

The Novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood Analysis

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Gender and Body

Throughout history, there have been a variety of socially constructed stigmas that have proved to be detrimental to women. Women have faced many challenges and injustices throughout history due to patriarchal norms and social stigmas that have shaped society. In society, women have been subjected to exist in a world dominated by patriarchy and as a result, they are seen as inferior. Furthermore, despite being viewed as inferior, women were viewed as valuable for one reason: their bodies. Women’s bodies have often been objectified, controlled, and commodified by men and subsequently women have been denied the same opportunities, rights, and respect as men. The objectification of women is a concept that has been portrayed throughout history in the forms of literature and present-day media which has reinforced harmful gender stereotypes that limit women’s agency as well as potential and justify violence as well as discrimination against them. It is a form of oppression that devalues and dehumanizes women by reducing them to mere things or commodities for the pleasure or benefit of men. When analyzing the concept through a historical lens, the ability to bear children was a critical characteristic for a woman to possess to be viewed favorably in the patriarchal society. This dynamic was evident throughout Margaret Atwood’s ingenious work “The Handmaid’s Tale”. Building on the dynamic of the objectification of women, Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” portrays the perpetual struggle of women who are fighting for individuality and independence in a dystopian regime that strips away individuality, autonomy, and reproductive rights.

The objectification of women in media and literature is not only a historical phenomenon but also a contemporary one that has serious implications for women’s rights and dignity. In Atwood’s novel, the author depicts a dystopian society where women are reduced to their reproductive functions and are treated as property of men. Through using a woman narrator, the author intricately exemplifies these dynamics by providing an account of a woman named Offred who was fertile and was forced to produce offspring. Through her account, the readers are exposed to the patriarchal dynamic that highlights the theme of gender and body in the novel “*The Handmaid’s Tale*”. These dynamics are further explored in “*Women’s Oppressed in Disfigured Life in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*” written by Bahman Zarrinjooee and Shirin Kalantarian which debunk the objectification of women while authors exemplify the marginalization of the women in the book and connect the concept to its real-world application. The article exposes the dangers of the patriarchal system presented in the novel that oppresses women and denies them their autonomy, individuality, and reproductive rights. The authors building on the novel also challenge the reader to question the stereotypes and assumptions that underlie the objectification of women in the real world. For

instance, the book criticizes the notion that women's value is determined by their beauty, sexuality, or fertility and that women are passive, dependent, and submissive to men. The novel also reveals the discrimination and violence that women face as a result of being objectified such as oppression, marginalization, abuse, rape, or exploitation.

The article written by Zarrinjooee provides a deep literary analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel "*The Handmaid's Tale*" based on the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir which show how Atwood portrays the women of Gilead are transformed into the traditional passive roles in the traditional and patriarchal society "through the discriminations they encounter because of their sex and infertility in their lives" (Zarrinjooee and Kalantarian). The article explores how Atwood portrays the exploitation and marginalization of women in the dystopian society of Gilead by comparing Atwood's work with Simone de Beauvoir's work "*The Second Sex*" which examines the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the identity of women as "Other" in a patriarchal society of men. The authors of the article show Atwood's portrayal of Gilead where women were treated as "objects" and reduced to their biological functions and sexual roles in the patriarchal system. This notion is further expanded in "*Representation of Female Body in the Social Context of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*" written by Samira Haghi et al who argue that the objectification of women was the largest contributing factor to their marginalization and subjugation. The paper argues that the novel reflects religious, social, and historical views on the "bodies" of women as "objects" that are subordinated to control women's agency, identities, and functions (Haghi, et al.). This research article also argues the way female bodies are appropriated and manipulated in the society of Gilead where women's reproductive and sexual functions were "objectified" to alienate and marginalize this specific gender.

To combat this marginalization, a blueprint is provided in Amanda Howell's "*Breaking Silence, Bearing Witness, and Voicing Defiance: The Resistant Female Voice in the Transmedia Storyworld of the Handmaid's Tale*", where she asserts that the challenges faced by oppressed and marginalized women can be rectified through social change and activism. This scholarly paper explores how the fictional world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is "unified by a thematic concern with the resistant women's voice" which challenges the oppressive regime of Gilead and its silencing of "objectification" of female bodies (Howell). The article argues that the resistant female voice is not only a narrative device but also a platform that offers different challenges and opportunities for the reception and expression of resistant females in political and ethical scenarios. Howell, in this article, also explores how challenges and different opportunities of "violence" against women contribute further to the expansion and engagement of the contemporary storyworld where women are still forced to live in a patriarchal system. The paper also analyses how the challenges posed to women due to their "reproductive systems" require a voice for social change and feminist activism. This research study by Amanda explores the role of the protagonist, Offred, a fertile female who is used as a "handmaid" to bear children for her assigned commander Fred. The sexual violence of the women in that Gilead republic is used as the justification to show that Gilead rulers treat their women with respect and protect them from violent behavior when they use women for bearing children than in the pre-Gilead society filled with rape and pornography. This confirms the notion that Atwood's novel has showcased the unfair treatment of women by providing a fictional account of the violence that had been

perpetrated against them in society.

Throughout the novel, women were subjected to a plethora of suppressed rights such as the prohibition of reading. This is evidenced in chapter 15 of the book when Offred states that “we can be read to it (the Bible) but we cannot read from it” stripping women of their ability to read. Reading, a basic skill, starts to be developed at an early age as a basic human identity and function which women were being stripped of in the society which reinforces the mantra of objectification. The article “*Women’s Oppressed in Disfigured Life in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*”, in this regard, argues that both Beauvoir and Atwood challenge the biological and sexual roles as well as discourses related to the mantra of objectification of women that define women based on their reproductive capacities. They both argue and advocate for women’s empowerment and liberation from the patriarchal system as Beauvoir criticizes the biological determinism that denies women their individuality. The authors also describe the dynamic between men and women as one where women’s intellect is disregarded in favor of their biological function. In addition, the sexuality section of the article explores how violence through objectification forced women of Gilead society “to have sex with their assigned commanders in the presence of their wives” (Zarrinjooee and Kalantarian). Moreover, the author, Aarti Sahu in the article “*Portrayal of Marginalized Women in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*” explores how Atwood exposes the terrible conditions that the agency of women feel in a male-dominated or patriarchal system and how they cope with or resist the marginalization and coercion imposed on them by the society of Gilead (Sahu). The article explores how Atwood has written this novel as a provocative and powerful feminist work to expose the violence on women of the Gilead society that led to the dehumanization of gender.

In addition to the blatant objectification that was experienced by women in Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale”, violence is another aspect that correlates with the theme that not only were women objectified in the Gilead society but they were also subjected to excessive violence from their male counterparts. Offred’s narrative provided examples of violence being perpetrated against women as Offred states “Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts nipped off with garden shears, her stomach split open and her intestines pulled out” which portrayed women as victims of their cruelty and violence (Atwood). This mantra of violence is also referred to in “*Representation of the Female Body in the Social Context of Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*” when the authors state “the handmaids are required to cover almost all parts of their body and only a fragment of their face is visible. Visibility makes them vulnerable and exposed to violation and penetration” (Haghi, et al.). Moreover, the handmaid’s requirement to remain covered lest they experience violation and penetration is an example of how a patriarchal society subjected women to marginalization, a loss of human agency and violence. Offred reinforces this by highlighting the way that this violence and focus on her body affects the way she views herself when she states “Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Haghi, et al.).

The way that gender roles were specifically implemented in Gilead in Atwood’s “*The Handmaid’s*

Tale" is to explore how women are divided into rigid categories based on their marital status, fertility, and obedience to the regime. Women were stripped of their rights and subjected to indoctrination as they were considered handmaids or fertile women who were assigned to high-ranking men to bear children. They were forced to participate in a ritual named Ceremony where they were raped by the commanders in front of commanders' wives as women were considered property of the state and had no autonomy or agency. Their names were also derived from the names of their commanders such as Offred from "of Fred" and they were constantly monitored by the eyes of the secret police. The paper written by Haghi et al. argues the way female bodies are appropriated and manipulated in the society of Gilead where women's reproductive and sexual functions were "objectified" to alienate and marginalize this specific gender. The patriarchal ideology of Gilead depicted in Atwood's novel is explored in this article showing the core essence of how violence leads to the dehumanization of women in a patriarchal society (Haghi, et al.). The research study presented by Howell explores the role of the protagonist, Offred, a fertile female who is used as a "handmaid" to bear children for her assigned commander Fred. The sexual violence of the women in that Gilead republic is used as the justification to show that Gilead rulers treat their women with respect and protect them from violent behavior when they use women for bearing children than in the pre-Gilead society filled with rape and pornography (Howell).

In "*The Handmaid's Tale*", Christianity was implemented to justify oppression by creating a theocratic regime that used biblical symbols to legitimize its totalitarian control over the population. The society of Gilead was divided into rigid classes where each class had a specific role and any deviation of resistance was severely punished. This class system in the society of Gilead was inspired by the biblical story of Leah and Rachel who gave their maids to their male counterpart Jacob to bear children for them when they were barren. Furthermore, the struggle for autonomy and liberation is the core theme of Margaret Atwood's "*The Handmaid's Tale*." Gender and feminism, as a concept challenge the concepts of patriarchal oppressive regimes and advocate for feminist activism. To reclaim their voice and some sense of autonomy, there are a variety of examples in the novel that show forms of resistance against oppression. The most prominent of these is the existence of Mayday. Mayday is a secret organization that seeks to undermine the government and help those who want to escape. This is an example of efforts and activism that seek to dismantle the regime. In the novel, Ofglen states "It isn't good for us to know about too many of the others in the network. In case you get caught" (Atwood). This quote showcases how even through forms of resistance, there was a fear that the oppression would not subside. However, it also highlights that in the face of oppression, resistance must continue to remain strong.

In Amanda Howell's "*Breaking Silence, Bearing Witness, and Voicing Defiance: The Resistant Female Voice in the Transmedia Storyworld of the Handmaid's Tale*," she reinforces the ideology of resistance over oppression. She contends that Atwood's text can be used as a tool for advocacy as it relates to media portrayals and legislation that aim to protect women. These ideologies are evident in the text where Howell states "The Handmaid's Tale and its storyworld have been used as transnational shorthand to advocate for the importance of legislation and discourses that safeguard women's reproductive rights, along with their broader social and bodily autonomy" (Howell, 2019). She goes on

to state “At a time when women’s reproductive rights are contending with not only “backlash” but actual repeal, it is increasingly important that we hold representations of reproduction and motherhood to account, especially when they appear in popular texts” (Howell, 2019). Both of these quotes as well as the introduction of Mayday in *The Handmaid’s Tale* exemplify that resistance is not futile and should be utilized to dismantle oppression. Moreover, the novel explores how a totalitarian regime uses language as a tool of power and oppression and how the characters resist or comply with it. Language, as a means to control and subjugate women, is used for manipulation and dehumanization of women in Gilead as they were stripped of their individual names and identities and were assigned titles based on their gender roles such as Handmaids, Unbabies, Marthas, and Unwomen. Gilead also creates an official vocabulary that warps and ignores reality such as using biblical terms to justify oppression and violence as well as imposing prescribed rituals to enforce loyalty and conformity.

In a nutshell, the novel “*The Handmaid’s Tale*” by Margaret Atwood serves as a powerful critique of the objectification of women and a call for resistance and empowerment. The concept of objectification and subordination of women is evident throughout “*The Handmaid’s Tale*” because the novel depicts a dystopian society where women are stripped of their rights, identity, and freedom and they are seen as members of a man’s household so they are, effectively, his property. Atwood’s book provides readers with an intimate understanding of the detrimental dynamics through Offred’s experience which makes the objectification of women clear and the way objectification presents itself in society has harmed women in every domain of their life. In addition, the suppression of language and independent thinking affected women’s agency and rights as women were forbidden to read, write, or express their opinions which limited their access to power, freedom, and sense of self.

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