



## PROCLAMATION OF ECOFEMINISM IN MARGARET ATWOODS'S 'THE HANDMAID'S TALE'

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper focusses on Atwood's widely acclaimed and thought provoking novel "*The Handmaid's Tale*" (1985) focused on the theme of the domination and ruthless governing of women by men. The novel presents a world where freedom of women is impeded on account of the new Christian Government's extreme policies. It portrays a futuristic picture of the new republic that throws away the U.S. Constitution and establishes the Republic of Gilead in which women are viewed only as reproductive machines. Portraying females as the leading characters, and environmental crisis as its background, the novel depicts people suffering from tragic environmental pollution in a totalitarian country. It is a place where the females are forced into a submissive position leading the whole society fall into abnormality.

The aim of the paper is to evaluate '*The Handmaid's Tale*' as an ecofeminist novel. The purpose is to assess the patriarchal domination of women and the capitalistic exploitation of nature in the Republic of Gilead. Dualism and patriarchy are harmful to both nature and society and are the root of all misery. The exploitation of nature brings annihilation to the society and become a causative factor of oppression of women by male dominated society.

**KEY WORDS:** Ecofeminism, dualism, patriarchy, Gilead, totalitarian, Handmaid, oppression

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### CONCEPT OF "ECOFEMINISM"

'Ecofeminism' is a term introduced by Francoise d'Eaubonne, a French feminist, in 1974 to emphasize upon women's potential in bringing about an ecological revolution. Ecofeminism combines ecology and feminism and questions the patriarchal domination of women and the capitalist exploitation of nature. Instead of viewing the women-nature connection as a weak link for women, Francoise argues that the affinity between the two is a source of strength needed to make the world peaceful and harmonious. Ecofeminist

movement gained international recognition as a grassroots movement for peace and it encompassed the pragmatic issues like women's status, role of technology, pollution, animal rights, and peace. Ecofeminists hold the patriarchal system and power-over relationship responsible for both environmental degradation and woman's oppression. Ecofeminism aims at solving the increasingly severer environmental problems by connecting nature with feminism. It inherits feminist theories, respecting the difference between two genders, encouraging diversity and criticizing

dualism and the antagonism between males and females, culture and nature, sense and sensibility; at the same time, it adopts the basic ideas of ecology, such as liberation, opposing oppression, and the pursuit of harmony.

#### **MARGARET ATWOOD – A FEMINIST CANADIAN WRITER**

A prominent and prolific Canadian contemporary feminist writer, Margaret Atwood has written award-winning poetry, short-stories and novels, including *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Snowbird* (1981), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *The Tent* (2006) and more. Her most recent novel, *The Blind Assassin* won Great Britain's Booker Prize for literature in 2000. Her works have been translated into 30 different languages. Her literary prowess is evident in her adroit handling of contemporary feminist issues in her novels. Atwood's chief aim in writing the novels is to explore woman's inner psyche, her search for identity, self-discovery and desire of living with dignity. Her protagonists are often a sort of 'every woman' characters of society that reveal the problems faced by women worldwide. The dominant themes of her novels are women empowerment and environmental crisis. Being a humanist, her works reflect humanitarian concerns and desire for a peaceful world.

#### **'THE HANDMAID'S TALE' – AN ECOFEMINIST NOVEL**

The setting of the novel is 2195 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a state in US with Boston as its capital. It depicts a futuristic, grim and authoritarian society where women are not accorded even the primary rights. Atwood names it as the 'Republic of Gilead' administered by a fundamentalist Christian theocracy. The novel is a dystopian vision of a future in which Christian fundamentalists have executed the President, machine-gunned the congress blaming the assassinations on Muslim fanatics and suspended the constitution. The new leadership is a dictatorship of extreme right wing religious radicals, with a goal of repopulating the country after infertility reached crisis low levels due to the ravages of war, radioactive material, etc. They have driven away and persecuted "undesirable" populations such as Jews, blacks, and homosexuals.

Women are denied every right and used only for procreational purposes. The new Gileadean society has created a new social order in which women are treated as commodities.

The environmental deterioration of the current times is the central reason for the creation of Gilead. In the Historical Notes of *'The Handmaid's Tale'* Professor Pieixoto suggests various reasons for the decrease in population.

"Some of the failure to reproduce can undoubtedly be traced to the widespread availability of birth control of various kinds, including abortion, in the immediate pre-Gilead period. ...Stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, ...and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (316-317)

What feminists considered the great triumphs of the 1970s—namely, widespread access to contraception, the legalization of abortion, and the increasing political influence of female voters—have all been undone. Women in Gilead are not only forbidden to vote, they are forbidden to read or write. Atwood's novel paints a picture of a world undone by pollution and infertility, reflecting 1980s fears about declining birth-rates, the dangers of nuclear power and environmental degradation. Gilead is a society founded on a "return to traditional values" and gender roles, and on the subjugation of women by men. Gilead, the biblically-inflected nation has turned into a totalitarian country that promotes taming and ruling of females. The natural world is denatured by man in the Republic of Gilead and pollution of environment has resulted in sterility and deformity of the offsprings. Females are forced into a submissive position and are used for procreation and to bear children for the childless commanders and to act as handmaids.

The great decline in population in Gilead results from the haphazard use of reproduction controlling techniques, due to sexually transmitted diseases and ecological contamination of the present times. Women are the worst victims of the consequences of this in Gilead. They are not provided even the right of citizenship in this totalitarian territory. An enforced new law denies them any right to property, which has to be transferred to the next male kin either husband or another one. They are not allowed employment any more. Even their bank accounts are forcibly frozen. They have been assigned only one function and that is reproduction. Women with fertile ovaries are sent as handmaids to the otherwise childless Commanders to continue their progeny. Every handmaid gets three chances, each of two years with one Commander. If, unfortunately, she is unable to produce a child within her term of six years, she is designated as 'Unwoman' and sent to the colonies to clean the poisonous wastes. On the other hand, if the handmaid is lucky enough to beget a child, she is then transferred to the next Commander after giving her child to the earlier Commander and her wife. Hence, woman is no less than a national resource in the Gileadean regime. Handmaid as an individual is stripped off her personal name and assigned a patronymic to her which merely indicates the male to whom she is assigned - as Of Fred Of Glen and Of Warren. The name is composed of the preposition 'of' indicating possession and the name of her. In *Gilead*, where women are defined as mere functions to serve man as the wife, decorative in function, and dressed in blue, the daughter, silent and submissive, dressed in white, the *Martha*, middle aged housekeeper, in green and *Handmaid* in red personifying the child bearing function, all concept their victim position as something is inevitable, dictated by Biology and decreed by history, at time when Caucasian birth rates had declined steeply. They who are the complete property of state have no name, identity or emotion other than fear and are known after the Commanders with whom they have to perform the impregnation ceremony. "We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels ambulatory chalices" (146) explains the whole situation. They are

not supposed to think and feel. There are a few like *Moirra*, *Ofglen* and *Offred* who rebel against the role of the victim but they are punished for this action.

#### OFFRED – THE CHIEF PROTAGONIST OF THE NOVEL

'*The Handmaid's Tale*' is a dystopian novel written as a fictional memoir by a woman captured in the theocratic regime of the Republic of Gilead. We learn about her story in bits and pieces as she moves along. We know that she didn't always live under this regime, that once, some years ago, she had been married to a man named Luke, that she had had a young daughter and a regular job, and that she used to wear things like jeans and jogging pants. We never learn her real name, only that she is now *Offred*, a name designating her as the property of a high level official named *Fred*.

The female protagonist *Offred* is one among the many handmaids in Gilead. Caught up in a world of rules, strict regulation, oppression and extreme punishment, the novel's protagonist, *Offred* attempts to get through each and every suffering, each and every day by holding on to the belief that she will someday be reunited with her husband and daughter. Like other women she too is considered as a mere natural resource, as a mere reproductive being and is utilized to the maximum. Romantic or even simply emotional relationships are illegal among most groups and punishable by death. At one point, the Commander, starving for such a connection, invites *Offred* to secretly play *Scrabble* with him. He asks *Offred*, "What did we overlook [in our new world]?" (231) and, with some of that power now melted through intimacy, she is able to respond honestly, "Love." (231) *Offred* is allowed no mirror in her room at the commander's house because she could kill herself with a piece of it, but she can see her red-robed figure reflected and distorted in the mirror of the stairs. *Offred* draws the reader into the dangerous enterprise of her narrative. Women are placed in a caste system that encourages alienation and resentment. *Offred* uses language as a means of communication in order to depict her inner agonies, pain and bitter experiences. Her affair with *Nick* and with the Underground network is meant for rescuing women. They present the mission of Gilead as: "Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of

life together, each performing her appointed task"  
(171)

As **Sharon R. Wilson** says: "Through *Offred's Tale* Atwood presents a timeless vision of sexual/gender politics in a fallen world"(Sharon: 294)'*The Handmaid's Tale*', Atwood's sixth novel depicts people who are suffering from tragic environmental pollution in a totalitarian country. Nature in Gilead is oppressed due to the repeated use of pesticides and nuclear accidents, where men rape and destroy living nature and women for their own sake. As **K. Balachandran** observes: "Every aspect of environmental degradation, destruction and abuse of nature will translate itself into a serious menace to the life of future generation". (Balchandran:4)In the novel, the natural creatures and phenomenon are seen as the incarnation of females and the product of civilization such as guns, cars and books are the incarnation of males. Both women and nature suffer under patriarchal domination and are treated as objects to be controlled, subdued, consumed, exploited and tamed.

#### ECOFEMINIST IMAGES

Atwood makes ample use of ecofeminist images in the novel in order to emphasize the close association of women and nature. She highlights the subjugation and oppression experienced by both, nature and women through the images and symbols manifested by her in the novel. Offred, the handmaid, compares her body with that of the Earth as she utters:

"I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth. I set my ear against, for rumours of the future... Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure."(83)

Margaret Atwood makes use of garden imagery through the incident of Offred making a visit to the Commander's garden. Offred thinks about her past days when she was leading her life happily with her husband Luke and her daughter. She says:

"I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes

of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers" (22).

Offred also remembers:

"The scent from the garden rises like heat from a body, there must be night-blooming flowers, it's so strong. I can almost see it, red radiation, wavering upwards like the shimmer above highway tarmac at noon". (201)

In Gilead, many wives of Commanders involve themselves in the gardening activities so that they could acquire some mental peace and inner harmony.

#### IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH FLORA

Atwood has linked several images of body of a woman with the flora in the novel. Aunt Lydia while explaining the handmaids about their duties, tells them, "Think of yourselves as seeds...let's pretend we're trees". (28) Offred is fond of adorning herself with flowers but now she cannot fulfil her desires as she considers "They're (Flowers) are the genital organs of plants". (91) Offered relates herself with the ecological image when she says: "Winter is not so dangerous. I need hardness, cold, rigidity; not this heaviness, as if I'm a melon on a stem, this liquid ripeness." (162). There is also a reference of nature as Offred narrates her experience of walking through the gravel path:

"I walk along the gravel path that divides the back lawn, neatly, like a hair parting. It has rained during the night; the grass to either side is damp, the air humid. Here and there are worms, evidence of the fertility of the soil, caught by the sun, half dead; flexible and pink, like lips."(27)

While suspecting Ofglen to be a spy, Offred vents her apprehension:

"It occurs to me that she may be a spy, a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow. But I can't believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening."(178)

#### IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH FAUNA

'*The Handmaid's Tale*' is replete with images related to fauna of the environment. A wide variety of organisms including spider, mouse, frog, snake, pig, vulture, chicken, fish, beetle, oyster,

worm, cat, dog, ant etc. are referred to in the novel so as to equate the handmaids' survival with them. While describing the appearance of Ofglen, Offred says, "She walks demurely, head down, red-gloved hands clasped in front, with short little steps like a trained pig's, on its hind legs." (29) Also the hanged bodies of the victims of Gilead are full of animal images:

The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels. (289)

### CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is rightly considered to be an ecofeminist novel as females, natural phenomena, and natural creatures show resemblance under the same oppression. Females hope to find harmony, equality, wholeness and mutual benefit by getting close to nature, which indicates the closeness between women and nature, as well as nature's healing power upon women. In contrast, men pay much attention to the strength and power that technology and civilization bring to them, and focus on increasing their ability in competition and rivalry. Besides, the depiction of female friendship and the thought-provoking ending of the novel indicate that although Gilead is horrible, the female friendship and the closeness to nature have suggested ways to control the patriarchal and dualistic ideas. *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects ecofeminist ideas that women and nature, which enjoy the same joy and moan the same sorrow, are closely linked together. Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society where fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. Man considers himself as the subject, the mind, the hub of the reason, active form whereas woman is considered as the object, the body, the hub of emotions, just passive matter. By voicing the antagonism between nature and civilization, females and males, it is evident that the ideology of dualism is the chief reason for Gilead's falling into crisis. On one hand, human beings' self-centeredness and blind exploitation of nature

causes sterility of nature; on the other hand, the sterility of society comes from women's exclusion from men and men's hostility towards women.

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