

WOMEN'S OPPRESSED AND DISFIGURED LIFE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE: WITH REFERENCE TO SIMONE DE BEAUVIOUR'S THE SECOND SEX

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ABSTRACT

*The paper is an attempt to bring out the oppression of women as presented in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) while comparing with the theories of, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) presented in *The Second Sex* (1949) which leads to better understanding of sex and gender. In *The Second Sex* the ideology focuses mainly on the oppression through social structure which confines women under the title of Other to man's self. She believes that woman cannot be a simple biological category, while she also asserts that womanhood is imposed on woman by civilization. As presented by her, the fundamental social meaning of woman is Other. She believes that biology is the main source for woman's oppression, within patriarchal society, she challenges the gender equality discourse in which women are defined based on their biology and also believes that women face oppression and exploitation because of the sexual deviation in men's mind. She does not accept the heterosexuality as the norm for sexual relations as she considers them biased. The paper also suggests how Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* is full of insights on feminist issues such as loss of identity, subordination of woman in a male dominated society and women's exploitation in a society where woman's body is treated as an object – a tool for reproduction. Gender parity, and pitfalls of patriarchal system are main causes of women's oppression.*

Keywords: Gender , Oppression, loss of identity, Patriarchy, Sex and Gender, Sexuality.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood is considered to be one of the most brilliant writers in contemporary Canadian literature. She has also been part of Canadian politics and its feminist movement, which shows why her works are mostly related to social and political issues. She considers the relation between men and women as basic human rights, as the issue of gender is the author's major concern. Her portrayal of women character shows that they are always searching for their lost identity in the patriarchal societies , as presented by her the struggle is real. Another theme for her novels is oppression of women in a patriarchal society which can be seen in her writings while challenging the inferior status of women in society while highlighting the issues of gender, exploitation and oppression of women, women's body with reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her female characters are confined to their feminine roles in her novels.

Here, gender is the main concern for examining *The Handmaid's Tale*. As shown in the novel , the women in Gilead society, are deprived of their freedom and ordered to serve the state in different ways the female body being the tool to serve, while being totally under the control of male members of the patriarchal society; which represents the patriarchal society ,reflecting the political ideology in America of that time. Women are considered as a mere tool of production, and under the control of men while Patriarchal rules and dominance of husbands or fathers in the family is shown clearly, the women are transformed to the traditional passive roles in the society. Atwood is concerned about women's situation in the society, and the discriminations they encounter because of their sex in their lives. With reference to the Gilead society the view presented is that in the mid-1980s in the United States, pollution and nuclear accidents left many women infertile. As the republic of Gilead gained control over the government, in the new regime, women were divided into several categories, they were categorized by their ages, and fertility so much so that they were assigned separate roles in the society. Jews, old

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women, and nonwhite people are sent to radioactive territory, known as Colonies. White fertile women are sent to Commander's house to become handmaids. The Handmaids have only one duty, which is bearing child for the childless couples of higher-class families. In Gilead, the Handmaids have to follow strict rules of the society and accept inferior and oppressed position of women in the patriarchal society. This patriarchal set up reduces the women to the status of slaves and being mere a means for reproduction. Atwood portrays a patriarchal society where women are victimized and marginalized by the state itself, while in reality the state should give them equal status to their male counterparts..

This study shows women's subordinate position and Otherness in a male dominated society and shows how, in this patriarchal society, women's basic freedom is ignored by the society.

Materials and Methods

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian nightmare, which denies basic freedom to enslaved women. This paper provides a point of view from which The Handmaid's Tale can be analyzed in terms of sexual inequality based on Simone de Beauvoir's theories stated in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir, as the most influential figure in feminism, argues in *The Second Sex* argues that women and their social condition in a patriarchal society is always defined as 'Other' with reference to their male counterparts. She shows that women are oppressed, marginalized, are given the secondary status in the society. The concept of distinction between sex and gender and rejecting biology as the basis for women's inferior position and oppression is also presented in *The Second Sex*. Her primary argument is that throughout history women are repressed and have been constructed as man's 'Other' and have no autonomy or control over their own lives. Man is in charge; while women are confined, and are just for men's use ,interest and for sexual gratification. The patriarchal society is constructed in a way to maintain women in the inferior position while completely ignoring their wills. Beauvoir argues that women's body, their female anatomy has been the main reason which confined them to the roles of wife and mother, the most important roles for women in the patriarchal society. The woman's role has been consigned to child rearing and sex. In this society is men's given freedom and priority in life, while oppression and suffrage are for women to bear. Beauvoir is the one who differentiates sex from gender. The famous claim in *The Second Sex*: "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (273), reflected the distinction between "sex" as the biological difference between man and women and "gender" as the socially and culturally constructed difference.

Beauvoir points out that the society and culture construct woman to be woman, and objectify them as marginalized in the patriarchal society. She says that no one can define what woman is, but social forces, which establish her oppressed situation determine what woman must be which is completely based on the patriarchal mindset. Based on Beauvoir's assertions in *The Second Sex*, through family and other social institutions man can always gets away in oppressing woman as per his needs.. In Beauvoir's view, "everything helps to confirm this hierarchy [hierarchy of the sexes]" (292). Distributing power in traditional families and other social institutions perpetuate the patriarchal system in a society. The male-dominated family in a society reinforces the idea that man is given superiority and domination based on cultural views. Beauvoir accepts physiological and biological differences between men and women; at the same time rejecting the physiological differences between men and women as the factor to repress women in the society. Troil Moi is of the opinion that that being a woman is seen as a background for all her acts and Beauvoir had found a way of thinking about sexual difference. Moi in *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays* (1999) states "to say that sexed body is the inevitable background for all our acts, is at once a claim that is always holds the key to the meaning of a women's acts" (120). Through her ideas Beauvoir aims to create a society where women can have her independent status as women where she is not compared to men for her identity nor is dependent on their opinions or not treated sexless beings only,. In her book, Beauvoir maintains that man refers to all human beings; man is the norm and standard in the patriarchal society, where as for man, woman is sex, an object for gratification. So it is not surprising that in such a society woman is defined in contrast to her differences from man. Man's body is considered as normal and woman's body is abnormal; more over very shocking but true is that, she is defined according to her reproductive capabilities. Beauvoir criticizes the sex roles imposed on women by patriarchy and argues that the female body justifies the feminine role which is not acceptable.

Women's Oppression

In *The Handmaid's Tale* women's sexuality is manipulated and appropriated by men. While taking their maternal tasks in bearing children, the Handmaids are regulated and oppressed based on their sex because of their restricted roles and subordinated position in Gilead.. Atwood's novel shows the female body as something that is degraded, sexualized, while being socially accepted as the core of female identity; women are reduced to an object in the heterosexual relationship.

Beauvoir asserts that women are considered as sexual objects, where the body is for men's pleasure; she rejects heterosexuality as a norm of the society, women are confined to their maternal task and men's requirements determine female sexuality. The women in Gilead are treated as sexual objects of men and even sexually violated to satisfy men's needs and pleasures and are thus victims because of their female body. In the patriarchal societies, the relation between men and women are built based on the domination and subordination. Sexuality is one of the important factors in their relationship.

As Beauvoir states, man's: "domination is expressed in the very posture of copulation—in almost all animals the male is on the female, and certainly the organ he uses is a material object, but it appears here in its animated state—it is a tool— where as in this performance the female organ is mere in the nature of an inert receptacle. The male deposits his semen, the female receives it. Thus, though the female plays a fundamentally active role in procreation, she submits to the coition, which invades her individuality and introduces an alien element through penetration and internal fertilization" (50). Beauvoir further states, heterosexuality is one of the main factors for oppressing women in their sexual orientation. In Gilead through the experience of sexual objectification from the heterosexual institution in the society. In Gilead, women's sexuality is under the control mainly through sexual abuse and exploitation.

Accordingly, heterosexuality, sexual torture are the means for abusing a woman and reducing her to a mere object. In the patriarchal society of Gilead, men have power over women and their bodies and women suffer due to this. The women, practically, are like prisoner of sexual desires of men. It is obvious that "The Handmaid's Tale construct a feminist reading position as it continues Bodily Harm's critique of the sexual degradation violence to which women are subjected" (Bouson 139). In the patriarchal society of Gilead women play the roles of prostitutes for men because of the authority and domination of male members toward female. Beauvoir believes "the prostitute is denied the rights of a person, she sums up all the forms of feminine slavery at once"; she then asserts "woman appears here [...] as an object of pleasure" (171). There is a hidden household, known as Jezebel's in Gilead that shows the strong sense of women's sexual slavery in this patriarchal society, as Moira defines "Butch Paradise" (The Handmaid's Tale 249). In Gilead women are victimized, brutalized, and dehumanized by the male's control and power upon the women's bodies which is like "Master-Slave relationship". Master always benefits from slave and "everything is in favor of the oppressor [master] and against the oppressed [slave]" (Beauvoir 20).

With reference to patriarchal society of Gilead, Offred is treated as a prostitute when she becomes Commander's mistress; it is very painful to see her dressed as a prostitute by the Commander when they want to go to the Jezebel's. Offred is a slave and a mere object for the Commander's desire.

Here at this point we must refer to Beauvoir's idea about prostitution which is a kind of slavery. She argues: "public or simply social authority always belongs to men" and also adds, for men, "women constitute a part of the property which [men] possesses and which is a medium of exchange between them" (ibid 96). The tag on Offred's wrist that makes her as an evening rental indicates her status as a slave and an object and Commander's property as Offred says the Commander "slips around my wrist a tag, purple, on an elastic band, like the tag for airport luggage", and also adds, "if anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental" (The Handmaid's Tale 233). Women are as commodities within the exchange market under patriarchy. Women in Jezebel's are like objects for sale in the patriarchal society. In Atwood's novel "women are particularly singled out as products, items to be decorated and sold as commodities" (Agee and Gaines 40).

Beauvoir further states that, in the patriarchal society, heterosexual sex results in gender inequalities. She argues that it is one of the main ways for women's subordination. In Gilead, the Handmaids are exploited and manipulated to serve as sexual objects for male sexual consumption and use, mainly through heterosexual relationship. Similarly, Beauvoir claims "it is impossible to regard woman simply as a productive force: she is for man a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object—another through whom he seeks himself" (85).

The strong hold of patriarchal ideology is signified in the impregnation Ceremony which in reality is sexual abuse of women. In the state of Gilead, sex for pleasure is forbidden as it is under the control of male members. In Atwood's novel, women's sexual desires are oppressed, and women's inferiority and man's superiority are presented in Ceremony. "The Handmaids are required to submit to sexual intercourse with their Commanders monthly in the hopes of achieving a pregnancy, sexual passion is entirely set aside and love no longer exists, at least not officially. Sex is a function" (Macpherson 55). In Gilead, the female body is just for bearing child and man's pleasure, it is just a job for the Handmaids. In a similar way, Beauvoir states that the woman is imprisoned "through man's need—sexual desire and the desire of

offspring" (10). Tidd, in her work *Simone de Beauvoir*, writes in "female sexuality within a heterosexual binary [...] women's role was conditioned by male desire and motherhood" (54). In Gilead, Ceremony is for satisfying the male desire and childbearing. In Gilead, the impregnation Ceremony is just for procreation under the state's rules and it has benefit for men and fulfills their sexual desires too. In other words, "man's biological role in reproduction [...] is such that it does not interfere with his interest as an individual. Indeed, the two interests can coincide exactly" (qtd. in Beaur 219). In the patriarchal society of Gilead heterosexuality is an ideal form because reproduction is their purpose and the other forms are forbidden by the state, and they do not have the right to choose. In Gilead, sexuality is bound to notions of biological sexual difference and reproduction and the state privileges heterosexual relations over other sexual relations, for example homosexuality. Women's definition based on biology is socially and politically constructed in Gilead society. The Gilead confines the role of woman mainly to the maternal role.

However, Moira is different and denies the principles of heterosexuality the state established to subordinate women. Some feminists believe that homosexuality is "the most or even the only, politically correct choice for a woman" (Walters 107). Moira denies man's superiority in Gilead and it is one way for her to show this. As a homosexual, Moira is a strange person in the heterosexual society of Gilead. She is not a traditional woman; on the contrary, Offred is a traditional one who seeks for men's love within the heterosexual framework. In Gilead, women as the Wives and Handmaids are forced to take the maternal roles to produce babies by social institutions. The state through family and other social institutions tries to convince women that biology determines their destiny and they fulfilled their duty and task by bearing child. The female victimization is clearly manifested by the Handmaids as sexual objects violated by the Commanders within the heterosexual society of Gilead.

Conclusion

The *Handmaid's Tale*, is primarily concerned with objectifying women in the patriarchal society. It is the story of women's oppression, where women become slaves subjected to the rigid control in every aspect of their lives. The novel shows the women's inferior status in the society. Atwood presents the women as the second sex and Other. She describes a world without freedom, without choice and opinion for women. She describes a society in which women are mentally and physically enslaved and men are their masters. In this novel, Atwood depicts a patriarchal society in which women are shapeless objects that society forms them in accordance with men's desires. She aims to show that in the patriarchal societies women are worthless and are just for reproduction and satisfying men's sexual desire. They are men's property and the patriarchal norms deprived them of everything even their identity. Atwood, by writing this novel, wants the reader to understand the social conditions of women over time. We must agree when Atwood and Beauvoir argue that women as a group are designated to inferior status in the society. They also argue that women's marginalization is mainly because of their capacity to reproduction. Their work presents that men are the prime measure by which the world and particularly women are judged, one theoretically and the other through her novel. Both represent the problem of women's otherness and attempts to discover the means by which women overcome this secondary status. They assert that the social construction creates a generalized idea of women that all female must obey, the social forces decide a woman's identity, establish her inferior position, and impose rules on her. These two thinkers show that sexuality has the main role in restricting women and is the main cause for women's oppression and victimization and their inferior position in the masculine society.

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