

## WOMEN DISUNITED: MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE AS A CRITIQUE OF FEMINISM

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**Abstract :** While there is plenty of traditional feminist critique of male power structures in Atwood's works, and particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this paper argues that the power structure of Gilead (the biblically-inflected nation Atwood imagines) also critiques the feminine roles that support and enable the repression of other women. Placing the novel in the contexts of Atwood's career, feminism, and dystopian literature, provides a fuller understanding of how the novel functions as an expression of the disunity of women. Thus, this paper turns the focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* from the consequences of patriarchal control and "traditional" misogyny, to the matriarchal network, and a new form of misogyny: women's hatred of women.

**Keywords:** Feminist , dystopian, misogyny, critique, patriarchal.

**Introduction :** *The Handmaid's Tale* was inspired by Second-Wave Feminism and the genre of speculative fiction. Indeed, blending these elements was the genesis for Atwood's portrayal in *The Handmaid's Tale* of the disunity of women, and the consequent destruction of female solidarity. Preying on the social confusion and unrest stemming from the Women's Liberation movement, the patriarchy of Gilead isolates women and then relegates them to the domestic periphery. Reacting to the increasingly strained gender relations of the liberal American culture that preceded it, the Republic of Gilead emerges as the new nation state. In Gilead, all men are not created equal: some men are second-class citizens and all women are third-class citizens. To be successful, the patriarchy of Gilead must re-assert male dominance. Women are seen as potentially threatening and subversive, and, therefore, require strict

control. They are banned from employment and then forbidden to own property or access assets, rendering them virtual prisoners within their homes. Women's imprisonment paves the way for Gilead's institution of a caste system, which, as previously discussed, is superficially designed to simplify the lives of citizens by dividing them into classes with clearly delineated standards for behavior, dress, and responsibilities. However, as in all dystopian societies, this caste system is actually a tool of oppression, particularly for women.

The result of the micro-stratification in Gilead is the evolution of a new form of misogyny, not as we usually think of it, as men's hatred of women, but as women's hatred of women. Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts one viable backlash from our current feminist momentum: gynocentric misogyny and "traditional" misogyny combined in one militaristic socio-religious order.

The patriarchy of Gilead establishes a matriarchal network responsible for regulating women through enforcing the division of domestic labor. The

matriarchal network ensures that, as Patricia Goldblatt points out in her article "Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists," "the work women do conspires to maintain the subjection of their own kind" (4). The epilogue of the novel re-affirms the purpose of the matriarchy: "the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves" (Atwood 308). This comment emphasizes the importance of the matriarchy both for establishing and maintaining the new social order. By relying on women to self-regulate, the founders of Gilead successfully destroy female solidarity. There are two social systems in which this dysfunctional matriarchy is enforced: the Handmaid training system and the household. These two systems illustrate the public and private enforcement of the matriarchy.

Handmaids are the crux of Gilead's survival, paradoxically the most valued, yet most despised caste. They are charged with reversing the plummeting birth rate, a vital mission following an age of readily available birth control, irresponsible management of nuclear waste and chemical weaponry, and indiscriminate use of agricultural chemicals. After being arrested for participating in non-traditional relationships (second or common-law marriages,

or other extra-marital liaisons), the Handmaids are then turned over to the Aunts for training.

At the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers (also known as the Red Centers), the Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids in the matriarchy of Gilead. The Aunts are entrusted with the crucial duty of training the Handmaids because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the patriarchal order. In full collusion with the male leaders of Gilead, the Aunts stop at nothing to subdue and domesticate the Handmaids during their initiation.

In the first scene of the novel Off red remembers one of her first nights at the Red Center: "the lights were

turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their belts" (4). In the semi-darkness of what was formerly a high school gymnasium, Offred and the other Handmaids-in-training mourn their lost culture, their lost lives, their lost freedom, and their lost selves. They are now a national resource to be protected and regulated. The Handmaids have lost their humanity; they are now nothing more than potentially productive ovaries.

However, by calling the Handmaids "sacred vessels" and "ambulatory chalices" the Aunts attempt to imbue their mission and status with honor (136). Indeed, the Aunts try to convince the Handmaids that Gilead has actually restored respect for women, who are now valued and appreciated because they are "holding the future in their hands" (55). The Aunts represent themselves as motherly mentors to the Handmaids, guides on the path to successful assimilation into Gilead. 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" (162). Aunt Lydia's pep talk on solidarity is disturbingly ironic in the context of the society it claims to represent. The caste system is not liberating. It is an insidious mechanism of the patriarchy, designed to convince women that their subservience provides personal fulfillment and serves the common good. Aunt Lydia justifies her mission to Offred's group, "I'm doing my best [...] I'm trying to give you the best

chance you can have" (55). The "best chance" the Aunts can provide the Handmaids is intimidation through brainwashing, humiliation, and torture.

As part of a brainwashing campaign, the Handmaids are drugged into complacency and forced to watch pornographic movies. These films, among the Aunts favored tools, depict many sexually degrading and violent acts against women. In a particularly disturbing film, as Offred recounts, "we had to watch a woman being slowly cut to pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach split open and her intestines pulled out" (118). Aunt Lydia uses this film to illustrate the disdain men previously held for women.

According to Aunt Lydia, women were merely bodies for men to use and abuse

as they pleased. This is ironic on two levels. First, this attitude echoes the sentiments of many Second-Wave Feminists who saw men's objectification of women as the primary source of the social oppression of women. Second, the Aunts are charged with controlling the Handmaids for the patriarchy. The leaders of Gilead view the Handmaids merely as bodies to be used for the good of the nation. The patriarchy has twisted a prominent feminist premise

into a tool that enables women to oppress each other. Within the confines of the Red Center, abuse is predominately psychological. Humiliation is a favorite technique of the Aunts. Janine, another Handmaid-in-training, repeatedly suffers public humiliation. For instance, an

Aunt refuses to allow her a restroom break so she soils herself in front of the group. On another occasion, Janine is bullied into admitting she enticed the men who gang raped her, resulting in the abortion that marred her teenage years.

Aunt Lydia condemns Janine, and all women who made spectacles of themselves

by "oiling themselves like roasted meat on a spit, [revealing their] bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public," and showing their legs without stockings (53). For Aunt Lydia, the sexual freedom women struggled to attain during pre-Gilead times was the source of their victimization. Women foolishly flaunted their bodies, tempting men to sexual violence. An immodest woman is punished by God, according to Aunt Lydia, to "teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson" (72, emphasis author's). According to the Aunts, as spokeswomen for the patriarchy of Gilead, rape and other forms of sexual and domestic

violence are consequences of women possessing sexual freedom and leading men on.

If psychological avenues are unsuccessful, the Aunts use physical violence to control the women in their charge. Offred recounts a few instances of violence. Her friend Moira, a militant lesbian she knew before the days of Gilead, suffers the Aunts' wrath. Since hands and feet are unimportant to the Handmaids' reproductive mission, the Aunts target these areas for torture; one beating left Moira unable to walk for a week. Nevertheless, Moira continues to

resist the Aunts' authority, the only woman in the Red Center who does so. Moira finally escapes from the Red Center. The manner of her escape—taking off her state-issued Handmaid robes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt—symbolizes her rejection of Gilead's attempts to define her identity. Except for Moira, the Aunts achieve complete control over the Handmaids. The women make a few attempts to comfort one another and establish friendships in the Red Center, but acts of friendship are punishable offenses. Upon discharge from the Red Center, Offred is at the mercy of the patriarchy of Gilead. Within the domestic hierarchy, every woman is a spy and an enemy, even other Handmaids. Once the Handmaids have been initiated into the patriarchy of Gilead, they are posted to households. The domestic hierarchy, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Wives, operates on mutual dislike. The Wives consider the Handmaids distasteful. During a Birth Day visit, the

Commander's Wife makes the following comment to her friends, "Little whores, all of them, but still you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?" (115). The Handmaids are personal affronts to the Wives; they are continual reminders of the Wives' failures to conceive. As Aunt Lydia tells her wards, "It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, [...] it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them. [...] Try to pity them. [...] You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable—" (46). The supposed empathy the Handmaids are asked to feel for the Wives as "defeated women" merely underscores the antagonism created by the patriarchy.

While Offred is cognizant of how Serena Joy, the Wife in her household, suffers under the patriarchy, she feels little, if any, compassion towards her. Offred dislikes Serena intensely for "her part in what was being done to her" (161). Serena was an instrumental figure in the Gileadean takeover, a supporter of a culture based in traditional values that would return women to the home. On a more personal level, Offred dislikes Serena "because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all" (161). This is perhaps the toughest obstacle for Handmaids. They are primed to devote their lives to conceiving children, yet are denied the pleasurable duties of motherhood. Waiting to be filled with the future of Gilead, Offred sees no glory in her sexual servitude: "The fact is that I'm his mistress. Men at the top have always had mistresses, why should things be any different? The arrangements aren't quite the same, granted. The mistress used to be kept in a minor house or apartment of her own, and now they've amalgamated things. But underneath it's the same. More or less, Outside woman, they used to be called in some countries. I am the outside woman. It's my job to provide what is otherwise lacking." (163)

The patriarchy has institutionalized adultery, under the guise of reproduction. Both Wife and Handmaid/Mistress are required to co-habit the house and must collaborate in the procreative mission of the household. Conception is the focus of family life in Gilead. Ildney Cavalcanti discusses the dynamics of Gileadean households in his article "Utopias of/f Language." As Cavalcanti observes, households rely on "the monthly rape 'Ceremony' [which] follows the scriptural 'and she shall bear upon my knees,' and grotesquely requires the presence of Wife, Handmaid, and Commander. It synthesizes the institutionalized humiliation, objectification, and ownership of women in Gilead" (166). The Ceremony is a socially condoned menage a

trois. Offred reflects that "it has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena" (Atwood 94). As Offred lies on Serena's canopied bed, her arms restrained, and her skirt hiked up to her waist she reflects, "This is not recreation, even for the Commander" (95). Hence, sex has become a rote duty for all parties involved.

To endure the Ceremony, Offred must detach from her body. Detaching from her body enables her to detach from her emotions. Offred learns to view the Ceremony as merely a part of her social duty. Serena, on the other hand, does not have the luxury of detachment. Her participation in the Ceremony requires her to watch her husband having sexual intercourse with another woman, an experience that is upsetting and insulting, to say the least. This disparity leaves Offred wondering, "Which of us is it worse for, her or me?" (95). Serena always cries the night of the Ceremony, but silently. Offred believes Serena does so because, "she's trying to preserve her dignity, in front of us" (95). The Ceremony illustrates Serena's failed intentions to establish domestic harmony by collaborating with the patriarchy. She fought for women to be restored to their traditional roles of wives and mothers, but the reality of being a Wife in Gilead is much different than she envisioned. Controlling Offred is the only outlet through which Serena can express her frustration with a system she once supported.

Except for the nights of the Ceremony, Offred is isolated from the rest of the household. Under Serena's critical and ever watchful eyes, Offred must also do without the meager companionship provided at the Red Center. Offred has a deep wish to establish female solidarity; she desires a bond of friendship and a sense of community with the other women who work and live in the household. However, Offred is continually reminded of her status as a pariah, even in her "home." As Offred remarks, Rita and Cora (the two Marthas), "talk about me as though I can't hear. To them I am another household chore, one among many" (35). For the Marthas, Offred has the same status as any other necessary chore. Interestingly, the two Marthas have slightly different reactions to Offred's presence. Rita, the older Martha, objects to Offred's household duties: "she thinks I am common. She is over sixty, her mind's made up" (48). Though Offred's only viable alternative to becoming a Handmaid was exile or execution, Rita believes that Offred should not have "chosen" to be a Handmaid. Because of Rita's traditional mindset, she continually criticizes Offred, both directly and indirectly. In contrast, Cora, the younger Martha, delights in the possibility of

having a baby to care for. She views Offred's presence as one of hope and happiness for the household. Offred recognizes Cora's scant, yet willing, protection: "It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us" (152). Cora treats Offred with respect and makes some attempts to reach out to her. Cora tolerates, clothes, and feeds Offred because of the child she might ultimately bear. Though Offred appreciates these token actions of respect and kindness, they merely reinforce her identity as a two-legged womb of Gilead.

Despite the Marthas' feelings towards her, Offred still yearns to sit at the kitchen table and visit and chat with them: But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid. The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us. Fraternize means to behave like a brother. Luke told me that. He said there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister. Sororize, it would have to be, he said. From the Latin. [...] I don't smile. Why tempt her to friendship? (11)

Treachery is so ingrained in every aspect of life in Gilead, that Offred realizes that even considering the act of friendship is dangerous. The other women in the household must avoid her, as they have been trained to do, or suffer the consequences. Accordingly, Offred's domestic isolation is filled with silence. She longs to break the perpetual silence that surrounds her with anything, even banal pleasantries: "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (11). The only quasi-friendship Offred is allowed is the companionship of the Handmaid who accompanies her on their daily walks to market. Yet even here, free from the physical constraints of their respective households, verbal exchanges are limited to socially acceptable catch phrases: expressions of piety and dedication to Gilead. Exchanges that are not scripted are forbidden and risky. Offred and her companion are painfully aware that they meet as neither friends nor equals, but as potential informants. They travel in pairs under the guise of safety but, "the truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (19). The culture of Gilead is based on fear and suspicion; women are rewarded for spying on and betraying other women. Gilead, then, is indeed a culture of female treachery.

The Handmaid's Tale comprises Offred's record of life within the patriarchy of Gilead. As she performs her rote duties, under the strict system of female control, she struggles to come to terms with her multiple losses: culture, family, identity, agency, and, most importantly, companionship. Though the Aunts insist that the household is a place of camaraderie,

the domestic hierarchy thrives on mutual dislike and disapproval. There is no reprieve from the purposeful and lonely life of a Handmaid; nothing must deter her from her mission. Offred is allowed to attend a few social functions, such as Birth Day celebrations and women's Salvagings; these activities reinforce her role in Gilead. The Birth Day celebrations remind Offred of her duty to her household, her Commander, and her country. The Salvagings

remind Offred of the consequences of any failure to follow the rules and regulations of Gilead. All of her other activities are designed to keep her body in reproductive health: daily exercises on the floor of her bedroom, daily walks to market, and her scheduled baths. As Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen assert in their study of female leisure spaces in dystopian novels, this "strictly controlled access to leisure reinforces the Handmaid's enslavement" (426). The Handmaids are doubly enslaved; first, by the patriarchy that

developed and then implemented the caste system of Gilead, and second, by the matriarchal system instrumental to this new social order. Within this system of dual oppression the Handmaids are severely constrained. Daniels and Bowen describe their daily life thus, "they have no choice regarding the treatment of their bodies; no permission to select the individuals with whom they pass time; [they have] no control over their lives" (428). Though Offred desperately wants to rebel and reassert her agency, the patriarchy ensures that she and the other Handmaids remain isolated and powerless within the domestic hierarchy that

exhibits the most serious consequence of women placing their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women: the destruction of female solidarity resulting in the disunity of women.

#### **Conclusion:**

"The answers you get from literature depend on the questions you pose." —Margaret Atwood, *Waltzing Again*.

The Handmaid's Tale ends on a note of disappointing ambiguity. We are left with more questions than answers as Offred steps up "into the darkness within; or else the light" (295). Did Offred escape? What became of her? Did she devote herself to the resistance? The text fails to answer these questions. We turn to the epilogue in hope of closure for Offred's story, but find instead that it undermines the chilling account of Offred's experiences. Titled "Historical Notes/" the epilogue is a transcript of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean

Studies, set approximately two hundred years after the fall of Gilead. The transcript distances us from the personal immediacy of the novel and re-focuses the narrative on an academic depersonalized view of history. The novel has asked us to sympathize with

Offred and judge Gilead tyrannical and oppressive. However, Professor Pieixoto, a Cambridge historian and the keynote speaker, promotes detachment, telling his audience, "our job is not to censure but to understand" (302). Pieixoto's appeal for understanding and the applause with which his audience greets it, suggest that the moral ambivalence of an objective approach sows the seeds for perpetuation of past ills. Offred's narrative, then, becomes a document to be objectively examined and evaluated for its historical worth. Despite the valuable insights Offred provides into the matriarchal functioning of Gileadean households, and the consequent

effect on women's relationships with one another, Pieixoto views her narrative as overly focused on personal concerns and experiences. Pieixoto criticizes Offred's failure to capture more "useful" information: "She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. [...] However, we must be grateful for any crumbs the Goddess of History has deigned to vouchsafe us" (310). Offred's "crumbs" are considered unsatisfying, partly because of their focus on the domestic sphere, but primarily because of the dearth of "official," "useful" documents. Pieixoto and his colleagues would prefer printouts from the Commander's computer, government documents, anything that might shed light on the political innerworkings of Gilead. They have no interest in what has been called the history of private life.

Pieixoto's dismissive attitude sounds a disturbing echo of Gilead's attempts to render Offred and the other Handmaids invisible. In addition, Pieixoto's urge to silence Offred reflects the attitudes which shaped gender relations prior to the rise of Gilead. Threatened by the social freedoms and power women had gained during the latter half of the twentieth century, men stripped women of their newfound agency. If women are silenced, they can be controlled; and, once silenced and controlled, they lose their identities. Pieixoto reminds his audience that Offred "must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part" (305).

Pieixoto's approach negates one principal of the Women's Liberation Movement: that the personal and the political are inseparable. Since, for Pieixoto the personal is irrelevant, secondary to the official and the political, his own historical moment seems to be one that cannot learn the lessons of Gilead. In addition, his crude jokes, such as the sexual pun on the word "tail," and reference to the "Underground Frailroad," suggest men's attitudes towards tale lost on subsequent generations. By placing the events of the novel in an historical context, Atwood urges us to think that such a fate is not far off, but

imaginable, especially for societies like Pieixoto's that mask their sexist attitudes with progressivism. The closing line—"Are there any questions?"—gives the narrative a deliberately open-ended conclusion. The end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, then, begins a discussion of the issues the story raises. As Offred tells us, "context is all" (144). And when we look at *The Handmaid's Tale* within the context of Atwood's feminist sympathies and from the vantage offered by the tradition of speculative fiction, we can better appreciate how it functions as a critique of Second-Wave Feminism.

By showing us a possible outcome of the momentum of Second-Wave Feminism, Atwood reveals that radical strains of this movement could backfire, with disastrous results. Indeed, Atwood witnessed a version of this backlash while she wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* during the early 1980s. She saw the conservative revival in America and Britain, fueled, in part, by a strong well organized movement of religious conservatives, who criticized the perceived excesses of the sexual revolution during the prior two decades. This revival was a counter-assault on the progress women had struggled for during the 1960s and women continue to be dismissive and hostile two centuries after Gilead has disappeared. That his jokes are met with laughter and applause merely reinforces this attitude. Thus, the conclusion of *The Handmaid's Tale* offers no comfort. Instead it asks us to contemplate the mistakes of the Gileadean era as a 1970s, and it seems that it partially inspired Atwood to issue *The Handmaid's Tale* as a warning of what could happen in the U.S. and elsewhere.

*The Handmaid's Tale* paints the conservative revival as stemming partly from a lack of female solidarity characterizing the Second Wave of the Women's Liberation Movement. Feminist theorist bell hooks has argued that "although [the] contemporary feminist movement should have provided a training ground for women to learn about political solidarity, Sisterhood was not viewed as a revolutionary accomplishment women would work and struggle to obtain" (4). For hooks and for Atwood this was one of the most destructive tendencies of Second-Wave Feminism. Without solidarity, without sisterhood, women are not

united. If women are disunited they have little hope of making the lasting revolutionary changes they see as necessary for social improvement. Unwittingly, then, they become agents of the oppressive social order they wish to escape. Because feminists allowed themselves to be divided over issues of identity, for example, the entire movement appeared weak and more vulnerable to attack.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood envisions religious revivalism as a counter-revolutionary force responding to a revolutionary doctrine espoused by

Second-Wave Feminists. 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 in Gilead, where women no longer enjoy any of their socio-political freedoms, and are also denied even the simplest of personal liberties. As critics Jennifer Daniels and Heather Bowen note, their "every step, every mouthful of food, every move is observed, reported, circumvented or approved" (428). Women are strictly controlled so that male dominance, which had been

threatened in pre-Gilead society, can be re-asserted. The success of the patriarchy depends on female self regulation, which is masked as female collaboration, and the women of Gilead are trained to place their allegiance to men before their allegiance to women. Gilead relied on the domestic hierarchy for its success.

Thus, *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates the lack of female solidarity as contributing to the failed feminist revolution and supporting the subsequent backlash of the religious right.

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