

Utopia versus Dystopia: Sexual Politics in Thomas More's *Utopia* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Aishwarya Bhutoria
MA English Semester II
St. Xavier's College, Kolkata.

Abstract

Utopia and dystopia are diametrically opposed concept and the treatment meted out to the women are different in several aspects. In a utopian set-up the process of commodification of women is countered by emancipation however, in a dystopic world the feminine subject is subordinated, reduced to a passive object who is always acted upon and never acting for herself. The women are deprived of identity, relegated to tradition and stereotypical gender roles of procreation as well as nurturing. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes Gilead's principal historian of the 'herstory', though her voice is strangled by the superstructure of parochial and possessing patriarchy. *Utopia* by Thomas More had presented the contrary perspective in the Renaissance.

Keywords: commodification, feminine, gender roles, tradition, procreation, historian, identity

Introduction

There are several works in the genre of Utopia that have presented women inefficiently, even in the ideal state a non-sexist and egalitarian society does not exist, women have limited access to political, social and economic nexus. The idea of utopia states that women would be crucial to the society however the stereotype of stereotyping women persists and they remain overshadowed, unidentified, unacknowledged and subservient.

Egalitarianism in More's *Utopia*

Thomas More's *Utopia* too establishes the superiority of men however the stance is not extremely misogynistic. Women were under the parochial patriarchal system seen as subordinate beings because the notion of gender equality did not exist. Hythloday describes that women were an integral part of the socio-economic nexus. They were involved in agriculture and other economic activities. This ensured greater holistic development of the society unlike several other countries. The domestic space was also regulated by women (as wives and mothers) as a companion to her male counterpart. The children were influenced by their female parent and the household staff was under her command.

Utopia being an ideal space (though fictive it is the quintessence of perfection) does away with gender segregation on the ground of pragmatically running the society. It strives to ensure equivalent contribution from men and women. The women even went to the battlefield, involving in ferocious combats where they were appreciated for their prowess and efforts.

Marriage was a sacred institute however certain stringent regulations were associated to it, for instance, strict age limits were prescribed for both the man and woman: the man had to be at least twenty-two years of age and the woman had to be at least eighteen. The subtle sense of equality between the spouses underscores the importance of women emancipation in *Utopia*, this was unprecedented in the English society of the contemporary times. The cessation of marriage was allowed on grounds of inappropriate behaviour, fornication or mutual consent, this is in contrariety with the contemporary English society that believed marriage to be an inexpungible truth and women had very bleak chances of seeking separation from their partners. The utopian society even permits remarriage. The women are allowed to become priests as many of them were old women or widows but considered exceptional. The priest's wife was highly revered and beyond the public scrutiny. The church too provided both men and women with equal space and position (men on the right and women on the left).

Parochial in the Paradisiacal

However, Hythloday at certain places makes derogatory remarks about women. The women being of the "weaker sort" were given simpler tasks to accomplish, like working on wool or flax while the men involved in the "more laboursome sciences" (More 57). The division of labour is on the basis of gender and not skills. The men were expected to be inclined towards their father's profession however they were provided enough opportunity to learn something different. The chances to learn were available to both the sexes however the husbands had the authority to chastise their wives" (More 92) in order to 'correct' them. This underscores the continuance of patriarchy. The act of tempting a married woman into fornication was punished as much as the actual completion of the heinous deed. The Utopians had a custom according to which prior to the marriage is finalized the man and the woman witness each other naked so as to find out any physical deformity.

In Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* it is stated that the Englishman is marooned on an island with four women and he establishes a clan by having one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine children, they were made into tribes under these women however he is succeeded by his eldest son thus presenting how women are mere means for creating the posterity. Pine has an authoritative presence (no competition or opposition) as all the four women are at his mercy to be contained, controlled and conveniently consumed. Women are reduced to reproductive machinery trapped in the cycle of polygamy and incest.

The Lack of Feminine Space in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale is a feminist dystopia that presents a fundamentalist regime that obliterates human rights and brutally oppresses women. It presents a world (a social, political and economic nexus) that the readers are unacquainted with. The dissolution of the United States

leads to the establishment of the despotic Republic of Gilead. It is a militaristic, puritanical and repressive system where certain territories are marked out as Colonies to accommodate infecund or infirm women, non-whites, Jews and abortionists. The fertile women are reduced to slaves of Commanders, they are made to lead an isolated life bereft of felicity and identity. There was preponderance of polygyny and misogyny, the women becoming mere machinery to perpetuate the white population.

A Historian of the 'herstory'

Atwood creates a feminine space by selecting a female narrator thereby subverting the conventional norm. The Handmaid is a peripheralized woman an unlikely narrator in the genre. This alters the power dynamics in the dystopian world. The written text (a fabricated autobiography) is formed from the oral narrative, it relates the attempt of a woman to escape the strangulating grasp of patriarchy that objectifies her. "Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*" states that by "an irony of history, it is Offred the silenced Handmaid who becomes Gilead's principal historian when that oral 'herstory' is published two hundred years later." (Howells 165) The novel focuses not only on the reproductive function but also on the emotional and imaginative elements associated with human sexuality. The account of Offred's life reminds of the words in "The Laugh of the Medusa"- "Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement." (Cixous 416) Offred narrates the stories of several women thereby making her narrative seem to have multiple narrators, she yearns to communicate and says because "I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (Atwood 212)

Offred attempts to flee across the Canadian border however gets caught and is imprisoned in the savagely suppressing Republic of Gilead, she becomes a prospective nurturer therefore she is proselytized at the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre. Her ingenuity and resourcefulness are evident as she puts on the facade of docility though she preserves her mettle. She is aware and desirous of a world beyond the boundaries of Gilead though she is situated in an infelicitous domiciliary milieu. She does not let her voice and emotions to be muffled as she laughs her heart out after a game of Scrabble and while she is involved in physical intimacy with Nick.

Offred is ensnared in the claustrophobic precarious dystopian situation where women are alienated from history and relegated to the role of a reproductive machinery, they are reduced to passive objects who are always acted upon and never acting for themselves. The women exist on the fringe, inaudible and invisible, being deprived of an identity or agency, a mere "two-legged womb".(Atwood 107) They are estranged from their family and their fertility leads to a dichotomous situation, it is a reason that they are alive but also the cause of their captivity. The women are deprived of their employment and financial stability. Offred before being given the pseudonym is identified as Luke's wife, however she decides to keep her pre-Gilead identity as a "secret talisman".

They are prohibited from reading and writing, the Gileadean society strives to keep its women uninformed away from any intellectual endeavour as it could brew rebellion. Janine faces

a severe psychological and emotional deterioration as she is unable to acclimatize herself to the brutal environment. Her brutish physical violation is transformed into a case of mere seduction and she is accused of the heinous deed of abortion. A woman's agony and abuse are absolutely disregarded. Moira's pretence of appendicitis leads her to being barbarously and remorselessly tortured with steel cables.

Women as Paraphernalia for Propagation

In the pre-Gildean state artificial insemination, fertility clinics and surrogate mothers were prevalent under the euphemism of “birth services” however the puritanical regime considered the artificial techniques as impious and enforced only the polygynous act. There had to be a Bible reading prior to coition in the presence of the wife which highlights the religious authority as well as a travesty of it. This happened every month as a norm which in actuality made the women mere possessions of the men. These acts have “nothing to do with sexual desire” and this is “not recreation, even for the Commander” (Atwood 75) it is merely an act to sustain the population. The wife had to witness the outrageous scene of her husband copulating with other women. This was a form of fornication which the Gileadean society licensed.

The superstructure of patriarchy contains, consumes and commodifies women, considering them irrational and inferior. Their identity is overshadowed and they are reduced to Offred, Ofglen, Ofcharles and Ofwarren. They are intended to wear red-coloured costume (idea of blood) and veil which symbolized their complete subjugation. Atwood writes “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law”,(Atwood 48) this explicitly presents the stereotypical notion that fertility and sterility are associated with women only, the men are beyond it. The stringent measures of the Gileadean society make it impossible for women to celebrate their womanhood or motherhood. Their existence is related to their procreative function, they conceive but are unable to nurture their own child.

The masculine is overvalued while the feminine is excluded and subjugated. The hierarchical nature of gender relation remains unquestioned and indicate the attitude of acceptance of male domination as the status quo. Women are divided into categories of- wives, Martha, aunts, widows and Handmaids, this structure was rigid and a handmaid (wearing red apparel) could never become a wife (wearing blue or teal colours as a sign of their purity). The wives became an integral component of the relentless system. Atwood presents a graphic account of the inexplicable hardships that the women underwent. The bleak dystopian text presents the conflicting ideas of human rights and freedom opposed to vicious repression and exploitation.

The women in the novel are passive but there is still a sense of sisterhood and unity amongst them, an attempt to resist the strangulating grasp of the parochial patriarchal system. They seek comfort in companionship, an attempt to preserve their sanity and identity. Moira and Offred had surreptitious meetings in the restroom which uplifted the spirit of Offred. Atwood has tried to foreground the silent resistance put up by the emotionally, sexually and psychologically oppressed and exploited women. The Handmaids who went out to the market daily had developed a camaraderie but could not trust each other as “the truth is that she is my spy, as I am

hers” (narrator remarks) they only exchanged platitudes and indulged in commonplace interactions in the fear of the surveillance.

In *The Edible Woman* as well, Atwood had presented the idea of a woman's identity and existence being subsumed by the man (father or husband) this reverberates through the words: “Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education” (Rich 52) the role women shall play. Gilead is also a place where women are to be merely seen, as objects, not heard.

Serena Joy, the dispirited infertile wife of Commander Frederick, is hierarchically superior to Offred however she too is downgraded due to her inability to conceive, she was a singer and public speaker, she ironically remarked about the “sanctity of the home” which she herself is denied. She was the reason for the previous Handmaid's suicide and Offred becomes her substitute. She is contemptuous of her, accusing her of sexually provocative activities with Commander Fred. When she learns of the illicit amorous rendezvous between the Commander and Offred, she only accuses her and remarks “You could have left me something.” (Atwood 230) Offred too felt like an “intruder” who was taking away “something” (love or rights of a wife) from Serena, such words do make the readers feel sympathetic towards the hapless wife. The narrator describes her as “stiff and straight as an effigy” (Atwood 75) while the commander indulged in the heinous act, this raises the pertinent question in Offred's mind- “Which of us is it worse for, her or me?” (Atwood 75)

She persistently tries to persuade even intimidate or threaten Offred into a venereal liaison with Nick, this attempt on her part is self-serving because Offred's pregnancy will provide her with a child. She was aware of the whereabouts of Offred's child and uses this information to extract her own benefit. Her deep-seated antipathy to Offred underlines the theme of women harbouring animosity towards her own sex. She is so self-absorbed that the excruciating pain of another woman (also a mother) goes inconspicuous to her insensitive heart. Serena becomes a cog in the dystopic wheel of Gilead that tramples the individuality of several helpless women. Her pseudonym is antithetical to her temperament.

Perpetrators and Protestors

There were women like Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth who became the perpetrators of the vicious masculine hegemony's dystopic and despotic actions. They train the women, conditioning them into becoming Handmaids, referring to them as “sacred vessels” (Atwood 107) in order to romanticize the reprehensible. The defective matriarchal set up is made indisputably evident in the domestic and training centre. Offred narrates the gruesome experience of watching a sadistic movie that depicted a woman's body being gradually chopped to pieces and entrails being taken out. Aunt Lydia utilizes it to show the abusive attitude that the men previously had and how the Republic of Gilead provides women with protection from abuse. Janine is maltreated and mortified to extreme level by Aunt Lydia in order to control her.

Moira is a firebrand and headstrong woman who is absolutely subsumed by the torturous system. She fearlessly voices her thoughts and is a homosexual (unacceptable in Gilead). Her presence acts as a link to the past for she was a companion of Offred and can never abandon the thoughts of her former normal life. She was “more logical” than the other captives and therefore becomes the first person to escape from the Centre in the disguise of the Aunt. She is found working at Jezebel's (as a prostitute) thus implicitly referring to her being coerced into submission. The Handmaids could find escape from the imprisonment only during public prayer sessions, birthdays, salvaging or medical examinations. The alternative apparel provided to Offred makes her appear as a prostitute, this underscores the fact that women can never evade their imprisonment. Moira was unable to flee from Gilead thereby coerced into Jezebel's unlicensed night club. The freedom that women enjoy at Jezebel's, “No nicotine-and-alcohol taboos here!” (Atwood 191), is a confinement in disguise as the right to exercise their choice is curbed by restricting their movement “nobody gets out of here except in a black van”.(Atwood 195)

Contemporary suppression of the female voice

The inconclusive conclusion of the novel has been jarring for the readers as Offred moves into “the darkness within; or else the light” (Atwood 235) her escape is ambiguous. The perplexing and fragmentary account of Offred's abstruse experiences hinged on the cassette tapes which were discovered in Bangor, Maine and explained by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. This however distances the readers from Offred and her struggle, being set in an academic space. The Professor's attitude underlines the similarities in the position of women in the twenty-second century is equally disparaging. There is preponderance of sexism and no solace is provided in the open-ended novel- “Are there any questions?” (Atwood 247)

Conclusion

Thomas More establishes an ideal state providing windows for development of women and promising an egalitarian set up however it is not absolutely attained and *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopic society establishing the menacing association between the political and sexual life as well as the present and the future. “*The Handmaid's Tale* emerges from the strongest strain in Atwood's imaginative sensibility, which is gothic.” (Bloom 8). Atwood feared her work being a prognostication of a cataclysmic probability and not merely a figment of imagination or forewarning, this reverberates in the words of Tom Moylan as he writes “dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century” (Moylan xi)

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