

GENDER POLITICS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVEL *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Mahmuda Nongjai
Research Scholar
Department of English,
Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh

The very issue of gender politics in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is an enigma. The question arising from such an assertion is what does it mean to speak of gender politics, and what is the relationship between politics and gender? There are theoretical assumptions in these juxtapositions because the inter-subjective realm of gender connects to the public and political domain. Gender politics is broadly the political attitudes or positions that focus on the concerns of social groups identified mainly on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the relationship between gender and politics is more complicated than it seems. And this paper explores gender related politics as projected by Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, like most of her other works covers a wide range of themes and issues. One predominant theme is the relegation and subjection of women by men on the basis of gender difference so as to benefit men's position in the society. Christine Gomez has rightly affirmed: "Most of Atwood's novels grapple with the politics of gender" (Gomez 73). Reaffirming the assertion of Gomez, it can be stated that *The Handmaid's Tale* is about issues regarding the policies of subjugation adopted by patriarchal state on its citizens based on sex and gender roles. The politics of gender is not new, it exists where patriarchy exists and "Patriarchy," as Moya Lloyd asserts, "is a system of male power that permeates all aspects of life at all times and in all places" (Lloyd 74). So, gender politics was there in any social set up as it is still in every society as Surya Munro observes in her book *Gender Politics*:

We live in a world that is deeply structured by sex and gender. The categorization of people as 'male' or 'female' permeates our society on every level, including our language, relationships, social institutions, and academic debates. On a social level, biological determinism, or the belief that we act in certain ways because of our physical make-up, is rife. This is the case despite the changes that have occurred over the past century in the way that gender and sexuality are constructed, and high levels of cross-cultural gender and sexual variance. The development of constructionist, or 'nurture', approaches, and, more recently, post-structuralist (and postmodernist) theories, has disrupted biologically determinist approaches to gender and sexuality, but at the same time, evidence to support the existence of some biological basis for gender differences continues to emerge (Munro 10).

Male and female are different regarding anatomy and biological function. But when there emerges an attitude of subjecting or treating women as sex slaves then the very foundation of the society is on a wrong footing. It is exactly what happens in Gilead. True to the words of Surya Munro the Gileadean categorization of its subjects into different categories is done on the social, cultural, political and lingual basis. The patriarchal mindset of subjecting women to inhuman conditions is so deeply structured in the social and political fabric of the Gileadean regime that everything from language to sexual practices are State monitored. Having said this, we may also familiarize ourselves with the notion of gender prevalent in the social and academic discourse in the present situation. The general notion of gender as feminists and academicians agree is that it is a social construct. Judith Butler, a US academician and one of the major proponents of gender studies, argues that,

If one “is” a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained (Butler 6).

As there is a binary or dialectic involved in the construction of a society, it is understandable that there has to be dividing factors between different and same sexes according to their function and status. Women are seen as anything opposite to men. When women are emotional men are rational. The republic of Gilead is founded on such assumptions. And Atwood here tries to depict that this age-old obsolete ideal of a patriarchal social mindset is still prevalent and may do so in the future as well.

As a novel which satirizes male dominance in every sphere of a woman’s life *The Handmaid’s Tale* reveals the politics of the patriarchal social set up in order to achieve its ends. The genre in which the novel is put may be anything as per the interpretation made by critics, it may be based in the past or present or in the foreseeable future but the novel is about women who have been silenced by the patriarchal system. It is a convenient tool for Atwood to write the novel as a science fiction as she can freely question not only the patriarchal social and political systems, but also the conventional narrative strategies employed by the male writers of the genre. This satirical novel, as Nathalie Cooke puts it, is, “an example of the way in which Atwood exposes the double standards associated with gender in our society”(Cooke113). Atwood’s attack is on the patriarchal mindset of the society. Putting blames on women for every conceivable mistake has been a perpetual practice prevalent in every society. Even in the Bible it is Eve, the woman, who is blamed for eating the forbidden fruit. Such a commonplace practice of blaming woman for every social mistake is because of long standing patriarchal attitude of the humankind. We all must know the forces behind patriarchy:

Patriarchy is driven by a powerful and self-perpetuating dynamic between control and fear. This dynamic is coupled to a system of male privilege that is paradoxically grounded in competitive solidarity among men. As in every social system, patriarchal paths of least resistance can make it seem natural, even invisible. These paths encourage men to perpetuate an oppressive system that privileges them at women’s expense, and

encourage women to accept the terms of their own oppression even to the extent of resisting change (G. Johnson 207).

It is exactly the situation Atwood delineates in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the Republic of Gilead, as in almost every society, men hold the power and they make the laws. Apparently, the laws made by the founding fathers of the republic are to save the society from extinction because of the rapid plummet of population as an after effect of a nuclear war and, hence, there is an urgency to produce babies at a higher rate and at any cost. For this to happen, the regime would go to any extent including domestication of women. The very idea of procreation has become the law and the culture for the regime. The Gileadean paradigm of domesticating and nurturing women who can produce children undermines women's freedom. It becomes very clear that such an act of putting women in such a situation is because of the emerging culture of the regime and partly due to women's ability to procreate.

Judith Butler, again, says that, "whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed" (Butler9). The culture of Gilead, then, is that of the division of individuals on the lines of gender and elimination of individual freedom, especially of women, for the sole purpose of the regime to survive. It is again true that Gilead comes first before everything else. In such circumstances one may ask the question some feminist critics have been asking, "How do women exist in cultural contexts and, more importantly, how do they respond to cultural traditions that impose their conventions and contexts on women's identities?" (Gottlieb, 2001, p. 12) So the Gileadean construct of women dehumanizes women and downplays women's self-respect and identity. It is in fact hypocrisy of the regime that, sooner or later, becomes the basis for revolt, breaking of laws by the lawmakers themselves and widespread discontent among men and women alike.

The story of the novel aims at the depiction of the politics of a government that claims to take the Book of Genesis at its word, and its demonic treatment of female subjects. It is true that patriarchal Gilead refers to the text of the Bible to fit their political, social, and sexual goals. Moreover, "sexual relationships are regimented and supervised by the ruling elite, ostensibly in the interest of producing the maximum number of children for the state but actually . . . to eliminate chances of forming personal relationships and private loyalties" (Hoeverler, Long and Schusterix) that could counter the regime's authority or pose a threat to the patriarchal order. It is evident from the story of the novel that Gileadean regime's sole aim is the control of sex and sexuality of its subjects. That is why the Gileadean regime is based on the idea that sex is for procreation, not for pleasure. And it is also part of the regime's policy to execute gays and lesbians, wiping out of pornography and sexual clothing in order to control the sexual behavior of its citizens. Apart from these, the regime bans abortion and kills doctors who are involved, makes divorce and second marriages illegal, and ritualizes unspeakable sexual rites and relations. The regime deliberately stirs up the fear of sexuality in order to separate sex from sexuality. Such a fear is imposed upon every citizen regardless of sex or gender. But in the case of female subjects it is even worse. It can be argued that such bizarre laws and circumstances affect women so much that they have no significant role to play in the making of the regime except for the duties assigned to them. As the identity of woman is reduced to that of 'natural resources', the very existence of their collective voice is never heard.

As stated above, sex in Gilead is understood to be for purposes of procreation only, as it was understood by the Puritans in Massachusetts in 18th century. In Gilead "Anatomy is destiny" (Coad54) and women such as handmaids become victims because of their biological features.

“The handmaid’s situation,” writes Amin Malak, “lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion in *The Second Sex* about man defining woman not as an autonomous being”, but merely as of value “relative to him” (quoted in Brian W. Shaffer140).The tendency to identify woman with her husband or the notion of woman needing a man to be identified with is customary in the patriarchal society. It hampers the all-round development of woman. This is the reason why we are not told the real name of the female protagonist. Offred’s name, a patronymic “composed of the possessive preposition and the first name [in her case, Fred]” of her Commander, but also suggesting “afraid,” “offered,” and “off-read” (misread) is a linguistic emblem of the regime’s misogynistic social system” (Bouson138). The Gileadean regime is so male chauvinistic that any handmaid must bury her name and be identified with the name of the Commander she is assigned to. It indicates that the roles imposed on her by the patriarchal system of Gilead have destroyed her true identity. No woman would want it and Atwood here strongly opposes such a commonplace practice. That is why she makes the narrator of the novel say, “I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up, one day” (Atwood,*The Handmaid’s Tale*104, subsequent citations from this text will be given in page no. only).Offred terms her previous name as ‘some treasure’ because her story is the search of her true identity. Her fragmented identity is further revealed in the broken images she sees of herself in effaced mirrors or shop windows.

It is a strong motion of many feminists that either sex is naturally superior to each other. They believe that women are inherently just as strong and intelligent as the so-called stronger sex. However, the female characters in the novel are portrayed in such a way that they are directly in conflict with the idea of women's empowerment. It could be because Atwood wants to portray the subjugation of women and their relationship with the state in a very satirical manner. She projects the plight of women at the hands of male chauvinists from the ancient times to the possible similar treatment in the future. Thus, in the construction of Gilead, Atwood seems to anticipateJudith Butler’s belief in the social and cultural construct of gender and sex. Quoting Judith Butler we get the argument that:

If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? Does “construction” suggest that certain laws generate gender differences along universal axes of sexual difference? How and where does the construction of gender take place?(Butler 11)

The notion that gender is constructed advocate certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inescapable cultural law. It is exactly what happens in the regime of Gilead where gender is a device for formulation of several laws in order to achieve its own targeted ends. Judith Butler further argues that, “When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (Butler12).

This ‘biology-is-destiny’ formulation makes Offred an instrument for procreation only as if she has no other role in the society. She is one among many women who are made to believe that they are doing a great service to the regime. She is also among the very few fertile women in the republic and, therefore, she is of immense importance.“A thing is valued, she [Aunt Lydia]

says, if it is rare and hard to get” (141). Handmaids with viable ovaries are rare things and prized possessions of the regime and they are “necessary to the good” (Beauvoir175) because it is through them that the population of Gilead can be increased. But, the regime does not consider the health problems handmaids face in giving birth to too many children. All that the regime wants is the process of procreation through women by all means. It is again true that once the handmaids stop breeding, they don’t seem to have any significant purpose to the republic. Even giving birth to an Unbaby [babies born with deformities] risks the position of a handmaid. Thus, Offred’s anxiety rises when Ofwarren starts labor pain,

What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby... There’s no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that is now outlawed. What would be the point of knowing anyway? You can’t have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term.
(139)

The Gileadean tradition that women are responsible for giving birth even at the cost of her life is highly paradoxical. It is because there is no way to tell the health of the child in the womb as such an examination is banned in the regime. It poses a great risk to the mother. On top of this, even if one knows what she carries is an Unbaby, there is no way to undergo an abortion as it is again banned. Abortion is a woman’s choice, her freedom to choose and decide according to her convenience. But, freedom is not there for women in Gilead. “Here one has only to think of Shulamith Firestone’s account of patriarchy as founded in male control over the means of reproduction (1970),” Moya Lloyd rightly observes, “Because men controlled these means, they were able to control women, thus securing men’s own interests as the ruling sex-class. The structure of society was knowable in terms of the laws of technological development relating to reproduction” (Lloyd75).

Regarding the cause of the subordinate position of women, Kate Millett writes in her book *Sexual Politics* that “If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women” (Millett 42). The Republic of Gilead is fully aware of this idea and hence their utmost endeavor is to impose this “systematic ignorance” upon women. As a result, Women, in the Republic, are prevented from pursuing academic and intellectual aspirations. All that a woman gains knowledge or being taught of something is from the state run centers where they are taught to fear the state and be obedient to their masters. Reading of anything is prohibited for women, especially for the handmaids in the state. There are no books, magazines, or any other thing which could be read. Even the Bible is banned for women. This prohibition is imposed to avoid women from acquiring wider knowledge and understanding “for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resource will she find within herself, the less will she dare affirm herself as subject” (Beauvoir308). Again, “Writing, no matter what its subject,” Atwood claims, “is an act of faith; the primary faith being that someone out there will read the results. I believe it’s also an act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are. If the writer is very lucky and manages to live long enough, I think it can also be an act of charity. It takes a lot to see what is there, both without flinching or turning away and without bitterness. The world exists; the writer testifies. She cannot deny anything human” (Atwood, *Second Words* 349). Gileadean regime knows very well that this act of faith, hope and charity produced by writing can be instrumental in communication and forming alliances which can overturn their government and bring down the regime. Subsequently, writing is also banned

for the handmaids in the Republic. So, they use pictures and signs for communication. There is also nothing which they can use for writing. So Offred's story is not written down but narrated as we know it from her recorded tapes. About her story, Offred says, "It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (50).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood employs powerful and subtle language so as to keep the readers wanting for more. The aim of the novel is, as Glenn Deer puts it, "to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one" (Deer215). This is a contest that the novel cleverly meets. Everything from Offred's sense of space to speech is controlled by the Gilead regime. It is not surprising that Offred succumbs to fatalism, admitting "I try not to think too much" (8). Though the Gilead regime claims that its social system is designed to protect women, this system's "actual purpose is to control them and reinforce the notion that their biology is their destiny" (quoted in Freibert 283-4).

It is worth mentioning that women are put into many-tiered categories according to their biology and biological productivity and preferences. The blue-clad Wives of the Commanders preside over their homes and gardens, and attend public functions. The red-clad handmaids are assigned sexual duties. They are drilled in self-denial and renunciation and reduced to fertility machines. The green-clad Marthas clean and cook. The Econowives, married to upper-level menials, combine the functions of the other groups and consequently wear striped blue/red/green dresses. At the Rachel and Leah Center, the Aunts use electric cattle prods to keep the handmaids in line. The black-clad widows, a rapidly diminishing group, live in limbo. The gray-clad Unwomen, those who refuse to cooperate with the system, work in the Colonies.

The significant use of colors - red for handmaids, royal blue for the wives, green for the Marthas, and all these colors in stripes for the econowives - has various religious and political connotations, all of which indicate the male-dictated roles for women. The uniformity in the plain style of dress also bears connotations of a military totalitarian order, which is governed by men dressed in black uniforms.

Despite the widespread acceptance of this social hierarchy, the Wives of Commanders with handmaids remain uncomfortable with the monthly coupling ceremony and therefore view handmaids as necessary evils. "I am a reproach to her," Offred imagines of the childless Serena Joy, her Commander's wife, but also "a necessity" (15). This monthly event is the centerpiece of the handmaid's life; it is her chief duty and the focus of her schedule. But this monthly ceremony is an abominable act to Offred as well as other handmaids. She laments one such ceremony as:

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 . . . What's going on in this room . . . is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance . . . It has nothing to do with sexual desire at least for me and certainly for Serena (116-117).

It is a general consensus that love ultimately leads to the physical union of two bodies. Such an act is possible when there is a presence of strong passions for love in both the individuals. But, what Offred experiences in the monthly ceremony is nothing to do with love or desire or passion. She did that just to fulfill the norms of the regime. That is not what Offred, as a woman, wishes. She is a woman and she wants her body to be given to the one she loves. But in this case, without a protest she agrees and becomes a part to the sexual act as a silent spectator.

It is because she becomes a property of the Commander. The Commander owns her like he owns a pet or a toy and he can use her anyway he desires. When the status of a woman is reduced to such dismal circumstances there appears the real idea of the republic in regards to women. The image of women portrayed here in the republic is that of women who are mere sex toys or slaves. Their want of love and care are demoted in the name of procreation and survival of the regime. Offred wonders about such a denial of love and pleasure: “But this is wrong, nobody dies from lack of sex. Its lack of love we die from. There’s nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere. Who knows where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere as I am for them. I too am a missing person” (127).

It is understandable for a woman to feel like a woman. Love and care are things of the past. Offred reflects the desires she holds so dear in her heart “I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I hunger to commit the act of touch” (13). Apart from stripping them of their freedom no woman can form emotional attachment with either sex. This lack of love and human bonding creates a hunger for all. And this would ultimately plant the seeds of discontent and revolt among the citizens of the regime.

In the Republic of Gilead, a handmaid’s life depends upon conception and giving birth to a real baby and therefore the monthly Ceremony of copulation is a “serious business” (117) for the handmaids including Offred. If she conceives and carries a healthy baby to term, she will be guaranteed that she will never be classed as an Unwoman: “she’ll never be sent to the Colonies, she’ll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward” (159). If she does not conceive, there is always the possibility of being declared Unwoman and sent to the Colonies, to her death. Ironically enough, in the republic of Gilead, a commander is certainly promoted if he is successful in impregnating the handmaid assigned to him and the handmaid gives to a real baby. It goes without saying that this most serious business of the handmaid’s monthly calendar dehumanizes her, so completely is she determined by the service her body performs for her master. Her worth is wholly bound up with whether or not she is a “worthy vessel” (81) and can fulfill her promise as a “natural resource” (80). “We are containers,” Offred observes of the role of handmaids; “it’s only the inside of our bodies that are important” (119). She later concludes that “We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans (170)... We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (171). Success or failure hinges exclusively on whether pregnancy ensues: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (91). This way biology becomes destiny for women in the Gilead. Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that “Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within her limits of her own nature” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 15) is extremely true for the society of Gilead.

Linda Kauffman says that Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* “gives a new and ominous meaning to the phrase ‘the body politic’” ((Kauffman 232). The body politic of Gilead is the horrifying representation of gender or individuals of low profile. It is a general conception that the only true study of mankind is man himself. Such a male chauvinistic view resolutely expresses the idea of the body politic and presence of the image of the human body in both thought and literature. Now that body has become sort of a fashion in the new social order of a society it is the body itself which is subjected to many examinations and scrutiny. This male chauvinistic idea of possessing female body for pleasure or other purposes is what the novel

deals with. Such ideas make a woman suffocate and she looks for a breathing space however meek she may be represented. It is actually the situation of the handmaids in the novel.

On top of this, the physical property of a female body is the only means of survival in the republic. It is considered a privilege to get pregnant in the republic. Offred says, “The presence of a pregnant woman in Gilead is a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She’s a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done we too can be saved” (33). The only way for the handmaids to prevent from being sent to the Colonies is to give birth to a baby. But, pregnancy is a rare case in Gilead as most of the women are falsely believed to have become barren as an after effect of the chemical and biological pollution. Thus, a pregnant woman becomes an object of envy as such a spectacle gives the other handmaids the hope of being pregnant at some point of time and be saved. Since women are valued only for their child bearing capabilities “no woman in her right mind would seek to prevent a birth, should she be lucky as to conceive” (42).

The handmaids’ service to the State is not limited to giving birth to children only but they are also used for pleasure. Although, sexual practices are regulated for female as well as other male subjects who are regarded low in the society, it is not so with the high ranking officials. The regime seems to be blind to all the illicit affairs the Commanders carry out clandestinely. We learn from Commander Fred about the existence of secret clubs where handmaids are smuggled in for enjoyment. These actions of the Commanders reveal that the regime cannot control illicit sexual acts merely by threatening fearful punishments. It is probably this law breaking behavior of the Commanders which inspired Offred when she takes a series of tremendous risks to continue her affair with Nick. Nick is paid by Serena Joy to produce a baby for the Commander and herself as she knows about the sterility of the Commander. This arrangement of Serena Joy is for one time only but it turns into a series of meetings between Nick and Offred. They ultimately fall in love and Offred risks her life for the sake of love which she is denied by the regime. She does it despite knowing that the regime imposes as many punishments such as forcing women to watch other women be hung, tortured and abused, etc. But no matter what the regime does, ordinary women like Offred continues to risk everything for acts of sexuality inspired by the possibility of love.

Gilead regime claims that women are treated well. However, as we learn from the treatment of women in the regime we see the real picture of a utopian future in which female subjects become more disheartened and chained. Women are made to believe that they are in a better society as compared to the days of anarchy which is succeeded by the regime. Such an instrument of this propaganda is the Aunts in the red centre. Aunt Lydia preaches to her handmaids-in-training that sacrifices in the present will justify social achievements in the future. She says, “women will live in harmony together, all in one family” (203). She further adds that, “Your daughters will have greater freedom” (203). Yet, she cautions, “But we can’t be greedy pigs and demand too much before it’s ready, now can we?” (203-4)

But there is no visible freedom in the future. And there is no question of demanding freedom of any sort. In a society where there is no freedom the identity of a woman is bound to be downgraded. Her voice is never heard. Even if there is really a voice of protest, it is too passive and has no takers in the regime. The regime of Gilead believes that the more women’s freedom are curtailed the safer she is; the less imprisoned she is, the less safe she is. It is the paradox of Gilead which considers women as convicts and keeps them in confinement. The official Gilead line, quite ironically, reads, “Women were not protected then” (30). On top of this

Aunt Lydia, whose sole aim is to brainwash the handmaids says, “There is more than one kind of freedom ... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (31). This ‘freedom from’ means not only freedom from rape and domestic violence, but also freedom from “the tiring chore of decision making”. Nathalie Cooke sums up this situation as, “The fate of all these women – passive and active – illustrates the ironies inherent in the Republic. Although Gilead was a society developed to protect women, Atwood’s readers must wonder just which women it protects and what kind of protection it provides” (Cooke127).

The Commander also justifies the ways of Gilead to Offred by claiming that in the new order of things women will be protected. But this protection is for the benefit of the patriarchal regime. Instead of protection what women get in the republic is oppression and the handmaids are reduced to dolls and animals in a cage. In another word, they are objects of another’s subjectivity. Offred remembers an anchorman of the state run television encouraging viewers to “trust” the regime. It is the propaganda of the state to trust the regime and its laws so that people do not voice against it.

Offred’s sums up her helpless situation as, “They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll” (19). Like livestock Offred is tattooed for the purpose of identification and processing. When a handmaid dies or fails to borne a child the commander gets another handmaid. “If your dog dies, get another” (236), Offred muses considering the death of her predecessor in her Commander’s house. But nobody in Gilead thinks to give chance to the handmaids.

Laws made by the male architects of the regime are broken by male only. If women break laws they are sure to get punishment. Though against the law, the Commander brings Offred to an illicit Bunny Club, where Commanders, other male senior officials, and trade delegations are entertained and provided with sexual favors by former prostitutes, political prisoners, and a few women who prefer this sort of work to the alternatives. Although the activities that take place at the club are “strictly forbidden,” the Commander hypocritically affirms about violating his own repressive sexual and social codes that “everyone’s human, after all” (297). If a man with power commits this it becomes human folly, if a weaker one, in this case a woman, does it, it becomes a crime. Offred imagines that such a transgression of the rules is a power-trip for her Commander: “He’s breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it” (296).

The physical sterility of the Commanders and their wives are symbolic of their spiritual sterility. The handmaids' prescribed position as child-bearers, reducing them to ‘wombs on twolegs’, also force on them the roles of mistresses, adulteresses, and prostitutes. All of this actually points to the social diseases that may arise from a fundamentalist application of religion and its scientific version in our time. The irony of the republic is revealed through the male hypocrisy of the regime. The physical sterility of Commanders is not allowed to talk about because the Republic of Gilead considers men to be perfect and, therefore, there is a general perception that they cannot be defective. But the handmaids who cannot give birth any more are considered as defective and either sent to the colonies or used for manual works or laborers

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood also depicts politics between the same gender. This politics is rather on the level of survival. Women become agents of suppression and oppression meted out to women and hence they are also blameworthy for the oppression exercised on them

by men. Serena Joy views Offred as a necessary evil. But she must accept Offred in her own house and let the ceremony continue because if she is not part of the process she would lose her position. Besides, her denial to a handmaid would mean her husband's doom. Since Serena Joy is also a woman under the same patriarchal system Offred is in, she must work towards her own benefit despite knowing the sufferings of a fellow woman. Their inability to work together makes them mere pawns in a broad game played by men. If they resolve to fight together against the system they might see some changes. But their inability to do so make them enemies of sort and they all in turn become victims of the resulting system. This is also the case with lesbian Moira. She puts up the strongest resistance both before and after the overthrow of the government. As there is no help from anyone, including help from fellow women, she ultimately fails in her endeavor. The Aunts, as best exemplified by Aunt Lydia, are probably most guilty of enforcing this patriarchal/totalitarian rule on the members of their own sex. But, Aunts do this heinous job for fear of persecution.

The actual story of the novel reveals that once you deprive any gender, social, or racial group of their freedoms they become mere slaves of the system. Women in the republic of Gilead face the same fate. In this sense handmaids are mere slaves. They are also national property as Aunt Lydia says to the handmaids-in-training, "think of yourselves as seeds" (23). They are the raw materials for the production of national population. If they fail, the nation fails too. But, like raw materials, they do not have a say. It is only the end products which is required and have significant importance to the republic. Offred obeys, "I stand on the corner, pretending I am a tree" (23) because Aunt Lydia tells them, "Arms up in the air now, let's pretend we're trees" (23). This means that Offred obeys to whatever the Aunts say because there is no other choice but to accept them willingly or unwillingly. In the Red Centre Aunt Lydia directs the handmaids to think themselves as procreators. By doing so, she is imposing a thought to the handmaids which they have to accept. As such, all that the handmaids or any other women can do is to abide by the law of the land which is exerted by the politics enforced by a patriarchal set up.

Another function of the Aunts in the book is to undermine the sense of female companionship and solidarity shown at other places in the book. While claiming to hate men, the Aunts side with the men, pushing their agenda on the handmaids and treating them as much like objects as the men in the story do. At the Red Centre, the handmaids' unworthiness, their taint, is drummed into them in the daily Testifying. When Janine speaks of her gang rape and subsequent abortion at the age of fourteen, the Aunts term it her fault and insist the other handmaids to have no sympathy for what she was forced to endure. This is reinforced by the almost ritual chanting that follows a handmaid's Testimony: "But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. She did. She did. She did. Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson" (88 – 89).

This lesson, this retribution from God, is a reminder that women are unclean, impure, and full of the taint of original sin. The only thing that will save these women, their only hope for salvation, is to perform their biological roles and to bear a child for the Republic. For all the mistakes and social ills women are to be blamed. Surely, this is not the image of women that the feminists would like to portray. Whether one agrees or disagrees this is where the problem of gender politics actually lies.

So, women in Gilead are normal human beings in extraordinary circumstances. They have their own musings, desires and follies. A woman's desires are not different from that of a man's. What a man feels is all felt by woman. However, the social and political dimension of Gilead restricts such desires in woman from coming out in the open.

There are voices of dissent and feminist representations in the novel by the characters of Moira and Offred's mother. Offred's mother and Moira are the two strongest female characters in the novel. It could be noted that Offred's mother provides a picture of the 60's era women's libber while Moira represents a modern, lesbian feminist. Offred's mother serves as a mouthpiece for a different sort of feminism. Offred's mother marched for abortion rights, the banning of pornography, and many other women's issues before the institution of the new regime. However, as the regime establishes itself, she is crumbled, declared an unwoman and sent to the colonies to clean up the toxic waste.

On the other hand, Moira has a somewhat less dreadful ending, but one that is no less tragic. The character of Moira has been portrayed slightly above any female character in the novel. She does not fear anything and she is a tough and determined woman. She has the guts to defy anything including the tough talking Aunts in the Red Centre. When no handmaid-in-training is allowed to talk to one another so as to curb companionship she starts to chat with Offred in the restroom. Her defying nature which is unthinkable in the regime makes Moira escape from the centre after kidnapping and stealing the Aunt's clothes. But, she is caught and forced to become a prostitute at the Jezebel. Consequently, Moira, the proud, self-assured symbol of feminist has become the antithesis of all she once stood for. What Atwood shows here is the systematic destruction of all the hopes of the female sex. The two strongest female characters falter under the pressure of the dominant males. Now the question is if these two independent and relatively stronger women can't stand strong against oppression, what hope does there remain for anyone else in the novel? It is in fact a challenge of the gender politics in the novel.

The novel centers on Offred, the most passive of all the female characters and who suffers the most in the novel. *The Handmaids Tale* is told through her experiences and she is the most developed of all the characters in it despite many shortcomings as a woman. Atwood, in this novel, allows the reader to explore the mind of a woman who tries to exist against all odds. It is an astonishing fact to note that Offred suffers not only physically but also mentally and spiritually which makes her waver on many occasions in her narration of the story. It is just uncertain to say just what thoughts populate her existence. She represents a sort of everywoman in a lot of ways. As noted above she lacks strength and confidence, but she's not overly weak either. Atwood seems to be portraying Offred as a representative of any woman who would react the same way as any woman would to the situations she encounters. Offred's position as a mere spectator to the ill treatment of women and her passivity even knowing that they are nothing less than sex slaves in the hands of men is best exemplified by Davidson when he writes that:

Offred's reconstructed narration embodies the same sexual dualities that Gilead exhibits in their starkest form. She is essentially passive and in need of rescue by a man, a gender cliché underscored by Professor Pieixote's distinction between the "quasi military" Mayday underground as opposed to the nurturing and escapist enterprise of the Underground Femaleroad. This distinction (Supported with remarkably little data, it

must be emphasized) posits men aggressively to destroy the regime and woman merely reacting to it in a compassionate capacity (Davidson116).

While Atwood is widely viewed as a feminist writer, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a complex view of feminism. It can be because of the clash between extreme nature of the regime and existing feminist viewpoint at the time of writing the novel. It is also noticeable that Gilead constructs a society for women only where they have little contact with men. Women are supposed to support each other in times of birth, death and sickness. Women teach other women about the ways and laws of the new regime. Within a household, women work together to fulfill the different functions of their gender. It is, sadly enough, a utopian ideal and the community of Gilead is far from reality. Such a design of the regime is to make women understand that there is no one to help them but themselves. This makes women suffer further because in the foundation of a society there requires equal participation of both the genders. This politics of gender division makes the republic oppressive.

The plight of women in the novel reaches new heights. It is just unimaginable how women can suffer in such male chauvinistic societies. Women's entire worlds have been turned upside down, just so that they can provide a healthy womb for their patriarchal society. It is revealed in the Historical Notes at the end of the novel as, Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birthrates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but the most northern Caucasian of the time.(378)

In reality, women are little more than broodmares, a fact that the Historical Notes seems to miss entirely when its author states, rather casually, "What male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, so highly prized?" (388).The implication seems to be that the sole value of women is as wombs, nothing more. It is true that women's worth is weighed by their child bearing capabilities. Atwood writes it even more candidly when Offred discusses Gilead's intense focus on fertility. Atwood says: "Fertility in Gilead is at a premium. Fertile women, women who can reproduce, are prize objects for those in power. And as is the case in which prize objects are Cadillacs and you want to have as many Cadillacs as you possibly can, so too when the prize objects are fertile women, then you want to have as many fertile women as possible" (396).

This extreme focus on fertility not only desensitizes women, but also ties them, once and for all, to motherhood, ensuring that any fertile woman will be forced to bear children.As there is declining birthrates, fertility becomes central aspect of the Republic of Gilead. For this reason women's lives are both controlled and regulated by the fundamentalist patriarchal order. Thus, motherhood becomes a curse in Gilead. It is women who bear the burn of the low fertility rate while men consider themselves as nothing to do with it, or do not want to take up the responsibility.

On the other hand, Offred's story serves as a stark, spoken warning that penetrates the fog of the patriarchal order. Atwood reminds us that both sexes suffer under patriarchies such as the Republic of Gilead, although women, as opposed to men, bear the brunt of these patriarchies' oppression. As Linda Kauffman observes, despite, "Offred's efforts to remember her prior existence, she has begun to take on the perception the regime wants her to have of herself

(Kauffman237). For example, toward the end of the novel, when Ofglen offers to help Offred escape if ever she is in immediate danger, Offred no longer wishes “to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom” (339) and instead wishes to remain in Gilead with Nick, with whom she is having an affair (and by whom she may be pregnant). She justifies her change of heart in terms of both love and expedience: “I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort” (339).

Sadly for a woman, these reactions aren't always flattering. Even if Offred has resolved to live her life the way it is throughout the novel, she never forgets her love for Luke and of how she misses him. She remembers him and at the same time Offred develops different kind of relationship with her commander, the man who owns her. She begins to see him in his office and other places like a date. There is a sense of the Commander using her as she sometimes uses him. When such a relationship develops there is bound to emerge some sort of affection between the two. At the same time she sees Nick, a young guard assigned to the house regularly. She sticks to Nick and lets him fill the void that Luke can no longer fill.

Karen Stein notes that, “Professor Pieixoto, in “bracketing” Offred’s tale, “reiterates the tension between Offred’s words and [the] patriarchal control of her story,” which is the very crux of the novel’s meaning” (Stein, 59). He further adds that, “Like Gilead’s “computer prayers” that “fall upon deaf ears,” Offred’s “voice falls upon deaf ears, unheard [in her own time] or misheard [in Pieixoto’s]” (Stein 62). Atwood makes the present readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to hear and understand the plight of women when we know that their ill treatment had no takers in their time as well as 200 years later.

Does Offred stray from the path laid out by the patriarchal society? This question is answered by her breaking the law, which is a punishable act. She does it despite knowing that Ofglen was hanged for committing this crime against the regime. Offred does not fall from grace but rises with grace and dignity. She does not stray from the right path but creates her own path towards freedom and women’s emancipation. Where she goes is not into the realm of darkness but she leaves the darkness behind choosing and spreading light to those women whose visions are marred by gender politics played by the male architects of the Republic. One may recall Offred when she laments:

But if you happened to be a man, sometime in the future, and you’ve made it this far [escape and survive after experiencing the horror of Republic of Gilead], please remember: you will never be subject to the temptation or feeling you must forgive, a man, as a woman. It’s difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power, perhaps the greatest (168).

The gender politics in the novel is the way the so called ‘weaker sex’ is treated. As a woman and as a bereaved mother she still possesses the will and power to forgive after all that she suffers in the hands of men. She knows that all men are not alike and there are still some few good men existing in the Republic. She also knows however powerful the force to corrupt the citizens of the Republic there are chances of surviving and breaking the very core of the regime as long as there is the desire to live. Her desire to live is so strong even if she is in an inhospitable atmosphere. She speaks the minds of every common individual in the regime when she opines that, “In reduced circumstances the desire to live attaches itself to strange objects. I would like a pet; a bird, say, or a cat. A familiar. Anything at all familiar. A rat would do, in a pinch, but there’s no chance of that”(137).

If one tries to break the barriers between the past and the present and reveal the continuum of human experience one would certainly come to know the idea behind Atwood's narrative technique in this novel. Atwood writes this novel in this manner deliberately because she wants to highlight the exclusive experiences of women's suffering through the ages. What is implied here is that the same religious, social, and political ideologies that once victimized women still continues to do so. The phallogocentric ideals of men are highly viable in Atwood's time which critics put as the 1980s, and these ideals continue to do so at any time in the future. It is everyone's wish to live and die in peace. But while one is alive he or she wants to do so many things which are natural and socially accepted. One such thing is reproduction. Two individual fall in love and get married because they have their own responsibilities to the society. When they procreate they are making a huge contribution to the humankind as that act of procreation would help to create a generation which will ultimately secure a civilization. Procreation as an idea revealed above is the same with that of the Republic of Gilead. But it is carried out in such a manner that it is hard to imagine the amount of pain and sufferings every individual would have endured. Politics of any sort is a healthy thing as long as it does not deny others of their happiness and freedom. Politics is a very healthy game as long as it does not discriminate humankind on the lines of caste, religion, creed, sex, gender, etc.

The position of women today has improved many folds. But what Atwood portrays in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the possibility of the repetition of history. A history filled with subjection of women; a history for 'his' but not for 'her'. The politics of 'his' has undermined 'hers'. Such a complex politics based on gender misleads women and disillusions them further. It is true in most of Atwood's female protagonists. Instead of rising from the shambles they seem to further submerge into the depth of this politics. Such an ironic twist of the patriarchal society which relegates women's due place in the society makes Atwood's female characters seen as helpless characters against a force far superior to them. Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* has every reason to be disillusioned. That is why Nathalie Cooke rightly says that: "Atwood's heroines don't "fall" from grace in one sudden dramatic gesture reminiscent of the villain of Milton's *Paradise Lost* or the woman undone in 19th century novels. Instead, they "stray" from the right path or wander into the realms of darkness" (Cooke16).

Offred's ordeals are neglected just because she is a woman. Her tale of woe and misery which is discovered and constructed some 200 years later is also ridiculed as the story narrated is about a woman. In the mind of a female reader, the novel seems to show the unchanging attitude of men who wants to control women with the power given to men by the patriarchal society. Under such circumstances it is not only Offred who would wander into the realm of darkness but every living woman. The political war between the genders is now becoming widespread. And, women would not rest in peace until there is equality among the genders. It is what the novel tries to enthuse to the readers by showing extreme sufferings received by women from men.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. *Second Words*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: Seal Books, 1988.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans and Ed. H.M.Parshley. London: Vintage, 1997.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999.
- Coad, David. "Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Literature and Psychology* 47 (2001). 54. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ese-english-studies-in-canada/V033/33.3.canton.html>> accessed on 17/07/2009.
- Cooke, Nathalie. *Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004.
- Davidson, Arnold E. "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*. Eds. Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro. USA: Southern Illinois University, 1988.
- Deer, Glenn. "Rhetorical Strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Dystopia and the Paradoxes of Power," *English Studies in Canada* 18 (1992) 215. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/464432>> accessed on 24/11/09.
- Freibert, Lucy M. "Control and creativity: the politics of risk in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Critical Essays on Margaret Atwood*. Ed. Judith McCombs. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988.
- Gomez, Christine. "From an Unaware Victim to Becoming a Creative Non-victim: A Study of Two Novels of Margaret Atwood." *Perspectives of Canadian Fiction*. Ed. Sudakar Pandey. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994.
- Gottlieb, Erika. *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
- Hoeveler, Diane Long and Donna Decker Schuster. "Introduction: Women, Creativity, And The Female Body." *Women's Literary Creativity and the Female Body*. Eds. Long Hoeveler and Donna Decker Schuster. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Johnson, Allan G. *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.
- Kauffman, Linda. "Special Delivery: Twenty-first-century Epistolarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Ed. Elizabeth C. Goldsmith. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989.
- Lloyd, Moya. *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power, and Politics*. New Delhi: Sage Publication India Pvt Ltd, 2005.
- Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the Dystopian Tradition," *Canadian Literature* 112 (1987), 11–12, quoted in Brian W. Shaffer, *Reading the Novel in English: 1950-2000*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Munro, Surya. *Gender Politics*. London: Pluto Press, 2005.
- Stein, Karen. "Margaret Atwood's Modest Proposal: *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Canadian Literature*, 148 (1996) 59. <www.canadastudies.com.cn/cs/cat63996/p6.html> accessed on