

Transcending Temporal Boundaries: A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood holds a very distinctive and relevant position in the realm of Speculative Fiction even today. She has been foresighted in analysing problems present in the society in her times and incorporated them in her texts which have transcended the temporal boundaries. These texts are as apposite today as they were three decades ago. In her famous work, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Canadian novelist has presented a theonomic society that functions on women's oppression on different levels and forbids emotional or physical involvement among people of all genders, to maintain its dominion. The protagonist defies the societal norms on various occasions, the most relevant being her physical intimacy with a guard, which finally brings upon her the inevitable doom. Atwood establishes her significance with the amount of number that have followed her novels, including not only works and cinematic pieces, but other forms of art too. This is an academic attempt to analyse the significance of Atwood's works in the contemporary times, and will look closely at the power dynamics and the relationships among people of the Gilead.

Keywords- Temporal boundaries, gender dystopia, Science Fiction

When you are a fiction writer, you're confronted every day with the question that confronted, among others, George Eliot and Dostoevsky: what kind of world shall you describe for your readers? The one you can see around you, or the better one you can imagine? If only the latter, you'll be unrealistic: if only the former, despairing. But it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have. If we cease to judge this world, we may find ourselves, very quickly, in one which is infinitely worse (Atwood 333).

The above lines by Margaret Atwood hold a significant position in the discourse of utopian and dystopian studies. The premise of Speculative Fiction, especially utopian and dystopian texts, is posited on the discontentment with the current society. While utopian works originate from the necessity to create a world which could become the basis for change in the real world, dystopian

works are created because reality has terrifying socio-political and psychological elements that may rapidly develop into alarming events. A work of Speculative Fiction becomes worthy of attention only when it encompasses elements of reality. As M. H. Abrams states, "Dystopia means a bad place...in which certain ominous tendencies of [the] present social, political and technological order are projected in some future culmination" (Abrams 417). The present paper focuses on one of the notable dystopian texts, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Margaret Atwood has achieved global recognition through her seminal works focusing on grievous issues, such as the dreadful impacts of climate change, human and technological advancements, etc. Among some of the greatest writers of Speculative Fiction, Atwood holds a very distinctive and relevant position even today. She has been foresighted in analysing problems present in the society in her times and has incorporated them in her texts, which have transcended the temporal boundaries. These texts are as apposite today as they were three decades ago. Atwood is widely known for one work in particular, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The Canadian novelist has presented a theonomic society that functions on the oppression of women on different levels and forbids emotional or physical intimacy among people of all genders to maintain its dominion. The work has a nightmarish quality since it is situated in a world where the movement for women's emancipation had already successfully taken place.

Atwood has imagined a future society in the late twentieth century where a woman's value is measured based on her ability to procreate, which holds the utmost importance in the face of a catastrophic decline in the birth rates due to pollution and diseases. In this totalitarian regime, the law denies women their rights of jobs, property inheritance, inheriting money, and identity. This new government is formed by right-wing religious fundamentalists, who take us back to the world of the so-called traditional values. One could see the glimpses of such sights in many countries of the world, where they advocate a return to the traditional values on the pretext of society's betterment.

The themes Atwood incorporated in *The Handmaid's Tale*, including the constant surveillance, lack of freedom, the routines, lack of intimacy, and the failed escape attempts, are common in most of the dystopian works. Yet, there are more possibilities for Atwood's work to have a plot closest to reality. The author may hope that their created society may serve as a warning to the world.

Quite similarly, we are under constant surveillance today. Everything that is said or done, and everything that's looked up on the internet, is constantly being recorded. People's identities are being fixed into tangible plastic cards, and people are becoming mere numbers. But how much do we bother? As Atwood, through Offred, conveys in the text, "we lived, as usual, by ignoring" (Atwood 62). We are no different from the people of Atwood's Gileadean society, who failed to foresee the impending crisis. We are too fully aware of how technological advancements are snatching away our privacy, yet we are unbothered by it. It's human nature to ponder over one's mistakes when time has passed. Social platforms – Instagram, Twitter, Facebook – play a great role in the fixations of identities. A wrong move on any of these platforms could easily develop into the whole nation standing against a person. Humans tend not to learn from history, but is it possible to learn from the future?

Another theme of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a much terrifying reality today. Recently, abortion bans were effectively passed bylaws in nine US states: Alabama and Georgia passed the most extreme of this law by banning abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, including in cases of rape and ectopic pregnancy. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the female body is treated as a bone for contention for society's power structures. Patriarchy invariably puts the female body in a paradoxical position – valorizing it on the one hand while also imposing an ideal type. Pregnancy is not deemed an appealing phase for the female body in the eyes of patriarchy, yet the relevance of pregnancy occupies a great space in *The Handmaid's Tale's* narrative. The existence of women is reduced to the sole purpose of domestic care, nurturing, and reproductive affairs. Women with viable ovaries have become "two-legged wombs". Society including the Aunts, who work as agents for the regime, care very little about the handmaids. If the handmaids are to be punished, it must be on the parts that don't prove to be damaging for society's interests. Aunt Lydia explains, "For our purposes, your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood 98). They are considered just as containers, and only their "viable ovaries" are valued in a society that assesses women on the basis of their labour.

A society where women are devoid of reproductive rights and body autonomy is already moving towards a dystopian future. "Gilead succeeds in reducing woman's perception of herself as a mere function" (Davaseeli 180), which results in division among women into various categories with varying degree of victimisation – Wives and Aunts ostensibly hold some power over other women: Marthas, Handmaids, and Econowives are each assigned tasks to carry out throughout their lives

and must not detract from their specific roles: Unwomen are denied any agency in the regime and are thrown out of the Gileadean society to rot while cleaning the toxic waste from the biohazards of the pre-Gileadean era. Even men are divided into categories – Guardians, Angels, Commander, and Eyes. The names assigned to men mirror the supreme position men hold in the world's patriarchy and major religions. They are the leaders of the world and guardians of women. The word 'Eyes' automatically establishes supremacy as the all-seeing eye of God.

Although women and men both stand at diametrically opposite sides of power dynamics, both are devoid of their identities. Women as well as men are reduced to categories. Yet, women are the ones who are subjected to complete loss of identity. The handmaids remain an extension of their patronymic titles. Offred's real name is not revealed in the text, and she remains 'of-Fred' even when the future society studies her memoir. Even in her victimisation, she is made to feel as if she is in a somewhat privileged position - "I am leading a pampered life," she says (Atwood 55).

Religious fundamentalism is spreading fast in the world. Many countries have started the practice of fascism to varying degrees. Where imposing a unified religious identity as part of the national sensibility is one, others could advocate coherence based on the nativity. In most cases of fascism, the dominant narrative that emerges has its basis on the need for the revival of the seemingly *lost* culture and identity. This culture and unified identity are not only based on a political agenda to separate a particular group but also invariably proves to be patriarchal in learning. As we all are familiar with patriarchy's social and psychological domination techniques, we nonetheless fail to discern the extent of its impact on everyday life. Our news channels, education, entertainment media, and advertisements help perpetuate the patriarchal myths and ingraining these ideas subconsciously. A rape survivor is considered more as an equal participant in the offence rather than a victim. Thus it makes the survivor internalize the patriarchal values prevalent in the society. The example of this internalization is depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Janine is criticised and blamed for the gang-rape she endured when she was a teenager. "*Her fault, her fault, her fault*, we chant in unison" forces the guilt on her till her barriers to keep the false discourse outbreaks down, and she perceives it as her fault. "It was my fault. I led them on. I deserved the pain" (Atwood 78). As Aunt Lydia advocates, "Modesty is invisibility...Never forget it. To be seen – to be *seen* – is to be...penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" (Atwood 34).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood very artfully depicts the different ways patriarchy works under a protector's guile, almost as a messiah. Aunt Lydia is the ideal example of how women are made

to think that their downfall is because of the abundance of choice in their lives. In the name of protection, patriarchy confines women in spaces that do not allow freedom of expression. The following quote sheds light on the above argument: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 30). This is also mirrored in the Commander's speech when he points out, "We've given them more than we've taken away...Think of the troubles they had before" (Atwood 227). The prime example of "freedom to" and "freedom from" can be seen in the case of an Islamic country, Iran. In the mid-twentieth century, under Pahlavi Shahs' rule, before the Islamic revolution in the country, women's involvement in various sectors of society increased. The participation of women in the fields of economy, education sectors, and workplaces increased many folds, and they acquired higher official positions of scientists, judges, ministers and athletes. However, the "freedom to" achieve greater in the public sector was attained at the cost of giving up the freedom to follow traditional values and women were forced, along with men, to absorb western values that were advocated by the then ruler. In 1979 women participated on a large scale against the Shah rulers in favour of the Islamic Revolution, leading to the overthrow of the monarchy. Ironically, under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini women faced many issues in political equality with men. The "freedom to" was now converted to "freedom from" western expression of liberty. While the veil was seen as a symbol of return to the traditional values of Iran during the revolution, it soon became a threatening force when the talk of the hijab being compulsory circulated in society. In the early 1980s, women were also banned from occupying positions of judges and were discouraged from pursuing law. Some of the changes made during Khomeini's rule were repealed after his death, but women were not allowed to enjoy major official positions as before. They were encouraged to fill fields such as gynecology, pharmacology, and midwifery – all domestic spheres in nature.

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a traditional dystopian narrative as far as the catastrophic endings of most of the dystopian texts are concerned. Atwood doesn't end the novel at the tragic end of the protagonist, rather it presents a further future society that has overthrown the totalitarian regime of the Gilead. This creates an opportunity for the readers to understand, even through the post-Gileadean era how the folly of human nature works against learning from history. Offred rightly hopes for a future even when the chances are bleak. "Sanity is a valuable possession: I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes" (Atwood 115). Unlike George Orwell's hero in 1984, who is a self-conscious character and actively takes part in the rebellion to bring about the fall of the regime, Atwood's protagonist is a passive character who gradually emerges as a heroine. In fact, Offred considers not herself but

Moirra as a heroine and wishes for her friend to continue her fight against the regime even when faced with dire consequences. Offred doesn't actively participate in the underground rebellion movement, but her actions are indicative of defiance at the unconscious personal level. The will to live and to feel, the constant reminders she gives herself of her name and her past, all these personal actions are suggestive of hope that someday this regime will end and she will be able to experience a normal life again. She doesn't prove to be entirely wrong, because the regime is eradicated in the future, although whether her ordeals end or not little is known about that. She leaves a dried daffodil under the mattress "for the next woman, the one who comes after me, to find" (Atwood 105).

According to Atwood, dystopia and utopia both are "two sides of the same fictional coin". Most dystopias are created, either intentionally or unintentionally, when the ruling body tries to fashion the present world on their narrow ideas of Utopia. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* transcends temporal boundaries because it successfully warns the readers about the psychological domination techniques of patriarchy and discusses its impact at length, which holds much relevance in the present time. Atwood's work brilliantly explores the theme of religion as a tool to successfully incorporate the oppressive patriarchal ideas within the society that deems women as a 'vessel' for procreation. As it is indoctrinated to the handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "*Blessed are silent*", I ponder whether we can afford to be blessed at present.

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