

# Women as a Lonely Bird in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Peshang Salih

English language and literature, Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey  
pesheng1[at]gmail.com

**Abstract:** *This paper will explore the Handmaids' role in The Handmaid's Tale, a dystopian novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood from a feminist perspective. This paper shows how the handmaids functioned in The Gilead Republic under the patriarchal and totalitarian state system. Furthermore, this study analyzes the Handmaids' lifestyle change after taking them and giving them different roles. The roles are given to them are the state's advantages, how this new lifestyle limits their freedom, and how the handmaids have ended up sexist. The state uses the handmaid's if they are impregnated; the child will belong to the commander and his wife. However, if the handmaids do not get pregnant, they would be sent to the colonies. To analyze the text, this paper will use radical feminist theory, and especially it will interpret the text through the theory on sexual politics by Kate Millet.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, oppression, patriarchal society, Kate Millet

## 1. Introduction

*The Handmaid's Tale* is by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, a dystopian novel, published in 1985. The setting is in a near-future New England, in a patriarchal and totalitarian state, known as Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the story describes a society, the political system with full control over the individuals, and the system left no space for personal freedom. However, this totalitarian system put too much on women's shoulders by giving them different roles and strict rules. Women's dehumanization is not only a custom Nevertheless but also the laws supporting it. A group of women forcefully is being taken by the state, and they name them The Handmaid's, mostly young fertile women. They have been divided into the commander's and wives' houses to stay there for a short time until the house's commander impregnates them.

Due to the pollution, abortion, and advanced birth controls they are many infertile families. As Michelle Gulick states, "Technology and industry have so damaged the United States that three in four women are sterile" (Gulick, 1991, p.27). The handmaids have the monthly ceremony that the commanders penetrate them without any emotional interaction and inform of their wives under the wife's control. The handmaids' purpose is to get pregnant and give the child to the commander and his wife. It is significant that although the handmaids are human beings, they have feelings and emotions. In the end, they are the ones who give birth to the child and become mothers; however, the child would be kept by the commanders, and the handmaid will be sent to another house to give birth to another child for another family. The patriarchal state and their strict rules expect no disobedience from them; their duty is to give birth to the family, although the handmaids look more like lonely birds in cages than women who should be equal and accepted as a part of society.

The handmaids used to have different lifestyles. More importantly, they used to have their own lives,

perspectives, freedom. They used to have family, husbands, lovers, and people who care about them. As Gulick suggests, "Women in Gileadean society have definitely been marginalized, and their concerns and desires have been ignored by the oppressive regime around them." (Gulick, 1991, p.36) However, in Gilead's state, everything is different. They only have one purpose, to be a machine to make babies and never be able to look back and find out where their children are, or even they cannot name the children they give birth to. The state is also an isolated area as the handmaids are being isolated from their old lives. Gulick states, "The Republic of Gilead, the perfect society of *The Handmaid's Tale*, is indeed physically isolated." (Gulick, 1991, p.24) because it is part of the United States and surrounded by Mexico, Cuba, and Canada. However, none of these countries have the same rules and politics as Gilead state. This paper aims to answer these questions:

\_How the handmaid's lifestyle limited their freedom?  
\_how the Handmaid's been used to decrease infertility?  
\_how a woman is treated in a patriarchal society as Gilead state?

## 2. Literature Review

According to Gulick, *The Handmaids Tale* novel can be considered an example of utopian and dystopian fiction. It is a dystopian novel that concentrates on spiritual and physical cruelty. However utopian society is considered to be an ideal, flawless society (Gulick, 1991, p.5). Espirito Santo comments on the enslavements of Offred as a handmaid in the novel, and she acknowledges the readers about the inequality between men and women in the novel through the income. Since the state suspended the income of every woman in the state, and only their husbands, fathers, brothers, etc., are capable of getting the money (Santo, 2018, p.50).

As the author of the novel throughout the novel, Atwood gives the idea of patriarchal society and the perspective of women's state. If a handmaid could not get pregnant for

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any reason, she would be considered "unwomen" she would be sent to colonies to work there until she dies. Women have a mission to accomplish. If she doesn't, she would not be considered or even named a woman (Atwood, 1986, p.16). However, Linda Myrsiades suggests that women in general and the handmaids especially serve the state for sterile wealthy families. Their job is to give birth. Later on, they will be "alienated," apart from their children (Myrsiades, 1999, p.219). Jeanne Campbell Reesman argues that the novel's moral theme is how human creatures harm each other when they see each other as objects controlled for the benefit of interest, as the states harm the handmaids physically and emotionally (Reesman, 1991, p.8).

Jane Armbruster explains that there are a group of women the handmaids called them aunts. According to the state, the aunts keep the handmaids organized and teach them new rules and norms. Through their lectures, the aunts try to convince the handmaids that back then, women used to be raped and face violence, and the reason is women themselves because they struggled for independence and equality. However, now there is no point in being worried because the state protects women and saves them from all the dangers they used to face before (Armbruster, 1990, p.147). Alice Jardine believes that the ruling patriarchal race opposes male versus female or masculinity versus femininity. (Jardine, 2019) Nerveless Simone de Beauvoir also rejects sexism, and she explains the characterization of women, which mostly is through the relation to men (Beauvoir, 2011, p.7). As a feminist, Kate Millet believes that lack of education and the economy is a big danger for women because it would weaken them. As a result, they have to be obedient to whatever they have been told (Millet, 2000, p.41). It is the same case for the handmaids because they get education from the aunts they teach the patriarchal rules and limit their freedom also they have no finance or power to depend on.

### 3.Methodology

This paper's methodology is a textual analysis of the handmaid's oppression and freedom limitation themes in *The Handmaids Tale* novel, through *sexual politics* theory by Kate Millet. Millet's works were fundamental to radical feminist theories. Radical feminism is considered the second wave of feminism. It deals with the radical and the base of patriarchal society because the whole society belongs to men and individuals mind has been organized according to that unequal system.

In short, Millet thinks the world is man's world. the *Sexual politics* issues begin with examining the ubiquity of patriarchy or the framework of male mastery in culture and appear how it saturates each viewpoint of society. She analyzes a few scholarly works of the twentieth century which express sexual scenes that shows how male writers descriptions are appeared to show, the man like the ones who are in control, powerful and dominant however women is associated with passivity and oppression, in other words, she believes that while women are associated with passivity, men is related to masculinity and dominance. However, this power forced women to be

obedient to survive instead of living a happy life. As Millet mentions, "The female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power" (Millet, 2000, p.54).

### 4.Discussion

This discussion will analyze the handmaids' freedom limitation, explain the use, and how the handmaids are treated in the Gilead state, which is a patriarchal state, which they based their rules, lifestyle, and customs according to the Judeo-Christian bible, especially the Old Testament. Offred is a young woman and a handmaid. She is the storyteller. She is a wife and a mother of a girl when she is separated from her husband and daughter. She is with another group of women, almost same ages. The handmaids stay in the houses of important, powerful, and wealthy commanders who cannot make children by themselves. The handmaids have given a role to bear children for them.

However, they have different customs and laws from the old life they used to have. Each of those handmaids used to be independent and live her life freely. They used to work and gain their own money; some of them are married like Offred. Meanwhile, in Gilead republic, there is no real money as it used to be back then, as stated in the novel, "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category. . . We are a two-legged womb, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 176). The handmaids are objects for the state, only for giving birth and the child will belong to those important families.

It is forbidden for the handmaids to commit any sexual engagement, the only time is in the ceremony when the commanders have sex with them in the presence of his wife, and the purpose is to impregnate them. The handmaids should lie down between the legs of the commander and hold his wife's hands. There is no pleasure in this engagement for the handmaids because it is totally forgotten that they are human beings. They need emotions, feelings, love, and passion for being able to have sex; as Offred says, "What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing." (Atwood, 1986, p.89) however, it is their job in the new state, they are not allowed to be against any of those traditions; otherwise, they would be physically punished cruelly.

All of the handmaids are wearing the same clothes, which make them all alike, and bonnets white-colored, they call it wings, which prevent them from viewing them, also its used to cover their hair. The handmaids are being alienated from their own bodies, as Offred states, "My nakedness is strange to me already. My body seems outdated" (Atwood, 1986, p.63) However, their bodies do not belong to them anymore. They have no choice to wear different clothes or even a different color. They have a body, but they cannot look at the mirror because it is not legal for handmaids to look at mirrors. They removed everything in the handmaid's room, which can help her

commit suicide even if the windows cannot be open fully. Gulick comments on Offred, "Not only does she fight to survive physically; she must fight for psychological and spiritual survival" (Gulick, 37).

Women, including the Gilead republic's handmaids, are not allowed to read or write, although there is no pen or paper for them. Only men can keep those objects because if they allow women to read she would learn new things, and it will lead them to have power as Miller states, "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" (Millet, 2000, p.42). She believes that through recorded history, always one sex, who is men, has dominated the life of the other sex, which is a woman. Patriarchy has become more of a government or a system that controlled almost everything and suites the Gilead republic fully. In the Gilead republic, they have removed every written word from the shops. Everywhere else instead, they added signs "under the lily, where the lettering was painted out when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone." (Atwood, 1986, p.31) the Gilead society's goal is to make women uneducated by forcing them to forget to read and write.

All the institution's power is in male hands to the point that females had been considered second-class citizens even reduced to be slaves. However, women are psychologically oppressed because they had been kept out of all offices of importance. Due to society's patriarchal system, women could not get educated, and even women were not allowed to get education the same way men do. However, due to the lack of education and equality, women could not stand on their feet and depend on themselves because they did not have any finance or income without men. Moreover, Offred and Moira's conversation mentioned that the first step of change in the state was freezing bank accounts of women "They've frozen them, she said. Mine too. The collective's too. Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We're cut off. .... Women can't hold property anymore, she said. It's a new law." (Atwood, 1986, p.163). As Millet argues, "Since education and economy are so closely related in the advanced nations, it is significant that the general level and style of higher education for women, ... Traditionally patriarchy permitted occasional minimal literacy to women while higher education was closed to them" (Millet, 2000, p.41). The next generation of women will lack education, illiterate, and will not work or have any income.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the handmaids are facing a strict powerful, cruel patriarchal system. It is a nightmare and a reality they are living in. the handmaids are oppressed due to the way the system treats them. Andra Septiawati states, "The handmaids become object of the implementation of sexism in Gilead society because they are oppressed through ideology, socialization, religion, biological, economy and education and also psychology."

(Septiawati, 2014, p.12) At first, the government took over their finance and forced them to leave their jobs. Later on, the handmaids are being alienated from their own bodies, the powerful male commanders using their bodies to get babies because they cannot have them. They are blamed if they do not get pregnant. As in the movie version by Volker Schlöndorff its shown, Offred is at the hospital to check if she is not pregnant yet, and she has a conversation with the doctor, and he says, "I know your commander, he has tried twice before. He is probably sterile "Offred asks him "Don't they test them?" the doctor answers, "No, they do not test them. You get the blame if it does not work." (Schlöndorff, 1990, 44: 39) life of innocent women is in danger because the patriarchal society would not dare to harm men's feelings, or accept the reality. After all, the handmaid's relationships are minimal. It is not allowed to have friends or any private conversation with anybody. Everyone is expected and forced to be by the government's side. As Lois Tyson states, "patriarchal ideology is a belief that promotes "women are innately inferior to men" (Tyson, 2006, p.85).

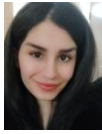
To solve this problem, the whole society should recognize that what is going on is terrible. However, it is essential if women recognize the fact that they are all victims of this man dominant society and system as Neal Frank Doubleday suggests, "As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew" (Doubleday, 1939, p.826).

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### Author Profile



**Peshang Salih**, English language and literature, Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey,  
Email: pesheng1[at]gmail.com