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**Carceral Maternity and Exploitative Biopolitics in Urban Dystopia: An Enquiry into  
the Female Experience in *The Handmaid's Tale***

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**Abstract**

*The film *The Handmaid's Tale* directed by Volker Schlöndorff presents a bleak, dismal future vision of a totalitarian government that subjugates and exploits women according to its need. Women are transformed into mere reproductive tools and their duty is to serve the state. They are treated as a national property. The handmaids have become the objects of sexism in Gilead society. They are the second-class citizens of the state. The only capital they have is their body that is important for the state. They are nothing but ambulatory wombs. They have to give birth not from their free will but as an obligation to fulfil the demands of the state. They are valued because of their body but at the same time, they are suffering because of that body. They are in an imprisoned state because of their special ability to give birth, so their fertility becomes a curse for them. But at the same time, they are alive as they are fertile, otherwise, they will be shifted to the Colony. They are giving birth but they do not have any right over their newborns. This maternity is an imposition upon them and as a result of it, they lose emotional connection with their babies. Their body becomes the site where the state can exercise its power. Women are the playthings for the male chauvinistic society. The present study tries to speculate the issues like suppression and subjugation of women in a male-dominated society, exploitation of women as an object of sexism, use of women as reproductive tools, denial of basic rights of women, and the relationship between power and body. The proposed study will analyze these issues with the help of the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Michel Foucault.*

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**Keywords:** *carceral maternity, women oppression, other, patriarchy, sexism, power, body, sexual Politics.*

### 1. Introduction:

The dystopian film *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990) is adapted from Canadian author Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name. Margaret Atwood is one of the most prolific and controversial writers in Canadian literature. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* achieved immediate success upon its publication in 1985 and Atwood won her second Governor General's Award for it. She has actively engaged herself in politics and the feminist movement and has "questioned stereotypes of nationality and gender exposing cultural fictions and artificial limits they impose on our understanding of us and other human beings" (Anne 2). She is mainly concerned of social and political issues and most of her works deal with the female protagonists and the problems they face in the patriarchal male-dominated society. Gender issue is the primary concern of her novels. She presents her female characters as the victims of male domination and oppression trying to search for their identity which is lost in the male-dominated society. These female victims are trying to create a space for themselves and seek freedom or revenge or equality. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is one most successful SF novels in Canadian literature. But Atwood claims that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a speculative fiction and she states that a speculative novel "employs the means already more or less to hand, and takes place on Planet Earth" (Atwood 513). She also says that the novel is, in fact, a satire.

The present film's screenplay was written by Harold Pinter and the film got an entry into the 40<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival. The film is set in a dystopic near future, where the human fertility rate collapses as a result of industrial civilization and environmental pollution. Here, it is necessary to talk about the concept of 'dystopia'. M.H. Abrams defines the term as- 'dystopia' "has recently come to be applied to works of fiction, including science, which represents a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some

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disastrous future culmination” (Abrams 218). So, the concept of dystopia connotes something which is nauseous and repulsive and that gives an ugly picture of the chaotic state. The Republic of Gilead is symptomatic of that situation. In the reign of this power-hungry totalitarian government, women are under the control of male members of patriarchal society and they have been reduced to reproductive machines. Women have completely lost their identity and they are now merely objects in the hands of male chauvinist society. They are the prisoners in the hands of the male-dominated Gilead society and their imprisoned body is exploited for the benefit of the state.

Men and women are different in many ways but they have also many similarities. Though women are capable of giving birth, still men are regarded as active agents in case of reproduction. In wider scenario, men are seen as strong while women are seen as passive and weak. This binary opposition links women with passivity, submissiveness and makes women the weaker sex. Women are assigned domestic duties and traditional gender roles and thus they are given a lower social status than men. To solve the problem of infertility, Gilead government forces women into a submissive position and women are used as handmaids to bear children for the childless commanders. Here, women's only duty is to give birth to upper-class men. She has to give birth not from marriage or from love, but only from a liability to sustain her society's needs. If she fails to give birth, she is no more needed for the system and she will be called 'unwoman'. Handmaids are the fertile women who are the property of the state. They have neither the choice nor the desire. They are not supposed to think or feel. They have no name, identity, or emotion; they are just the reproductive tools. Their status is aptly stated by Atwood in the novel where Offred says- "we are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 146). Government has total control over their bodies and they have to give birth like machines.

The film's protagonist Offred is one of the handmaids in the totalitarian regime. During this chaotic period, she is confined in a world of strict rules and regulations where she undergoes acute pain, torture, oppression and continues with the belief that someday she will meet her husband and daughter. Like other women, she is also a natural resource of reproduction. She is like an imprisoned female inmate and her body is very much needed for

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the society. She has now lost her individual identity and now she is a part of a collective identity. Based on the ability to give birth, the government classifies women into different categories-Commanders' Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Econowives, Widows, Jezebels, Unwoman, Aunts. These women wear dresses of different colours because colour represents the government's classification of women. Homosexuals, old women, non-whites are burdens of the state; they are sent to the colonies. Men wear grey, black, dark green dresses representing their power. The handmaids have to wear red dresses and white hats. 'Red' represents the status of 'other' in Gilead. The handmaids do not have their own names, they are named after the names of the commanders, like- Offred, Ofglen, Ofwarren. They are economically totally dependent upon men as they have no money, no property rights. Even Serena, the commander's wife has no power in Gilead government, she has to manage her household and she can supervise other women in the house. She has to accept the 'ritual' that the handmaid has sex with Commander every month as she is unable to give birth. There is a group called 'aunts' who train the handmaids. After the training, handmaids are sent to the commander's family as reproductive tools. They are almost like the prostitutes but giving sexual pleasure is not their main duty because they have to give baby to the family. They are the national property. Women are the second-class citizens here. Women are slaves in the hands of men. Here, we can refer to Hegel's idea of 'master-slave' dichotomy where he says that the contradictory relationship between the self and the other is represented by the relationship between "Master and Slave". Master and slave are related, master is the powerful subject who can force him to work. The slave has no right to defy his master and he has to obey his master's rules and needs (Hegel 42).

This oppression of women brings in the note of ecofeminism that studies the exploitation of nature that is similar to the exploitation of women. Industrial developments, gas emission, deforestation, use of pesticides, nuclear reaction result in the sterility of nature. In Gilead, the same hostility towards nature contributes to the sterility of women. The film visualizes the adverse effect of environmental degradation on the life of women. Nature is denaturalized by the men in the Republic of Gilead and women are suffering its effects. To solve the adverse situation, women are used as sacrificial tools by men. Women are the

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victims of men's hostility and their maternity is used for the sake of the benefit of the state. In the name of the Bible, the Republic of Gilead exploit the handmaids. Since biblical times women are considered transgressors and they are punished. Adam was not deceived but Eve was tempted by Satan and this temptation caused man's fall. Women are considered useless if they fail to serve the state. The handmaids will give birth for the commanders as the commanders' wives are infertile. This incident is a reminiscence of a biblical incident of Rachel and Bilhah- "And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Genesis, 30:1-3).

## 2. Research Methodology:

The Republic of Gilead has transformed women into national property and they are just reproductive tools and are destined to serve the state. They are the imprisoned bodies and their maternity is exploited to fulfil the demands of Gilead. The present study attempts to analyze the position of women and their suffering in the film *The Handmaid's Tale* based on the theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault and Kate Millet.

### 2.1 Beauvoir and The Handmaid's Tale:

In her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women are oppressed, marginalized and put into the category of secondary status. Beauvoir's main arguments are distinction between sex and gender and her negation of biology as the main cause of oppression for women. She argues that from the very beginning of civilization, women are defined as 'Other' and they do not have any autonomy. Men are active beings; female are there for men's use. She again argues that women's body confines them to the role of wife and mother and these are considered as the most important roles for women in society. Women's duty is to rear a child and do the household duties. Beauvoir's statement "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 273) reflects the distinction between sex and gender. Sex is the

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biological difference between men and women but gender is a socially and culturally constructed difference. Women are not born feminine but it is society and culture that shape them as the weaker sex. Family and other social institutions try to construct them as the other and through these institutions men can oppress women. These institutions become the means through which patriarchy can perpetuate its needs. Men are the norms and standards of the society, whereas women are the objects for men. Women are defined in contrast to their differences from men. Man's body is the normal whereas woman's body is the abnormal. A woman is defined by her reproductive capabilities. Beauvoir says that the problem lies in the conviction that man is the 'self' and woman is the 'other' and woman's oppression originates in her Otherness. Woman is considered as other as she lacks the qualities of man. A woman for her biological difference is categorized as the Other and weaker sex. Beauvoir argues that by biology men and women can be categorized but biology is not the determinative of their social roles. It is the social institutions and the norms that try to normalize and justify her marginalized position in society. Beauvoir suggests that a woman's body is the cause of her imprisonment, she is able to give birth and her female functions imprison her. She is designated by her capacity that she can become a mother. So, her maternity chains her and contributes to the oppression by patriarchy.

### **Women's biological and sexual oppression in *The Handmaid's Tale*:**

The film portrays women as two-legged wombs, women are nothing but ambulatory wombs. In Gilead, the state controls the biological and reproductive capacities of women. They are considered useless if they fail to give birth. Women are devalued and they are worthy only for their fecundity. They are only destined to fulfil their biological duties. Handmaids are confined to the Red Centre where they are trained on how to serve the men and how to fulfil the need of the Gilead society. They are the slaves and the commanders are the absolute masters. They are defined by their biology, and their capacity to give birth, they are not regarded as human beings. The handmaids are the prisoners of patriarchal tyranny. Throughout the film, we see that totalitarian government not only denies the fact that women can have some agency but also transforms them into easy commodities that can be exploited to the heart's content. Beauvoir asserts that "humanity is male and man defined woman not in

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herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being” (Beauvoir 16). This strain of argument clearly analyzes the condition of Handmaids in Gilead. They are even deprived of their real names; they are named after the commanders. They have to play the maternal roles designed by the state authority. It is their destiny and they cannot refuse this institutionalized maternity. They are taught by the Aunts how to play the maternal role perfectly. The Aunts in the Red Centre tell the Handmaids that their feet and hands are useless organs, only their wombs are precious. Handmaids are told to think of themselves as seeds as they will bring new lives to Gilead. The handmaids are reduced to their body, and male-dominated society reassigns their power by manipulating the reproductive ability of women. Women are reduced to sexual objects in heterosexual relationships. They are the prisoners of sexual desires of men. There is a hidden household known as Jezebel where women are used as prostitutes. So, whatever role the women play here is linked to the men's needs. In case of the Handmaids, officially, sexual passion is entirely set aside and love does not exist; they are involved in sexual intercourse with the commanders for achieving pregnancy. Women are imprisoned through men's desire- the desire for offspring.

## **2.2 Kate Millet and The Handmaid's Tale:**

### **Handmaids as the objects of sexism:**

In order to analyze how the handmaids have become the objects of sexism in Gilead society, the study uses Kate Millet's theory on sexual politics. Kate's theory will be analyzed through the characters of Offred, Ofglen 1 and 2, Moira and Janie. Gilead society controls women in two ways- taking control over their economy and imposing domestic roles upon them. Their freedom is very much limited, they are not allowed to read. They are not also allowed to watch or read news. Millet opines- "if knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women" (Millet 42). Reading means knowing new things and knowing new things means power, so Gilead cannot allow the women to read. Reading is restricted only to men. All the shop signs in Gilead have been replaced by images as Gilead

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wants to make the Handmaids illiterate. No magazines or books are allowed in Red Centre for the Handmaids. Their rooms are empty and they have to spend their days idly lying on beds. This makes them mentally unhealthy. There is a scene where we see that Offred longs for reading, she is very much interested in playing scrabble with the commander. The Republic of Gilead restricts the Handmaids' movement by freezing their bank accounts. They are fired from their jobs; they have no money. Now they are totally dependent on men. Money means power, without money or jobs they are powerless. Millet states- "since education and economy are so closely related in the advanced nations, it is significant that the general level and style of higher education for women, particularly in their many remaining segregated institutions is closer to that of Renaissance humanism than to the skills of mid-twentieth-century scientific and technological society. Traditionally patriarchy permitted occasional minimal literacy to women while higher education was closed to them" (Millet 41). The only capital they have is their body which is now transformed into a mere reproductive tool. So, now they have nothing of their own. The discourse that Gilead has established is based on the workings of sexism where man is at the centre and woman is at the margin.

#### **Handmaid's body as an instrument of Gilead Society:**

The biological difference between men and women is the main point that sexism underlines as sexism believes that the biological difference makes women the weaker sex and dependent upon men. Body is the main component for a handmaid. She has to be healthy as she has to give birth which is her national duty. She cannot smoke or drink. Handmaids are the national property of Gilead. The handmaids wear red clothes and their bodies are totally covered up as their body's curves are not supposed to be observed and enjoyed by others. The handmaids are under the strict supervision of the guards and their freedom is very much limited. They cannot run away or commit suicide as they are national property. They are useful as they are reproductive machines. The handmaids are used as objects for copulation, they cannot choose the man who will be the father of their babies. They are the submissive category and men are free to exploit their sexuality. The sexual ceremony consists of three people- the commander, his wife and the handmaid. In this encounter, Offred takes part as a



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passive agent, not as an active being with sexual feeling or desire. We observe that during the sexual encounter, Offred thinks of her past life, her daughter and her husband; she is not at all interested in this intercourse. Moreover, in this ceremony, both the commander and his wife Serena Joy are officially dressed up as there is no feelings or love in this intimacy. They are performing only to get a child from this intercourse. The handmaids act as breeders and for that reason they have to be healthy. They have to give birth to continue their white race, to fulfil the needs of the state. They are just like the surrogate mothers, they will give birth and the babies will go to the commanders' house. They have to bear the child for nine months but when the baby is born, she has no right over the baby. The handmaids lose their connection to their bodies and their reproductive capacities. Just after the delivery, they are shifted to another family because again they have to give birth to other families. In this process, they lose emotional connection to the babies. Pregnancy becomes a tool for them to live otherwise they will be shifted to the Colony with the unwomans (infertile women).

### **2.3 Michel Foucault and The Handmaid's Tale:**

The handmaids are placed in the Red Centre and they are trained for transforming them into docile creatures. They are under strict supervision; their every movement is surveilled by the Gilead government. The handmaids are the prisoners in the hands of the male-dominated Gilead. They are supposed to be disciplined by the Aunts. They are deprived of basic liberty and they are under the complete control of the state. The condition of the handmaids can be analyzed through Foucault's notion of 'discipline and punish'. The handmaids are now caught up in a cage (Red Centre) and they are subject to power relations. The knowledge of the body creates a mastery over it. Power and knowledge are related. Knowledge possessed by the state authority creates a certain technology of power. Foucault points out that "power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another, there is no power relations without the corrective constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relation" (Foucault 27). Body is a target of power, the docile body is subjected and transformed. The chief functioning of disciplinary power is to train. The handmaids are trained to shape their behaviour and habits and to make them realize that their only duty is to

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serve the state, to produce child. Their reproductive ability is exploited, their body is exploited, and their maternity is exploited to save the white race.

### 3. Conclusion:

The present study shows how women are portrayed in the film *The Handmaid's Tale* and what role they play in Gilead. The film visualizes a story of victimization, exploitation of the female sex, and power politics of patriarchy. The totalitarian government is playing games with the women where the males are the gamers and the women are the playthings. Women are used as reproductive tools and imprisoned in the hands of an authoritative state and they are the victims of their special ability to reproduce. Their maternity is bliss on one hand and on another hand, it is a curse. They are alive because of their fecundity but at the same time they are suffering and their body is exploited because of this special capability. The film is set in an imagined future but its theme is realistic. It describes the persecution of the power-hungry government against human beings. Although the film predicts a future society but it contains similitudes with the present scenario of the condition of women. Even today women are regularly exploited, humiliated, and segregated in many sectors of society. Actually, the film portrays delineates the role of women in society which is not different from what has happened in past or continues to happen daily in our society. It is a critique and reflection of the socio-political condition of the status of women of all times. The ultimate message the film tries to propagate is that women need caution. Power relations will always be there in society but women have to be aware of their oppression and exploitation. They have to raise their voice against the patriarchal domination of males. They have to realize how power is getting exercised over them. The film actually tries to make women aware of their present status and also tries to change the wrongdoings of the patriarchal society which is not as different as Offred's world, Gilead.

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