



BODY DISCOURSES IN ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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Abstract: In the gripping dystopian narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood skillfully weaves together a tapestry of societal despair and resilience. Within the bleak backdrop of a Gileadean republican society, where infertility plagues the land due to environmental pollution and the consequences of unchecked promiscuity, a glimmer of hope emerges. The remaining fertile women are transformed into "handmaids," unwillingly coerced into servitude, tasked with the sacred duty of bearing children for the ruling elite. These women become mere pawns, their bodies manipulated for socio-political gain, reminiscent of the biblical handmaid Bilhah, who found herself in a similar predicament at the side of her master, Jacob. Atwood deftly borrows the term "handmaid" from Genesis 30.1, using it as a scathing commentary on the theocratic society of Gilead and the anguish of barrenness that pervades it. Yet, amidst the oppressive coercion, a paradoxical transformation unfolds. Atwood's masterful exploration delves into the complexities of oppression and resilience, ultimately illuminating the transformative power that can emerge even in the darkest of circumstances.

Key Words: Body Politics, Handmaids, Econowives, Libration, Dystopian, Promiscuity

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel by Margaret Atwood, was first published in 1985. The book imagines a near-future New England and postulates that a Christian fundamentalist theocratic state developed in the former United States as a result of a reproductive crisis. In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, there are five categories of women: the Commander's Wife (14), who ostensibly controls the home but do not dare to bear the children; "Marthas" (19), or domestic workers; "Econowives" (34) who are lower class and must perform all functions (Wife, Handmaid, Martha) for their husbands' households; the highly secret Jezebels, women kept as forcibly prostitutes for the Commanders and other men of status until one's "snatch wears out" [1] and they are discarded in the Colonies as Unwomen (20), performing nuclear-waste cleanup until they die of radiation poisoning; and the "Aunts" (14), are the women who work outside the home, in the Red Centers, due to their having demonstrated their belief in Gilead's "traditional, family values." Men are also divided

into classes: the "Commanders" (19), older men who hold most of the power; the "Eyes" (30), who are the intelligence corps and secret police about whom little is generally known; the "Angels" (14), or soldiers; and the "Guardians" (27) of the Faith, or the local police force and other men assigned to Commanders' households as drivers or aides who perform other menial duties.

Offred is covertly brought to Nick's apartment by Serena Joy, who then calls Offred from outside to let her know that she has requested Nick to attempt to become pregnant with Offred. Offred has to keep tri-relationship regarding marriage, love and child reproduction with all the three male characters Luke, Commander and Nick. Luke, in the novel is presented as real lover, husband and father for her child. The commander represents the powerful sugar daddy and controlling agency in the Gileadean society. Nick is submissive character and is induced by Serena Joy to have illicit relationship with Offred to bear child, and thus she wants to obliterate the infertility of her husband. One of the many dangerous issues for the handmaids is that the majority of the ruling males are infertile themselves, which this essay investigates to determine how that empowers a handmaid like Offred. It is through her body that she emerges as a powerful character amid many perilous complications, presented in the novel

The handmaids' institution is created in a society when there is an oppressive dictatorship in order to turn "unruly" fertile women, such as lesbians, divorcees, and women in second marriages, into reproductive resources for the potentates. Stripped of their autonomy and identities, these women are forcibly placed in the households of the ruling elite, but handmaids are in central place who had reproductive servitude and power. Their bodies become site of exercising power. Praisler et. al mentions "The larger political and social framework is an alarmingly falling birth rate, whose apparent cause is men's infertility produced by environmental abuse". [2] Of course, in the official narrative, there is no such thing as men's infertility.

Actually, women are subversively empowered in the implicit way. Ohannesian mentions "together with the strong bond between affect and corporeality, is exploited by the protagonist, Offred, as a strategy to occupy and force open the fissures in the overpowering hegemony of the state of Gilead. [3] Aware of her body's value as a scarce asset, particularly during gestation, the handmaid harnesses this



realization as a catalyst for rebellion. Realizing the regime's dependence on her reproductive capacity, she strategically uses her pregnancy as leverage, secretly forming alliances and plotting her escape. Her growing belly becomes a symbol of defiance, a tangible reminder that her body, once considered a mere vessel, now holds the potential to disrupt the oppressive system.

II. CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE HANDMAID'S TALE

The Handmaid's Tale is studied through various critical responses from the date of its publication. Regarding the themes, motifs, language and structure of the novel numerous critics have debated on the novel from several perspectives. Interpreting this novel from Marxist perspectives, critic and Elizabeth Hansot focuses upon the struggle of character in social structure as: Offred's story is one of groping and essentially daily domestic labor of crafting selves capable of surviving her new and impoverished reality. [4] The issues of haves and have-nots are mentioned in Marxism. The coercive relation of classes and struggle among the social phenomenon is dealt with Marxist lenses. It is clear that Atwood draws real historical events to give a strong sense. The rights in the republics, human behaviour on the basis of class is affected with sociopolitical context. The critic, Janet L. Larson opines, "The testimony [...] is submerged in sociopolitical reconstruction that has learned nothing from the Handmaid or the study of ideology and history". [5] The Handmaid's Tale remains one of the most powerful recent portrayals of social phenomena; and it is one of the few dystopian novels that examine in detail the intersection of politics and sexuality. Gilead's treatment to women is based upon a literal, fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible, meaning that women are the property of and subordinate to their husband, father, or head of household. They are not allowed to do anything that would grant them any power independent of this system. The historical novel The Handmaid's Tale presents a picture of the past. It also reflects shifts in perceptions of historical research in the second half of the 20th century. Even the historical discipline is criticized, and an argument is made for alternative historical interpretations and practices. Harold Bloom in his book Margaret Atwood: Bloom's Modern Critical View has traced about the historicity of the novel The Handmaid's Tale. He says, "At about the same period that Atwood began to write poems on war, she also in her "Historical Notes" appended to The Handmaid's Tale began to focus directly on the problems of writing and interpreting history representing past". [6] Through the use of interviews and letters, The Handmaid's Tale connects feminist literary discourse with historical and biographical context. Bloom claims in his article "The Story Behind the Story" that the successful feminist dystopia was inspired by a timely dinner conversation with a friend about "the more absolutist pronouncements of right-wing religious fundamentalism."

III. EXPERIMENT AND RESULTS

The body is a place where power is exercised, not only because physically stronger people can subdue weaker ones, but also because it serves as the mechanism for systematized social control. Women's body in the patriarchal society is taken as counter part of male. Atwood satires on nomenclature providing the names of characters associating with possessive marks, which has the sole purpose of exploiting them but it was up sided down through the joint effort of handmaids. They are known as the wife of someone like 'Offred'(94), 'Ofglen'(29). Physicality of women is oppressive in the dominant culture of patriarchy since antiquity, but still that female body can also be seen as marking not just gender difference but also social difference, and tool of power. Due to cultural meanings related to physical disparities, the body serves as a basis for both empowerment and powerlessness based on gender, class, race, and age, all of which are strongly represented in it. The meaning of the body is associated with self and moral worth. Self-control, self-power, self-reliance, and independence all energize the empowerment of the body, which further strengthens the rhetoric of power in other socio-cultural spheres.

This study on The Handmaid's Tale is done with the theoretical tool on body. Body is site of empowerment in the patriarchal Giledean society. The politics of body is the appropriate lenses to penetrate into the context of The Handmaid's Tale. The Handmaid's Tale consists primarily of the story of the handmaid in Northern America. Gilead is the republic where authoritarianism is abolished but handmaids were vindictive to assist the puritan society. Offred, the handmaid was compelled to serve the Commander. In the form of Utopian fiction Atwood has represented a coercive society where the discrimination between the ruling class people of commanders and the subjugating class is blurred with the issue of infertility. The weakness of the higher-class ruling people's infertility is balanced by the coercive body politics that actually complicates the social hierarchy by indirectly strengthening the handmaids, who are used as agents for maintaining social structure.

Themes covered by Atwood's writings include power politics, religion and myth, gender and identity, and religion and myth. Her writings, which frequently draw inspiration from mythology and fairy tales, are also linked to the technology that enable remote robotic document authoring. Many critics have observed her as versatile writer. David Staines in his article "Margaret Atwood in her Canadian Context" reflects how Atwood, both as a Canadian and a public persona and as a set of literary and political concerns, has put "Canadian literature on the cultural and literary map". [7] In her oeuvre she has complicated the traditional representations of literary phenomena while revealing the time consuming, blood-giving literary efforts of the 70s and 80s, particularly of Canada.

In The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood evaluates the significance of names, especially the names of female characters that are associated with the control of a male



commander. It investigates internal politics as well as gender and identity. The Handmaid's Tale has generated a lot of critical debate since its release in 1986. The Handmaid's Tale, a dystopian survival novel set at the end of the 20th century just as gender equality was about to be achieved, depicts the breakdown of the United States and what Christopher Jones rightly labels as "revigorated hatred of women and the explosive growth of religious patriarchal fundamentalism." The story takes place in Gilead, a civilization in the not-too-distant future that is rigorously stratified. Offred, the main character, is a Handmaid, a woman who performs reproductive tasks for the Commanders, the ruling class of the regime. She is one of the first Handmaids and must undergo re-socialization at the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center before taking on her responsibilities in the Commander and his wife's home.

The idea of a dystopia has shifted the roles of women and men in the book from the periphery to the center. As a result of the authors of Gilead's infirmity and the capacity of women to have children as a means of freedom, it shows the higher success of women's culture in Gilead, from the widespread desire for pregnancy to the cult-like Birth ceremony. Sylvia K Blood states "presenting information about body image to women as something all women 'have,' as something that can be identified and measured according to scientific norms".[8] Atwood's investigation of gender, identity, and domestic politics continues in this book. Since it was published in 1986, the book has gotten a lot of attention. It takes place at the turn of the twenty-first century, just when sex equality was about to be achieved. Stephanie Barber Hammer's "The World as It Will Be Female Satire and the Technology of Power in The Handmaid's Tale" brings the example of success of the novel. Hammer has presented the motif of success of the novel thus: "Atwood has broken into the formerly male-dominated genre and presented the success.[9] Satire is the most effective trope in the practices of Atwood's writings, and it is through this trope that Atwood has presented the success of women and successful discourse of the society.

Atwood has acquaintance with language, imagery as well as with the natural environment and female power. In her preoccupation with individual and collective survival strategies at physical and spiritual levels, she basically has foregrounded these qualities. The implications for women of revising myth and reimagining spirituality are important to Janet L. Larson, in Margaret Atwood and the Future of Prophecy says with the reference of The Handmaid's Tale as, "women can't be exploited with the reference of Bible. They have the good judgment and can assist the world with natural law, connects the crises and atrocities of Western history with the gender politics of interpretation and advocates to women's spirituality".[5] Women are morally responsible for procreation and are spiritually led. Her work, including the creation of novels and the portrayal of the female self, is characterized by the expression of desire, the acceptance of spirituality, and a commitment to process and inquiry. The

female characters in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale combine myth and spirituality.

The handmaids' act of bearing children is not just for their survival but also for the survival of the Caucasian society. They felt their subjectivity through their own business of sex and childbearing. Linda Myrsiades presents in her article Law, Medicine, and the Sex Slave in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale as: "the handmaid learns to regard her function as a business transaction, the delivery of a service from which she is alienated, much like the sex work of a prostitute. The exchange value of her service is such that she comes to enjoy her role, maximizing her value in the swish of a hip which displays".[10] The novel has thus presented the female strata as their more confident self-survival. Beside this, the future of North American society was in the hand of handmaids. The aunt, the representative of handmaids is stimulated to instruct the new culture of Gileadian society to the newly recruited handmaids. They even teach the women's struggles for equality in a society where autonomy had caused rape and violence against women. Additionally, they preach that the handmaids are shielded from rape and violence by the limitations on their freedom of movement and communication. Because The Handmaids Tale takes genuine conditions and follows them to their natural conclusion if current political and cultural trends continue, Margaret Atwood categorizes the book as speculative fiction. Karen Keifer Boyd say, "Atwood describes that The Handmaid's Tale is a slight twist on the society we have now".[11] The novel deals with the context of dysfunctional utopia. The circumstances presented in the novel, cannot be described as of a utopian society, rather here A conservative fundamentalist cult governs what is left of the United States, which is now known as the Republic of Gilead, in Atwood's dystopia of the near future, but the novel also offers glimpses of fresh possibilities.

"New" is not quite the right word because many Gileadean practices were familiar in other times and places, but Atwood shows us the efforts of Gilead's elite to establish and maintain a new social order, including a new culture, class system, gender ideologies, gender roles, and methods of social control. The story is essentially Offred's account of becoming and being a Handmaid, of power relations in a society where power is concentrated in the Commanders' hands. The critic Cheryl Laz in his article "Science Fiction and Introductory Sociology: The "Handmaid" in the classroom" mentions: "The Handmaid's Tale addresses three themes broadly conceptualized as history (especially the tension between historical continuity and social change), gender, and the tension between freedom and control individuality and conformity".[12] There were three themes as the history, society and social freedom. Some resent research in English literature even suggests that a growth in pornography has reduced the number of sex crimes. Nevertheless, feminists see pornography as part of the 'Subjectification' of women and a contributory factor in violence against women. They play the key role to reduce the crime factor. Through the act of



subjectifying themselves, women are empowered. According to *The Handmaid's Tale*, American women are most effective when they are authentically themselves: varied, diversified, and nuanced in a way that would astound Aunt Lydia.

This research investigates on female body at the backdrop of a male-centered autocratic society to find out how the then institutionalized body policy of Gileadean republican society itself subverts the subjugating position of women and empowers them. Even more, the study disrupts the traditional theocratic and hierarchized society by critiquing its basic infrastructure at which the very conception of a rank and its power is crumbled. The study deals with the issue of women empowerment with the theoretical tools of body politics and the fourth wave of feminism. Since body politics and fourth wave of feminism radicalize the traditional definition of women along with the undercurrents of norms and conventions shaped by phallogentric patriarchal social structure, this modality will be the apt tool in order to consider the women's significant role in contributing to the wellbeing of a society, and that can be seen as an outcome of their growing self-consciousness into the awakening of their subjectivities.

The lines demonstrate Offred's eloquent sensitivity to the powers and search for the identity. She expressed through means of language and narrative, in the course of biography she got the eloquence of characters; Moira, Ofglen and others. Sometimes, Offred used to sing song of freedom as, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound; Could save a wretch like me; Who once was lost, but now am found; Was Bound, but now am free" (64). It proves that she is always in the side of achievement of freedom. *The Handmaid's Tale* transcends the conventional romance by immediately capitalizing on it rather than by downplaying or criticizing the romance storyline. It reveals the romance plot, which tackles parenting, mothering, and the ties between women, in a fascinating way.

The lack of closure at the end is seen as collectively marking Offred's narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist meta-fiction that questions both patriarchal discourse and the male quest through the nonlinear design of Offred's narrative and through the opposition of Offred's narrative to the appended Historical Notes where Offred's sense of herself as a subject is constructed rather than as one of predetermined and fixed identity

Through her experience and thinking back on her past, Offred ironically uses her voice as a disembodied subject to construct her subjectivity. Even as she reconstructs her own narrative, her identity in the book is fully embodied in language. Offred appraises her body, she says, "It's the body's way of seeing to it that I remain alive, continue to repeat its bedrock prayer: I am, I am. I am, Still, I want to go to bed, Make love, right now" (293). By narrating the reconstruction of her body, Offred investigates her power through her body and attempts to keep her identity.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood reveals how the power emanates from her body. The Tale is mainly Of- Fred's

narrative of becoming and being a Handmaid, of power relations in a society where authority is, on the surface, centralized in the hands of the Commanders but where the Handmaid has greater power thanks to the weapon of fertility. Offred appraises:

I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It's warm. Women used to carry such eggs between their breasts to incubate them. That would have felt good [...] pleasure is an egg. Blessing that can be counted, on the fingers of one hand. But possibly this is how I am expected to react. (120)

Women have got the opportunity to work and to be employed as male. In chapter 28, Offred gets job in insurance company. So, the boundary of male and female is subverted here. It was different because the balance of power was totally subverted by the handmaids through their obliterating power of bearing children.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood is recognized as a book that reveals the perspective of a woman in a strong position. While the patriarchal ideology of the Republic of Gilead encourages women to adhere to it by using the Bible as a justification for the patriarchal society, it also encourages them to reject this subordinating trend in Gilead. This research paper explores the female subjectivity is empowered and installed in the matrices of power in the patriarchal regime through body performance of the handmaids in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The body is the tool of self-reflexivity through intrapersonal communication that redefines the relation of gender and body. The intersection of politics and sexuality is viable tool to study the novel. The sexuality what Offred performs is self-reflective dissembling the order of patriarchal society, Gilead. Offred's strong sense of self has destroyed the patriarchal façade, and her ability to experience both self and non-self creates a crucial place where she feels empowered to advocate for herself rather than continue to support the Gileadean government.

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