

VISION IN MARGARET ATWOODS *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important novel in many aspects including visions. This is a novel with a definite visionary quality and it depicts a terrifying annihilistic and futuristic vision. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is cast in the form of visionary fiction, which is presented as a women's dystopia. The novel is a brilliant indictment of the twentieth century life as a whole in a totalitarian state. *The Handmaid's Tale* projects a grim vision of the plight of women in the foreseeable future, a vision which broadens almost into an apocalyptic one. The paper attempts to reflect the vision of Atwood in the socio-cultural and socio-political condition of the Gilead period, which exhibits the conflicts and tensions, fear of uncertainty, violence and insecurity among the people.

KEYWORDS: Dystopia, Future Vision, Social and Political Conditions, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood is an internationally known, read, translated and critiqued contemporary Canadian Woman fiction writer. Atwood is a prolific writer, versatile social critic and perceptive observer of life. Margaret Atwood's literary career as a novelist started with *The Edible Woman* in 1969. Her literary contribution includes novels, books of poetry, short stories, children's book and literary criticism and many more. The Canadian women writers of fiction are concerned with woman's struggle to self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Their main theme revolves around woman's experience in a male dominated society. The heroines of these writers are concerned with the exploration and survival, crossing boundaries, challenging cultural and psychological limits and glimpsing new prospects. All contemporary woman novelists present vision of alternate worlds that "examines the multiple ironies of contemporary society" (Feminism/Postmodernism, 26).

Margaret Atwood like most Canadian writers is certainly a writer with a vision. Atwood's vision of life is complex as it is conditioned and shaped by various historical and social processes such as exploration, immigrant colonization and decolonization. The vision is a complex one, because it tries to integrate the vision of the external world and that of the inner world. This results in an interaction between the two worlds. Her novels depict the society's life, culture, custom, manners, religion, politics and the emotions of the society. Like most writers Atwood's novels also present vision of specific places and societies.

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Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important novel in many aspects including visions. This is a novel with a definite visionary quality and it depicts a terrifying annihilistic and futuristic vision. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is cast in the form of visionary fiction, which is presented as a women's dystopia in the tradition of George Orwell's 1984, Aldous Huxley's *The Brave New World* and Zamyatin's *We*. It is written from a woman's point of view and presents

dehumanizing effects of communism and religion. Atwood herself comments that “It is not a science fiction. There are no space-ships, no Martians, nothing like that” (qtd. Vevaina, 73). The novel is a brilliant indictment of the twentieth century life as a whole and achieved without resorting to special effects. “human brutality being what it is, gene splitting and electronic surveillance aren’t necessary in a totalitarian state” (qtd. Vevaina, 73).

The novel is set in 2195 in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the Centre of the Republic of Gilead, which was previously known as United States of America. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied rights.

The Handmaid’s Tale projects a grim vision of the plight of women in the foreseeable future, a vision which broadens almost into an apocalyptic one. In this novel God and Government together run America as a puritanical theocracy? The moral and political vision of Margaret Atwood is highlighted through the portrayal of disciplined and serious life in the regime of Gilead.

The novel reflects Gilead’s life, culture, custom, manners, religion, politics, emotion and the aspirations of the society. The action in the novel reflects not only the philosophy and social structure of Gilead society but also the imaginative structure of the novel which embodies vision of destruction or death. Vision of violence and domination are reflected in the socio-cultural and geo-political structures.

The Handmaid’s Tale is set in the society of Gilead under the totalitarian system of the Gilead regime. It reflects the socio-cultural and socio-political condition of the Gilead period, which exhibits the conflicts and tensions, fear of uncertainty, violence and insecurity among the people.

The novel portrays the life in the Republic of Gilead, a theocracy which was founded by the religious extremists. The novel unfolds through the recollections of the protagonist, the conditional set-up and the social situation in the Commander’s household. The novel emphasizes and recommends social and economic reforms. The events and characters are influenced and characterised by the social, economic and political conditions of the Republic of Gilead. The novel presents the violence and degeneration of a precarious modern structure of society. It presents the whole structure of household of the Commanders and their Wives, their handmaids and the implementation of various capitalistic structures. The household which is symbolically described as a ‘gymnasium’, ‘an army’, ‘a college’, ‘guest room’, ‘a nunnery’ and ‘a loony’ (HT, 67) represents and depicts “life of uncertainty, insecurity, conformity, homogeneity and a life of monotony and boredom (HT, 69). The protagonist, who is now a Handmaid, describes the social setting she lives in as:

This could be a college guest room, for the less distinguished visitors; or a room in a rooming house, of former times, for ladies in reduced circumstances. That is what we are now. The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances....where I am in not a prison but a privilege, (HT, 8)

The socio-cultural dimension in the novel is evident from the manners and custom strictly adhered by everyone in the Commander’s household. The novel depicts the social isolation of women in Gilead who occupy any one of the position suggested above. The women in Gilead hold the least power among the various classifications. The separation of women according to their function in Gilead promotes their fragmentation and prevents them from forming a unified front. The wives are infertile. They help their husbands during the insemination commonly referred to as “Ceremony”. The Wives are mainly decorative in function and are incharge of household discipline. They wear blue dress which

resembles virgins. Daughters wear white until their marriage. The Marthas are middle-aged maids, housekeepers, they are dressed in green. The Wives of the poor men are called "Econowives". They wear striped dresses in red, blue and green. The Handmaids are young women in their twenties and thirties and serve as child-bearers to elderly childless Commanders. The Handmaids wear red, symbolic of blood and birth and sex and life. The Aunts, the policewomen of Gilead wear parliamentary khaki dress with cattle prods hanging from the belts.

The Handmaids are distinguished from others in the household by their red uniforms—a prescribed issue; red gloves, flat-heeled red shoes, ankle-length red cloak, white wings and a veil to keep them from seeing and also from being seen. (HT, 8)

The women of Gilead are repressed and are forbidden to read or write. The handmaids and Jezebels are the most alienated class of women and thus they are the most controlled class. The men of Gilead are also segregated in their functions as Commanders, who are the most powerful men in Gilead, the Eyes, who are the secret police of Gilead and the Guardians. The social life that prevails in Gilead is a repressive one and embodies rigorous and restrictive forces in the state of Gilead.

Margaret Atwood's political vision can be discerned from the juxtaposition of good and corrupting forces as is evident in the moralistic set-up of the Gilead regime with its puritan values on the one hand and the corrupting influence of the tourists on the other.

The socio-political dimension in the novel reveals the sharpness of a Atwood's perception as also the largeness of her vision and it presents the harsh realities underlying the rigour of a radical structure represented by the Republic of Gilead. The Republic of Gilead represents an intolerant theocracy formed by religious extremists embody both good and corrupt forces at work. Some virtues which give shape to the structure of the Gilead regime surfaces when the protagonist remarks:

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speak to us, touches 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 (HT, 24).

The grim side of the system can be seen from the strict enforcement of rules and the rigours of prison life. Non-conformity with the rules results in bodies hanging, by the necks from hooks on the red brick wall with their hands tied in front of them—hung there for days, like "scarecrows" (HT, 31). The dark vision of life which permeates the novel can be seen from the "Men's Salvaging"(HT, 31) early in the morning and as the protagonist points out,

We stop, together as if on signal and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We are supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them. (HT, 31)

The socio-political conditions in America bring to light, the plight of the people under totalitarianism. Atwood's prophetic vision of life moves from the realms of imagination into realism reflecting her philosophical view of life. She presents in an impersonal objective manner the multiple compulsions which are predominant both in man and society. Atwood's vision of disintegration profoundly shapes her naturalistic vision of life which determines the evolution of violent structures of domination.

Atwood's futuristic vision of life is well expressed through a gradual revelation of haunting memories recalled by the young woman protagonist. Her perceptive portrayal of life distils through the consciousness of the narrator, through thoughts, memories, dreams, reminiscences and recollections. It reveals the universal plight of woman in an unjust world. The underlying theme of women as victims, caught in the web of a male-dominated world is exemplified by Atwood's cosmic vision of contamination and violence which manifests itself in the stubborn structure of the Gilead regime. The portrayal of life in the Commander's household is a microcosmic representation of Atwood's futuristic vision of diabolic forces at work. The Handmaids, victims who have no or little choice, are portrayed as exiled young women who have been assigned the purpose of child-bearing.

Offred, the Handmaid, suffers and is victimized for no fault of hers. The handmaids have to prove themselves to be fruitful and bear a child else she will be termed Unwoman and sent to the colonies to clean the toxic wastes. Even when she is tempted by the doctor she rejects it by saying "There is no such thing as sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (HT, 57).

The leaders of Gilead use certain rights and rituals to create and enforce group norms. The women in Gilead are placed in constant pessimistic gloom of fear, insecurity, frustration, isolation and alienation. Life in Gilead is portrayed as a serious business with a sense of detachment. Even Commander's sexuality with the handmaid is presented as an act of religious rite. Before the sexual act is committed there is a ceremony with reading from the Bible:

Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.... Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her (HT, 84).

Atwood seems to be convinced that the woman has always been a victim in a male-dominated world from the Biblical times to the present day world. Her ideas of the dark future as presented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, finds its roots in the genesis.

CONCLUSIONS

The Handmaid's Tale viewed as a novel of victims, presents Atwood's social, political visions and the reality of a futuristic dystopian state. The novel has no serious plot, rising action or climax. It is a novel with a realistic and imaginative structure where the narrator unfolds actions in the first person. *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with violence, especially towards women. The women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are kept in constant fear of being hanged or sent to colonies to clean the toxic wastes. Women are treated as objects of breeding alone. The novel embodies Atwood's anti-utopian vision of an unpleasant intolerable fundamentalist establishment characterised by power, fear, terror, repression and rigid structures. Atwood's dystopian vision holds both fantasy and reality. It also reflects the futuristic dangers of totalitarianism or a church-state regime. *The Handmaid's Tale* relates to the vision of the future and of life. The postmodernist concerns in Atwood's novels relate more to the postmodern questioning of male-defined structures, traditional roles of male superiority and female subjugation. The novel is a vision about how the dystopian presents a social, political, and economical anarchy where women are wholly suppressed as a class and are treated as mere objects of reproductions. Thus it is clear from the discussion that in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* vision forms an organic whole in self expression.

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