

## Gender Roles and Misogyny in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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### Abstract

Among the postmodern feminist writers, Margaret Atwood stands towering as an internationally prolific, acclaimed and highly talented woman writer. Her feministic ideology brought her fame and critical acclaim. It is unique in the sense that the writer did not intend to project herself as a feminist and even hated her works to be labelled feministic. She saw the suffering of women and portrayed it in her works with a genuine concern. The present paper argues that Margaret Atwood's feministic vision is not entirely anti-men but it is rather a critique of gender roles and misogyny, which served to reinforce and perpetuate the subservience of women against their will.

**Keywords:** *Postmodern Feminist, Feminism, Gender Roles, Misogyny, Feministic Vision*

Margaret Eleanor Atwood (b. 1939) is a renowned Canadian novelist who has many impressive poems, novels, short stories and children books to her credit. She has contributed to literary criticism and penned impressive essays. She has been active as an environmental activist and won various honours and prestigious awards. Her works focus on a variety of issues ranging from gender equality to climate change. From a literary perspective, her feministic vision holds considerable relevance and significance.

Margaret Atwood's powerful fiction projects a feministic concept that cannot be interpreted or reduced simply as feminism. It goes far beyond the label of feminism and its traditional implications. It encompasses a realistic view of the status of women and their struggles to survive and protect their individuality and self-identity and womanhood. It brings out the valuable contribution of women and stresses their basic rights to liberty and equality. Through her works, Atwood criticises the stereotypes of gender, gender roles and the restrictions they serve to impose on women. Consequently, her feministic vision or ideology becomes all-inclusive and so gains a global significance.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is influenced by second wave feminism, dystopian fiction and religious fundamentalism. It is set in Gilead, a totalitarian patriarchy in a time when the entire planet is wasted by nuclear contamination, toxicity, chemical weapons, fertilizers, pesticides and other reckless acts of man. Atwood discusses the reasons behind writing such a novel as, "to make my future society, I proposed something a little more complex [than the twentieth-Century dictatorships]. Bad economic times, yes, but also a period of widespread environmental catastrophe, which has several results: a higher infertility and sterility rate due to chemical and radiation damage (this, by the way, is happening already) and a higher birth-defect rate, which is also happening." (Slawomir Kuznicki 22)

In Gilead, the birth rates of humans had plummeted significantly. Even when some partly sterile women gave birth, their babies had serious defects and had to be killed. Some women make themselves infertile to avoid becoming handmaids and some other women join the resistance and fight the powerful state in vain. Fertile women are kept as handmaids by rich men to reproduce and fulfill their sexual needs.

Following the deterioration of gender relationships in the liberal culture of the former state, the Gilead had emerged as a new nation with its own rules, classes and roles for both men and women. In the new nation, all women are treated as sub humans with no identity or individuality. The ruling patriarchy oppresses women in all possible ways and controls them for its own survival. They covet fertile women, isolate them from the rest and use them as their property. Women are seen as potential threat to the

patriarchy so they are watched and controlled very strictly. They are refused any chances of education, employment and self-reliance. They cannot own assets or use them like the elites. They are kept as slaves within the four walls of the house to be used as objects of pleasure and reproducing machines. Kelly Garbato rightly states that “By far, the most pervasive theme in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is misogyny and the oppression of women; in fact, female oppression The Republic of Gilead is so ubiquitous...Every facet of society works in concert to control Gileadean women; their subjugation is total.” (easyvegan) Sexuality is strictly meant for procreation and not for pleasure. Marriages of handmaids that took place before the emergence of the new order were considered illegal.

The Gilead has its hierarchy, which divides women into wives, handmaids, maids and econowives and designates each a particular lifestyle, role and dress code. It had a powerful rank of patriarchy called the Aunts to control women. The patriarchy trains fertile women to be handmaids as they are crucial to the continuity of the elites. However, the handmaids could not even open their mouths to speak freely. They were completely oppressed and kept as slaves by the elite.

Offred, a 33 year old woman the protagonist and the narrator of the novel is forcibly separated from her family and kept as a handmaid for elite Commander. When the novel begins, she remembers living with her family members in an old and unused gym. She is abducted by the Gilead and separated from her daughter and husband Luke. Her mother, a feminist and an activist disappears under strange circumstances. The captured women are kept in a heavily guarded place and watched by the strict women called the Aunts. Offred’s only duty is to bear children for the commander and do his household tasks.

It is now five weeks since Offred was brought to the commander’s place as a handmaid. She always thinks of using her body as a tool to lure a guard and use him to escape from the place. But she wears red clothes and a white headdress that covers her entire body and face. Her head cover controls her vision and allows her to have only a glimpse of the outside world. Sometimes Offred thinks of killing herself but deep inside she wishes to live in the memories of her past and her daughter and husband. Her household duties allowed her to go outside and buy necessities for the commander’s family using tokens. In the kitchen, she derives some comfort from the maids Cora and Rita, who wear green robes. Offred dreams of having a friendly chat with the maids over a cup of coffee but she knows well that it can never happen. In the commander’s house all women are isolated and had to stick to their places and roles.

Upon arriving to the commander’s house Offred had a glance of Serena Joy, the commander’s wife. Serena Joy was dressed in blue robes and was smoking a cigarette. Later, Offred comes to know that the name of the commander’s wife is not a real one. Serena had been a speaker and a singer once and delivered anti-feminist speeches highlighting the role of women in the household. Radical feminists had made attempts tried to kill her but such incidents may be set by Serena herself to gain publicity and fame. Serena speaks to Offred in a business-like fashion and tells her about her duties in the house.

Serena and Offred shared a complicated relationship. Being women they lived restricted lives and stayed within their spaces each had their own fears and intentions. They have specific roles to play and have to wear dresses of particular colours to differentiate themselves. Serena wore blue robes to symbolise purity and Offred wore red robes that denoted sexuality. The maids on the other hand wore green robes. The wives had certain liberties including gardening, knitting, and running the household as the elite’s real partner. The handmaids went for walking and shopping trips and produced and mothered children for the elites to whom they are designated. Although the women have different roles they do not see in any case come together as a sisterhood. This is because the roles are so designed to keep them apart. The infertile wife feels humiliated in the presence of a fertile handmaid as she has to share her husband with a handmaid. Yet she cannot do anything about it as it is necessary for the continuity of the elites. This resentment makes the wives scorn the handmaids and treat them with hate. They exercise all possible authority on the handmaids to establish their superiority and belittle the value of the handmaid in the household. The econowives spit at the sight of handmaids and wives frown at them when they see them on the streets. The women hate each other and strip themselves of their individuality and identity and become social and functional stereotypes. The wives treat the maids with indifference as they are both infertile and belong to lower social classes. In addition, aging wives Serena Joy harbours hatred towards handmaids as their role in the household is weakened and taken away. This is why Offred feels more threatened by Serena than by the powerful commander who is the true master of the house. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood depicts ...“gynocentric misogyny and traditional misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order.” (Dr. Muktha Manoj Jacob)

During an event named as the Ceremony, the handmaid sleeps between Serena Joy's spread legs and has to watch her making love with the commander. During such Ceremonies, the entire household gathers in one place for the event. The handmaid's value as a tool of procreation makes the people of all the other roles secondary. The powerful commander and his wife could not have any control over the handmaid's essential role of producing an offspring.

During the course of her role as a handmaid, Offred develops a closer relationship with the commander. She begins to meet him secretly and illegally as she could not refuse his requests. Such visits can easily spell disaster for a handmaid like Offred but she has to risk it as she has no other choice. During once such visit, the Commander present her gifts and tells her that he is drifting away from Serena and needs her more. He reveals that the previous handmaid had killed herself when his wife came to know about his secret affair with the handmaid. The commander does not another such suicide and asks Offred to make things better for her and him. To Offred's surprise, Serena Joy offers to arrange secret meetings with Nick to help her become pregnant as she believes that the commander could not produce a child. Offred is alarmed but she has to accept her offer. It is illegal and so very risky yet she could not refuse Serena Joy's offer and make her unhappy. In return, Serena allows Offred to look at her daughter's photograph and smoke a cigarette.

For handmaids like Offred, their inner life of imagination offers some peace and helps to remain sane and cope with the mechanical and meaningless existence. As Offred's mother had pointed out to her "Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations." (Margaret Atwood 283) The handmaids have to adjust with their roles by reliving their past in their heads. Such moments of fantasy gives them a false sense of control and the illusion of liberty. The women who resist the Gilead are punished by hanging and those who disobey are shifted to colonies that are hazardous and toxic. The handmaids who are fertile and so indispensable are returned to Red centres where they are re-educated and regulated by the matriarchy of Aunts like Lydia and Elizabeth. The women of the Gilead have to stick to their roles and they are not given any choice. Handmaids like Offred have no sense of independence and they have lost the control over their lives. They are only allowed the give birth and mother children but they cannot choose their men.

To further suppress women, the Gilead had strict rules that prohibited women to read and write or own material possessions. The handmaids can perform their roles and see other maids while they go on shopping trips. They are stripped from their families and blood relations and have to live with the elites as fertile objects of sexuality and procreation. The status of a handmaid is determined by her ability to bring forth healthy babies. Pregnant handmaids are seen with eyes of envy by other women like wives and the maids. But the handmaids do not wish such false social status. As women, they long for liberty, self-identity and individuality. In this respect Aunt Lydia's words have far reaching implications. She differentiates between two types of freedom for women as, "There is more than one kind of freedom ... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it." (Margaret Atwood 34)

Aunt Lydia of the Red Centre differentiates freedom for women as freedom to make choices and freedom for women from violence and crime. She implies that the former liberal society had died due as it had lot of freedom to make choices but it was not free from violence. She insists that women have to sacrifice some 'freedom to' in order to enjoy 'freedom from' state of living.

Offred recalls how women turn against women and blame and make fun of other women. In an event called as the Testifying Janine a handmaid who had suffered abortion confesses that she was raped and sought an abortion. The other women do not console her but they accuse her and make fun of her for crying. Misogyny prevails at all levels among the women in the Gilead society as it is designed in such a manner. The roles of women are planned in such a way that each outweighs or belittles the other thus keeping them apart at all times.

Offred is valued in her world because of her fertile body which has the ability to reproduce. Although this imparts value to her it strips her of her liberty. She cannot choose other roles as there is none to choose but disobedience. However, disobedience will only bring her pain, suffering and torture and even death. So she has to comply and play her role as a slave. During this process, she comes to know that the difference between love and sex. She feels the longing she has for Luke and her lost daughter is love and that she feels for Nick is sex. Now, Offred is denied love and given only sex which she does not want.

Sometimes Offred is allowed brief periods of idleness and freedom. At such times, she realises how limited her life is. Her role as a handmaid forces her to live only as a slave. She gets up, goes for shopping trips, rests in her room alone and sees no one and talks to no one. She feels like burning the commander's house down or kill the man with some kind of sharp instrument, and attack his wife and run away from the house with Nick. However, she knows well that she cannot go far away as the Eyes watched her and the Angels controlled all her movements in the town. When Offred develops intimacy with the commander and Nick she finds some relief and liberty which is equal to that of a wife. When the novel is about to end, she escapes in a black van with the help of Nick and other members of the resistance group.

From the last section title 'Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale' it transpires that Offred survives and makes it to England. The section is actually a presentation in a conference by professor Pieixoto, who studies historical events that happened in the past. He and his colleagues transcribe and sequence the story from thirty tapes belonging to the Gilead times.

### **Conclusion**

In the new order of Gilead, Women's existence is predefined by strict hierarchical roles and dress codes. They do not have any rights and could not make any choice of their own. They are valued for their fertility and servitude. The infertile and low-class women serve as econowives, maids or Marthas. The Aunts are entrusted with the indoctrination, regulation and training of the handmaids. The wives live with the commanders and manage the handmaids. The hierarchy of the Gilead with its gender roles creates a misogyny, wherein women hate women and try to control and suppress each other. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: Gynocentric misogyny and "traditional" misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order.

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