

## The Feminine Betrayal: The Anti-Feminist Discourse in Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale

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### Abstract:

Margaret Atwood tends to emphasize women's situation in patriarchal societies, but her feminist behavior seems to be distanced from the first and second waves of feminism. She indulges into a third wave feminism that attacks an anthropocentric feminism. This attack is held on the fact that first and second wave feminisms focus only on a specific category of women. This article, therefore, tries to explain how women are betrayed on their way to liberate themselves. It distances Atwood from the feminist anthropocentric attitudes as it portrays a group of females who are caught in an oppressive patriarchal/matriarchal society. The oppression of this society is related to having women controlling the lives of other women. *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of the novels that emphasize the atrocities that can be brought by betraying women by other women.

**Key words:** feminine betrayal, feminism/anti-feminism, matriarchy, Gilead, disunity, Aunts, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* (HMT), Atwood creates a dystopian futuristic society that seems to be ruled by patriarchy. The society of Gilead is divided into different categories of people. The division is based on the functions these people occupy in society. Men in the novel are the leaders of the society. They are the ones to classify and enlist people in their right positions. Their essential method is to give power to some women in order to maintain order among other victimized categories of women.

The Aunts in the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center are responsible for convincing other weak women that they are, by right and fate, fit in their socially ascribed positions. This attitude resembles the one of the first and second wave feminists who were calling for the rights of upper and middle class white women forgetting about the rights of all other kinds of women. Different critics link Atwood's implication of the Aunts in her plot to radical feminism. Catherine R. Stimpson states that,

In one of her most original maneuvers, Atwood links the morality of the Aunts to that of radical feminists. The Aunts are repressive. Radical feminists can be repressive too. In the active syllogism of power, the premises of repression lead to conclusions of oppression. (81)

Radical feminism is one of the feminist trends that fit into the personalities of the Aunts. The repressive nature of this kind of feminism appears to be the cause behind the status quo of women in Gilead, for the handmaids in this story are firstly oppressed by other women who claim authority over them. Fiona Tolan strictly links Atwood's novel to the second wave feminism stating:

Against backdrop of postmodernist debate, the mid-1980s became a point of evaluation and reinvention for feminism, as a second generation of feminists inherited the second wave. The Handmaid's Tale looks back at this transition, examining the changing concerns and evolving vocabulary of an increasingly theorized feminism. Through her dystopian vision, Atwood exposes something of the

limiting and prescriptive nature of the utopianism that had underpinned much of the feminists of the early second wave. By juxtaposing flashbacks of 1970s feminist activism with contemporary descriptions of Gileadian practices, each informs the other, so that the *Handmaid's Tale* comes to satirically depict a dystopian society that has unconsciously and paradoxically met certain feminist aims. (145)

Tolan insists on the dystopic nature of the feminist movement. In this sense, second wave feminism betrays its own goals to become an anti-women movement. The novel, therefore, excludes the utopic nature of a liberation movement.

The subjugation of women in Gilead is ironically maintained by other women. The military world of the Gileadian society seems to be a combination of patriarchy and matriarchy. The latter is shown within private and public spheres which are at the top of the feminist agenda. Atwood's plot points at the future of first and second wave feminism, i.e. with the triumph of feminism, upper and middle class women will gain their rights and will have the power to enslave other women (black, lower classes, third world,...etc). As presented within the folds of the novel, the Aunts,

Uphold the male supremist power structure of Gilead with its hierarchical arrangement of the sexes, and they play an active role in the state's sexual enslavement of the Handmaids... *The Handmaid's Tale* describes the brutal reeducation of the Handmaids, who are coerced by the Aunts to forego the ideology of women's liberation and to revert to the 'traditional' values of a male-dominated system. (Bouson 141)

Many women in the novel are shown to willingly accept the role of an Aunt. They do not seem to care about their abuse of other women. They rather cherish the advantages that being an Aunt can bring to them. They blindly support the Gileadean regime and whatever it stands for.

The training system is held in the Red Centers or the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers. These centers are used to "re-educate" women about their real and only role

in the society. After the catastrophic decrease in birth rates, Gilead was at the edge of distinction. The handmaids were the only way of survival since they are the only women who can give birth to children. The handmaids were trained to accept their destiny and to pass it to the coming generation. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia telling them that, "For the generation that come after... it will be so much better" (160). The other main focus of the Aunts' training is those who come after the Handmaids; the second generation. They knew that they won't face any problems with them because the first one will teach them everything they learned, and because they will know no other alternative. It will be easier for them since "the new generation of Handmaids will be born and raised by women socialized to replicate 'maternal' qualities such as nurturing and self-sacrifice" (Elaine Adams 108). The Aunts' figure presents different perceptions that are related to feminism in one way or another (as mentioned before). Different critics like Shannon Hengen relate this figure to the blurring of gender lines. The advocates of feminism insist on gender issues, believing that gender is the main source of evil. In her novel, Atwood shows feminists what happens when we set gender into fire:

In this novel, Atwood's contemptible minor female characters have been given power of the violent kind and appear as tyrannical aunts... Thus the gender of characters begins to matter less to Atwood in her text than their ability or inability to interrogate and undermine the governing order. Men can be "women," or leftist feminists; women can be "men" or sexist conservatives. (99)

To preserve the status quo, the Aunts use different methods to brainwash the handmaids. Their main goal is to convince those powerless women that their bodies are a sexual tool at the hands of men who tend to use it as they please. The Aunts, in this sense seem to be more masculine. They are complicit with the leaders of Gilead. They know that the woman's emancipation can be achieved only if women knew the importance of their bodies, therefore, they turned to devalue this body in order to

render it with no importance. Offred recalls when Aunt Lydia shows them a pornographic movie in which they “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” (116). Such films are used to underestimate women’s bodies and show them as useless cattle of animals that is meant to be men’s property. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia trying to prove that women had lost nothing in this society. They have rather gained a kind of freedom they were missing in their previous lives. Offred recounts this fact stating,

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us. No one whistles. ‘There is more than one kind of freedom’, said Aunt Lydia. ‘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. (22)

In the ‘days of anarchy’ as Aunt Lydia describes them, women succeeded to gain freedom to choose a husband, to get a job, to have abortion...etc. During the new days of order, women are deprived from the freedoms that are considered dangerous for them. They were rather granted a healthy freedom from the gaze, from rape and from hurting themselves and their bodies through abortion. The Aunts’ brainwashing turns occasionally into physical violence. They torture any woman who might show any kind of resistance and disobey the rules. The Aunts’ torturing areas are the hands and the feet since they have no importance in the reproductive system. This behavior enhances the women’s displacement from the bodies that are seen only as a reproductive machine. Moira is the handmaid who suffers the most from the physical violence especially after her escape attempt.

The women’s disunity in the Red Center continues after they “graduate” as handmaids and get distributed to the commanders’ houses. Offred maintains the “unity” importance insisting on the crucial part “separation” plays in alienating women from each other. She states that she “would help Rita make the bread, sinking

my hands into that soft resistant warmth which is much like flesh. I hunger to touch something, other than cloth or wood. I to commit the act of touch" (9). Offred is aware of the dangers of their imposed disunity. Her hunger to be touched shows the importance of being close to another human being. In the household, women are divided into three categories: the commander's wives, the handmaids and the marthas; and each category seems to hold grudges against the other. The division and separation between women in the novel are even shown through their outfits and their colors. Each category is supposed to wear a special and a differently colored uniform. Each uniform and color stands for the true situation of each category. And even though they seem repressive, they also widen the fissure between the different categories of women,

So even if in the world of Gilead, the Handmaid's uniform is intended to signify modesty, protection and invisibility, it is equally a composite mask which announces display, mystery, illicit encounters and repressive sexuality... Uniforms in general, those worn by the men and women alike, are a way of distinguishing categories and ranks and recognizing functions in the hierarchy of the regime. In the domestic world of women in the novel blue is a commander's wife with special privileges, green a carer. The Handmaid's dress situates the wearer as a womb in the service of the nation but nonetheless the very status of Offred is ambivalent as she is on the borderline of several categories of women in the regime. (Sturges 72)

As they divide them, their colored uniforms are meant even to create instability within their identities. They lose sight of who they are and how they can relate to other women. This totalitarian technique might be the result of men's awareness of the importance and the dangers of women bonding.

The Handmaids are a continuous reminder to the Wives of their failure to have children of their own, therefore, these wives tend to ignore and humiliate them whenever possible. In this sense, the women's education at the center teaches them

to pity and feel sorry for the wives. The Aunts try to convince them that the Wives – not the commanders- are their first enemy and that they are going to detest them; “It is not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it’s the wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It’s only natural. Try to feel for them” (44). Ironically enough, the division made between the Handmaids and the Wives cherishes patriarchy which is considered with placing mothers at the center of life; the Handmaids were indeed at the center of Gilead. They were considered as the hope of the nation. The Handmaids did not feel that much for the wives. They consider them as the thieves who are going to take their children. Alice Adams comments on women’s disability to connect or unite as they are,

Uniform but divided from one another, women cannot achieve solidarity. Handmaids and Wives, for instance, are necessarily divided over issues of class, sexuality and child bearing ... Within the Wives class, women are reproductive consumers, competing with one another for access to the scarcest commodity: children. Handmaids, as reproductive laborers, also compete among themselves to produce children to the market. (106-107)

Margaret Atwood exposes the drawbacks of a feminine system that is marching on the same lane with patriarchy. She seems to threaten the feminism that indicates that, for a better world, we should replace patriarchy with matriarchy. In conformity with our previous assumption, Elizabeth Hansot asserts that

Gilead, in fact, shot through illicit communication. The Marthas have their networks. The Wives conspire to get handmaids pregnant and gone from their homes. And the handmaids become expert at the strategic use of public occasions (birthday days, prayvanzas, salvaging) to track each other as well as those missing from the past. (64)

The relationship between the Handmaids and the Marthas is also critical. The relation between Rita, Cora and Offred is the best example. The Marthas consider Offred as an outsider. They give no importance to her feelings or to what she thinks. Offred remarks that they always "talk about me as though I can't hear to them I am another household chore, one among many" (46). Offred's statement emphasizes the break among women. The Marthas consider her as nothing but a task they need to accomplish, but they have different attitudes towards her. The older Martha, Rita, hates to serve Offred questioning her choice to be a handmaid, forgetting that the only other alternatives were execution, or exile to the colonies which is another kind of execution. Cora felt more for Offred. She always tries to connect with her and to have a good relation with her for the mere reason that Offred can bring a child to the household. Even though in many occasions Offred was uncertain about what she thinks of the Marthas, she seems to enjoy her relation to Cora.

The only woman-to-woman relationship that the women of Gilead were able to cherish is the one between the members of the same group. The handmaids are able to have a relationship among each other but only on occasions. They were, for instance, able to talk and connect on their walk to the market. But, their exchanges are limited since they are supposed to report each other if they talk about inappropriate subjects. Offred knows that they travel in pairs in order not to be friends but to spy on each other.

At a first sight, having a well organized society in which each person is fully accomplishing his/her role seems to be a utopian society. The division, though, was not that fair. Women were divided according to their abilities into wives, child bearers, cooks, un-women...etc. This division prompts an atmosphere of unity. The narrator herself states that, "women untied for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task "(161). These relationships seem to support the natural rights and



duties of women in a well organized society (everyone is working for the well being of Gilead.) But, a further reading and analysis would show that these attitudes are manners of oppression and enslavement. These manners become Offred's obsession. She furthers her arguments focusing on econowives:

There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything if they can. (22)

Throughout her work Atwood keeps referring to feminism through the narrator's mother who is a feminist. The narrator believes that her mother's feminism is one of the causes of her present dystopian society. She addresses her mother stating; "You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (125). Such statement shows the righteous nature of her mother's quest and the wrongfulness of her feminist methods. Offred believes that this kind of feminism made women disunited entities that lack respect, communication, friendship and bonds among each other. Madonne Miner states that Atwood's creation of this Gileadian society is nothing but a

Vision of what might happen if certain attitudes are carried to the extremes. Reactions to the Tale focus on its horrific presentation of "theocratic ambitions of the religious right" on its understanding of the sinister implications of an exaggerated cultural feminism ... and on its critique of our own gender arrangements (Gileadian "solutions" highlight the problematic nature of sexual/social interactions in the 1980s) (149)

Miner's statement enlarges the reception of the novel as a serious threat. Such a statement displaces the novel from its fictitious futurist atmosphere to make it more tangible for its readers. This quote convicts all extremist thinking focusing on the religious and the feminist. The controversy that is highlighted through the novel's

analysis implicates a contradiction on its stance towards feminism, particularly cultural feminism. In alliance with Miner, Peter G. Stillman and S. Anne Johnson proclaim that some critics of the novel

Have looked to the pre-Gilead period (our present) as a happy (or tolerable) alternative to the Gileadean nightmare; others have interpreted the Gileadean society as, in part, a by-product of cultural feminism and few have found hope or assurance in Gilead's obvious demise before 2195, the date of the epilogue's academic conference. But these interpretations are unseated by a close reading of the text and attention to its dystopian context, which demonstrate the need for sustained political, feminist consciousness and activity among women by exploring what may happen in their absence. (70)

As it gathers the different views of the novel, the previous quote comes to the conclusion that even though we should not blame it totally on cultural feminism, women should be aware of two major things: their crucial importance in life and the flaws in their system.

Taking into consideration that Margaret Atwood has always been identified as a feminist, her novel shows that her feminism is distanced from first and second waves of the movements. The society she designs helps to prove that creating a matriarchal world instead of the patriarchal one will not serve women. In this world one small group of women (white upper middle class) will be privileged. The other groups, however, will face a doomed future at the hands of matriarchs. Even though it does not provide an answer, *The Handmaid's Tale* proves that women must revise their 'fighting' methods that should create a harmonious unity between all categories and types of women.

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