
**Objectification, Dehumanization and
Disfigurement of Women: Discourse of
Marginality in Margaret Atwood's
*The Handmaid's Tale***

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Margaret Atwood, the most brilliant prolific and prophetic novelist in the contemporary Canadian Literary world, being an essential and integral part of Canadian feminist and political movement, shows the reality of societal, political and gender issues where the relationship between men and women is based on gender bias and on complexity of interactive discourse. Her novels generally put forth the women in their eternal quest for identity, freedom and rights under the garb of the patriarchal configuration of society. Her novels become the symbol of the revelation of oppression, subjugation and exploitation of women who are treated as peels of orange in the 'male-gaze' society. Atwood's present novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is all about the subjugation, suffering, and gender complexities in a newly ordered Gilead society where women are exploited and deprived of their individual rights, freedom and psychic excavation and instructed to perform their acts in different directions, according to the rule, discipline and order of the new totalitarian society. The novel exhibiting the strict and ruthless control of the patriarchy over the helplessness and marginality of women implies the political ideology of the contemporary time in America. In such societal structure, women are marginalized

sexually, socially and culturally; they are treated as mere handmaids used by the males for the fulfillment of their sex-urge.

Gilead discourse is central to the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* where women are objectified, marginalized and subjugated due to Gilead society's use of new kind of language and actions based on violence that keeps a strict and harsh hold on women to restrict their speech, performance and behavior. This discourse quite obliquely refers to Foucault's notion of discourse where he argues that interpretations, actions, statements of certain society must be in the field that is called the 'regime of truth'. To Foucault, the very concept of truth is related to discourse and is the product of power relation. He is very critical of the regimes of truth. Knowledge and truth can't be existed outside the power-circulation. People cannot manipulate the power except through the production of power. Foucault explores the way that in order for something to be established as a factor as truth, other equally valid statements have to be discredited and denied. Thus, rather than focusing on the individual thinkers who developed certain ideas and theories, Foucault wants to focus on the more abstract institutional process which establish something as knowledge. He is interested in traditional concept of knowledge at any period, rather in 'the material conditions of thought'. Truth or any certain knowledge is generally produced in a society by virtue of several forms of restraints. Thus, Foucault asserts in *Power/Knowledge*:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth is not outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth is not the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131)

Truth is not a self-qualifying entity but an abstract idea that is produced in a discourse. Foucault talks about the kind of truth that plays an important economic and political role to modify and electrify its process of channelization. He argues again in the same writing-

There is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth' – it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted', but rather 'the ensemble rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true', it being understood also that it is not a matter of a battle 'on behalf' of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays. It is necessary to think of the political problems of intellectuals not in terms of 'science' and 'ideology', but in terms of 'truth' and 'power'. And thus the question of the professionalisation of intellectuals and the division between intellectual and manual labour can be envisaged in a new way. (132)

Again, Foucault gives some meaning and interpretation of truth that will help us to make a proper understanding regarding power/knowledge discourse.

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.

'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effect of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth.

This regime is not merely ideological or superstructural; it was a condition of the formation and development of capitalism. And it is this same regime which, subject to certain modifications, operates in the socialist countries. (133)

Though the values of Gilead society are not new as they were deeply rooted in the early societal structure, the values are new and remodelled reconstructing the discourse of silence that marks a new paradigm governing and ruling the masses in the new societal system.

The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* revolves round the story of an oppressed captive in the Gilead society, a totalitarian and dictatorial social structure that is in proximity in American frontiers. In this social order, women are restricted in their limited world where they are not allowed to read, write and think freely; their values are judged and appreciated on the ground of their reproductive abilities. The narrative of the novel is narrated by the protagonist Offred who performing the role of handmaid in a rough and tough political system, serves a couple by bearing children. The novel implies Offred's struggle to get the solidarity of her identity, freedom and self-confidence through her acceptance of complexities that came in her life. Regarding the dehumanised condition of women by power game of the society, Karen F. Stein remarks in "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia" in the following way –

Feminists are particularly interested in stories, because as a marginal group of society, women have often been the objects rather than the creators of narrative: their stories have often been untold. People on the margins of societies often find they are denied access to the discourses that confer power and status. (269)

Being the subject to the Gilead world, Offred tells her story in the novel accepting the language of Gilead society which is male dominated and Offred is presented as existing in the framework of male discourse with all limitation and restrictions. Though the process of reading, writing and thinking on the part of the women are determined within limited space, Offred manages to develop her sensibility and ability to capture the spirit of language showing her inner strife to survive and was invited to the Commander's personal chamber and assigned to certain act of child-bearing. The commander holding the high rank in society symbolically sets forth the depoticism and totalitarianism of the Gilead world and being boss of his family, he has engaged Offred to play with her sexually and wants her to play board games with him. The commander remarks in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the following –

We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (139)

It is obvious that in time of game with the Commander, Offred is not in the control of language; she constructs the language of her own. Her keen sensibility of tackling the awkward situation and her capability of creating own chosen language, give an assault to the patriarchal norms. Offred's concentration through her flashback device on the tight control of patriarchy over women is presented in the novel thus:

I remember walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, fat women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. (74)

Through her flashback, Offred recollects her previous ignorant nature of former society contrary to the new model of Gilead society.

Offred has unfolded the patriarchal discourse of Gilead society by presenting her cynical attitude towards language and truth of new regime. She creates a situation of hesitancy and doubtfulness on the basis of which she cannot be marked whether she is controlled by the Gilead discourse. She posits a conflict through alternation of her character and ability showing her strong objection against the patriarchy. Offred through changing nature and nourishing conflict regarding the acceptance of imposed norms and disciplines of the Gilead world, attempts to bring a change into the society. Ethel Crowley in "Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism" argues that "the inadequacies of post-feminism seen/addressed and rocentric hegemony are different kinds of repudiation and different investments in such a

stance. The more gentle denunciations of feminism co-exist with the shrill championing of young women as a metaphor for social change" (47). Though Offred is quite concerned with her role as a handmaid, she visits the doctor's chamber where the doctor offers her to get impregnated by him after knowing about the sterility of the Commander. The hesitation of Offred is conveyed in the novel through the following conversation –

I could help you, he says. Whispers. What? I say... How do you think? He says, still barely breathing it. Is that his hand, sliding up my leg? He's taken off the glove. The door's locked. No one will come in. They'll never know it isn't his.

I also gasp: he's said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law... I hesitate. He is offering himself to me, his services, at some risk to himself. I hate to see what they put you through, he murmurs. It's genuine, genuine sympathy; and yet he is enjoying this, sympathy and all. His eyes are moist with compassion, his hand is moving on me, nervously and with impatience... I put on my clothes again, behind the screen. My hands are shaking. Why am I frightened? I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation. (66-67)

It is not the fact that Offred has been haunted by the sense of fear that if she does not impregnated by the Commander in his three attempts, she will be thrown to the Colonies; rather she shows her bold and strong mental stability by engaging herself in sexual play with the doctor, merging her thinking with the gradual flow of the Gilead discourse which is governed by ruthlessness and dictatorship of patriarchy that slides women down to the world of marginality where they are subjugated, oppressed and marginalized either by physical violence or by imposition of strict rule and disciplines. Though in some sense, Offred acts against the law of the Gilead discourse in her presentation of language and her dauntless spirit of sexual performance, sometimes she is concerned that she acts according to the Gilead discourse and she finds this when she and Ofglen confront some Japanese tourists. Their encounter with the Japanese tourists are described in *The Handmaid's Tale* thus –

Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of time before.

I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. (37)

There is no other alternative left on the part of Offred to accept except the Gilead discourse where power and discipline play a free game to control others like Offred and other women in the novel who are under control of power-knowledge discourse. Foucault rightly points out in *Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*, that:

There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tried to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to. (331)

Offred and other women are strictly under the control of state-power where televised broadcasting as a super structural agent captures the minds of common masses with the intrigued manner of convincing them to accept the truth generated by the totalitarian authority. Regarding the news, telecast by the state agency, Offred remarks that, "such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none" (85). Offred is on the field of inner conflict that how much she is ready to acknowledge the 'truth' of Gilead domain. She sceptically recites the propaganda-elocutionist in the following way –

He tells us what we long to believe. He's very convincing. I struggle against him. He's like an old movie star, I tell myself, with false teeth and face job. At the same time I sway towards him, like one hypnotized. If only it were true. If only I could believe. (86)

The impact of the importance of knowledge, concretised by the state power, on Offred is revealed in one of her confrontations with the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

"What would you like"? He says, still with that lightness, as if it's a money transaction merely, and a minor one at that: candy, cigarettes, "Besides hand lotion, you mean", I say. "Besides hand lotion," he agrees. "I would like [...]" I say. "I would like to know." It sounds indecisive, stupid even, I say it without thinking. "Know what?" he says. "Whatever there is to know" I say. (186)

Apart from Offred, other women characters such as Rita and Cora in *The Handmaid's Tale* uphold the world of marginalization, being deprived of economic, cultural, social and ethical grounds which are well accessed by the privileged group of the society, controlled by authority of Gilead societal order. The narrator's voice openly presents Rita and Cora with their monotonous life that is engaged for serving the higher-ranked people in the new society, in the novel in the following –

Today, despite Rita's closed face and pressed lips, I would like to stay here, in the kitchen. Cora might come in, from somewhere else in the house, carrying her bottle of lemon oil and her duster, and Rita would make coffee – in the houses of the commanders there is still real coffee – as we would sit at Rita's kitchen table, which is not Rita's any more than my table is mine, and we would talk, about aches and pains, illness, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it. (19)

They are all employed in the house of the Commander to perform the household activities and remain silent when they are exploited and violated mentally and physically and overthrown to the periphery of the society. The miseries, suffering and complains are flowed through their realisation that they share amongst them: "We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries; gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor key and mournful as pigeons in the eaves

troughs" (19). They are assigned to the household works confined in the kitchen which becomes the symbol of their entire world where they concentrate, realise and share between them their own aches and agonies. Atwood, being disillusioned about the societal management, has portrayed women in the contemporary American dystopian society as marginalised, less privileged and mere puppets dancing on the thread, monitored by the policies of state power. She skilfully sketches the women characters in her novels in eternal search of their freedom and identity which can never be achieved in reality, by posing the question of women's societal role and identity. The social role of women is revealed through the narrative voice of Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

Sometimes I listen outside closed doors, a thing I never would have done in the time before. I don't listen long, because I don't want to be caught doing it. Once, though, I heard Rita say to Cora that she wouldn't debase herself like that. (18)

Again the sense of marginalization, in addition, is reflected through Cora's voice that muses:

Looks big enough to me... Is she standing up for me? I look at her, to see if I should smile; but no, it's only the food she's thinking of. She's younger than Rita; the sunlight, coming slant now through the west window, catches her hair, parted and drawn back. She must have been pretty, quite recently. There's a little mark, like a dimple, in each of her ears, where the punctures for earrings have grown over. (54)

Atwood quite obviously has depicted the discourse of the dystopian society in Gilead era where women are treated as sub-human as well as men's other. The reverence, value, and free sensibility of women are lost in such dystopian world where a strong threat of punishment, exploitation and violation always prevails. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the value, respect and identity of the narrator and the protagonist Offred are totally lost and replaced by the imposition of new identity given by the totalitarian authority. Offred claims strongly for his identity:

My name is not Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it does not matter, your

name is like your telephone number, useful on to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shinning in the dark. (87)

Offred becomes very much desperate about the system that imprisons women within certain space. Her desperate and dauntless spirit is expressed: "But that's where I am, there is no escaping it, Time's a trap, I'm caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now and here is where I live" (142).

The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to evoke Atwood's sarcastic attitude towards the dystopian world where men and women cannot wander alone in the society with their own individual freedom; rather the values and freedom of women are all thrown aside and they get entrapped within the social network where their positions slope down to the marginalized section. Contempt, rage and complains against the authority at the hand of which Offred was insulted and treated badly, are exerted by Atwood through the voice of Offred Thus:

Now a close shot of a prisoner, with a stubbled and dirty face, flanked by two Angels in their neat black uniforms. The prisoner accepts a cigarette from one of the Angels, puts it awkwardly to his lips with his bound hands. He gives a lopsided little grin. The announcer is saying something, but I don't hear it: I look into this man's eyes, trying to decide what he thinking. (85)

Offred's deprivation of her proper and balanced life setting forth the radical position of the Gilead society against women is delineated in the following –

The door of the room – not my room, I refuse to say my – is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly. I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way. (17)

Atwood channelizing her satiric dart towards the corruption of political system of the Gilead society through the character of the Commander has remarked in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

The sitting room is subdued, symmetrical; it's one of the shapes money takes when it freezes. Money has trickled through this room for years and years, as if through an underground cavern, crusting and hardening like stalactites into these forms. Mutely the varied surfaces present themselves: the dusk-rose velvet of the drawn drapes, the gloss of the matching chairs, eighteenth century, the cow's-tongue hush of the tufted Chinese rug on the floor, with its peach-pink peonies, the suave leather of the Commander's chair, the glint of brass on the box beside it. (82)

Holding the higher social rank of the Gilead world, the Commander performs the role of a corrupter who dominates not only his wife but also the lives of others with threatening. He always violates the law, rules and order of the society which is governed by the authoritative people like him. He exploits Offred sexually and mentally. He is very much money-minded and heart-core materialist who gives the touch of the heart of darkness of the dystopian world where Offred along with the other helpless women live.

To conclude, the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* concentrates on the issues of political corruption, marginalization of women and peculiarity of the Gilead society, a dystopian world through the narrator and protagonist Offred's realisation and recognition and her ever quest for individual security and freedom. The novel is also concerned with the dehumanization, oppression and objectification of women in patriarchal framework. Atwood in this novel shows that how women are treated as second sex and men's other. She quite ironically depicts the contemporary patriarchal domain where women are physically and psychologically enslaved and become mere objects that society ranks them according to the will and cravings of male-gaze paradigm to fulfil the process of reproduction and men's sexual desire. The narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how language, truth, and action are used as ideological forms and models to suppress women both in the Gilead world and in the society before. Thus, Atwood in her present novel gives a space for

the readers to create a discourse where they can subvert the traditional and mechanical role of patriarchy and its power game to uplift the status of women with their own individual intelligence, proficiency, confidence, competence, identity and freedom.

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