

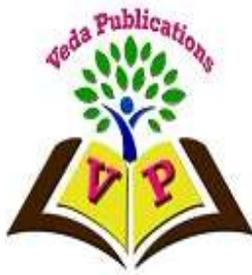


OPPRESSION, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY : A STUDY OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *HANDMAID'S TALE*

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ABSTRACT



The paper is a study of oppression, sexuality and representation of women's identity in *Atwood's Handmaid's Tale*. The novel opens up various avenues for discussion as well as critique on the representation of women. I have recently read the novel and I could not stop imagining if it literally comes true. Atwood is able to create the feeling of the possibility of the Gileadean society in the 21st century. I feel it's not far from us with all the climate changes, wars, gun violence in every nook and corner of the world; no doubt it might come true soon. Oppression, sexual violence, and poor representation of women in any field are not new topics to the world. The paper is the outcome of my anxiety.

Keywords: Manipur, Feminism, Oppression and Sexuality.

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Recently, I have just completed reading *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. It has left me with thousand unanswered questions and could not stop wondering about it. I read almost one third of the book to get a feeling of the situation, to my opinion nothing much was happening. I could not understand what I was reading and was totally blank. I went back to the front page to restart it again just to get a glimpse of idea. But when I am about to finish reading the novel, everything fall into its places. I was relating the situation in India at the larger context and later the possibilities of happening in Manipur, a north eastern state of India. I wanted to know more about this and started probing about it on the internet and discuss the book with my colleagues as well research scholars in my department. I began trying to find out the hidden implications in the book and to comprehend it better. It was really complicated for me. In the recent time atrocities and crime against women have been on rise globally, especially in India. It's petrifying to think about it. There is not a single day where there is no news about rape, or women being killed or burnt in the name of dowry, or boy friend killing the girl friend the list can go on and on. The worse news to start the year 2018 is of an infant 8 months old girl rape by 28 years old cousin in Delhi, India's capital. What more heinous act can be there on this Earth? I came across the news from internet, "8-Month-Old Allegedly Raped by Cousin in Delhi Shifted to AIIMS". It did not sound that promising to start the year with the news. One blunt conclusion is that women are not safe anywhere. We are living in 21st century, age of artificial intelligence, advancement of science and technology, but with wretched mindset towards women. If the Gileadean society is established what might be the condition of women? Is it safer there? How will be the treatment of common women? In any of the case the problem of women will still linger on. At one end we advocate equal treatment, same rights, equal pay, but how far has it been fruitful? About 10% women are literally safe and secure how about the rest of 90% women. The more I think of it, it really sadden and terrified me as a woman, as a mother and as a human.

Atwood is presenting a dystopia society which is applicable to my home state Manipur, a

society that has all kinds of wrong. Ruling by the so called some powerful MLAs, highly corrupted political personal, the state is going through a difficult phase for the past 68 years ever since its merger with the independent India. It is a problematic state a total mess if you put in. If the situation keeps on prevailing, a civil war is on the way which is going to bring quite a lot of destruction to the communities living there. I think 'Totalitarian' will prevail in Manipur and the near possibility of Atwood's *Handmaid* situation for the women of Manipur.

When I went through a material on how the Gilead's government functions from the internet source it says that it has a strict class system and hierarchy, with everyone is being assigned to a particular class and expected to fulfill certain roles. The high-ranking men who govern Gilead are known as Commanders, The Eyes serve as force and spies. Guardians serve as bodyguards, and Angels serve as soldiers. Men can access to education and political positions. Women, except for Aunts, are prohibited to read or write. Econowives are the lowest classes of women. Wives are almost certainly the highest-ranking women. The law is supreme in Gilead. Rule-breakers are harshly punished. Executions are referred to as Salvagings and are held in public. I feel there are Eyes in every society. Every society is divided with specific roles to play so does our current governmental system, what not is happening in the name of democracy. The rich are getting richer day by day. The poor sections of the society are the victimized lot. There is exploitation of nature in the name of growth and advancement, benefitting only the few.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist's struggle to resolve conflicting identities between socially described identities like wives, mothers, workers, cooks and maid, instead of juggling all of these social functions, the women of Gilead are assigned only one of these roles, a system designed to foster solidarity among women with specific hierarchy. The Gilead society is brutal towards women. Even knowing that this is a dystopian novel, one can still find in it details or situations that could be reattached to our present world. If one is a woman, one will be even more touched by Offred's story because women in this novel have no liberty



which is quite relevant with our society now to an extent. Women specially and children are in vulnerable position. In Manipur, no single woman will go out alone at night due to the fear of being the prospective victim. Atwood certainly wanted us to realize with the *Handmaid's Tale*, how luckier people and especially woman are today, at least in some countries. I believe with maximum freedom given to men leads to increasing number of sexual abuse, marital rape and domestic violence especially in India as well as in Manipur. These are obvious consequences of too much freedom given to men.

Offred, the protagonist is a handmaid which is by classification a fertile woman and her role is to bear children for a Commander. The story is narrated from her life as a handmaid; she also reveals the details of her previous life. She has a husband and a daughter. Offred lives in a society governed by oppression and knowing what a great risk she is taking, she agrees to have a secret relationship with her Commander. Despite the tragically situation, she hopes for getting liberation from her situation one day. Her fertility which is a powerful gift became her own destruction too. It is because of her fertility she is staying a life as a captive and license to be raped by the Commander on every Ceremonial ritual night.

Serena Joy is quite an interesting character in the novel, her presence cannot be ignored. The Commander's Wife, Serena is an anti-feminist activist and campaigner for traditional values. In Gilead, she sits at the highest women social ladder but is dreadfully unhappy. Even in a high positioned woman in society she does not have much freedom apart from being a housewife. She cannot bring happiness in spite of being powerful women. Serena jealously guards her claims to status and behaves cruelly towards the Handmaids in her household, but she knows those handmaids are in better position than her. She cannot give birth to a baby; she has shared her husband with the other women. I do not think any normal women will take it casual knowing the fact that her man is sleeping with some other women. Serena Joy has to deal with another woman who reminds her of her incapability to bear children and it humiliates her. Thus, create lack of bonding and a gap between husband and wife. There is no

relationship between both, but merely the functional role assigned by the society which is mechanical.

Moira is Offred's best friend from college and a staunch feminist. She embodies women's wits and independence. Her rebellious nature contrasts severely with the behavior of the other women in the novel. She makes several escape attempts and finally manages to get away from the Red Center. She is as spirited women with full knowledge of what she wants in life. Later on Offred encounters Moira working as a prostitute in a club for the Commanders. It seems like she has given in to her fate, which suggests that a totalitarian society can crush down and even the spirited and independent people.

Aunt Lydia belongs to the class of women assigned to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the beliefs of the new society and make them accept their fates. She works at the "Red Center," where Offred and other women go for instruction before becoming Handmaids. Her instructions obsess Offred in her daily life. Aunt Lydia drilled the ideology of the new society into heads of the women, until even those like Offred, women who do not truly believe in the ideology, hear Gilead's words echoing in their heads.

Cora works as a servant in the Commander's household. She belongs to the class of Marthas, infertile women who do not qualify for the high status of Wives and so works in domestic roles. Cora seems more content with her role than her fellow Martha, Rita. She represents women with compromising nature.

The greatest threat in Gilead comes not from male but from female control. It is the women who are responsible for the atrocities of another woman; the 'The Ceremony' act:

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is



in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose. (104-5)

The above passage is the best example which depicts the atrocity to its highest peak. The monthly rape ceremony is followed as ritual process in the Commander's house. The whole episode is repulsive. The presence of wife in the ceremony makes the matter worse. It synthesizes and objectified the woman body just as merely for the production machine for babies. It depicts women's cruelty towards one another. The predicament of Serena is not considered in this heinous act, the whole situation look amoral to me. Offred is the force victim here because of the Gilead, but according to me Serena joy is at the receiving end, she is triply oppressed. First, by allowing to have physical intimacy with another woman right under her nose and secondly, she is force to be part of the whole ceremony where Offred on top of her, 'Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach'. Thirdly, the fact that she is not able to conceive make her biologically depended on other women to have offspring of her husband. It is such a pathetic situation. It also shows how unnatural the whole process is. A woman has to have total control over her own body. She should be freed from the imposed biological act of reproduction. Woman should not be subjected to sexual violence and choice of sexual partner should solely on her. Ovaries become the only valuable parts it the handmaid's body. While performing the ceremony the rest part of the body is covered, 'My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is

fucking'. Women who cannot bear or have refused to bear children for the state have been labeled as "Unwomen"(128) and sent to the mysterious and life-threatening "Colonies." Every basic human rights is deny, economic independence, the right to education, free citizens. Fertility is the most powerful tool that attributes worthiness to the female subject. The womb becomes a medium that acknowledges the power of the female body and yet it also function to oppresses that same body. The whole focus is on the fertility and nothing else matter. The phrases such as, "Blessed be the fruit,"(29) "May the Lord open," (29) "Under his Eye," (54) and "Praise be" (29), they are forced to recite, three times a day, the Republic's creed: "From each according to her ability; to each according to his need" (127), denotes the main motif of the Gilead government. Women are merely an object to produce babies. " In western thought, the body has been historically associated solely with women , whereas men have been associate with the mind" (*Feminism and Gender Equality*, 6). The present scenario is quite similar with the plight of the women in Gilead society.

The Handmaid's Tale is a satire, and more of a warning to our generation. She warns us showing how not dealing with true problems could bring a situation similar to the one in the novel. Right now with the conflict between countries, exposure to harmful chemical, and competition among the countries for nuclear bomb will surely leads to the state like the novel. It makes the reader to alert and stay consciousness about the possible harm. After reading the *Handmaid's Tale*, it is difficult for the reader not to agree with everything she develops. She does it with so much passion and precision, that it becomes almost impossible to disagree with her. She proves that a woman becomes nothing as soon as her rights to possess or to make her own decisions disappear. In fact, all of her female characters, in this novel, are unhappy. Her purpose is obviously to show how they should not be treated if one wants them to be accomplished and satisfied. She is certainly willing to let the reader get a personal opinion on the manly attitudes one can find in the novel. It certainly is a novel that encourages pondering on women's position in society. This book is powerful and should, at least once in a lifetime; it must be read by every



woman. The novel provides avenues of the current status women are enjoying and certain freedom we are able to access. If there is by chance a reverse in the world political scenario. In spite of the modern technology and advancement, the religious fundamentalists trying to impose orthodox way of life are possible. The novel examines some of the traditional attitudes that are embedded in the thinking of the religious right and which can be particularly threatening too many modern women. Gilead society eliminates the need for choice, controls individual desires and directs them into socially acceptable channels, reading and writing are strictly forbidden activities for women which literally are only left with ovaries is destiny with mere function of giving birth.

From an article in Wikipedia, according to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, reported incidents of crime against women increased 6.4% during 2012, and a crime against a woman is committed every three minutes. In 2012, there were 244,270 reported incidents of crime against women, while in 2011, there were 228,650 reported incidents. Female infanticide is becoming a common practice. In India, there is incentive to have a son, because they offer security to the family in old age.

In India, a woman is raped every 29 minutes. Incidents of reported rape increased 3% from 2011 to 2012. Incidents of reported incest rape increased 46.8% from 268 cases in 2011 to 392 cases in 2012. Looking at this scenario sometimes I wonder Atwood's Gilead world might be a better place at least mass killing of female infanticide as well as rape will not occur there. Somehow it's the choice between the fire and the frying pan, in both the situation women are at the receiving end. None of the women were successful each of them had a tragic end in the novel.

Republic of Gilead in Atwood's novel have roots in ancient and modern cultures which can be dangerous. This highlights the fact that the novel corresponds to the readers of our society as perfectly as it did in 1985, when it was written. There are many women like Aunt Lydia who believes that women should be submissive to men and solely concerned with bearing children and such a social order ultimately offers women more respect and safety

than the old, pre-Gilead society offered them. Freedom for women means inviting troubles and problems. I do agree with this point. Crime against women is increasing day by day, who is responsible for that? We are advancing no doubt about that but are we able to change the mindset of the men? That leaves a huge void in readers' mind. It has left a deep impact on my thinking towards the whole term call human and being humane.

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