



Margret Atwood: Social brutality and Sexual Politics

Arwa H. Mohammed
University of Tikreet- College of Education -Department of English

Awfa H. Mohammed

ABSTRACT

It is said that literature is all continuity, all echo. In other words, there is a recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images in many literary works. This can be applied to Feminist writers who used to be demanders of women rights. They believe that males' power over women is consolidated by ideological myths about women. These myths are part of a powerful socializing influence upon women that leads them to define their major role as that of a mother, housekeeper and child-bearer.

Margaret Atwood, whose fame lies on her boldness and versatility, is a feminist Canadian writer. Though she refuses to label her works with feminism, many of her literary works are revealed through the eyes of powerless women. Atwood's literary texts mainly deal with females' way of feeling, thinking and acting. She links her female characters with suffering, and she believes that their suffering comes from real life. Atwood's literature, in fact, is concerned with sexual politics which is one of the terms that joined the second wave of Feminism in 1970. It refers to ideas and activities that are concerned with how power is shared between men and women, and how this affects their relationships

The aim of this paper is to examine Atwood as a feminist writer rather than an anti- feminist as she believes herself to be, in addition to the fact that sexual politics is a recurrent theme that dominates most of her literary works.

This paper includes three sections and a conclusion. **Section One** is an introductory one. It introduces the reader to Margaret Atwood's literary personality. **Section Two** deals with the major themes, motifs and symbols in Atwood's poetry by which she shows how the sexual inequality is institutionalized in society. **Section Three** sheds light on Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, in which women's rights are ignored and their freedom and identity are seduced by a totalitarian society. **Conclusion** gives an overview of this paper's most important findings.



Section One

Margaret Atwood: A glance at Her Literary personality

Margaret Atwood is one of the foremost contemporary Canadian writers. Her literary production in which she tackles several subjects, includes group of novels, short stories, poetry, and children books. Part of Atwood's success lies on her boldness and versatility. She has been labeled a Canadian nationalist, a feminist, and even a gothic writer. She has worked as a critic and an editor, aiming at rescuing former Canadian authors from the shade and bringing them into the light they deserve. Though Atwood agreed with all what was said about woman rights in the second wave of feminism that emerged in 1960, she didn't want her literature to be a stage for an ideology. She emphasized the danger of art becoming a tool for a particular ideology as: "The quality of art suffers when it becomes part of the ideology". (quoted in VanSpanckeren & Castro:25)

Margaret Atwood seeks happiness and fulfillment among sufferings and despairs of life. She was gaining fame as a writer at home and abroad, and many of her literary works reveal her growing preoccupation with the demands of the public life. The contrast between the familiar and the unknown, the gulf between civilization and wilderness, and the difference between society are dominating themes in her works.

Atwood believes in the deep connection between the individual and literature, in a sense that understanding literature may parallel understanding one's identity. She compares this parallelism of understanding to a journey, which is metaphorically revealed as an inner trip that is made possible by the activity of reading added to the use of imagination: "Literature is not only a mirror; it is also a map, a geography of the mind. Our literature [Canadian literature] is one such map, if we [Canadians] can learn to read it as our literature, as the product of who and where we have been." (Atwood:18)

Most of her books have postmodern features, in a sense that these books contribute to the understanding of how the postmodern conditions have affected the modern society in general and the Canadian one in special. These postmodern features are explored through the recurrence of certain themes, which usually relate to Canadian culture and identity, the challenges that women face in determining their roles, and survival.

Survival is one of the thematic concerns that characterize Atwood's works. According to her, survival is a symbol of Canada. Earl G. Ingersoll justifies Atwood's belief as the following:

For early explorers this meant bare physical survival, later for French Canadians-after the English took power-it meant cultural survival, and later



again English Canada itself had to fight for cultural survival in the face of the overwhelming influence of the United States.(Ingersoll:46)

What Ingersoll says doesn't mean that Atwood limits theme of survival to Canada. Although Atwood speaks very pointedly of her role as a Canadian, as a woman, and, most importantly, as a critic and a writer of Canadian Literature, she moves forward into expanding theme of survival as well as many other themes to the suppressed all over the world. Atwood admits the universality of her themes when she says:

I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger, non - exclusive picture. Looking back over this period, I see that I was writing and talking a little less about the Canadian scene and a little more about the global one.(Atwood:75)

In her book *Survival: A thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Atwood argues that Canadian literature is mainly concerned with victims and with the victim's ability to survive the unforgiving circumstances (Ibid.:20)The victim in so many cases is a female who escapes or reject the rigid roles that society sets for her.She takes action to change her life and she doesso by destroying a former identity that was imposed upon her, and consequently create a new one. She cannot survive unless she replaces society's imposed values with her own, and takes control of her present and future through her own creativity. Michael Spiegel states that "Atwood creates situations in which women, burdened by the rules and inequalities of their societies, discover that they must reconstruct braver, self-reliant personae in order to survive."(Spiegel:119)

Political sexuality is another concept that characterizes Atwood's works. It refers to the differences in the amount of power that dominates the relationship between man and woman in a group or society. She identifies women with nature and men with the technical assault on nature. Nature is very often the victim, and man is pictured as the manipulating oppressor.A question may be asked, why Atwood describes the relationship between man and woman with the word political? According to Atwood the word political means:

"[...] having to do with power: who's got it, who wants, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how"(quoted in Willsin:38)

According to this one may understand that Atwood is basing male-female's relationship on a base of a political nature. In many of her literary texts,Atwood has examined this political nature in a society that limits women and make them the victims of men.The female is expected by the society to adjust to the role of a mother and a wife.Her females characters are



obliged to succumb to the social demands, and to lose the sense of self and become victims to the male-domination in a mannish society.

Dystopian vision is what Atwood presents in many of her literary text. Atwood's works propagate dehumanizing and unbearably pessimistic dystopian vision, in a sense that she particularly sets her factious works in worlds without love, without freedom, and without personal integrity.

Symbolism is among the stylistic devices that Atwood uses to explore her themes of survival, sexual politics, identity, and female's victimization. The symbols which she repeatedly uses in her literary texts are food, animals, female's body, and moon.

Atwood's style of writing includes realistic details about food. She, symbolically, links food with the spiritual quest of women for survival through the power of self-realization. Emma Parker states that eating:

is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men. The powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their non-eating. (Parker:1)

In *Edible Woman*, for example, Atwood depicts the heroin's refusal to what socially imposed upon her by the lack of the ability to eat. In this novel as well as in many others of her literary works men and woman according to Atwood are in a continuous struggle against each other's to see "who can do what to whom and get away it, even as far as death" (Atwood:144). According to this, one may say that the relationship between male and female is led by the image of the hunter and the hunted. Whenever Atwood was asked about the reason behind her negative view points about men, her answer was usually be: "I'm describing the world around me". (Ibid:145)

Of the many symbols Atwood takes from the natural world, the moon is among the most malleable. Traditionally invoked as a female goddess, the moon offers a vehicle for Atwood's interest in darkness and the brief illuminations that interrupt it. The moon sees all but never comments. It is the silent, inscrutable, and probably an indifferent observer of the human comedy unfolding below.

Female's body also demonstrates the unbreakable connection between the Earth and women, proof of a woman's vulnerability and mortality. A woman's body is the theater on which men's brutal rituals are enacted, as they vie for supremacy.

Margaret Atwood uses animals imagery because of the sense that animals are effective on Canada's biological and geographical environment. Consequently, they occupy such central position in Canadian literature in general and in Atwood's in particular. She helps her readers to re-examine



their ideas about what distinguishes human from animals. Atwood offers an observation about eating animals: "the animals die that we may live, they are substitute people... we eat them out of cans or otherwise ; we are eaters of death(Adams:142)

Atwood is possessed by the term politic even in her use of language. Language is inherently political and the use of language is a political process according to Margaret Atwood as she thinks that politics has to do with what kind of conversation one has with people, and what he feels free to say or he doesn't feel free to say.(Wilson:34)One may say that language for Atwood is a device of power for or against the individual because through its use one defines his position in society. Moreover, Atwood links language with culture and reality. Language for her is a "cultural relativity "which means that any individual's language depends mainly on his cultural, social, and personal background. In addition, language is a cause of reality. When it is used creatively, it is going to open new readings, inspire new thoughts, and create new realities. Consequently, the power of language is going to affect the individual as he is going "to be a creative, non-victim". In other words, the core of language's power is when it evokes thought and feelings in such a creative way. (Ibid.)

To conclude, the struggle for survival, sexual politics, death, food, and animals which form the main themes and motives in Margaret Atwood's literature are in fact plants that move around one orbit because of the relatedness that brings them together.

Section Two

The Voice of Canadian Identity & Sexual Politics in Margaret Atwood's Poetry

Sexual politics is a dominating theme in Margaret Atwood's poetic works. It was a recent feminist theory, both North American and French and it is useful in interpreting her texts since the reader notices that she always moves around the same theme in her texts despite using different techniques and devices in interpretation. This term was first used in Kate Millett's germinal work of feminist literary criticism by that title. It refers to the politics of sexual relationships, power structured in patriarchy so that one group--males--controls another--females(Wilson:xii).It also means the inequality in the distribution of rights and duties among males and females as members of one society.

In "This is a photograph of me," the first poem in Atwood's first collection, Atwood hyperbolically depicts women as powerless creatures



Arwa H. Mohammed

Awfa H. Mohammed

who are victimized by men. She also plays with the conventional equation of appearance and reality; however she succeeds because of her artistic profundity in the employment of imagery, diction, poetic language for thematic purposes.

Photographs, in this poem, are no longer static recorders of a fixed history. Instead, they represent the ideas the poet chooses to represent:

It was taken some time ago.

At first it seems to be
a smeared

print: blurred lines and grey flecks

blended with the paper; then, as you scan

it, you see in the left-hand corner

a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree (selected poems 1965-1975:8)
the speaker is passively exposed to the photograph which symbolizes a woman's history. The title is personal, the first sentence is in the passive voice. This is a photo others have taken of me. This is a history of me which others have created. The others are males who are active to make history of females. This imagery hints to us quite literally that there is much more to this photograph than "blurred lines and grey flecks blended with paper" and on a more hidden level it reveals something much deeper that we discover in the latter half.

The photograph is a symbol of herself and of her history which is not clear; light stands for the creativity of the woman. If a woman does some important work in the society, it is shadowed.. In the left hand corner, there are branches of tree which have emerged to right hand side. In right hand side there is a frame house which stands for male and left hand side (branches) stands for female.

In the patriarchy, a woman is treated as left hand and man is treated as right hand. A Woman who is placed on the left hand is simply associated with branches which have no roots and man is placed on the right hand side:

The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned. I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface. It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:



the effect of water
on light is a distortion but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.

Lake symbolizes the society of the photograph. Beyond the society, there are low hills. Hills and lakes keep the woman in shadow. Hills and lakes are the causes that distort her history. Society, the lake and the hills are responsible of what happens to women. The speaker is not taken out of the lake. She is dipped and left in the lake. She could not get her identity. Time is not clear, symbolically means that it was not clear when the domination of women started. Atwood uses the imagery of nature in this poem delineating the terms of survival and growth as well as oppression.

In "Siren Song," she uses myth to dramatize male's cannibalism and dismemberment of females:

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible
the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls
the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember
(selected poems 1965-1975:19)

In Greek mythology, Sirens are creatures with the heads of females and the bodies of birds. They lived on an island and possessed the irresistible charm (through their songs) to lure mariners to their destruction on the rocks surrounding the island. The speaker in this poem is a siren which is a symbolic stereotype of coquet women. The siren is portrayed as the typical luring woman; she is the picture of beauty and the embodiment of perfection, but she is not content. She is depicted as able to commit coquetry in order to lure men in with the promise that they are different and that only they can save her.

Seamus Heaton notifies that The siren desires rescue and articulates that desire, her song expresses frustration, loneliness, and hope; but that same song is, of course, also a trap for her victim. In this kind of text, desire and the trap are implicit (Vanspanckeren:129). Atwood's satire of society's impression of women is evident in the lines:

I will tell the secret to you
to you, only to you
Come closer. This song!
is a cry for help: Help me



Arwa H. Mohammed

Awfa H. Mohammed

Only you, only you can
you are unique
at last. Alas
it is a boring song
but it works every time.

The idea that the siren's appearance is merely an illusion is demonstrated by the line "...will you get me out of this bird suit?" demonstrating that the freedom implied by the creature's wings is illusive referring to a fact that women's equality too is an illusion and therefore they are incapable of saving themselves.

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?
I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical
with these two faethery maniacs
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable

One of Atwood's most valuable and effective strategies used to project her idea is the use of a variety of tones and tone shifts through the poem. This is significant to "Siren Song" because the various tones Margaret Atwood uses, shows the development of the Siren's character and how the Siren causes temptation and leaves poor figure on fellow man that appears within Siren range. Within the first three stanzas, Atwood opens up by presenting a proud tone; however the tone falls towards the end of the poem as if the speaker wants to convey depression because the siren wants help to get out of her evil ways which are in fact proofs of her hidden weakness. The last stanza also represents a shift in tone. The tone of the last stanza is boastful. The Siren mentions that the song is boring but it works every time. This conveys that the Siren is deceitful and proud of her song because she can lure men to try and help her escape herself when she really does not want to.

Margaret Atwood employs visual imagery and diction and to convey the idea that temptation is a force that is difficult to overcome and may result in destructive consequences. Atwood depicts a picture of men quickly jumping out of their boats in huge groups to rush and see what and where the music from the Sirens is coming from. This poem has a song-like rhythm. The lines "I will tell the secret to you/ to you, only to you" is especially similar to the lines of a song, due to its repetition.

Landscapes in Margaret Atwood's poems are harsh and brutal, wild and unconquerable, like the heart of darkness within all humans. She mainly depicts reality against the outer appearances surrounding it, civilization



against wilderness and truth against the illusion that captivates it. She considers these oppositions as principal outstanding to identify the major principles of Canadian literature. These oppositions also serve as good interpretations to the inner human self.

In *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), Atwood uses the experience of Susanne Moodie to explore Canadian immigrant history and relationships to Native Canadians. It is through this history that the work highlights changes in the shift to modernity and the lingering effects of a young country attempting to establish its own national identity. Throughout Moodie's experience, Atwood explains aspects of her own personal and national identity.

Susanne Moodie, a well-known literary figure who was born in 1803 in England. She began to write at an early age. She was especially attracted to historical figures that she believed to be misunderstood. She was also introduced to the injustices of slavery and produced pamphlets describing the lives and sufferings of two Caribbean female slaves. In 1830, Susanna met Lt. John Wedderburn Dunbar Moodie. They married in 1831, and after their first child was born, they decided to emigrate to Canada in 1832. There they settled in Upper Canada (Ontario) on a half-cleared farm. Susanna began publishing in local journals and ladies' magazines. With honesty, humor and sometimes bitterness, Susanna describes her new life in Canada, and her difficulty of adapting to a new country (Kroller:135).

The book of Moodie inspired Margaret Atwood to write a collection of poetry titled *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. Atwood emphasizes the way each generation creates a new Moodie, she also outlines what she sees as the typically Canadian aspects of Moodie's mentality and writing, particularly her perception of the wilderness as hostile and her efforts to love Canada despite her revulsion at so many aspects of her life there. Atwood makes that Canadian literary figure an example of women's endurance and mental strength despite their physical weakness. She makes females as symbols of Canada, the victim, the oppressed minority and the exploited which struggles to survive, to avoid dying and to prove its identity. Females, in Atwood's literary works are probably symbols of Canada with an almost intolerable anxiety they have inside, males, on the other hand could possibly symbolize England with all their arrogance, pride and egoistic nature.

The relationship between males and females is symbolically depicted as the relationship between the victim and the malefactor. The victim is always Canada whereas the malefactor wavers between England and the United States of America according to the setting of the literary text and according to the historical era on which the literary text was written.

The Journals of Susanna Moodie is a book of poetry that is tied up to chronological arrangement. Moodie reveals the reason of her separation from the land. Her initial commitment is to all those things associated with



Arwa H. Mohammed

Awfa H. Mohammed

light: civilization, reason, order. Margaret Atwood believes that "Susanna Moodie has finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land she once hated"(ibid:142). Only as she comes to accept the darker side of herself, and of nature, will she be able to change and grow.

These poems are in fact a journey into the inner human self and the exploration of a new land symbolizes a psychological exploration of the self. . Atwood recalls some of her favorite themes: the brutality of civilization and awe of the landscape, the terrors of the forest, and the space between the picturesque and the sinister.

In Atwood's poem "Disembarking at Quebec" the speaker says:

Is it my clothes, my way of walking,
the things I carry in my hand
- a book, a bag with knitting -
the incongruous pink of my shawl
this space cannot hear (Atwood:11)

In the first stanza, Susanna Moody is talking about how she feels that she has no sense of belonging to the new vulgar land. She is trying to figure out what the reason is. Her clothes, her book, the color of her shawl. She feels very insecure by questioning why people may not like her. Susanna Moody came from an upper class life, so it's a thought of hers that people may not like her appearance. She describes her spiritual alienation by saying: "I am a word/ In a foreign language". Now she is questioning her lack of conviction. The poem establishes, through the questioning tone of Moodie's voice, the possibility that her disharmony with the land is of her own making: "or is it my own lack / of conviction which makes / these vistas of desolation, / . . . omens of winter." By at least recognizing that her alienation may be caused by her foreign habits of mind.

In "The Planters" Mrs. Moodie is well on her way to this kind of perception. The image of "planting" is a key word in this poem. Moodie watches her husband and the other man attempting to plant the garden, attempting to tame and humanize the wilderness, she realizes that if they:

open their eyes even for a moment
to these trees, to this particular sun
they would be surrounded, stormed, broken
in upon by branches, roots, tendrils, the dark
side of light
as I am. (Atwood:16)

The poem takes on a new dimension as she explores the impact of the land on identity, there is a suggestion that Mrs. Moodie is beginning to come to terms with the land, and beginning to recognize that the trees are her guide in her journey to self-understanding.

Margaret Atwood, in a report she made after visiting the Toronto zoo, described the modern institution, designed to provide the animals within it



with something approaching their natural habitats, as a considerable advance over earlier zoos, she writes:

This kind of zoo was essentially a Victorian institution and the Victorians were great collectors and classifiers; so they put all the cats together in the cat house,all the birds in the bird house and so forth. Unfortunately, the animals might as well have been stuffed and kept in glass cases;The arrangement was convenient for people -- with all the animals crowded together, not much walking was involved -- but hell on the animals(Vanspanckeren:163).

Atwood's interest in animals is not occasional. In some of her poems the references to animals underline the poems' themes, motifs, imagery, and structure: they pattern the growth of the speaker-poet herself, her country, all women, and all human beings. Atwood, in these poems, uses her wit to set up ironic or parodic correspondences. She resembles animals to women for both types of creatures are, according to her viewpoint, centered around the hunting relationship. In some poems animals and attitudes toward animals are references to Atwood's description of sterility of human life. In other poems, references to the animal world are obvious metaphors for what humans do to one another. A "dead dog" helps Atwood to express the power of the actual and her relation to it in "*The Double Voice*," a poem about two ways of seeing and writing:

Two voices
took turns using my eyes:
One had manners,
painted in water colours,
used hush tones when speaking
of mountains or Niagara Falls,
The other voice
had other knowledge:
that men sweat
always and drink often,
that pigs are pigs
but must be eaten
anyway....
One saw through my
bleared and gradually
bleaching eyes, red leaves,
the rituals of seasons and rivers
The other found a dead dog
jubilant with maggots
half-buried among the sweet peas.
(The Journals of Susanna Moodie: 104).



Arwa H. Mohammed

Awfa H. Mohammed

Atwood describes the two voices that speak inside her. These voices symbolize the dualism that come through in most of her poetry; the voice that sees the enchanting, romantic things in life, and the other that focuses on the morbid, the voice of painful realism that sees the rawness of life. Kathleen Vogt assumes that the "dead dog" in this poem, probably serves as a warning that we are flesh and that life and death are one, but we see the dog's body before responding to the concept (VanSpanckeren & Castro: 180).

To conclude there are certain themes that reoccur in Margaret Atwood's poetry. Two of these are related to Canadian culture and identity, and the challenges that women face in determining their roles. Atwood came to maturity at a time when issues of Canadian cultural identity and the role of women were drastically changing. Atwood's references to animals sometimes signify the behavioral correspondence between humans and animals in their struggle for survival. The references to animals symbolize the contrast between the familiar and the unknown, the gulf between civilization and wilderness, and the difference between society, where human beings live but behave as animals and the forest where wild animals have facial expressions of some wicked human beings.

Section Three

Social Cannibalism & Dismemberment In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a science fiction which dramatizes a futuristic totalitarian society that turns out to be controlled by a puritan theocratic and despotic government, and in which women's social role is thoroughly dominated and severely limited by patriarchal system. The novel was awarded the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Commonwealth Literature Prize. Stephanie Barbé Hammer writes:

...the satire in *The Handmaid's Tale* directs its criticism towards all of us—feminists and non-feminists, women and men. It warns us of the imperceptible technology of power, of the subtle domination of women by men, and of our unconscious imprisoning of each other and ourselves by ourselves. (quoted in Klarer: 130)

As Atwood is a good observer of what she is surrounded by, the world around her was the source of inspiration from which she has created the factious world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood explains that:

...the novel has its roots in the mud, and part of the mud is history; and part of the history we had recently is the history of the women's movement, and the women's movement has influenced how people read and what you can get away with. (quoted in Feuer: 83)



Atwood effectively appropriates historical fact from Reagan era. On August 21, 1980, Roland Reagan said before a crowd of journalist and new Evangelical Right supporters: "...all the complex questions facing us at home and abroad have their answer in that single book[Bible]."(quoted in Wilson:33) When he was elected as the president of the United States, this statement proved to be a sign of how he intended to run the country. Atwood is clearly inspired by this era in a sense that *The Handmaid's Tale* carries Reagan's desire for a country ruled by the Bible

Margaret Atwood raises a number of feminist issues in *The Handmaid's Tale*. She is embodying a vision of a dystopian society, or a utopian society that does not work and does not serve the interests of the majority of its population. The novel is narrated by its protagonist, a young woman known as Offred who has been kidnapped by her government and separated from her husband and child. She is forced into slavery as a Handmaid, or surrogate mother, for a powerful couple that cannot have children of their own. This story is set in a future where such arrangements have become commonplace. Offred encounters a number of forces that her society imposes her. It forces her to dress and behave in a certain way in order not to be punished. Atwood develops here a vision of the place of women in society and uses an extreme situation to comment on the secondary position women occupy in Western society today. The novel uses an exaggerated social setting to delve into issues of women's powerlessness and loss of identity.

The novel is set in the United States at the beginning of 21st century. When the president and members of Congress have been killed in a terrorist attack, the Republic of Gilead is set up. Burt explains that this republic is based on: "... the Old Testament, 17th century Puritanism, and 1980s right-wing ideology." (Burt:535) There, fertile women are recruited to be "handmaids" because they are in good condition for reproduction. Their social function is to bear children for the Wives. They are reduced to sexual slavery and they used to wear red clothes. There are many women who became infertile due to environmental problems such as pollution and radiation. For that reason, women are divided into several categories, such as handmaids whose , wives to commanders, aunts, Econowives, and infertile women or "Unwomen" (who are sent to colonies) Male infertility in Gilead is unthinkable as the protagonist says: "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law"(HMT:96)

Deborah Hooker argues that this division may illustrate one of the messages that Atwood wants to deliver. The message is that social division is not limited to male and female. The division is also between different classes of women.(Hooker:275) This is particularly emphasized when analyzing the relationships between the Handmaids and the Wives. The wives don't hold the authority in society, as it is empowered by males, however within their own households, they have the ability to exercise authority on the



Arwa H. Mohammed

Awfa H. Mohammed

handmaids. Offered comments on the way they are treated by the Wives as the following: "They don't want us to look attractive. For them things are bad enough as it is." (*HMT*: 107). Here one may notice that women in the republic are not totally victimized and to a certain level Atwood's belief in the female as a victimized individual is exaggerated. One may say that Atwood is judging the whole matter according to a feminine point of view.

Women are not only oppressed by women in the Republic of Gilead as Atwood depicts; they are also oppressed by men. Women are unable to vote, hold property or jobs, read or do anything that encourages independence. Women are objectified, and reduced to nothing more than a biological role of a "two-legged womb". Their bodies are regarded as tools, as they are lead to believe that their only importance in life and in society is to bear children. "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (*HMT*:107) Roberta Rubenstein describes the body of the Handmaids as a vessel and as a tool for reproduction. Bodies in general according to Rubenstein are objectified and described in terms of parts rather than as wholes. (Rubenstein:103) In her former life, Offred had regarded her body as an "instrument" under her own control -- with "limits ... but nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me" (*HMT*: 84). In Gilead, her body, exists literally to be used against her:

Now the flesh rearranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night ... (*HMT*: 84).

Even the doctor who examines them periodically for signs of pregnancy never even sees their faces; he "deals with a torso only" (*HMT*:70).

Whenever the Handmaids have sex with the Commanders, they are doing so with the presentation of the Wives, who stand behind them (handmaids) and hold their hands. This symbolic action confirms the fact that those handmaids have no power over their bodies, and no choice over their ability to make love or to have children. Their humanity are completely ignored. They are usually told to think of themselves as seeds but these seeds as Rubenstein argues are associated with manipulated, not natural, reproduction. .(Rubenstein:106)

The Handmaid's Tale is studded with such references to plant and animal life which are often juxtaposed with aspects of the human body and/or sexuality. The animals in Gilead are, for the most part, repugnant. Rubenstein suggests that: "The handmaids are treated like brood livestock: tattooed with cattle brands" (*HMT*: 266), they are kept in line by women called Aunts who wield electric cattle prods.

Women in Gilead are forbidden to read and write because it is believed that this would enable them to be on an equal level of knowledge as men. If people are not allowed to use words other than those needed to for



basic communication, many will soon forget the more powerful words which are able to evoke emotions. As a result, they will be less able to communicate many of their emotions, thoughts and feelings because they do not have the vocabulary to do so. This can be noticed on Offred who has a trouble in recalling words that she does not use in basic everyday language: "My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I had once known but had nearly forgotten" (HMT:155). To deliver this idea, Atwood employs food and hunger:

When her[Offred] Commander, having sought her out for forbidden companionship, allows her the proscribed act of reading, she reads like a starving person finally given food -- "voraciously, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished, if it were sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" .(HMT:194)

Offred longs to make food and to chat in the kitchen with other women. These things are denied; the only thing she can do or has to do is to buy food from the store in her daily walk. Symbolically, longing for making food is the hungry desire to touch:

I would help Rita to make the bread, sinking my hand into that soft resistant warmth which is so much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch.(HMT:21)

She longs to have kitchen in where she can do what she wants whenever she wants. Offred as well as all the Handmaids are forced to eat alone in their rooms, which have one small window that is partly opened and a picture on wall with no glass over it to prevent the Handmaids from committing suicide . on the other hand Kitchen stands for friendship and company. Symbolically, the kitchen represents the hungry longing of the Handmaids for warmth companionship, talk, and gossip.

Choosing what to eat is not allowed for the Handmaid. In order to be a healthy vessel, a handmaid has to have a healthy body by eating a healthy food. The healthy foods the Handmaid eats may form symbolic representation of wombs and fertility. Moreover, to control what the Handmaid's eat is to control their bodies and souls. For Offred the unhealthy food represents happiness and control over her life. Before being a Handmaid, Offred has the will to direct her life and to eat what she likes whether it is healthy or unhealthy. After being captivated, her will becomes something eaten by the Republic of Gilead. She no more, has the right to choose or to fulfill her desires.

There are kinds of food which represent females rebellion and resistance. Butter in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* stands for defiance and



Arwa H. Mohammed

Awfa H. Mohammed

rebellion. Using cosmetics such as lotion or make up by the Handmaids are forbidden in the Republic of Gilead. Offred steals butter and uses it to moisturize her facial skin: "Buttered, I lie on my single bed, like a piece of toast" (*HMT*:108). This image of the toast is a mixture of victimization and survival according to Niamh Creely who states: "On one hand, she [Offred] is the commander's easy food, but on the other hand, butter is a mark of her strength and pleasure" (Creely:40). What Creely means to say is that though she isn't able to protect her humanity in the Republic, she is able to keep her femininity out of reach. Her survival is in the way she follows the strategy of self-protection which gives her the sense of strength and pleasure: "As long as we do this, butter our skin to keep it soft, we can believe that we will someday get out, that we will be touched again, in love or desire" (*HMT*:96–97).

Although, there are many symbols that stand for Offred's resistance and rebellion, there are also symbols that explore the moments in which her desire to rebel is decreased. While watching her morning's eggs, she thinks: It's a barren landscape, yet perfect; it's a sort of desert that saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. the life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside. The egg is glowing now, as if it had energy of its own. To at the egg gives me intense pleasure. Women used to carry such eggs between their breast, to incubate them. That would have felt good. The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg. (*HMT*:120)

The egg fills her with feelings of peace and contemplation. Looking at the egg creates a wish inside her to be happy and content. She finds pleasure when she feels so, but this pleasure is a dangerous one. She is afraid that she will get used to the situation, stop remembering the past, and stop planning for a different future. The egg and the pleasure it gives intoxicate her defiance and rebellion. It gives her instead, slavery and stability.

Personal identity is one of key words in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. A deliberate and systematic attempt is made to obliterate all sense of individuality and identity in women, by taking away their names from them: the Handmaids have lost their original individuating name; their name indicates merely the male to whom she is assigned: "A still-fertile woman is forced to act as 'handmaid' to one of the military leaders of the burgeoning state. She is told her name is 'Offred' as the commander to whom she now belongs is named Fred." (Creely:40) This destruction of the individual's name is part of the attempt to destroy the past and force women to live in their present moment alone.

My name isn't Offred , I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your



telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. 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. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past (*HMT*:94).

Remembering her original name fills Offred with peace, comfort, warm feeling, and dreaming of survival. Though her name indicates her belonging to the commander, one may interpret her name in a different way. Offred name can be divided into off and red. Off means to stop something. As if Offred's name indicates her secret desire to stop her relation to the red colour by which she is identified as a handmaid.

Parker explains that Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is saturated with images of the body as food. She deconstructs the traditional metaphor of woman as food and explores the effects of symbolic cannibalism as a sanctioned cultural system.(Parker:349) To Conclude, one of the messages of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is that women are still oppressed by men within society.The irony is that without women, men would not be able to survive.For the sake of the continuity of the universe, the existence of women must prevail. Atwood however expresses that men use women for only that sole purpose, and not treating them as human beings but merely as objects responsible for the continuity of mankind.

Conclusion

In her poetry and novels, Margaret Atwood explores political realities in the relationships between male and female , and to a significant degree her insights into power-patterns are shaped by an awareness of the ways in which people are trained by their society from childhood to hold one set of attitudes toward women and another toward men. Her portraits of women and men, and of the relationships between them, demonstrate how this double standard has destructive consequences for both sexes, among them the suppression, denial and eventual atrophy of feeling, resulting in relationships governed not by love but by subtle power-games which are characterized by insensitivity and ruthlessness and in which men hold the advantage. An inconsistency is apparent here, for, although she touches upon sexism, she does not explore the ways in which sex-role conditioning encourages women to play victim roles. Atwood's own analysis of politics in woman-man relationships in the novels and poetry is inconsistent with this omission in "Survival"; the failure in that book to deal with the realities of sexism in Canadian literature indicates that Atwood's analysis of sexism is incomplete.



Margaret Atwood's reading of Moodie is colored by her own wish to define the Canadian national character reinforcing the notion of shared national consciousness. Margaret Atwood views Mrs. Moodie as a woman who is divided between her Victorian middle class manners ,ladylike art forms and the need to get used to the new style of life she is leading with its sweat, dirt, disease and insects. These divisions in herself have made her the "archetypal" Canadian figure.

Bibliography

-Atwood, Margaret. *Survival -A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.(M&S, Toronto, 1972).

-*The Handmaid's Tale*. (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985).

-Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems*(1965-1975), England: Cambridge University Press,1976).

- The Journals of Susanna Moodie,1st.edition,(Canada: Oxford University Press, Canada,1970).

Becker, Allienne R.(ed.)."The Engendering of Narrative in Doris Lessing's *Shikasta* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Visions of the Fantastic" in*Fifteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts*. (Canada: Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1996.)

Carol J. Adams. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*,(England: The Continuum International Publishing Group,2006).

Creely, Niamh. "The Handmaid's Tale" in *Film Ireland*, Issue:126, (U.S.A:ProQuest LLC Press,2009).

Deery, June." Science for Feminists: Margaret Atwood's Body of Knowledge" in *Twentieth Century Literature*. Volume: 43. Issue: 4. 2002).

Feuer, Lois "The *Calculus* of Love and Nightmare: the Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition" in *Critique*, Volume: 38. Issue: 2, (England: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Hooker, Deborah " Gender and the Environmental Ethos of Atwood's *the Handmaid's Tale*." In *Twentieth Century Literature*. Volume: 52. Issue: 3,(U.S.A: California, Hofstra University Press,2006).

Klarer, Mario, " Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's *the Handmaid's Tale*." In *Mosaic*. Volume: 28. Issue: 4, (U.S.A: University of Manitoba, Gale Group Press, 2002).



Kroller, Eva-Marie (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Canadian Literature*, (England, Cambridge university press, 2004).

Parker, Emma, " You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." in *Twentieth Century Literature*. Volume: 41. Issue: 3, (U.S.A: California, Hofstra University Press, 2002).

Spiegel, Michael, "Character in a Post-National World: Neomedievalism in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*" in *Mosaic*. Volume: 43. Issue: 3, ((U.S.A: University of Manitoba, Gale Group Press, 2010).

Vanspanckeren, Kathryn, *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, (U.S.A: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988)

Whitson ,Kathy ,*Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* ,(Canada: Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2004).

Wilson, Sharon Rose, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. (U.S.A: Jackson, MS, University Press of Mississippi, 1993).