

## Analysis of Feminism in The Handmaid's Tale

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**Abstract:** The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, originally published in 1985. In the near future, human fertility rates collapse as a result of sexually transmitted diseases and environmental pollution. With this chaos in place, a new, power-hungry, militarized, hierarchical regime of fanaticism took control of the government and established a new country called "Gilead". They created new social classes, in which women are brutally subjugated, and by law are not allowed to work, own property, handle money, nor read. Women are divided into a small range of social categories that dictate their freedoms and duties: Marthas (who are housekeepers and cooks), Wives (who are expected to run their households), Handmaids (who are forced into sexual and child-bearing servitude) and Aunts (who train and oversee the Handmaids). This paper attempts to analyze the feminist consciousness of Margaret Atwood through the depictions of the characters in the novel. At the same time, it extends to the reflection on the problem of gender inequality in contemporary society.

### 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is one of the most successful and influential Canadian litterateur and sociologist. As a novelist and poet, Atwood has published nearly a hundred literary works. Her works encompass a variety of themes including the power of language, gender and identity, religion and myth, climate change, and "power politics". She has been shortlisted for dozens of important prizes correspondingly. She is the 2016 recipient of The National Book Critics Circle's Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Award for ten times. Besides, She is also considered as an important representative of the international feminist movement in the field of literature who was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame in 2001 and shortlisted for the PEN Center USA's Lifetime Achievement Award at the age of seventy eight.<sup>[1]</sup>

Her novel The Handmaid's Tale gained immediate success upon its publication in 1985, and the next year won Atwood her second Governor General's Award.<sup>[2]</sup> This novel has sold millions of copies and been translated into dozens of languages. It is set in a near-future, where the society is organized by a totalitarian, Christian theonomic government along a new, militarized, hierarchical regime of fanaticism and newly created social classes. It mainly narrates themes of women in such a patriarchal society who is suffered from subjugation and misogyny, and by law are not allowed to work, own property, handle money, nor read. And the various means by which these women attempt to gain individualism and independence.

### 2. Feminism and Feminist movement

#### 2.1 Feminism and Feminist Movements

The idea of "feminism" appeared several centuries ago, while until today there is no definitive definition. By general definition, feminism is a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued. It is based on social political and economical equality for women.<sup>[4]</sup> Feminism can also be described as a movement or a revolution that is to define, build, and realize equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for both women and men and to make the world to be equal without boundaries. An American scholar Cynthia Enloe defines feminism as the belief in the significance of gender equity, nullifying the ideology of gender hierarchy as a socially-constructed

concept.

Feminist movements have proceeded and continued to fight for women's rights, including the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn fair wages or equal pay, to possess property, to get education, to sign contracts, to have as equal rights as men in marriage, and to have maternity leave. Feminists have also devoted to promote bodily autonomy and integrity, and to protect women and girl from rape, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. While feminists around the world have differed in causes, goals, and intentions depending on time, culture, and country, most Western feminist historians assert that all movements that work to obtain women's rights should be considered feminist movements, even when they did not (or do not) apply the term to themselves.

## **2.2 The History of Feminism**

Feminism has a history of about three hundred years now. The history of the modern western feminist movements is divided into three "waves", each one is related with different aspects of the same feminist issues.<sup>[5]</sup> The first wave is women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focuses on overturning legal inequalities, particularly women's suffrage, promoting women's right to vote. The second wave is associated with the ideas and actions of the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s broadened debate to include cultural inequalities, gender norms, and the role of women in society, aiming to fight for legal and social equality for women. The third wave began in the 1990s, refers to diverse strains of feminist activity, seen as both a continuation of the second wave and a response to its perceived failures.

## **2.3 The Feminism in China**

Feminism in China began in the twentieth century with the Chinese Revolution. At that time, gender equality has been one of China's national policies, and the slogan "Women can hold up half the sky" was put up at that time. The foot binding, a cruel rule which was made by the empire, is abolished, ending the torturing on women for centuries in 1920. Besides, in the same year, the first female student was accepted in the Peking University, soon followed by universities all over China. The new Civil Code which made in 1931, gave women the equal inheritance rights, the right to choose marriage partner, the right to divorce and the right to control their own property after divorce.

However, many Chinese feminists began realizing that the feminism has not been accepted by the whole society for most of the people care more about their living standards than their invisible rights. More and more organizations and centers for gender were established after the Fourth UN Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995. Women's rights groups became increasingly active in China these years with the support of government, but it stills needs more attention.

## **3. Feminism Consciousness in The Handmaid's Tale**

### **3.1 The Role of Men in The Handmaid's Tale**

The Commander is a sort of scientist and was previously involved in something similar to a research of pre-Gilead. As a founder of Gilead, a world where the people there always fear of being trapped forever in property deprived of the human right to live with dignity and hope for the future, he bears responsibility for the entire totalitarian society.<sup>[6]</sup> However, his unhappiness and need for companionship make him seem as much a prisoner of Gilead's strictures as anyone else. But, just like a situation from a documentary on the Holocaust, the mistress of a brutal death camp guard defended the man she loved, claiming that he was not a monster. "How easy it is to invent humanity". Indeed, anyone can be likable given the right set of circumstances, but even if the Commander is likable and can be kind or considerate, his responsibility for the creation of Gilead and his callousness to the hell he created for women means that he, like the Nazi guard, is a monster.

### **3.2 The Role of Women in The Handmaid's Tale**

Offred is the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, and we are told the entire story from her

point of view, experiencing events and memories as vividly as she does. She was an ordinary woman who used to have a happy life, working as an employee, married a man who loved her so much and raised a daughter. However, all of a sudden, she was dismissed for no reason at all, her bank accounts were frozen and she was not able to neither manage nor control her own property anymore. What's worse, she was separated from her husband and daughter. Considered as an important commodity she was "distributed" to the Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy, to bear a child for them, as a handmaid (Serena Joy is believed to be infertile).

Like most of the women in Gilead, she is considered as a tool, a "two legged womb" rather than a human being, a woman.<sup>[7]</sup> Handmaids are not qualified to choose their husbands; their only identity is as the Commander's property. They cannot choose their own job, the only thing that they can do is to bear a child for their commander. They even cannot have their own name, take Offred for example, Offred is a slave name that describes her function: she is "of Fred", which means she belongs to Fred, her commander, and is considered a concubine.<sup>1</sup> Handmaids are never alone and are expected to do everything with their partner, not for companionship but to police each other's behavior. They are absolutely the victims of that tragic society.

#### **4. The Gender Issues in Contemporary Society**

As Margaret Atwood said in an interview, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a science fiction, but it is based on what has happened in history or what is happening around us now.

Look around us, there are a lot of gender-inequity phenomena. For example, nowadays, it is much more difficult for female applicants to find a job in certain field, the employing units in the recruitment use various causes of discrimination against girls. More and more girls are under much pressure of being forced to get married after the age of 25, however, on the other hand, most boys are forced to buy a new house when they get married as well. Besides, a large number of men feel it's harder for them to express their true feeling, because "men do not easily shed tears". However, we keep hearing a particular gripe about the feminism movements. Some people have been calling this movement puritanical or a return to Victorian values, where men can not behave or speak sexually around dainty, delicate or fragile women. But, in fact, the current system is puritanical. Maybe men can say and do whatever they want, but women cannot. The current system inhibits women from expressing our desires, wants and needs, from seeking their pleasure.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Feminism should never be a derogatory word at any time, just as Drucilla Cornellmen said "men should have similar freedoms--thus returning feminism to its promise that freedom for women would mean freedom for all". Feminism is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women, it's all about equality rather than gender discrimination. We should never be afraid of the word feminist. With moral pluralism and limited human desires, people can set up a more well-rounded society. Just as Natalie Portman said, "It's time for a new day, a new locker-room culture, time to think about every person's desires, needs, wants and pleasure."<sup>[11]</sup> It's time to realize that we, every one of us are worthy of safety and respect.

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