

Exploring the Dual Dimensions of Women's Condition in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1996) is a dystopian novel that narrativizes the lived experiences of some women in a domineeringly patriarchal regime known as the Republic of Gilead. A noteworthy feature of this text is that both men and women act as active agents in abetting patriarchy. This paper seeks to examine the position of various characters under the patriarchal regime, the Republic of Gilead, which has been constituted on certain repressive ideologies. Women as portrayed in this text are not only the sufferer, but are active agents of the regime. The narrative highlights the regressive side of the society burdened through constant exercise of power and autonomy while there is overt use of indoctrination for the benefit of the people in power. The readers can notice that Atwood seeks to criticize the use of extreme ideological conditioning that tends to subjugate the people and their efforts to live an independent life. The narrative seeks to challenge the ideal notion of persecutor and victim under the institution of patriarchy because the readers can notice that this text portrays women not only victims, but also as active agents of patriarchy. Therefore, this paper will attempt to explore this dichotomy a bit more by considering the livelihood of the characters as portrayed in the text *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Keywords: Patriarchy, marginalization, ideology, complicity, authority

This paper seeks to underscore the problematic dimensions associated with the aspects of women, power, and function in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It will attempt to highlight that those women characters who can be viewed as victims at one level are also the oppressors on the other level. This paper will also seek to highlight the functioning of the State Apparatuses while engaging with the concept of Interpellation to understand how people are ideologically indoctrinated at times to transform them into certain subjects who

will submissively perform the task assigned to them by the authority. However, this study will specifically focus upon analysing the women characters in the select text.

The methodology involves a critical reading of the text *The Handmaid's Tale* (1996) through the discourses of Feminism and Psychology. This paper has relied upon texts such as *The Second Sex* (2011) by Simone de Beauvoir and *Powerarchy: Understanding the Psychology of Oppression for Social Transformation* (2019) by Melanie Joy. This study will also engage with the ideas shared by critics such as Earl Ingersoll in the essay titled "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale': Echoes of Orwell" to understand the narrative from a critical point of view.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* documents the horrendous effects of exercise of patriarchy in the society. The regime of the Gilead commoditized and reduced women into the position of functional categories only. Furthermore, the oppressive Republic of Gilead employed both men and women as active agents to aid patriarchy in several ways. However, women tend to be the worst sufferer as they were assigned with ambiguous roles which in a way challenges the entire notion of persecutor and victim within the regime. It can be seen that they are the worst sufferers of the regime whereas some of them are quite instrumental in aiding the rule of regime as well. Specifically, the character of the 'Aunts', a high-ranking group of women under the regime, tends to subvert the often-assumed belief that only women can be considered the incessant sufferers of patriarchy because through their character representation it can be seen that those women empowered with authority are also acting as active agents of patriarchy who relishes exercising authority under the rule. Thus, it can be argued that there is a dualistic portrayal of women in this text because women in this narrative have been depicted not only as sufferers, but also as active agents of patriarchy in the society.

This paper seeks to examine the role of women who deliberately or naively assist patriarchy in the society either as indoctrinated bodies or as an agent seeking power to perpetuate it. Here, one can take into account what has been contended by Simone de Beauvoir in the acclaimed text *The Second Sex* which stands pertinent to women's condition in the society, Beauvoir contended that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 293). Beauvoir's text highlighted the aspects associated with conditioning of

women by the social decrees and tends to ponder over the fact that the body of a woman is noticeably quite often neglected since birth.

It can be seen that the women characters in this text inclined towards complying with the demands of the totalitarian regime of Gilead through acceptance, obedience, and submission to the ideologies under the regime. Thought provokingly, these women serving the rule are overtly involved in supporting the regime and explicitly exerting power assigned to them by the regime. Furthermore, it can be seen that the totalitarian regime of the Gilead curbed their freedom and reduced the body of the women to a mass of flesh only recognized by the womb they carried. The Aunts such as Aunt Lydia, Aunt Sara, and Aunt Helena can be seen ideologically conditioning the Handmaids to fit into the newly prescribed roles assigned to them by the oppressive regime. These Aunts exerts power prearranged for them in order to restrain the freedom of other women and in that sense, they tend to assist the regime in maintaining the functional status quo.

Under this oppressive regime where patriarchal ideologies held forth, varied roles have been assigned to both men and women. It can be argued that these people are interpellated in a way that conditioned them to accept the role of the subject positions designed for them by the regime. Both men and women were indoctrinated to become concrete subjects of the regime and for the regime. For instance, the Angels have to act as soldiers while the Guardians are the special helpers to the Commanders. Similarly, the Handmaids are the child bearers to the high-ranking officials under the regime. On the other hand, the Marthas have to act as special assistance to the Commanders' families. Moreover, there is a section of women working as Econowives and are not divided by functions. It can be seen that the position of Econowives is indeterminate in comparison to others. *The Handmaid's Tale* emphasizes how the evolution of men and women into concrete subjects of the regime serves the regime and this scenario in a way generalizes the contemporary position of every individual in the society. The Republic of Gilead not only conditions them to fit into the roles assigned to them but also compels them to become agents actively involved with execution of violence. Moreover, the people assigned as Angels and the Guardians are supposed to function through violence.

The Aunts are those women who are responsible for perpetuating the regressive ideologies of the regime. They are assigned to propagate the ideology of a totalitarian and

dictatorial regime. Indeed, they reinforced the rule of administration and acted as active agents in propagating its ideologies by means of the power assigned to them; however, the very fact that they are even left with no other option, but to become instrumental for the regime should be noted as well. Such scenarios in a way depicts the absence of a proper agency to speak for women. It will be pertinent here to quote a few lines from the select text to understand the scenario better:

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks: but this is the centre, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. (33)

The Aunts were highly instrumental in propagating the patriarchal values of Gilead and are actively involved with ideologically conditioning the rest to transform them into the required subject positions for the regime. Under such a circumstance, it is quite obvious that the subjects have to perform accordingly so much so that the Handmaids ended up believing that bearing a child to those in power would help them attain a better position in the society. They were deprived from any source of entertainment, particularly because the authority believes that it might initiate the formation of resistance movements against the regime.

Women, particularly, had to play the role of being either a votary to the regime or a sufferer under the regime. Handmaids such as Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, and June were the worst sufferers, "We are the containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (107) says June acknowledging the vulnerable position they held as subject-positions of the rule. On the other hand, the Red Centre symbolizes the repression and exploitation inflicted upon them. It manifests an overt exertion of patriarchy under the pretext of exercising a system that finds validation in totalitarianism and patriarchy. Under the regime everyone has been denied of their fundamental rights and are deprived of an agency to speak. Furthermore, women particularly are extremely marginalized and exploited by gender bigotry.

Thus, it can be seen that under such a totalitarian regime every other individual ends up exploiting, oppressing, and subjugating the other. They are under constant surveillance and also operate as an Eye, an agent for surveillance of others, for the regime as well if required. The people have no private space of their own and their private life is constantly

intruded upon and put under the state's surveillance system. Thus, Offred says "The door of the room-not my room, I refuse to say my-is not locked. In fact, it doesn't shut properly" (Atwood 18).

On the other hand, the exploitative role played by the Commanders in promoting patriarchy under the regime is highly questionable as well. They actively participated in restraining the freedom of others and women particularly. They are the chief agents of the regime and they actively participate in indoctrinating patriarchal values into the subjects of the regime. The female body is not only subjugated, but are often referred to as the containers or vessels to carry the progeny of those men in power. They exercise power and autonomy to aid the regime. However, it has been noticed that even the Commanders transgress the rules recognized by the regime as well. Additionally, it is quite possible that they were either exercising their autonomy to the fullest or are experimenting their extent of their power. The entire regime is hypocritical in its conduct and functioning while its subjects might be an Eye or a victim of the regime.

The narrative also examines the functioning of the State Apparatuses, the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses, as used by the authority upon its subjects. The narrative highlights the use of both the apparatuses by the authority to subjugate the subjects. As contended by Louis M. Althusser, the Repressive State Apparatus primarily functions by violence and in *The Handmaid's Tale* the Guardians and the Angels exploits others and deprive them of their rights by overtly wielding physical power and authority. It shows that the people in power just want to ensure that there will be no further resistance against the regime in the upcoming days. Women are categorized as the Handmaids, the Marthas, and the Econowives and are deprived of their fundamental rights, moreover, they are forced to live under constant surveillance and as subjugated subject positions of the regime. Even Serena Joy, an influential character in the narrative, is no exception to such cruel treatments despite being the wife of a Commander. It can be seen that through her position she might be in a rank higher to the rest, but it is quite pathetic that even her rights and emotions are equally curbed and restrained so much so that even Offred sympathizes with her condition.

Ideological State Apparatuses manifest itself through different structures of the patriarchal and totalitarian regime. For instance, the Red Centre is involved with

indoctrination and curtailment of the freedom of women. The Red Centre serves as the base for propagating the ideologies that internalizes and indoctrinates patriarchy into its subjects. The Aunts eventually exhibit the same as they are actively involved with the propagation of the oppressive ideologies of the regime. They indoctrinated women to serve as the Handmaids, the Marthas, and even as Econowives and forced those women to fit themselves into the roles assigned to them by the regime and remain submissive towards it. The Handmaids are forced to remain subservient to the patriarchal regime by use of power and autonomy. The authority threatens them and declares that anyone trying to resist against the authority will be sent as Unwomen to the nuclear-radiation affected colonies to die a terrible death. However, there is an underground resistance group known as the May-Day, but it quite noticeable that the group has been failing to protect its supporters and agents to a large extent. Thus, it can be highlighted that there is constant use of both the State Apparatuses in maintaining and consolidating the structure of the Republic of Gilead.

Offred, a Handmaid to one of the Commanders can be considered a victim and even an unconscious supporter of the regime because by accepting her role submissively she tends to be an unconscious supporter of the regime to a certain extent. Moreover, her character is quite ambiguous in nature. It is difficult to assign her either as a revolutionary character or as a character subservient to it. It can be seen that she fails to exhibit a rebellious side of her nature against the regime. If the readers are to assume that she has to bear the brunt of the regime because her husband Luke and their daughter might be alive, one must also realize that she never did anything substantive to locate the whereabouts of her family members. However, it can be seen that several times she was left with no other option, but to remain malleable to the decrees of the regime. Nevertheless, her compliant nature questions her position as a sufferer under the totalitarian regime. She often acknowledges that she is a functionary to the regime and this might in a way serve and propagate the ideologies of the regime as well. It will be accurate here to quote a few lines from the selected text to comprehend the scenario better:

We do have something in common: both of us are supposed to be invisible, both of us are functionaries. I wonder if he knows this. When he opened the door of the car for the Commander, and, by extension, for me, I tried to catch his eye, make him look at me, but he acted as if he didn't see me. Why not? It's a soft job for him, running little errands, doing little favours, and there's no way he'd want to jeopardize it. (244)

The presence of Moira's character further problematizes Offred's position as a victim under the regime. The fact that, both Moira and Offred underwent the same indoctrination and conditioning and provided Moira managed to retain her revolutionary zeal while Offred displayed a sense of timidity delineates the submissive nature of Offred. It can be argued that her subservience in a way highlights her complicity towards patriarchy. Indeed, Moira was even unable to escape from the regime and ends up being a prostitute in Jezebel, however, her resistance against patriarchy transforms her into a heroic figure and this in a way supersedes the character of Offred. However, the very fact that Offred has a family to care for should be considered as well and maybe this consideration will enable the readers to provide a fair analysis of her character. Earl Ingersoll in the essay titled "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale': Echoes of Orwell" delineated a comparative analysis of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *1984* and contended that Atwood's novel features a near-future vision of misogynist regime of the Gilead which has been delineated in a similar manner in Orwell's text who portrays a similar nightmarish future. Ingersoll's paper also analyses how Atwood and Orwell both share anxieties about a future where a totalitarian regime will only offer individual options of either freedom and anarchy or repression and security (64).

On the other hand, when it comes to complicity of women in aiding patriarchy as portrayed in the select text *The Handmaid's Tale* the readers can notice that there are ample characters who dutifully accepted her position as a Handmaid and actively served the regime by bearing a child to the Commanders. Such Handmaids are celebrated as good Handmaids by the Republic of Gilead. Thus, some of the women characters are overt supporters of the patriarchal regime, and hence, they can be regarded as the abettors of patriarchal totalitarian rule. Thus, a detailed analysis of the women characters in the select text will enable the readers to understand that these women also played a noticeable role in aiding, promoting, and in abetting patriarchy in the society. Lastly, it should be mentioned that this paper does not promote any kind of prejudices against any action, person, and section of the society rather it is just a critical analysis of the select text to understand the dual dimension of oppressor and victim visible in the areas associated with Feminism in the society.

Thus, it can be argued that both men and women have their own role to play in aiding or abetting patriarchy in the society just as the characters did in the select text. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explicitly criticizes the same. It can be argued that, the select

text tends to contend that irrefutably women are the worst sufferers of patriarchy, but some of them also act as abettors of the entire schema of patriarchy at times. For instance, if one seeks to comprehend the sufferings of the Handmaids, one must also notice the role played by the Aunts in indoctrinating women to act subserviently towards the regime. However, their acceptance of subservience towards the regime is noticeably characterized by the role played by the authority to condition them into specific subject positions. Furthermore, the social space and social conditioning which supports the ideologies of patriarchy must be criticized as well. Thus, the role of women either as victims or as perpetrators of patriarchy is a thought-provoking issue which needs to be explored on various dimensions.

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