Ecofeministic Vision: A study of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid's Tale*” has also said that “The handmaid's have become the complete property of the state and are utilized as a national resource” (Reshmi 65). Atwood through this novel shows her opposition against patriarchal monopolization over women. She questions the issue as to why men are given the power to subdue the women along with the other contemporary issues like pornography, power politics, abortions, rape and toxic waste etc. in the novel. Through *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood poses questions of female oppression and their marginalization in almost all totalitarian states.

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