

Sex Inequality in The Handmaid's Tale

By Margaret Atwood

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the theoretical challenges of women's life in The Handmaid's Tale which was written by a female character, Margaret Atwood is an imaginative novel which can be seen in the reality of most of the countries in the world which is narrated by a female character her name is Offred. It can be accounted as a cautionary tale in a dystopian world it is about the implementation of an excessive power over woman's life and the inequality, discrimination of the two sexes. Moreover the novel displays the spoiled frame of social life, apparently the government's bad intention toward woman's life. In this novel the lives of women are shaped by men in a way they are roughly stuck and assigned by men because the society is the patriarchal one which gives woman no rights of life, as a perfect instance is that they are even prohibited to embrace their wombs' fruit after they gave birth, the commander used to seek fertile woman hoping that through the illegal monthly intercourse with him having a child for the traditional family. The aim of this paper is to show how the women of Gilead suffered from the other gender.

Key words: The Handmaid's Tale, Sex inequality, Male dominance.

Introduction

Jacobsen in his paper Gender Inequality exposes that gender inequality percolates the world. In a way economically women earn less than men at their works, they are having a poorer life comparing to men, are less participating in all the sectors of life, while they have a greater share in their chorus, and deprived in their political representations in a way their attendances are less than men in the offices and political negotiations.

Socially gender inequality is common, men are more favorable than women, and they are more commended to violence, sexual insulting, isolation, and educational deprivation. The Handmaid's Tale shows the life style of females in the world generally and the Gilead society in special so it could be dealt as a feminist novel. A feminist analysis is an accurate way to understand the text well.

In Margaret Atwood's novel women are seen as objects in the hands of men, apparently they are oppressed by men's dominance, deprived to get their rights; even women are the slaves of men.

The story of *The Handmaid's Tale* is regarded as a political one which was the best seller novel in 1985, the main character of the novel is Offred who lives in Gilead which is well known as a theocratic state where women have no rights such as selection, choice and expression... etc. Offred with her peers live in a place that is called as gymnasium, she is selected to be the servant of a house which is known as the commanders house, its lady's name is Serena Joy she only has right to sex with the commander to create a child for him while he has a legal wife that his wife is infertile one, Offred is the teller of the story she explains that she has lost her family under the totalitarian power of Gilead where life is a true picture of hell for people in general and for women in special in a way they should listen and obey the power of the state regularly, life for female is very tough and difficult because they are under the will and control of men, they are behaved as toys nothing more. Time passes and Offred is introduced to a man his name is Nick by Serena Joy, he is doing sex with Offred secretly with the hope of making her pregnant and giving a child to the family. At the end of the story Offred is able to escape her bitter reality and follow her plan which is encountering her family and escaping the sad situation, as we see at the end that Gilead is fallen and the powerful eye of the state becomes blind which means the state is vanished and women become free.(Atwood, 1985)

Michel Foucault in his book *Power/Knowledge* states that "There is something in surveillance, or more accurately in the gaze of those involved in the act of surveillance, which is no stranger to the pleasure of surveillance". (p186)

In the explanation of this part, it can be mentioned that the author of the book wants to determine the act of surveillance which covers the whole life of Margaret Atwood's novel in general and the women's life specifically.

Liberal Humanism and Sex Inequality

To explain the history of sex inequality we need to consult some rich sources in the history of English society, Peter Barry in his critical book *Beginning Theory* sheds light on the past notions on the ocean differences between the two sexes in England's higher education, and states that "It was a church of England monopoly, there were only two universities, oxford and Cambridge, there were divided into small individual colleges which were run like monastic institutions, only men could attend them".(p12) Meaning that it has been handed down from old generations to the new ones. In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* women were passive in their lives and they were cut from the natural their rights such as, freedom of life, legal marriage and education...etc.

The representation of women in literature as the author of literary texts was very important to convey their bad situations in life and to demand their rights at which level is seen as the most prominent figure of the field.

Sex Inequality in The Hand Maid's Tale

Gina Whisker in his critical book states that the readers of *The Hand Maid's Tale* should believe in the realistic performance of Offred's role in the tale and also the presence of her mother in the tale should be trusted as she exhibits the women's position. (p34) .The absence of women in life and the focus on their oppression has pushed Atwood to write this novel, she depicts a symbolic hierarchy of life that has been deformed by men, although women are allowed in power but apparently subjugated by men. In the 1980s who demanded for achieving their political, economic equality, while Offred and her friends collected their shoulder works.

Michel Foucault in his prominent book *The History of Sexuality* illustrates that sexuality cannot create power but it can help to achieve it in many different ways for the social resistance, therefore women use it for different intentions in *The Handmaid's Tale* Offred the main female character benefits sexuality to approach commanders life and open his heart to collect information about Gilead also she advantages sexuality to bridge her relationship with Nick so as to support and guide her to cast Gilead away. Offered aids sexuality to control the male characters' minds in this story and reaches what she wants although those who are alliance her sexually are known as illegal partners, but she does sex with them. One day the commander demands Offred to his office for a sexual meeting, she plans to missuses this time to achieve her needs such as, hand lotion, music and magazine, sex inequality will be bold after Offred enters the commander room and sees the true picture of discrimination in Gilead, that all the prohibited things which are not allowed for women to use in their lives are well-allowed and arranged for men to use. She becomes down hearted when she observes that there is an ocean difference between the life of men and women in Gilead from this chance she understands that there is a sort of huge power which is indefinable behind sexuality which can support women to exploit men easily, from this point she realised that this point is the best chance to see her daughter's destiny, sex made her to be dominant over the command's mind.(Atwood, 1985)

To precede the analysis of *The Hand Maid's Tale* as a representative of social and cultural motion in the novel some relevant events of the novel are required such as, night, women's limit, Red Center...etc.

Night

In patriarchal societies women praise night as a chance to resist and sleep on those dreams of life that cannot be achieved in the reality of the daytime. In *The Handmaid's Tale* female characters consider night as a free time to unlock their imaginative lives. Women's verbalizations can be observed apparently at night in a way they disobey all the rules of life through discussing their daily matters and release their psychological oppressions by providing themselves freedom to walk on the ground on the ground of the Gymnasium and pronouncing their real names at their beds. The beginning of *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts these nightly activities and exposes the need of night time for the women of Gilead society.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads at on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed. (Atwood, 1985 p 2)

It is very logic to say that the hand maids see night as their golden chance to some activities while they had a very limited sort of freedom in the daytime, their excessive performance at night was regarded as an effort to toward freedom for them touching each other's hands looked like was considered as the freedom of expression besides that they implemented a method as a sign of communication which was called (lip- read). (Atwood, 1985)

Women's Limit

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the woman's jobs have been limited by the men this is not specified for the handmaids only, but generalized for all female ones, they had no chance to walk out, read and make their futures. They were oppressed and angled in some special spaces which were the gymnasium, commanders' houses and gardens where they should take care of the plants, the angels' instructions and fulfill the commanders' desires. (Atwood, 1985)

Due to the era of infertility which became reality as the result of that regard which defines women's role as a part of labor force they postponed their motherhood till they have found their jobs, in fidelity becomes less with the passage of age, apparently women's have lost their physiological strengths so both gender were barren while men didn't observe that but it can be seen in Gilead's Society, concerning birth controlling it is very needed to read their beneficiary article of Yinnopoulos which is supportive to understand this part of the novel and the picture the situation of women in Gilead where the writer shows a bunch of serious problems which appear after sex controlling through using pill, the side effects will cause the ladies sick such as, being fat, makes your voice unattractive and makes you to choose your mates wrongly...etc. Besides that using pill may damage the marriage relations because having no children leaves no satisfactory reason for the wife and husband to hold each other, he adds that to save our civilization we should have kids. (Yinnopoulos 2105)

Commander's ladies could not give birth, the role of creating new generation has been given to the handmaids, they were deprived from motherhood after they delivered their newborns, they only are expected to lay and leave the houses. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the commander's wife Serena Joy secretly tells Offred about her husband's infertility, she believes that the commanders manhood is doubtful so she guides her to implement her obligatory duty and have her sex with the house's servant Nick, the act will be done several times secretly as a picture of love or desire to make a new generation for the commanders family, Offred finds a good time to make a private conversation regarding the misery of her life after explaining her painful life to her, Serena joy starts her talking and states that women have been manipulated and they are approaching their death day after day, each single minute is defined as the bitter flavor of death due to their miserable life in Gilead. She added that in past she was allowed to talk freely but she doesn't speak anymore, she has lost the strength of speech, she is controlled at home "I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, and the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers. Time could pass more swiftly that way." (Atwood, 1985 p 10). Offred doesn't agree with such form of life and defined this type of life as a deformed one.

The dilemma of birth controlling involves the lives of many parents that are explained well by Susan Berry, in an article she states that the most devoted part of parents' lives is abortion that is a war against women. (Berry, 2017). In the Atwood's novel the handmaids should see their special doctors to test their bellies and the size of their bellies limit the range of their luck, Inside the waiting room there are other women, three of them, in red: this doctor is a specialist. Covertly we regard each other, sizing up each other's bellies: is anyone lucky? The nurse records our names and the numbers from our passes on the Compudoc, to see if we are who we are supposed to be

On the role of female characters in society Yinnopoulos vocatives Atwood's novel, *The Hand maids Tale* by stating that, nowadays the only power that can stand and renew the living tree of life is woman who is capable of giving birth to life which is the brightest side of existence that must be concerned and celebrated. (Yinnopoulos 2016)

Red Center

Apparently Offred is isolated in the Red Centre a centre which provides no life flavor, is a well-known place that has prison qualities and makes all the women prey especially the main character of the novel Offred, it hurts them psychologically, physically and socially which is shaping hell life to them. They are not allowed to leave due to that reason Offred selects an imaginative travelling in replace of physical one. As Atwood clearly mentions in her novel, offered flashes back her past memory, opens all her past pains to keep her memory alive and to take care for love and humanity. (Atwood,1985 p 230)

About the role of female in in life many writers have published their gorgeous ideas among them is Yiannopoulos who hopes to rebuild the personality of female in society in a way the place of women should not be only her kitchen and he states that women are the mean of life and existence. He adds another proposal while he says it is possible to create a female internet to keep female from online harassment in this way women can retake their social position back and show their abilities in life. (Yiannopoulos 2016a)

Conclusion

In a nutshell the paper was about sex in-equality which was applied to the prominent novel of Margaret Atwood, it showed that women were passive due to the dominance of men, they were entrapped, played and imprisoned by men. Atwood mentioned some sad places in her imaginative and well-known novel such as Red Centre, Commander's house and Gilead...etc., they were places which hurt all the women of Gilead in general and Offred specifically because they were run by men and they made women decentered in it means that men became dictators and women became victims.

Offred is the main character of the novel that depicts the truth of women's life in reality, her plight and all the difficulties that she faces in her life only because of one reason which is that she is solely has a bare fact that is woman.

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