

Strained Discourses between the Patriarchal Society and the Matriarchal Society in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

Rumana Chowdhury

Assistant Professor

Department of English Language and Literature

Premier University

Chattogram.

Email: chy.rmn@gmail.com

Abstract

Margaret Atwood, the famous Canadian author describes the contemporary society of New England through her renowned novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here she explores the work and function of the handmaids through some female characters. The protagonist, named Offred is assigned to do her work for the high-class soldiers. Being a mother, as a handmaid she has to leave her child and husband and is forced to do the work for the Gilead society. Offred's character comes out through her work, dialogue, recalling of past life, and description of the present situation. While narrating her character, the writer describes both male and female characters who represent the society. At the same time, the characters of this novel reveal two dominant societies during that time: patriarchal society and matriarchal society. This paper brings out the strained discourses between these two societies of New England by analyzing the characters. At the same time, my purpose is to show that the females always struggle hard for living purpose in so many ways, but ultimately their condition never improves because of the dominating patriarchal society.

Keywords: Patriarchal society, Matriarchal society, Handmaid, Discourse, New England

Besides being a renowned writer and a critic in contemporary Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood has shown her keen interest in feminist movement of Canadian politics. That is why, in her writing, she brings most of the time the contemporary society, male and female characters, their relationship to

each other with their sentiment, work and their rights. In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author portrays two societies with gender issues. Her suppressed female characters always face challenges and struggle a lot to live in the male dominated society. In this novel, the novelist describes how patriarchal society snatches the liberty and freedom from the matriarchal society in so many ways and in different situations. Moreover, Atwood wants to show that women are the rivals of women in the same society. This paper reflects these two societies through some of the major strained discourses in this novel.

Atwood works on women's movement which is known as second wave feminism. The period of this feminist movement is from the year 1960 to 1985. The motto of this movement is peace, equality in education, impartial employment, safety for women and birth control. Mary Wollstonecraft, the British proto-feminist of 18th century established the rights of women in her famous book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In that book, she argues that women are not naturally inferior to men as they lack education. She brings comments of great philosophers like Bacon and Locke, and then puts her logical arguments. One of the suggestions suggested by her is that, both men and women should be treated as rational beings and imagines a social order founded on reason. Both of them should be well educated as they both have to take the responsibilities of family and society together. Other early feminists had made similar pleas for improved education for women, but Wollstonecraft suggests that society will be benefitted if there will be a radical change. Following Mary Wollstonecraft, Atwood and other feminist writers have established some rights for the women in twentieth century.

There are some influential and famous feminists who work for this second wave feminism through their physical work, different piece of writing, and slogans, motto and speech. As Atwood is a liberal author, she puts her comments, arguments and criticisms by her strong pen. Through her writing, she describes the movement of women's representation in everything from professional work to personal work which insists on respect for non-mainstream identities and demand reform of law and government. In her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, by describing the place named Gilead and its male and female members of different ranks and position, Atwood focuses the contemporary society with the violence and result of feministic movement.

Gilead is a 'rational' society which aims at serving its misogynist and racist purposes. As a place in a developed country, it is a society full of terror, doubt, depression and unhappiness. Offred, the protagonist of the novel, describes the place in her own words:

The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live... 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...Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers any more, and the university is closed (Atwood 33).

In Gilead society, at first some young Caucasian women are selected. They are imprisoned and trained as childbearing handmaids. Among them, the healthy and sound children are abducted by the government in order to give punishment to their parents. Particularly, young mothers are the main target in this society who are bound to listen to the male characters of the society according to the new Gileadean social order. Offred's only daughter was also kidnapped in this regard. Offred, from that time, becomes a Handmaid whose work is to serve the Commander, a high-ranking officer of the Gilead physically.

The women of Gilead society are treated very inhumanly, and they suffer from the oppression imposed upon them by the male dominated society. Offred comments about the handmaids: "ladies in reduced circumstances. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances". (Atwood 13) The women of Gilead are oppressed in many ways. The autocratic society dominates the poor women in such a way that they do not get freedom in their personal life. Or, it can be said that, they almost forget that they have a personal life to live. The males, who play different roles in the society, cruelly oppress the women. They become satisfied physically by getting pleasure when they get the company of the women whenever they want. For example, the handmaids who are able to be pregnant, are kept by their commanders in order to bear children. Those women who do not have fertility, are sent to the colonies to experience a slow death as a punishment. In the same society, women are oppressed not by the males only, but by other women as well. The role of the Aunts can be taken in this regard. According to the author, Aunts are a class of ladies who act as the agents of the Gilead regime. They supply the information of the handmaids to the commanders; thus, they maintain their safety and security by creating trouble to the Handmaids. Maximum time the handmaids get severe punishments only by the Aunts. Finally, women of this society are oppressed by religion, which is the principal reason for all other suppressions.

The novelist describes an incident which occurred in the year 1980. During that year, a good number of people severely suffer both physically and psychologically because of strong reactions occurred by nuclear and other poisonous chemicals. Unfortunately, women face many types of physical problems. One of the major problems is the infertility of the women. Then the present Government divides fertile and infertile women and they are categorized by their age and working ability. Jews, aged and non-white women are sent to colonies, a radioactive territory. On the other hand, white and fertile women with sound health are sent to the soldiers and commander's house. There they have to share the bed with the male members of that family

and bear children for the family, especially to those families who are unable to bear children. According to the novelist, these women are known as Handmaids. The Handmaids work for the high-class families by following some strict rules. Most of the times, they are asked to share the bed with the male member of a family in presence of the infertile wife of her husband.

In this novel, Serena Joy is an infertile spouse of the Commander. She is a frustrated, selfish and complex character. As she is unable to bear children, she requires Offred's help. When Offred is asked to lie with the Commander in front of Serena Joy, she is found sitting near at Offred's head and holds her hand tightly. She does it only for one reason. That is, if Offred fulfills the desire of the Commander, it becomes easy for Offred to be pregnant and both the Commander and his wife become the parents of that child. Offred comments about it: "She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity." (Atwood 23) So many times Serena Joy asks Offred to maintain some restrictions strictly. One of these is that, Offred and the Commander can go to bed to have their physical relation, but they are not allowed to kiss each other, and after completing their sexual work, Offred gets only ten minutes to leave the room. Offred tells,

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread ... My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being ... The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers... I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (Atwood 104)

Thus, in this novel it is found that, in that patriarchal society, not only the male but also the females of the upper class get the right and the power to dominate other women.

In the book *The Second Sex* written by Simone de Beauvoir, the renowned French existentialist and feminist philosopher, explains some theories based on sex and gender. Through this book, she investigates popular definition of femininity. She explains that, femininity is a concept that has been learned through socialization in order to keep man dominant over others. According to her, the cultural devices of domination is responsible confining the women in so many ways. She also comments that, as these women cannot be a simple biological group, womanhood is forced on woman by civilization. She uses the word 'Other' which represents the fundamental social meaning of woman. According to this critic, biology is the main source for the women's oppression within patriarchal society. Sexual harassment is also an unavoidable part of women's subjugation, manipulation and all other purposes of women. In this regard, Atwood brings

and describes the logical arguments of Simone de Beauvoir in her text through the characters with their characteristics in this novel.

Like Beauvoir, Atwood also believes that among man and woman, only the woman is allowed to be judged by physically and psychologically. Offred, for example, purely and simply is not treated only as human in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The main reason of it is that, the society is a patriarchal based society. Both inside and outside the living place, Offred has to maintain some strict rules. She never thinks about any dream for her, and no one also asks her about her wish and dream.

As the women in Gilead society are deprived of their individual freedom, they are bound to lead their life according to the wish and order of the males of that society. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred narrates the full story of Gilead into a tape recorder with the barest trace of emotion, for she has been practically engaged in her handmaid training. Through her description, a clear picture of the matriarchal society comes out which is fully controlled and dominated by the patriarchal society. In Gilead society, language is the main way to give social roles and identities through labels. Then the patriarchal society executes their ideologies and principles by using the Holy book like Bible. Offred once described about religion by referring to some Biblical lines. These Biblical references are used and considered to justify the rules of the law. One of the rules is that, it is extremely prohibited for the women to read and write. That means, they should be illiterate. Because of this reason, they are unable to distinguish the real Biblical references from the altered versions. Unfortunately, they are forced to accept the false ideology of Bible imposed on them through these logical Biblical explanations. Master, father, husband or any male member of the family apply the patriarchal rules made by them over the females of that society. Another rule is that, the women are not allowed to make a plan for their personal life, neither they are allowed to dream, or indulge in dreaming. As they are considered as a means of production and under the control of the males, the patriarchal society deprives them from happiness, security, freedom and their own identities.

In Gilead, the women are categorized with their different ranks and labels such as Handmaids, Marthas, Wives etc. Each role is assigned its own color of clothing as a code for the work. The women are forced to wear these colors which represent their roles in the totalitarian theocracy known as Gilead. Furthermore, the color of the women's clothes indicates their specific duties along with hidden meanings. In this novel, the color of the dress of the Handmaids is red which symbolizes fertility. Offred says about this color at the time of introducing herself as a Handmaid in this way: "The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red, the color of blood, which defines us." (Atwood 18) Red suggests blood of the menstrual cycle and of child birth. This color is also a traditional marker of sexual sin. When the

Handmaid's reproductive role supposedly finds its justification in the Bible, in some sense they commit adultery by having sex with their commanders who are married men. In contrast to red, they also wear white bonnets and wings to symbolize their purity and innocence. Green color dressed ladies are called Marthas, the domestic servants who take care of the house. They are older, infertile women who cannot bear children, but they can raise other people's children. They have access to information that gives them some control over handmaids and wives. The Aunts are the only class who keep the authority among all the women. They wear brown colored dresses symbolizing authority and power. They can read and write. They train the handmaids, organize their placement at Commanders' households, and monitor the compliance of wives and handmaids with their prescribed roles. In the novel, Aunt Lydia is the head aunt whose description through Offred's speech proves that she is a prestigious lady with authority:

I wasn't looking at her face, but at the part of her I could see with my head lowered: her blue waist, thickened, her left hand on the ivory head of her cane, the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine filed to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic smile, on that finger, like something mocking her. (Atwood 24)

There are also 'Econowives', who are the spouses of lower-class Caucasian men. They are used by Aunts as examples of inferiority in handmaid training. Using the dress of Aunt, Moira gets a chance to escape from Gilead society. Her exchange of clothing with Aunt Elizabeth is a symbolic gesture, a symbol of rebellion and resistance for the Handmaids. Though Gilead uses clothing and color to define different rank of the women, Moira strikes a blow against Gilead's attempt to define her identity. As a feminist and lesbian, Moira appears as an unconventional, rebellious character. To Atwood, Moira represents courage and hope, which other women of Gilead society have lost. Her determination is in contrast to Offred's, and her bravery is something exceptional that all the Handmaids wish to be a character like Moira.

When the Handmaids are asked to meet the Commanders, they have to obey the rules and formalities. When they show their passes, the two Guardians punch their numbers into the compucheck. Looking at their eyes, Offred compares the faces of those Guardians to the sheep, but the looks were like dog, 'spaniel, not tender' (Atwood 31) Offred describes the situation by the following lines:

What if I were to come at night, when he is on duty alone-though he would never be allowed such solitude- and permit him beyond my white wings? What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to him, to them, by the uncertain light of the lanterns? This is what they must think about sometimes, as they stand endlessly

beside this barrier, past which nobody even comes except the Commanders of the Faithful in their long back murmurous cars, or their blue Wives and white -veiled daughters on their dutiful way to Salvagings or Prayvanzas, or their dumpy green Marthas, or the occasional Birthmobile, or their red Handmaids , on foot.(Atwood 31)

Through this speech, Offred wants to tell that the Guardians, whose work is to protect the Handmaids and fulfil their duties by sending the Handmaids to the Commanders, also become crazy to get the attachment of the Handmaids. But they have to control this feeling as they are afraid of the Commanders. The Commanders always deny the feelings of human beings, such as love, friendship and sexual relations through which man can be able to be experienced about practical life. Without any hesitation, they punish as subversion the tiniest expressions of feelings, as feelings lead people to form an emotional bondage with one another which is difficult to break. In Gilead, patriarchal society gives punishment to the people. Dead bodies of the lovers who, according to the Government, criminal, Doctors who performed abortions, priests, nuns and feminists are publicly displayed as warnings. Through this display, the patriarchal society wants to mean that if anyone wants to live in Gilead society, he or she should keep a bondage with the society by following the rules created by them. When the handmaids conceive, they get extra caring by the Guardians. They become very alert about the daily affairs of the handmaids until they give birth to the children. Offred describes this by the following lines:

She needs only the floor exercises, the breathing drill. She could stay at her house. And it's dangerous for her to be out, there must be a Guardian standing outside the door, waiting for her. Now that she's is carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get het, it's happened before. All children are wanted now, but not by everyone. (Atwood 36)

By these lines, Atwood wants to show the cruel side of the patriarchal society. After giving birth to a child, it is the wish of the Commander whether the Handmaid will continue her life, or embrace her death declared by the Commander. The Commander and his wife never become grateful to the handmaids for giving them a baby in their life for which they get crazy for a long time. This is the subordinate position of the Handmaid. To Beauvoir, this subordinate position is known as 'Otherness' where a woman loses her freedom to bear child for herself according to her wish. In other words, in this patriarchal society, basic demands of a Handmaid like Offred are ignored by the society.

In Gilead, all the handmaids who make sexual relation with the Commanders and prepare for bearing the child, are regular visitors to the doctors for their regular routine checkup. The Commanders are very

punctual at this and every month according to their order, the Handmaids visit to the doctor. Offred describes this through these lines, 'I'm taken to the doctor's once a month, for tests: urine, hormones, cancer sear, blood test, the same as before, except that now it's obligatory.' (Atwood 69) The doctors represent the male dominating society like the Commander. They make the poor innocent ladies as their targets to fulfill their physical thirst who visit them as their patients. According to Beauvoir, two of the most important roles of a woman in the patriarchal society are wife and mother. As both these roles are connected with the satisfaction and happiness of men, they become conscious about the health issues of the women. This is described by Atwood in this novel wonderfully through Offred's character. Offred visits to the doctor for her regular mandatory routine checkup once in a month. The doctor, at the time of continuing his checkup, offers his voluntary help to her. He assures Offred that if she agrees to stay with him, he can take the risk to change her test report: "'Shh,'", he says, 'I could help you. I've helped others.'...'Today or tomorrow would do it, why waste it? It'd only take a minute, honey.'" (Atwood 70) But Offred refuses his proposal and leaves the chamber: "'It's too dangerous,' I say, 'No, I can't.'" (Atwood 71) Offred is an example of oppressed woman who is safe neither at her own place, nor at anywhere. She is leading a life full of uncertainty and insecurity.

In the novel, among many ceremonies the author describes a ceremony which is known as Sexual Ceremony. This ceremony is held every month where the Commander takes Offred with him. Like Offred, other Handmaids also join there. There the Handmaids suffer both psychologically and physically by the Commanders and other males. There the Commanders forcefully make the Handmaids as their target. This Ceremony is an example of the manifestation of the strict religious doctrines which prevent women, particularly the Handmaids, from having any control over their bodies and their identities. The masculine power of the Commanders represents here the western colonizers who, for their own benefits, control over the bodies of the Handmaids.

When Atwood was nine years old, she saw a film named *The Red Shoes*. The film was about a lady, who was a dancer. She had to choose either a life full of love, or her career about a dancer. Later, as she could not take the decision, she committed suicide by throwing herself under a running train. Atwood, reflecting on this movie, later commented in her book of essays named *Negotiating with the Dead* that, it was a hard task for a lady to choose between love and dancing. As both needed full dedication, Atwood commented that women could not manage both home and career equally. This theme is used by the writer in this book *The Handmaid's Tale*, where oppressive patriarchal society strongly denies women's right. She used red shoes in this text where the Handmaids wear red shoes. Atwood wants to show

her feministic attitude in the text. As a feminist, Offred's mother was always very vibrant against pornography and abortion. In the text, women, who were the feminists, were known as Unwomen, who always demonstrated against violent sexual attacks on women.

Atwood depicts the oppression imposed upon women by the political and religious trends, women's reaction to such victimization, their loss of identity, and their search for lost female and national identity. The issue of gender is the main concern for examining this novel. By revealing the manipulation and oppression of women, the author depicts the misery of her female characters who always restrain in their feminine roles. Further, she challenges the inferior status of the women in that contemporary society. Atwood has strongly applied the logical arguments and theories of Simone de Beauvoir about sex and gender in her novel to make her points logical and clear. Not only from the philosophical background, but also from the social and religious background, she describes the strained discourses of both male and female societies. Through her writing, Margaret Atwood wants to give a message to all- the people of Gilead do not have sentiments, feelings and conscience; they become numb and disoriented to their shared humanity, and continue their living without any kind of spirit to resist their own repression. Her novel bears the bitter truth of human life: matriarchal society is always controlled by the patriarchal society.

Works Cited

- Armbruster, Jane. "Memory and Politics — A Reflection on 'The Handmaid's Tale.'" *Social Justice*, vol. 17, no. 3 (41), 1990, pp. 146–52. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766564>. Accessed 18 Sep. 2022.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. McClelland Stewart Ltd, 1885. Print.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans and Ed. H. M. Purshley, London: Jonathan Cape. 1956.
- "Patriarchy Reinforced Through Language in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* By James Leavell". *Gender & Litutopiadystopia Wiki*, 2022, https://genderlitutopiadystopia.fandom.com/wiki/Patriarchy_Reinforced_Through_Language_in_Margaret_Atwood%27s_%22The_Handmaid%27s_Tale%22_by_James_Leavell.
- Stillman, Peter G., and S. Anne Johnson. "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2,

1994, pp. 70–86. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719314>. Accessed 18 Sep. 2022.

Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Theory*. Pearson Education Limited. 1994. Print.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Boston, United Kingdom. 1792.

"Women'S Movements In Canada: 1960–85". 2016.

Zarrinjooee, Bahman, and Shirin Kalantarian. "Women'S Oppressed And Disfigured Life In Margaret Atwood'S The Handmaid'S Tale". *Advances In Language And Literary Studies*, vol 8, no. 1, 2017, p. 66. *Australian International Academic Centre*, <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiaa.v.8n.1p.66>. Accessed 18 Sept 2022.