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Narrating marginality: Gender crisis in Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's tale

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood is one of the most brilliant writers in contemporary Canadian literature. She has actively participated in Canadian politics and its feminist movement. Her works are mostly related to social and political issues. She considers the relation between men and women and human basic rights. The issue of gender is the author's major concern. She portrays the women in her novels that always search for their identity which is lost in the patriarchal societies. Oppression is another theme for her novels and it can be seen evidently in her writings. She challenges the inferior status of women in society. Atwood's representations of gender, reveals the exploitation and oppression of women, particularly women's body. She portrays the suffering of her female characters confined in their feminine roles in her novels. Moreover, gender is the main concern for examining The Handmaid's Tale. The present study makes an attempt to read The Handmaid's Tale and analyses how women carve out a distinct female space and retrieve the submerged self.

Keywords: Feminist movement, patriarchal societies, exploitation and oppression, female space

Introduction

Margaret Atwood, a feminist focuses on the problems of victimized women. In the novel The Handmaid's Tale Margaret Atwood explores the women's quest for their own identity. This paper tries to show how Atwood in The Handmaid's Tale speculates feminist issues such as loss of identity, subordination of woman in a male dominated society and women's exploitation in consumer society where woman's body is treated as an object, a tool and consumable item. Atwood focuses on the problems such as gender inequality, and pitfalls of patriarchal system for women's oppression. Margaret Atwood, in The Handmaid's Tale, is primarily concerned with objectification of women in the patriarchal society. The Handmaid's Tale is the story of women's oppression, where women become slaves subjected to the rigid control in every aspect of their lives. Atwood in this novel shows the women's second status in the society. She presents the women as the second sex. She describes a world without freedom, without choice and opinion for women. Atwood describes a society in which women are mentally and physically enslaved. Women are slaves and men as their masters.

In the Handmaid's Tale, Atwood depicts a patriarchal society in which women are shapeless objects. She aims to show that in the patriarchal society's women are worthless and are just for reproduction and satisfying men's sexual desire. Atwood, by writing this novel, wants the reader to understand the social conditions of women over time. The Handmaid's Tale is an overtly political fable. The narrator self-consciously tries to tell her story. Atwood once declared that "fiction is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community." Atwood thus is one of the most important novelists belonging to the postmodern phase. She is at the centre of the Canadian imagination. Survival for her means that there is no dominance or submission but that all individuals are free to determine their lives as equals. The novel is the projection of female destiny which is locked into female biology. The re-emergence of women's movement is fostered through the female characters in the novel. The author demonstrates the range and complexity of sexual power politics and provides a solid foundation for understanding the evolution of her feminist sympathies. In Atwood's novel, women's sexual desires are oppressed, and women's inferiority and man's superiority are presented in Ceremony. The Handmaids are required to submit to sexual intercourse with their Commanders monthly in the hopes of achieving a pregnancy, sexual passion is entirely set aside and love no longer exists, at least not officially. Sex is a function.

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In Gilead, sexuality is just for bearing child and man's pleasure, for the Handmaids it is just a job. In Gilead, the impregnation Ceremony is just for procreation under the state's rules and it has benefit for men and fulfills their sexual desires too. In other words, "man's biological role in reproduction is such that it does not interfere with his interest as an individual. Indeed, the two interests can coincide exactly".

Many novels of Atwood deal with woman's experience in a male dominated culture. They present the woman caught in oppressive stereotypes and they show how some women struggle to create a female space for themselves. This may be done through autonomy of thought through self definition and reconstruction of the self, through bonding among women, and through a refusal to take up the victim position. Historically the disciplines that formed the political anatomy of the body were adopted in response to needs varying from the rise of industry to the outbreak of epidemic diseases similar to the fertility epidemic that triggered the rise of the Gileadean regime. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred's everyday life in Gilead is strictly monitored in ways that recall a monastic existence.

There are echoes of the time-table method in *The Handmaid's Tale* through regulations that further embolden bodily docility and utility. For example, bells and other sounds measure time. Offred remarks that "the bell that measures time is ringing. Time here is measured by bells, as once in nunneries" (Atwood 8). Here, too, the bell establishes a rhythm. It signals a change in time or a change in activity. The bells are so commonplace that many have grown accustomed to the sound. And there are other alerts, as well, that establish a change in routine. There is a siren which prompts Offred to rush to a nearby window, where she sees a red Birthmobile make its way down the street. The bell also signals the start of the ceremony, the ritual of nonconsensual sex between the Commanders and their Handmaids. Offred remarks that "when the bell has finished, I descend the stairs, a brief waif in the eye of glass that hangs on the downstairs wall. The clock ticks with its pendulum, keeping time; my feet in their neat red shoes count the way down" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 79). In this moment Offred knows what the bell is for and what is expected of her. When she counts her steps on the way down the stairs, she follows a ritualistic rhythm, not imposed by the guidelines for the Ceremony but arguably self-imposed by her subconscious desire for distraction. When she counts her steps in the same way that soldiers in the seventeenth century monitored their marching, she separates herself from her reality, attempting to form her own subjectivity in the face of oppression.

Rituals in Gilead such as the ceremony illuminate what Foucault calls the "temporal elaboration of the act" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 151). Specific gestures and movements are controlled or set to a rhythm rather than a specific partition of time. In Gilead, at events such as the Prayvaganza, certain socioeconomic classes are cordoned off and controlled. Offred remarks that "this rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen, so into it we go, arranging ourselves in rows, which we know very well how to do, kneeling them on the cement floor" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 214). Many other behaviors, even everyday routines, follow a certain rhythm or set of guidelines. When Offred goes to meet her partner for their

daily walk, they greet one another with "the accepted greetings:" "Blessed be the fruit" and "may the Lord open" (19).

Gender as a discipline can also be seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the way criminality is treated through both Gilead and the Colonies, particularly female criminality. For women, acts such as reading and adultery are prosecutable by death or dismemberment. For example, during a Salvaging of a Handmaid and a Wife, Offred ponders, "Reading? No, that's only a hand cut off, on the third conviction ... As for the Wife, there's mostly just one thing they get salvaged for. They can do almost anything to us, but they aren't allowed to kill us ... especially not when we are pregnant" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 275). Men are not always held to the same standard, especially the Commanders. Men are afforded the additional agency that comes with being allowed to read and write, and are not subjected to Salvagings, or executions to the same frequency as women of all classes are. Some men are even afforded access to Jezebel's, a brothel providing women an alternative to Handmaidenry in the form of prostitution. The Commander explains that it is "only for officers, from all branches; and senior officials. And trade delegations, of course. It stimulates trade. It's a good place to meet people. You can hardly do business without it" (237). Here, the objectification of women holds global economic power, strengthening bureaucratic connections through the fetishization and sexualization of female bodies. And yet, even in an extremist state like Gilead, these inklings of sexual immorality are afforded a pass when these acts are performed by powerful people, and more importantly, powerful men.

Misogynistic ideas about women are regularly used to justify wage gaps and other inequities, some more heinous than others, in the larger world. Femininity is still seen as synonymous with weakness and submission even in industrialized, modern nations like the United States and the United Kingdom. These ideas show that Foucault's theories on power are not merely theoretical, and Atwood's portrayal of such sexist power is not merely fictive. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of female brutalization, a theme articulated in *Bodily Harm*. It is a dystopian novel by Atwood which imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference. It is recorded, not written. The protagonist's "own story" recalled from memory is transcribed by Prof. Pieixto, an activist. The narrative may be controlled and ordered by patriarchy, but it is surely an approximation and reconstruction of the protagonist's version. Offred, the protagonist, uses language as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings. Her tale involves an exposure of how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a piece of 'speculative literature' built up out of the experiences of the past and present and extending to the future. The novel concludes with an Epilogue which gives us hints about the main story and yet it exposes the critical interpretations of the story by posterity. There is yet another ambivalence in the novel. That is feminism itself appears to have been viewed in certain contexts with certain ambivalence. An overtly political fable, *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how in Atwood's fiction formalist concerns and political ones are never separate and this is a paradoxical postmodern phenomenon. If Cat's Eye is a woman painter's cynical retrospective principally on her relationships with other

women and feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale* is most often labelled feminist dystopia. The novel is offered as a prediction of the future only if its warnings against oppressive central powers to mute protest are ignored. The world of Gilead is not quite an inevitable destiny.

The Handmaid's Tale resists labels that place it within a particular generic stream. The maintenance of a multiple identity is shown in the novel to be part of a policy of subversion of the dominant. The perspective given by the final chapter, that what we grasp as a single text is in fact a reassembled account from a surviving jumble of cassette recordings, shows how the novel reiterates its uncertain, problematic relations with the concept of a single reality, one identity, a truthful history as propagated by the political orthodoxy of Gilead.

There are four levels of narrative time in *The Handmaid's Tale*. One of them is the pre-revolution past characterized by the narrator's memories of her childhood with her mother, her student days with Moira, her memories of her daughter, and her relationship with Luke. The second level of narrative time refers to the period of revolution itself and the time immediately subsequent to it. At yet another level we have the Gileadean time. It is this narratorial period that is interrupted by the dream sequences. The Gileadean present is what the narrator is telling her tale about, although the events at this present are still retold as past occurrences narrated retrospectively. At the fourth level we have the time of the present, the period of the Symposium of Gileadean studies.

The novel suggests that the privileging of history, in the form of authentic first-person account of the past, as something more truthful and accurate than fiction, is fallacious. The narrator insists that the tale she is telling is a reconstruction which is going to be at some level inaccurate, partial, incomplete, because it is retrospective. But she suggests that this status, neither wholly fact nor complete fiction, is something that her story has in common with other historiographic met narratives.

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