

Woman Empowerment in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of women's empowerment in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, arguing that empowerment in the novel emerges through subtle and often hidden forms of resistance within the oppressive patriarchal regime of Gilead. Although the narrative depicts extreme control over women's bodies, language, and identities, Atwood simultaneously reveals how women negotiate power through memory, storytelling, solidarity, and inner resistance. Using a feminist critical framework, the study shows how Offred's narration becomes a key act of empowerment, transforming personal memory into a form of survival. The paper also highlights how female relationships challenge the regime's strategy of isolation, demonstrating that empowerment can exist even in highly restrictive environments. Ultimately, the novel redefines empowerment not as complete liberation, but as the preservation of voice, identity, and hope in the face of systemic oppression.

Keywords: Empowerment; Patriarchy; Agency; Dystopia; Resistance; Identity; Surveillance.

تمكين المرأة في رواية حكاية الخادمة

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المُستخلص

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية تمثيل تمكين المرأة في رواية «حكاية الخادمة» للكاتبة مارجريت أتوود، حيث تقول بأن التمكين في الرواية يظهر من خلال أشكال خفية ودقيقة من المقاومة داخل النظام الأبوي القمعي في جلعاد. وعلى الرغم من أن السرد يصور سيطرة شديدة على أجساد النساء ولغتهن وهوياتهن، فإن أتوود تكشف في الوقت نفسه كيف تفاوض النساء على السلطة عبر الذاكرة، وسرد الحكايات، والتضامن، والمقاومة الداخلية. وباستخدام إطار نقدي نسوي، تُبين الدراسة كيف يُصبح سرد (أوفريد) فعلاً محورياً من أفعال التمكين، إذ يحول الذاكرة الشخصية إلى شكل من أشكال البقاء. كما تُسلط الدراسة الضوء على كيفية تحدي العلاقات النسائية لاستراتيجية النظام القائمة على العزل، مُظهرةً أن التمكين يمكن أن يوجد حتى داخل البيئات شديدة التقييد. وفي نهاية المطاف، تُعيد الرواية تعريف التمكين لا بوصفه تحرراً كاملاً، بل بوصفه الحفاظ على الصوت والهوية والأمل في مواجهة القمع المنهجي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التمكين، الأبوية، الوكالة، المجتمع الكابوسي، المقاومة، الهوية، المراقبة.



Introduction

The novel projects the heroines as fighting the systemic oppression within societies designed to restrict their autonomy. Her work focuses on blending themes of feminism and nationalism, highlighting women as victims of patriarchal domination, while simultaneously highlighting their power to assert themselves and resist injustice. Atwood underscores the necessity for women to cultivate spaces for themselves through independent thought, self-definition, and self-reconstruction, achieved via oral and written expression and defiance of subjugation. The novel depicts these fears within a dark and pessimistic society located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a critique of religious authoritarianism, indoctrination, and the systematic victimization of women, blending contemporary political anxieties, ecological concerns, and religious fundamentalism. The title reflects the collective experience of women in Gilead, with Offred serving as their spokesperson, narrating her experiences to expose the dehumanizing effects of authoritarian control (Gopalan 2001).

Offred's narrative relies on flashbacks, asides, and digressions to highlight the natural intelligence and adaptability of women in the face of extraordinary circumstances. Though initially hesitant, she gradually asserts her agency, aided by Nick, while reflecting on past relationships and her life prior to Gilead. Women in this society are deprived of economic and social autonomy, forbidden from reading and writing, and reduced to reproductive functions. Literacy itself becomes a tool of religious and ideological control, mediated through pictographs, graffiti, and primitive writing among the wives of Commanders (Vevaina 201). Gilead operates as a Church-State regime in which biblical authority legitimizes polygamy, reproductive control, and the subjugation of women. Handmaids like Offred are valued solely for their fertility, and their previous freedoms and familial relationships are systematically erased. This structure reinforces a patriarchal framework in which women's worth is contingent on their reproductive capacity. Beyond gender oppression, Atwood employs dystopia to comment on broader societal issues, including environmental hazards, toxic waste, and social inequalities. The setting draws on the historical Puritan legacy to illustrate the origins of systemic oppression. As Klarer (2004) notes, the novel continues the American dystopian tradition, adapting totalitarian themes such as media manipulation, re-education, and literary prohibition for feminist critique. Overall, *The Handmaid's Tale* examines patriarchal structures of power while highlighting women's efforts to reclaim agency and voice. Offred's novel highlights women's strength and resilience in the face of an oppressive system, highlighting the role of language, memory, and solidarity as effective means of resistance and establishing autonomy.



Control of the Female Body

The novel uses verses from the Old Testament in a justification for a man's right to marry more than one woman and suppress them when he wants to. Atwood did approve this social system, which deals with women as "breeding machines." Christine Gomez points out that the novel, which belongs to postmodern literature and is set in a future theocratic Gilead, presents a literal interpretation of the Bible with the aim of establishing women's submission, "Creating Female Space..." (136- 137). The novel's crux lies between patriarchal texts: the Biblical story of Rachel and historical accounts. Epigraphs from Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* and an Islamic proverb also underscore survival, control, and the use of food as a metaphor for women's exploitation. Gilead's system aims to repopulate the Caucasian nation through enslaved handmaids.

This narration validates her existence and establishes female space within a patriarchal universe... She perceives the emptiness of Gilead's home and family structure: "The Commander is the head of the household... Hollow" (91). Reading and writing are forbidden, preventing women from exercising objectivity (Klarer 135). Through her first-person diary-like account, Offred documents day-to-day life in a dystopia, highlighting the fate of women as mere instruments of procreation (Klarer 131). In Gilead, fertile women serve infertile wives of Commanders. Men's sterility is ignored, while barren women bear the blame. Pre-modern beliefs elevate men while ridiculing modern science. Even officials like doctors secretly impregnate fertile women, demonstrating the state's constraints and the tension between ideology and human desire. Fertility drives the oppressive system: handmaids are considered "two-legged wombs" or unintelligent vessels dominated by men (*The Handmaid's Tale* 146; Klarer 131). This ideology elevates men as fathers and reduces women to incubators.

Offred recalls her past life: conversations with her friend Maria, walks in the park with her mother, and witnessing the burning of pornographic magazines. This flashback illustrates that sexual control is not unique to Gilead; similar suppression occurred during feminist anti-pornography campaigns in the United States. Both left- and right-wing extremists sought to regulate sexuality, showing that the urge to control women's bodies transcends specific ideologies. Offred narrates the traumatic loss of her child, an event that deeply wounds her psyche. She recalls her past in fragments, struggling with memory and emotional pain. While remembering her daughter, she addresses an imagined audience- God, Luke, or a future reader: "I would like to believe this as a story I'm telling... A story is like a letter. Dear you, I'll say" (49). Through narration, she transforms her life into a controlled, fictionalized account, giving shape to horror while making it bearable.



Offred resists the patriarchal tyranny of Gilead by attempting to escape via the Female Road, using language as a “subversive–weapon” to report oppression and amplify her voice against women’s marginalization. Sheila C. Conboy observes that Offred “explicitly connects sexuality and textuality” (355). She compares the restrictions of her limited freedom in Gilead to the freedoms she enjoyed in the past, reflecting her moral vision, her adherence to anti-militaristic principles, and her display of great resilience and flexibility. A degrading practice in Gilead is sexual intercourse with Commanders, where Offred notes, “copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved” (104- 105). Babies born belong to the Commanders and their wives, with handmaids acting as surrogates by literal enactment of the Biblical Rachel story (Prabhakar 88). Handmaids unable to conceive within two years are condemned to the Colonies for slave labor, often in radioactive waste. Amin Malak observes: “the dictates of state policy in Gilead thus relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival” (9). Male sterility is ignored: “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren... that’s the law” (Atwood 71). Women are assessed solely by fertility, not gender. Handmaids’ identities are erased; they are given patronymic names, e.g., Offred, meaning she belongs to Fred: “my name isn’t Offred, I have another name...” (94). Jessie Givner notes the regime’s desire to remove names parallels its attempt to erase faces and mirrors (58). Handmaids wear red robes symbolizing adultery and are confined to strict roles: handmaids, Jezebels, Wives, Marthas, Econo Wives, and Aunts who enforce control (Prabhakar 89).

Offred, formerly Luke’s wife and mother to a five-year-old daughter, is isolated and indoctrinated at the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre. She must submit to ritualized subjugation: offering her body to Commanders, remaining pure, forbidden to read, write, or desire. Tattooed with numbers instead of her name, she wears a simple red dress and undergoes monthly pregnancy tests. The doctor exploits handmaids sexually, and refusal may result in being declared an “un- woman.” Minor infractions, like reading, are punished brutally: “arms and legs... ruthlessly chopped off” (Prabhakar 89). Pornographic films of past decades are used to enforce submission. Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion is exemplified: women are defined by men, “incidental as opposed to the essential... He is the Absolute- She is the other” (84).

Language is tightly controlled; words are seen as a means of liberation and thus suppressed. Only the ruling class reads books, and handmaids memorize Biblical injunctions to reinforce obedience (Klarer 131). Public signs and shop names are replaced by pictographs to control perception (Klarer 137). Handmaids live in gymnasium barracks behind barbed wire. Offred reunites with Moira, a



resilient friend who maintains her individuality while feigning submission to Aunts Lydia and Elizabeth. They secretly support each other, observe guards, and exploit unguarded moments. Moira eventually escapes by impersonating an Aunt. Offred moves to Commander Fred's household after failing to conceive in the centre, following the suicide of his previous handmaid. She accompanies Ofglen on shopping trips but returns to monotonous incarceration, temporarily relieved only by public prayers and birthing rituals. Sexual encounters with the Commander occur monthly, conducted with Bible readings in the presence of Serena Joy, the Commander's spiteful, unhappy wife.

She understands her current position, and immediately decides to run away from the claustrophobic environment. She takes pride in being a woman because she has a genuine love for her spouse and daughter in the climatic stage. A phased growth of feminist consciousness in her enables her to plan and execute even risky things with effortless ease. Offred gives up her regular red outfit and dresses herself with Whorish frippery. She goes along with Jezebel to a place where illegal night club functions and frequented by the officials of Gilead and Japanese as well as Arab business people. She identifies Moira among the prostitutes.

On one late summer day, Serena accuses Offred of treachery. As Offred considers other alternatives of escape like suicide, she runs to Nick's quarters and pleads for mercy. The novel ends with an Epilogue which is supposed to take place after 200 years. By utilizing the epilogue, Atwood is able to bring out the view of the woman's story from a male perspective. The novel gains depth due to the epilogue which is presented from a man's perspective. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood like several other writers, vehemently attacks social injustices and brings out the sorrows of oppression in a telling manner.

Atwood is able to describe about a believable evil in an intolerable world. Apart from it, she is good at satirizing the horror of contemporary politics, ecological dangers and exploitation of the female sex. She ridicules about marginalizing woman in a patriarchal setup. Since the aunts happen to be older in age, they try to indoctrinate the younger ones. It apart, "Atwood also points to imminent dangers such as the spread of AIDS, stillbirths, miscarriages and genetic deformities due to toxic pollutants, biological warfare and nuclear waste disposal which exist in our present world and are regarded as unimportant by most present day Governments" (124). Through Offred's story, Atwood is able to raise questions regarding the age old patriarchal order and the weak freedom enjoyed by women folk in a male dominated society. She is ruthless in condemning the religious fundamentalism and fanatic people who are against women freedom. Through the narration, "in the process of reconstructing herself into an individual,



Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead” (Howells 127). Offred worked as a librarian in Gilead and because of it, she is able to survive in it as she knows the language of it.

For Offred, language happened to be an intimidating silence earlier and it proves to be a liberating tool later on. By employing similar technologies, Offred gets into her most subversive act which talks about her narrative. She employs the language- a revolutionary medium as “subversive- weapon” to be heard louder in her protest against age old customs prevailing in Gilead. By this manner, there is a possibility to cultivate orality in a137 deliberate manner for questioning the wisdom of the authoritarian power structures. She is able to create an audience by reporting talks about the fight taking place within the arena regarding the symbolic order.

It is evident from the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* that men have been rulers in the Gileadean society and women have been destined to be their subjects. Among men, an elite group exists named Commanders and they are born to rule. They exercise power and guard. They come in the next level of authority and carryout the functions of police men .At the next level are doctors and drivers. Commander of Offred has been power hungry, yet he is very kind and considerate. At the earlier stage, he makes use of Offred no more than his official hand maid, later on he considers her as his unofficial scrabble partner and club companion. He makes arrangements for stealthy meetings with Offred and gifts her with books, magazines and hand lotions which are banned for hand maids. For him, polygamy is something natural as women are inferior. Occasionally, he appears to be kind and considerate to Offred. There are two Freds. One is the thinking Fred and the other is the feeling Fred. Nick is Offred's secret lover and he is a man with passions and looks after Offred in a genuine manner. He works as chauffer of the Commander. In the past, Gilead denied women from employment and financial autonomy, along with their money and property, which were moved to their husbands or male relatives. Luke quietly acknowledged the new law without showing any violence. Luke considers it as only a job. The male characters in the novel directly or indirectly try to legitimize and increase their powers and suppress women. The wives of the sterile Commanders also fall into this class.

The aunts, the policewomen of Gilead are middle aged and they happen to be very strict with internalized patriarchal values and try to exercise them over women. They conduct their reeducation centres by having cattle prods, torture techniques and brain washing slogans. These aunts have been well tutored to follow male practices and tortures. It is also believed that in Gilead, they handmaids have been living in safer and protected system. Though outwardly there



appears to be a support for women, yet all activities are based on a patriarchal setup.

Patriarchal Oppression

The only duty assigned to the hand maids are child bearing. They are believed to possess “viable ovaries” (153) and this is considered as important and a very rare resource. They are decked red and they resemble their religious habits. The novel attempts that the role of women is confined to give birth to babies; here they are inhumanely treated. They do not have any social status. They are granted three chances with three different chiefs to get pregnant in a period of two years, and when the handmaid gives birth, the baby is handed over to the chief and his wife. Later on, the handmaid is shifted to another house. In this sense, the community in Gilead acts as if it owns the body of handmaid. If a handmaid is infertile or unable to produce babies, she is deported to another colon to clean the wastes. This denotes that handmaids are treated as if they are prostitutes. As such, for them life at Gilead is comparatively better than the one at colonies.

This social system suggests that handmaids in Gilead are categorized into two parts: fertile and infertile women; but it overlooks the fact that men can line up in this criterion, too. Another sign of subjugation of handmaids in this novel is that they are deprived of using social curtsey or greeting except the religious ones. Due to this social subjugation and suppression, the handmaids tend to communicate secretly via whispering or touching each other’s hands.

These social constrains oblige handmaids to reach out for each other by lip movements or whispering their names. The society of Gilead tries to make them forget their past, identities and even their names while living in a state of slavery according to this new constitution. The intensity to erase the previous names of the handmaids is on par with the desire to remove faces. The handmaids are not allowed to look at their faces in the mirrors and see their reflections. The aunts bear the names of well-known cake –mixers and cosmetics.

Moira, in true sense, is a representative of an ideal image for Offred, yet she happens to be source of guilt. She tries to do what Offered does not even dare to think of. The mother of Offred is another rebellious woman in the novel. She does not make her presence directly. Yet she keeps coming in Offred’s memories. She happens to be “the kind of old woman who won’t let anyone, but in front of her in a super market in line” (130). She is known for her independent nature and strong will power. She was very active with feminist movement in her early days and was instrumental in burning several pornographic books. In a situation, Offred’s mother opines about men: “any way what do I need it for, I don’t want a man around, what



use are they expect for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other woman" (130-131). She eggs on her daughter to maintain her individualism and independence from men, yet Offred has different ideas and summarily rejects her mother's values and suggestions. Offred says that she admires her mother for many reasons.

Pam's feelings make evident that she is a spokesperson for female suppression. She is known for campaigning against female rights. Such qualities make her as an individual who can be sympathized. Once up on a time, she was a votary of anti-woman policies. The moment they were implemented in Gilead, she understood that they affected her personally as well. She had to be content with a life without freedom as well as finding her husband having sex with a handmaid. Being toothless to fight against this social evil, she shows her frustration in the manner in which she treats Offred. In several ways, she treats her worse than her husband. It only shows that the draconian –power structure implemented in Gilead is sustained by woman like Serena. She is neither happy nor unhappy.

To satisfy her egos, Pam starts treating Offred in a cruel manner and makes clear to Offred that she means business. She is instrumental in arranging for an affair with Nick so as to free her husband from the clutches of Offred. Still when she comes to know about the nocturnal visits of Offred to her house, she gets dejected. She becomes a divided personality. Her sexual repression could be understood from the variety of flowers grown in her garden such as tulips, irises and bleeding hearts. Being female in shape, "it was a surprise they'd not long since been rooted out."(161).

Her description about ceremony enables in understanding that it was ironic, horrifying and funny. It was totally a ridiculous affair inspite of its ceremonial preparations. She neither calls it copulating nor making love as these two acts would involve both the partners enjoying it. She is unable to call it rape. As she was given an option, she preferred to be a handmaid. The Commander was only partly involved in having sex and made it a dull and drab affair. This act is scripted as formal and neither of the parties seeks pleasure in it. It is done for the purpose of reproduction, no more, no less.

Pregnancy is given utmost importance in Gilead. Being a rare event, giving birth proves to be a wonderful community gathering for women. Yet, there is a fear lurking in the minds of the pregnant women regarding giving birth to defective babies, a possibility due to pollution. She says, "I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me, I am an object" (268). Her horrendous experience of having sex with the Commander has made her distance



from her own body. For her, his act is “a serious business” (105) and he is “doing his duty” (105).

Atwood is able to withstand the pressure of being totally analyzed due to her awareness about her body. The women who are victimized opine that they are locked in rooms resembling prisons and are constantly monitored and guarded. They can go out only in twos. Offred’s room is very much like prison cell and she is the lone person in the room. Her room is in upstairs and she has ‘minimized life’. These words provide her with energy and enthusiasm. The unorthodox behavior of the Commander gives her an opportunity to get some gifts from him. She understands the implied meaning in Aunt Lydia’s speeches about men being sex machines and the need to manipulate them with sex. The major male character in the novel is the Commander and he represents the Gilead society. His character proves to be likeable as Offred starts visiting him often.

Quite similar to women, he also appears to be a prisoner of Gilead and is badly in need of a human companion. He makes sure that his behavior does not rattle Offred in any manner. In spite of being a kind hearted person, it is bounden duty to ensure a totalitarian state in Gilead. Moreover, it appears that he is quite naïve in understanding the plight of women. His perception of women is limited to the superficial level, as he does not realize the extent of the humiliation they are subjected to or the cruel treatment that resembles treating them like animals. Though human at heart, the Commander is very much responsible for the monstrous Gilead world. Being on friendly terms with the Commander, Offred feels embarrassed to have sex with him during ceremony. She loathes Selena as she happens to be his mistress despite not having any sexual relationship with him.

Offred cautions him not to repeat it as such an act would result in Serena transferring her to the Colonies. She gets comfortable with him. She recalls the words of aunt Lydia who used to tell them that the population of Gilead would reach an accepted level. Afterwards, all handmaids will live in only one house and would be treated like daughters of the wives. Both the Commander and Offred become informal to each other. It proves to be a nexus between her and her husband. It proves to be fitting response to a patriarchal setup.

The comments made by the Commander during his relationship with Offred show him to be an interesting personality. He makes a revelation that the previous handmaid also used to meet him stealthily during evening time. When Serena came to know of it, the handmaid had to hang herself. This revelation enables the readers in understanding the selfish nature of him and how it makes the future of Offred at peril for having a little physical intimacy. He is not bothered about these things.



Resistance and Rebellion

The women in Gilead are crueler to women than men. The trip undertaken to the wall draws comparison between Nazi Germany and Gilead. The anti-Jewish laws practiced at Gilead are the causes for deportation as per the observations of Offred. The first story is full of passion and desire and it is narrated in a felt tone. No sooner she starts her affair with Nick, than she gets in to a complacent mood exhibiting the manner in which the oppressive regime in Gilead gets into power and functions without being. Her relationship with Nick makes her understand the truth of her mother's statement.

The circumstances faced by Offred force her to compare the freedom she enjoyed in her previous life. Her relationship with Nick makes her realize a small part of her past self. The physical intimacy and companionship shown by Nick is a minor compensation for the restrictions forced on her. She makes nocturnal visits to Nick without Serena's knowledge. She told him she had a baby, even though what she really wants is just a wish. Offred witnesses, the bloody "Salvagings", the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of women. She feels shocked, is upset and treats all of them as barbarous. She understands that she is in a dangerous situation. She realizes her body condition which is not ready for any more sexual pleasure. However, she backs down with obvious embarrassment. Offred is a woman who has tremendous faith in her life and the word 'Faith' is embroidered in the cushion. From this statement, it is evident that she feels happy about being a woman and man. She recalls her intimate connections with her husband and daughter from whom she was forcefully separated. She realizes her love and attachment to them:

... Nobody dies from lack of sex. It is lack of love, we die from. There's nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere... where they are or what their names are now. They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person. From time to time, I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like the images of the saints... I can conjure them. (113)

She hopes against the hope that one day she will meet her husband and daughter. Offred fondly remembers her mother who was a votary of feminist movement and actively took part in several 'anti-porno' and 'pro-abortion' movements with the expectations to establish a women's culture with social freedom. Offred starts remembering her pas by saying: "Can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It is n't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (137).



Her attempt to commit suicide fails miserably. She incurs the wrath of Serena as she comes to know her secret affair with Nick. By night time, a van arrives to pick her up. As the van gets parked in the driveway, Nick whispers to her that she could be safe in the hands of the Eyes. He tells her that they have come to save her. Offred suspects Nick also to be part of the Eyes because they only know about Mayday. She goes and meets the persons waiting for her. The Commander wants them to show the warrant. The officials from the Eyes state that she has been arrested for revealing the state secret. Offred moves out with the Eyes.

The slavery syndrome prevailing in the mindset of Offred is shattered due to a phased growth of feminist consciousness in her. Malak argues that Offred admits, "I'm tired of this melodrama, I'm tired of keeping silent..." (305). Through Nick, the chauffeur for Commander, she is able to establish a link with the underground network and because of it she is moved from "being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor" (13). In this connection, Howells observes that: "stubborn survival continually subverts the regime's claims to absolute authority creating imaginative spaces within the system and finally the very means of Offred's escape from Gilead." (69). From the 'four basic Victim Positions' pointed out in Atwood's *Survival*, Atwood prefers one plausible option. (i.e.) to acknowledge being a victim, yet refuse "to accept the assumption that the role is inevitable" (37)

The story of Offred ends in an abrupt manner with some element of uncertainty highlighting the precarious nature of the totalitarian society where all stand at the vulnerable end of arrest and execution. The climatic stage of the story goes at a rapid pace with Offred coming to know about Ofglen's death as well as the Serena coming to know about her visits to Jezebel's and the timely help rendered by Nick . All these things happen on the same day with Offred having no role to play in it. So many things happen around her and she does nothing. She exhibits shortage of enthusiasm by contemplating on murder, suicide and escape in her room. Whatever ability she had, she lost it at Gilead and pitifully waits for the black van to come and rescue her. All through the novel, the readers are able to perceive both internal as well as external struggles carried out by Offred against the established system.

The moment she becomes aware of Ofglen's death, her mind gets clogged with fear and she understands that she would rather accept help than die. From the author, it is understood that the resistance displayed by one or two individuals hardly matter. She escapes due to her passive nature and lady luck smiles on her. When the van arrives, Offred does not have any other alternative other than escaping from the place. At Gilead, a woman can't escape herself unless some



other individual helps her. The story closes either in: be “darkness” or “light”. She does not know what it will be. After the end, an epilogue comes.

The predicament of Offred literally moves the professor and the participants of the conference. They talk about her as a small chip in the reproductive act and call her story as the crumbs of history. They glorify about some pages found in the computer of the Commander instead. From it, it is evident that even the new world is patriarchal in its mindset. The problems of Offred are remote to them. Through the novel, Atwood expects the readers to realize that such fate is not far away. It is very fair to consider the novel as a metaphor about the plight of woman and their lot has not changed for centuries. Though their living condition has not changed, the reason for keeping them subjugated has changed over a period of time.

The form of oppression may be different and their external manifestations may vary, the crux of the matter is that women are still poor victims of the patriarchal society. Atwood is courageous enough to project the challenges faced by women in a male dominated society, though her protagonist is silent. The female protagonist Offred’s self- consciousness is understood through her escape from Gilead with the support of Nick.

Identity and Self- Reconstruction

In the end, Offred emerges as a rebel and breaks the silence by using language. She runs away, from her part as a victim in Gilead. Through the novel *The Handmaids Tale*, Margret Atwood is able to present a shocking and horrible account of sexual exploitation of women and abuse of reproduction, demeaning the motherhood itself. It is believed that the glory of womanhood is motherhood. This noble concept becomes a pseudo- theocratic, self- righteous Gilead society. In this context, women appear as inactive beings, while men’s consumerism has reached its peak. The fertile women are treated as reproductive machines. On the contrary, the barren women are considered as corpses and they are treated worse than the dead bodies. In this sinister atmosphere, the prevailing order is to lead an inhuman life. Atwood attains success in creating a dystopian society in the novel.

Themes like power, sexuality, post-modernity; women’s bodies, rape and sexual violence, misuse of religion and gender conflict are skillfully introduced by Atwood in the dystopian structure. Though the novel talks about feminism from different perspectives, she emphasizes on themes interconnected with victimization of women pertaining to sexual cruelty and consumerist behavior. Among the feminist circles, there have been endless arguments regarding sexual abuse of women as it is a direct product of women’s bodies. In the feminist perspectives on ‘body’, Kathleen talks about varied views of several feminist writers.



Initially, the western philosophy was considered a tool that needed to be modified or perhaps a source of chaos that needed to be controlled. The views regarding women's bodies like abuse, sexual harassment, perversion, pornography and rape have been a challenge to feminist philosophers. A renowned American feminist named Catherine A. Mackinnon is an untiring champion for woman's cause. She boldly questions the wisdom of having Laws of Human Rights which create a male dominated system and female subordination. This arrangement renders power to men and powerlessness for women. Her prominent book is *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (2006). It is an anthology of her speeches delivered in various forums by making a direct and scathing attack on Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This difference between the women's human rights and UN canons is strongly condemned by MacKinnon. She does not just finds similarity between the difference, but also the biased vision about women everywhere. In the 'Universal declaration', it is pointed out that men gets to be both neutral and positive whereas women are 'negative' and 'marked case'. Therefore, an individual happens to see in the declaration that the neutral is also a male. A person seeks to work in order to earn a wage that will help him meet the requirements of life and support his wife and family.

The solidarity among brotherhood happens to be 'brotherhood'. The critic reaches conclusions that being a woman is still far from being a definition of your way of being as a human being, even in those most sophisticated human rights documents. When comparing the reality of women in all its diversities with the guarantees of the Universal Declaration, we find that women's suffering is not limited to not enjoying the rights guaranteed by the Declaration, but it is also difficult to see the humanity that this Declaration depicts bears the features of women in a real way. The vehement attack of Mackinnon mentions the portrayal of women in Gilead society. It makes an individual to think about the outrageous sexual assault on women, Rape. There cannot be another name given for the fertility ceremony conducted by the Commanders in Gilead.

Rape happens to be a sensitive subject while discussing feminism. It happens to be a forced, unwilling act, called sexual assault about power and not sex. A rapist employs actual forces or violence –or the threat of it to take possession of another human being. Rape is treated as a crime whether the person committing it is a stranger, a date, an acquaintance or a family member. Susan Brown Miller (1935), a freelance writer and reporter to NBC –TV has authored several books. In the article named "Moral Injury and Relational Harm: Analyzing Rape in Darfur", she states that rape is a conscious process of intimidation by



which all men keep all women in a state of fear”. “Men rape because they can; women have always been vulnerable.” (Miller 504-523)

In the following thought-provoking article, she makes the profound observation that the violent male capture and rape of women may have been the first basis for the emergence of primitive male conservatories. Rape is a deed which carries legal protection in Gilead community to get a baby for the Commander’s wife who is sterile. Both Offred’s body and Serena’s joy become the properties of the Commander. The sex act is accepted by the couple and a further crime, invisibility of the motherhood is committed. Both Mackinnon’s enquiry and Brown Miller’s remarks correlate each other in proving the arrogance and merciless of patriarchy in making males merciless consumers. In the novel, the Commander, David and Peter are shown as mean products belonging to a male dominated patriarchal system.

The manner in which sexuality reverses its reaction is a point to be noted here. The Gileadean regime emphasizes on control over sex and sexuality. Strict punishments are imposed on transgressors like executing gays and lesbians, destroying pornography, killing abortion doctors and removing divorces and forcing second marriages. Yet, they ritualize bizarre sexual relations, which they consider very much supported by Bible. It is very natural that Gileadean regime got itself destroyed. In its effort to separate sex from sexuality, the regime exhibits both its underestimation and fear of sexuality. It has the right to fear sexuality, as illegal sexual practices are performed in a stealthy manner. The Commander states that “he carried out clandestine affairs with his handmaids, but that there are ‘secret’ clubs where higher-ups consort with women solely for sexual purposes.

Apparently, by administering severe punishments, the Government cannot remove illegal sexual acts. While Offred enters into a secret affair with Nick, she faces serious danger that could lead to the harshest punishment. This behavior reflects an aspect of her strength related to her sexual side. In spite of the Gilead regime administering all kinds of punishments for illicit love affairs such as forcing them to watch other women getting hanged, torturing and abusing, a woman such as Offred will accomplish everything she has to keep love. It is made clear that in spite of women victimization; there is the will power of woman to survive.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study clearly demonstrates the intricate dynamics of oppression and resistance within a rigidly controlled patriarchal order. The novel presents the Republic of Gilead as an extreme manifestation of patriarchal power,



in which women are denied identity; they are subjugated and used; their voices are silenced. Within such a system, subjugation is institutionalized through religion, language, and socio-political control, making resistance both dangerous and deeply complex.

However, despite the severity of this oppression, the protagonist Offred emerges as a significant representation of the struggle for selfhood. Her resistance is not overtly revolutionary but subtle, internal, and psychological. Through memory, narration, and language, she preserves her individuality in a society that seeks to erase it. The act of storytelling becomes her primary means of asserting the self, as it allows her to reconstruct her identity and maintain a sense of personal continuity against enforced anonymity. Furthermore, the novel highlights that the assertion of the self in a patriarchal society does not always take the form of open rebellion. In conditions where direct resistance may lead to annihilation, survival itself becomes an act of defiance. Offred's ability to think, remember, and narrate reflects a conscious refusal to submit entirely to the system. Her inner voice challenges the imposed silence of Gilead, demonstrating that even within extreme subjugation; the self can endure and resist domination.

At the same time, the novel reveals the pervasive reach of patriarchal control, which extends beyond physical domination to influence thought, language, and perception. By restricting literacy and manipulating religious ideology, the regime attempts to control not only women's bodies but also their consciousness. Yet, Offred's fragmented narrative exposes the limitations of such control, suggesting that the human mind remains a critical space for resistance and self-assertion.

In the end, *The Handmaid's Tale* affirms that the struggle against subjugation is continuous and deeply embedded within the structures of patriarchal society. The assertion of the self, though fragile, persists through acts of memory, narration, and inner resilience. Through Offred's experience, the novel underscores that even in the most oppressive conditions, the quest for identity and autonomy cannot be entirely extinguished, thereby reinforcing the enduring power of the human spirit to resist and assert itself.

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