

# Oppressed Handmaid in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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**Abstract:** *The selected paper “Oppressed Handmaid in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale” reveals the condition of Offred, which highly examines the cultural construction of female identity, language and historical memory. The tale portrays the physical and psychological oppression of women under a futuristic totalitarian regime that reduces its female subjects to voiceless, childbearing vessels. The novel relates events in the Republic of Gilead, a militaristic Christian state that has supplanted the democratic government of the United States. The handmaiden have the role of procreation in the Gileadean society. Offred, the handmaid escapes from her subservient role and speaks out the negative role of women and their oppression. The paper points the bitter experiences of the Handmaids in the selected novel.*

**Key Words –** Victimization, Patriarchal, Political, Breeders, Identity, Slavery

Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* questions the very idea of freedom, the individual self and the questions of choice. She makes the “Other” the centre of her story. Atwood believes that the silencing of woman, the thematics of victimization, functions not only through patriarchal attitudes but also through woman’s conscious or unconscious complexity in the matter. The novel paints female experience from the angle of personal and political victimization. The female protagonist Offred, in her struggle for survival, attempts to comprehend the gender arrangements in the society of Gilead. The novel presents the story of a woman in a theocratic society. She is regimented to serve the ageing commander in different capacities. The handmaids have the most significant role of procreation in the Gileadean society.

Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale* escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the Underground Female Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. Offred uses “language” as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences as well as a “subversive-weapon” to tell her tale. Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization of women. She tells her tale with a sense of commitment to expose how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies like the Republic of Gilead. She also suggests the ways and means to surmount the barriers to woman’s individuality and autonomy.

Offred is separated from her husband and daughter after the formation of the Republic of Gilead. She is part of the first generation of Gilead’s women. She is considered an important commodity and has been placed as a handmaid in the home of the Commander Fred. Serena Joy, the wife of the Commander is said to be infertile. According to McDowell, “Offred is one of the surrogates, and is regularly

held down and raped by the Commander and his wife, until she conceives” (“Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*). The women of Gilead are stratified as Wives, Handmaids, Marthas and Ecowives according to various functions that they perform in society. Offred asks herself, “Waste not want not, I am not being wasted. Why do I want?” (7). Offred is denied her freedom. According to Adhikari, “Offred’s room is a transit camp, a prison cell; the use of mirrors, hooks have been dispensed for safety purposes and also for dispossessing woman of her identity” (159).

Handmaids are fertile women whose social function is to bear children for the wives. They dress in a red costumes that completely conceals their shape, including red shoes and red gloves. Offred often recalls the views and actions of her mother, a militant feminist who believes that, “A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (130). She often recalls her life with her husband and their daughter. Gomez says, “Offred apologizes for her frequent flashbacks” (139).

Offred is a spokesperson for the Handmaids of Gilead. The debate on freedom runs right through the novel. Aunt Lydia, in one of her indoctrination speeches tells Offred:

There is more than one kind of freedom . . . 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. In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them habits, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break. (24)

Offred, is one of the several “Handmaids” who because of their “viable ovaries” (135) are to be recruited for “breeding purposes” of the “Commanders of the Faith” who are childless. The “Commanders of the Faith” are childless because of the infertility of their wives. The Republic of Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theory and practice. The state reduces the Handmaids to the slavery status of being mere “breeders”. As Offred says, “We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (128). If the Handmaid becomes pregnant, the child she bears will be regarded as that of the commander and his wife. After the delivery, the Handmaid has to surrender the child to her mistress. So the Handmaid must act as surrogate mother and bear a child for the aging commander. In this way the Handmaid is desexed and dehumanized. Rao is of the view, “the wives who aid the ‘insemination’ merely known as ‘ceremony’ are no more Rachels. The commanders deem themselves as modern Jacobs” (152-53).

The Handmaid is proclaimed an Unwoman if she does not succeed by the end of her third year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment of banishing to the colonies. Thus, the dictates of state policy in Gilead relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival. In contrast male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says, “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (57). So women are judged by double standards of morality in respect of infertility.

Moreover, the state cancels the original names of the Handmaids in order to erase their former identity and labels them according to the names of the Commanders. Hence “Offred” the narrator’s relational naming is not a name but a tag that she wears to signify that she is Handmaid “Of Fred”. As Offred says:

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, so treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. (79-80)

Similarly other Handmaids' names are Ofglen, Ofwayne, Ofwarren. They are doomed to wear the scarlet robes signifying their adultery. According to Hariharan:

The subject or the 'I' is acted upon by a peculiar context and environment that determine for Offred her identity which can survive only "like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy tale figure in a red clock, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. (74)

Offred, the Handmaid in her "reduced circumstances" (99) obeys "ritualized subjugation" to the ruling elite. She is compelled to discharge her duties as a Handmaid. Under the pressure of terrifying alternatives, Offred feels, "I resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object" (268). Offred is forced into pregnancy tests every month. The doctor who examines Offred and other Handmaids periodically never even sees their faces. The Commanders who attempt to impregnate them once a month, are indifferent to their appearances. As appearance is unimportant for them, the Handmaids are not given face creams. Their food is not chosen by them. They are fed only with what the authorities regard as healthy food. According to Prabhakar:

Offred feels the indignity and terror of living under a futuristic regime controlled by Christian fundamentalists. She is aware of her present reality which is oppressive denying her individuality, nurturance and autonomy. Her life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term. (169)

As part of the training, the Handmaids are required to recite the Biblical Order which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness. Biblical and Marxist teachings are blended and distorted in an effort to brainwash the Handmaids. It is stated:

From each, says the slogan, according to her ability to each according to his needs. We recited that, three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts. You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. (111)

Offred's ironic comment casts doubt on the authority of the statement, and forces the readers to note the use of the pronouns "her" and "his" yet another evidence of the oppression of women in Gilead. "I remember the rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew" (24). So Offred questions the authority of patriarchal language which comes from the reservoir of male discourse. Women in Gilead are denied books, papers, pens and even hold on to something is a clandestine activity. The shops are identified by pictures rather than by names "they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us" (24).

Offred attacks Biblical language, as the language of patriarchy. She refers to the Bible as an "incendiary device." (82) because, like other weapons, it is available only to the ruling-class men in Gilead. Offred attempts her own version of the Lord's Prayer, but finally concludes, "I feel as if I'm talking to a wall" (183). She

experiences the hollowness of the concepts of home and family in Gilead by word associations. According to Adhikari:

Gilead is designed by men but it is women who make it work. Aunts against their own gender. It is a reminder of male indoctrinated woman's role in undoing of women through foot-binding or turning of women into Handmaids. (12)

Offred begins to break the slavery syndrome by transgressing the uniforms of Gilead. She steals into her Commander's study to play illicit games of scrabble and discovers that there can be freedom even with in the prison house of language. She gives him an insight into the real living conditions and situation of Handmaids. Offred imagines stabbing the Commander when he asks her to kiss him. She says, "I think about the blood coming out of him hot as soup, sexually over my hand" (131). She realizes the power of "pen". As she says:

The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another centre motto, warning us away from such objects.

. . . Just holding it is envy. I envy the commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal. (174)

Offred is very conscious of her body. It is this acute awareness and being in touch with her body that enables her to remain "alive". During one of her walks she looks at women's feet and observes:

One of them is wearing open-toed sandals, the toe-nails painted pink. I remember the smell of nail polish, the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon, the satiny brushing of sheer pantyhose against the skin, the way the toes felt, pushed towards the opening in the shoe by the whole weight of the body. The woman with painted toes shifts from one foot to the other. I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry. (28)

Offred, who witnesses the bloody "salvagings" the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of women shock her. She is outrageous and considers them barbarous. She feels her stay there as a jail sentence and she likes to scratch marks on the wall. She is filled with weariness in Gilead. She would like to repent, abdicate, renounce and sacrifice her life in Gilead. She feels her body is no longer suited for pleasure. She does not wish to be a doll hung up on the wall. She occupies herself with nostalgic memories of her husband and daughter and strongly desires to escape from her present "claustrophobic environment" (Prabhakar 171). She is not even free to die in Gilead. Ultimately, Offred decides to end up by hanging, "I could noose the bedsheet round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off" (274). But she considers suicide as an idle thing, a timid action. Offred has much patience and disbelief for rumours, "I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of future (69). The word "faith" is an image that reveals Offred's profound faith in her life as a woman.

Although Offred lives in the man's tyrannical world in Gilead, she feels a sense of pride for having been born as a woman. As she says, "Oh God, king of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man" (182). Offred recalls her visceral

connections to her husband and daughter from whom she has been abruptly separated. She expresses a holistic love for them:

Nobody dies from lack of sex. It's 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 saints . . . I can conjure them. (97)

In this way, Offred endorses a genuine and holistic love for her husband and daughter. She hopes she will receive a message that keeps her alive.

Offred's memory is a mode to offer universal accounts of woman's subjugation in Gilead. Women are indoctrinated through recorded messages, "blessed are the meek, Blessed are the silent" (100). Woman's mission of life is framed in rigid words. "Oh God obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled" (204). Handmaids have kneeling cushions with "Faith" embroidered on it but cushions with "Hope" and "Chastity" are suggestively missing. According to Gomez:

Gilead [is] a highly alienating structure of society, especially for women. Women are prohibited from communicating with one another, under the "Divide and Rule" policy of patriarchy. There is constant invigilation to prevent the forging of relationships among women. Women however overcome the externally imposed interpersonal alienation and reach out to one another secretly. (137)

In Gilead, the women of the poorer classes are called Econowives. They wear striped dresses in red, blue and green colours. "They have to do everything they can" (34) such as wiving, house keeping and child-bearing. In Gilead, the population has enormously declined due to the environmental crisis. In the academic discussion regarding Gilead, professor Pieixoto comments that this could be traced back to the widespread use of birth control of various kinds including abortion practised during the pre-Gilead period. He says:

Still births, miscarriages and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to various nuclear plant accidents, shutdowns and incidents of sabotage that characterized as well the period as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic waste deposital sites . . . and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides and other sprays. (286)

In this totalitarian regime, the handmaids are rendered powerless, passive and mute and are subdued to their anatomical destinies. In this novel, Atwood depicts how patriarchy and religion have exerted a total colonisation of woman's mind and body. "The very survival of the race depends on them and yet, they could be easily discarded as Unwomen" (Gopalan 119).

The Handmaids have become the complete property of the state and are utilised as a national resource. If they fail to produce a child within the three chances given to them, they will be declared as Unwomen and exiled to colonies. In the colonies they clean toxic waste and act as slave labourers.

It is the fear for herself and for her lover and child that keeps Offred passive in the beginning. But her emotions and vitality are not to be suppressed for long after ceremonial fertilization. She aches for Luke, her lover. Her developing awareness of herself as a victimised woman kindles in her the desire to subvert the pervasive canons of Gilead. Her secret affair with Nick and with the underground network are means for rescuing women. Eventually she is saved from Gilead by Nick, though one is not sure whether this freedom is everlasting or not. Atwood concentrates on the problem of woman's survival in a hostile male-dominated world through her refusal to be a silent victim. Offred lives through her memory and the game of scrabble. "Ironically, the path of emancipation is paved by the victimizer" (Adhikari 161).

The novel is an ingenious enterprise that shows the real dangers to women of closing their eyes to patriarchal oppression. Offred in her autobiography sets before the readers her desperate struggle to reconstruct her being across an unbridgeable, violent severing of time before and after the imposition of Gilead. According to Coral, *The Handmaid's Tale* "warns us of the imperceptible technology of power, of the subtle domination of women by men" ("Margaret Atwood's Tale").

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