

FEMINIST DYSTOPIA IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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Abstract

Atwood does not dismiss male privilege. She eventually makes it clear that it is the Commander who has allowed Offred to win at the game of scrabble and there is no escaping subordination or biological inferiority to men as woman in the bible was made as a helper and subordinate to Adam and merely to complement Adam as a servant rather than function as an equal. This is made clear in the reduction of women to servile roles as Wives, Marthas, Aunts, Econowives and Handmaids. Females it seems are condemned to serve men in society and as Atwood's romance has it, they remain at the mercy of men to liberate them from their male imposed prisons. There is thus no escaping male privilege, the female's choice is merely to negotiate or play within the confines of male power.

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The Handmaid's tale is Atwood's speculative fiction about what would happen if religious fundamentalists who are out to reverse the progresses made by the feminist movement were to take over America and replace the capitalist government with a theocracy of Christian fundamentalist state.

In Atwood's dystopia, the trend of viewing women solely in terms of their functions in society is taken to its extreme conclusion in the setting up of women in roles such as handmaids, Aunts, Wives, Marthas, Econowives and so on. Women in an extreme patriarchal society are reduced to mere functions such as Offred's status as a walking womb in her role solely to breed in a society where environmental disasters have destroyed the fertility of most women and there is a limited number of women to breed for the purpose of perpetuating society.

She is reduced also to the patronymic name Offred meaning Of Fred because she is solely the property of her commander Fred in the story and her identity as an individual with rights has been erased, a logical conclusion of the current trend to term women solely as Mrs John Atkins and so on.

While Atwood's vision of the brutalization of women in extreme patriarchal states might seem unrealistic, it is merely a logical extension of trends today such as viewing women solely as mothers who remain the property of their husbands and whose sole responsibility is to breed and perpetuate the family name.

According to Atwood thus, the oppression of women and the reduction of women to mere breeding and servile functions in society has its roots in patriarchal and fundamentalist religions such as extreme incarnations of a Christian fundamentalist state which views women solely as the property of men and whose sole functions lie in the domestic sphere.

As such, June or Offred gets terminated from her job as a librarian and reduced to a mere handmaid whose sole purpose is to breed and get impregnated so that she can perpetuate a sterile society where fertility is limited.

It is clear in Atwood's dystopia that women function solely in the society as the servants and property of the men they serve. Hence Offred's individual name is erased and she is reduced to her function as a handmaid or breeder and she is allowed no private space of her own as even her room has been visited and invaded by the Commander whom she belongs to. Atwood is merely projecting to its logical conclusion trends that are already inherent in current society, such as the view of women as servants of the domestic sphere who should not be allowed to extend their functions beyond the domestic or maternal sphere as extreme Biblical fundamentalists who declared feminists as anti-family heretics were termed in Atwood's time.

It is also clear in Atwood's dystopia that women function merely as the playthings or toys of men, as is shown in the scene where the Commander commands Offred to don a harlot like dress and to visit Jezebel's, a prostitutes den in which women are reduced to dressing up as sex toys for men to be solely used for their sexual pleasure. The commodification of women as sex objects, sex toys and mere maternal or domestic workers then becomes very clear in Atwood's dystopian novel.

Yet if the politics of Atwood's take is clearly a feminist reaction to dystopian trends in patriarchal society it offers no radical revolutionary solution to this feminist dystopia because the Handmaid's tale remains a romantic novel in which Offred is rescued by the chivalric Nick whom she has an affair with and who later heroically functions as the knight in shining armour who will arrange her escape.

So while it is categorically men who are the oppressors in this novel, it is also a romance in which it is a male who comes to the rescue of Offred and liberates her from the Christian theocratic oppression that she suffers. Hence there is no utopian declaration or vision of women who will somehow come to liberate themselves from their male oppression, indeed Atwood's vision is that while males imprison, they are also the potential liberators or redeemers of women as they can use their Biblical based power inscribed in patriarchy to set women free.

Moirra who had been a swashbuckling lesbian feminist radical is reduced to a prostitute's role eventually at Jezebel's. Hence I would argue that Atwood does not view women as capable of liberating or redeeming themselves from male oppression, instead they remain at the mercies of men to liberate them from their prisons as rescue them from their prisons by using their Biblically inscribed privilege to allow women to extend beyond the circumscribed limits of their patriarchal defined roles in society such as Wives, handmaids and servile breeders of men.

The tone of Atwood's dystopia thus remains bleak as it does not view women as capable of conducting their own revolutions of redeeming themselves from their patriarchal imposed prisons in society as the fate of Moirra in Jezebels shows. Her rebellion in being a lesbian and separatist from patriarchal society fails as she has no one to redeem her from her fate of being punished for her lesbian separatism in being reduced to a mere sex toy at Jezebel's.

She is also described as being defeated and resigned to her fate of being a mere plaything at the hands of men as it is men who wield true power in a Biblical theocracy of patriarchal state. Atwood's dystopia is thus pessimistic to the end that it offers no radical alternative to patriarchy and indeed declares that while men imprison and oppress it is only the power of men in society which will set women free to move beyond their roles inscribed by patriarchal society as Nick as chivalric hero shows.

Women thus remain at the mercy of men for their confinement or liberation and remain dependents on men whichever route they choose to follow, as conformists or rebels against patriarchy, it is only members of the paternal order or men who have the power to confine or liberate them as it were.

In Offred's room is the inscription in Latin :Don't let the bastards grind you down, but it is Offred's experience, in her games with the Commander and her eventual liberation by Nick, that she remains very much at the mercy of men as patriarchy and Biblical authorities have put men in places of privilege and control to determine the fates of women who serve them.

Atwood also does not dismiss male privilege. She eventually makes it clear that it is the Commander who has allowed Offred to win at the game of scrabble and there is no escaping subordination or biological inferiority to men as woman in the bible was made as a helper and subordinate to Adam and merely to complement Adam as a servant rather than function as an equal. This is made clear in the reduction of women to servile roles as Wives, Marthas, Aunts, Econowives and Handmaids. Females it seems are condemned to serve men in society and as Atwood's romance has it, they remain at the mercy of men to liberate them from their male imposed prisons. There is thus no escaping male privilege, the female's choice is merely to negotiate or play within the confines of male power.

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a construction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have plated it, If I ever get out of here. (Atwood 1985: 144)

It becomes clear from the above quote that Offred is reduced to negotiate with male power and remains solely at the mercy of male power and has to play games within its confines while Atwood seems grim at the possibility of escape from this female dystopia on Offred's own terms as it is Nick who eventually rescues Offred from the tyranny of the Commander,

Let's stop there. I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn't last forever. Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had. (Atwood, 1985: 144)

It becomes clear that this idea of being forever imprisoned by men is the grim reality for women because of the patriarchal privilege which is delineated for them by the bible. Hence the forever indeed lasts as long as a woman lives, being all the forever they had as it is a metaphysical subordination that woman has been imprisoned by being decreed by God to be Man's helper and servant and it is only man as such who has the power to liberate woman as Nick does from her role, there is no escape for women on their own terms.

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half colours too many. But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far, please remember, you will never be subjected to the temptation of feeling you must forgive a man as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold it or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest. (Atwood, 1985: 144)

The only power that women hold is thus the written word and testimony as Offred testifies to the brutality that is conducted on her by patriarchal society. The only power she has as a woman is the power to forgive the sins heaped upon her by men who use and abuse her only as a domestic slave and sex toy. The only resistance that Offred has is to withhold or bestow forgiveness and Atwood describes this power to withhold to bestow forgiveness as the greatest power of all, because in history women have been silenced and it has always been His Story, this is Offred's attempt at reclaiming the narrative and making it Herstory by

controlling and regulating the power to withhold or bestow forgiveness of men for their many abuses of her.

Even in the Bible, it is mentioned that it is the poor in spirit, the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the silent that God eventually will have mercy on, so while women experience gender discrimination and oppression in this life, in the afterlife where there is no marriage or distinction into gender roles as angels women may finally experience reprieve from all the injustices they had to suffer on earth as women under the subordination of men.

Or you'd remember stories you'd read, in the newspapers, about women who had been found- often women but sometimes men, or children that was the worst- in ditches or forests or refrigerators in abandoned rented rooms, with their clothes on or off, sexually abused or not, precautions you took that had to do with locks on windows and doors, drawing the curtains, leaving on lights. These things you did were like prayers, you did them and you hopes they would save you. And for the most part they did.

But all of that was pertinent only in the night, and had nothing to do with the man you loved, at least in daylight. With that man you wanted it to work, to work out. Working out was also something you did to keep your body in shape, for the man. If you worked out enough, maybe the man would too. Maybe you would work it out together, as if the two of you were a puzzle that could be solved, otherwise one of you most likely the man, would go wandering off on a trajectory of his own, taking his addictive body with him and leaving you with bad withdrawal, which you would counteract by exercise. If you didn't work it out it was because one of you had the wrong attitude. Everything that went on in your life was thought to be due to some positive or negative power from inside your head. (Atwood 1985: 238-239)

Indeed while Atwood describes the man's departure as the woman's fault, as the wrong attitude she holds towards the men that makes the man responsible for leaving the woman and not making the relationship work out, it remains that women even in relationships where equality is supposed to happen are at the mercy of men.

Women are supposed to bear the right or wrong attitude towards men, or the positive or negative power towards men, but it remains the women who must change their attitudes and dance around men's attitudes whereas men can be entirely indifferent and leave women as they please because the women are not behaving in a manner that pleases them, women are expected to keep fit and work out for men while men can only work out if it pleases them or if they want to, at heart is the absolute power that men hold over women and the double standards at work.

Women are expected to conform to men's desire and to meet expectations and work and change to meet expectations, while men can remain static and just hold on to their stubborn desires and withdraw from women and leave them if they do not please them simply because they have the power to do so.

The Handmaid's Tale is thus about the absolute power that men wield over women in society because of Biblical authority. The world at present remains, patriarchal in its inheritance of Biblical traditions and its inscription of the female as the servant and subordinate of the male because God designated Eve to be Adam's helper and servant, to be Of Adam rather than Eve. The story is thus an attempt at protesting this absolute tyranny of male privilege over female subordination and oppression.

Works cited:

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