

Distorted and Victimized Lives of Women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This study intends to evaluate Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* from the viewpoint of feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which offers a more nuanced perspective on sexuality and gender. Beauvoir's philosophy centres on the societal systems of oppression that designate women as 'Other' to a male reputation. According to her, femininity is something that society imposes on women, and feminism cannot be reduced to a basic biological statement. According to her, 'Other' best reflects the primary social function of a woman. She disputes the vocabulary that defines women based on their biology and asserts that biology is the primary cause of women's subjugation in patriarchal societies. She believes that sexuality contributes to the subjugation and exploitation of women. According to Beauvoir, the prostitution business and the heterosexual lifestyle are the two most visible instances of women's exploitation. Clearly, she rejects the notion that heterosexuality is the norm in sexual encounters. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how Atwood employs conjecture to examine feminist issues in *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as women's identity loss, subordination in a patriarchal society, and exploitation in a consumer culture where the female body is considered an object. In her novel, Atwood examines issues pertaining to the subjugation of women, such as gender inequality and the flaws of the patriarchal system.

Keywords: gender inequality, patriarchy, subjugation of women, sexuality, victimization

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is widely considered to be one of the most talented authors working in Canadian literature today. She has been an active participant in the political life of Canada as well as its feminist movement. Her writings almost always address some aspect of contemporary social or political life. She takes into consideration the relationship between men and women as it relates to fundamental human rights. The author is particularly interested in the problem of gender. In her work, she writes about women who are always looking for their identities, which are obscured by the patriarchal communities in which they live. Another recurring topic in her novel is oppression, and it is easy to understand where she gets her inspiration for her writing from. She fights against the stereotype that women have a lower standing in society. The portrayals of gender in Atwood's work shed light on the exploitation and oppression of women, especially of the female body. In her works, she vividly depicts the anguish that her female characters experience as a result of being constrained to their traditional gender roles. In addition, gender is the primary focus of examination in the Gilead civilization, where women are not allowed to have autonomous freedom and are obliged to serve the state in a variety of capacities.

She depicts America's patriarchal society and political ideas of the time. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, female characters are subjected to patriarchal men. Women are production tools under male leadership. Patriarchal standards and husbands' dominance in the home are clear. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are submissive. Atwood is troubled by the precarious position that women find themselves in today's culture, as well as the prejudice that women face daily due to their gender in all aspects of their lives. In the mid-1980s, pollution and nuclear mishaps in the United States rendered a huge number of women sterile. Control of the government was taken over by the Republic of Gilead. Under the new system, women are separated into a few different groups. Women are differentiated from men based on factors such as their age and fertility,

and they are assigned distinct duties in the community as a result of these factors. People of Jewish descent, elderly women, and people of colour are among those who are deported to the radioactive colonies. White women who are still fertile are forced into service as handmaids in the commander's mansion. Handmaids' only job is to parent childless upper-class spouses. Gilead restricts the Handmaids' social roles. *The Handmaid's Tale* shows women's subservience in Gilead's patriarchal culture. In this patriarchal society, women are considered slaves and a resource for male reproduction. In her novel, Atwood depicts a patriarchal regime that oppresses and marginalises women. This study shows how women are seen as 'Others' in a male-dominated culture. It shows how patriarchal cultures overlook women's rights.

2. Objective

The study's objectives are as follows: i. to analyze the status of women and their search for freedom in *The Handmaid's Tale*; ii. to research the portrayal of feminist components in the novel; iii. to expand on the subtleties existent in the social and political system described in *The Handmaid's Tale*; and iv. to illustrate the link between feministic principles and the dystopian society of the novel.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to accomplish the study's goals. Secondary sources are culled from academic libraries, and a thorough web database search has been analysed. The qualitative research design allowed for a thorough examination of the novel's representations of the distorted and victimized lives of women.

4. Influence of Male Chauvinism in Gilead

The novel written by Margaret Atwood is a nightmare of a dystopian society that restricts women's fundamental liberties and enslaves them on the level of their biology and sexuality. This research utilises Simone de Beauvoir's viewpoints in *The Second Sex* as a springboard for analysing *The Handmaid's Tale* within the framework of sexual injustice. These theories are presented in this book. As the most prominent person in the history of feminism, de Beauvoir utilises the "otherness" of women in a patriarchal society to argue for the need to highlight women's problems. She does this by comparing women to other animals. Through her work, she demonstrates how our society devalues women and forces them to suffer oppression and isolation. The first of its core ideas is that there is a difference between sex and gender, and the second is that biology cannot be used to justify women's subordinate roles or oppression. The primary thrust of Beauvoir's thesis is that women have been subjugated throughout history, that they have been constituted as men's 'Other,' and that they lack any kind of agency. Women are relegated to the background and exist only for the benefit of males. Recent researches also reveal women receive less visibility than their male coworkers, and their works are also assessed differently.

The structures of a patriarchal culture are designed to keep women in subordinate positions and disregard their desires. Patriarchal societies also tend to be more violent. Beauvoir contends that the female body limits women to the duties of wife and mother and that these are the positions that are considered to be the most significant for women in patriarchal societies. The duties of a woman have been reduced to those of a sexual and maternal nature. According to Beauvoir, society is structured in a way that favors males; there is a great deal of oppression and suffrage for women, and as a result, women are miserable. This novel is set in a new world located in New England where the political and social power is under the totalitarian authority of Gilead, "Gilead represents the patriarchal power of the society that indicates the possibility of tyranny if not protested" (Lafren, 2007, p. 85). In essence, Atwood draws attention to the new world's oppressive system, which is based on a devastating past. The overthrow of the democratic government was established in Gilead amid corruption, pollution, violence against women, and a dreadful decline in the birth rate. Atwood depicts a dystopian society that readily oppresses women while pretending to protect them from violence and crime. This is insisted in an article that, "The seeds of oppression are sown by Gilead not only through an illusion of protection but also through fear and hegemonic supremacy" (Vinoth & Vijayakumar, 2022).

Beauvoir distinguished sex from gender. *The Second Sex's* argument that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (273), distinguished 'sex' as the biological difference between men and women and 'gender' as the socially and culturally manufactured difference. 'Gender' refers to the socially and culturally manufactured distinction between men and women. Beauvoir argues that women are not born feminine but rather constructed by society and culture as second-class citizens in a patriarchal society. Based on these findings, "I contend that the disparaging manner of reading consists of forceful gendering, a kind of invisibility mechanism." (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 834). Beauvoir believes that society and culture shape women's femininity. She says nobody or nothing can define womanhood. She realises that cultural influences determine her subjugated position and what it means to be a woman. According to *The Second Sex*, a man may dominate a woman in the home and other social institutions, "everything affirms this hierarchy," says Beauvoir (292).

Traditional families and other social organisations support a patriarchal structure in society. According to Beauvoir, the conventional family, or the male-controlled family, perpetuates the idea that man is dominating and superior, "Social justice movements confront hegemonic ideas associated with gender, race, and sexuality, and it is common for such

confrontations to be explored through art” (Roy, 2010). Beauvoir accepts physiological and biological differences between men and women, but she does not feel these should justify women's societal enslavement. Troil Moi believes that, being a woman should be the background for all her behavior, and Beauvoir established a technique for comparing the sexes. Moi states in *What Is a Woman? and Other Essays* (1999) that “The sexed body always contains the key to the significance of a woman's acts” (Moi, 1999, p. 120). According to Beauvoir, ‘Man’ refers to every person and it is common in a patriarchal society. Miller’s observation from Beauvoir is that “women artists, musicians, and writers describe being taken less seriously than men, being treated as novices when they are skilled professionals, and having to work harder than men for equal recognition” (Miller, 2016, p.124).

The sex of a woman is a man's desire. In this culture, the value of women is compared to that of men. A man's body is typical, but a woman is abnormal; she is also classified by her reproductive capacity. Despite her rejection of patriarchal institutions, Beauvoir feels the female body validates the feminine viewpoint.

5. Shackled Life of Women's Bodies

Feminism supports the idea that women are treated unequally in many sectors of life. Since patriarchal institutions are founded on gender roles, women are not recognised as humans in patriarchal nations. Sarah Gamble argues in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post Feminism* (2006) that, “women become everything men are not or don't want to be recognised as, women are weak when males are strong, logical when men are emotional, and active when men are docile” (Sarah Gamble, 2006). Feminism tries to increase ‘women's access to equality’ in a male-dominated society. Because women are restricted everywhere. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir reveals the forces that subjugate women. Beauvoir's principal interest is gender; she claims that women's predicament stems from their view that men are the ‘self’ and women are the ‘Other’ (17). Otherness causes women's subordination. Unlike men, women are classified as ‘Others.’ To survive, men persuade a woman to become the second sex. According to Beauvoir, a woman is constituted through her contacts with people, her society, and her beliefs. Offred, the novel's central protagonist, reveals that her real name is ‘June.’ Although Offred is used to communicating in the past, her diary is written in the present tense, which is a stark contrast to the present tense. Attempts are made in a totalitarian regime to restrict and eradicate older forms of linguistic discourse in favour of the biblical style of using the language, “Gilead is aiming to set social standards by mandating that its citizens embrace a theistic, biblical worldview”, which is also considered the official language (Somacarrera, 2005, p.180).

In a male-dominated society, Beauvoir argues, a man defines a woman by how she responds to him. She claims that because men and women are physiologically different, women are the other sex. She reveals that a man's biology determines how much he needs a woman. According to Beauvoir, biological differences between men and women do not determine social positions. A woman defines herself by engaging with nature in her emotional life, she explains. She argues “a woman's identity is not dependent on nature” (65). Beauvoir believes a woman's body binds her. When pregnant, a woman is limited by her body and feminine functions. In patriarchal culture, a woman's status is based on her capacity to conceive and carry children (Beauvoir, 1956). According to Beauvoir, sexuality is another aspect of women's subjection and cannot be controlled. This study examines a fictional civilization in which women are both dominant and subservient to males. Males control and affect women's biology and sexuality, which causes their subjugation. This concept is most compelling because it appeals to conventional ideals of motherhood (ones that might even be shared by some viewers and hence lead to an even stronger engagement on their part with Janine). According to these ancient beliefs, “pregnancy and delivery produce a maternal ‘instinct’ and a sacred tie between mother and child that is almost hard to break, much less governed” (Debra, 2010).

In Atwood's novel, women's subjugation is based on their biology. The state influences women's reproductive potential. In this patriarchal society, women are solely valued for their capacity to reproduce and serve males. *The Handmaid's Tale* imagines a future in which women are the property of ‘Others.’ They are made for men's enjoyment and gratification. In the novel, a woman is taken, hostage. Reviewers’ gendered readings are also a product of their historical setting since the context and the ‘intellectual resources’ it affords them are products of the historical setting (Corse & Westervelt, 2002). The author highlights two dimensions of women's enslavement. According to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, biology and sexuality are irreconcilable. Atwood describes a patriarchal, feminist world in which women are submissive to men based on their biology. Sexual and economic slavery coexist. This study shows how patriarchal culture overlooks women's independence. In the Republic of Gilead, women are not humans but rather men's property. In a patriarchal culture, women are delicate and submissive. According to Beauvoir, men exploit women via prostitution and monthly sexual activity. Therefore, it examines the origins and effects of women's subjection in patriarchal societies through the lens of the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir.

6. The Otherness of Women and the Oppression of Women's Biology

The Second Sex explains how biology determines a woman's identity and purpose in a patriarchal society. Atwood presents women in Gilead as two-legged wombs, ovaries, and females. ‘Female’ is derogatory under patriarchy since it limits

women to their sexuality. Atwood puts forth her feeling in the thirteenth chapter; “We've been removed from the geisha, concubine, and courtesan categories. We are ambulatory chalices” (139). In Gilead, Atwood's work creates women's wombs; childless women must lose their femininity. *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays women's biology. The patriarchy manipulates women's biology. Motherhood is a patriarchal value. Gilead's women are only worth their children. This novel contrasts Janine's ‘actual’ labour with the ‘as if’ ritual of the Wives: Mrs. Putnam and her friends behave as if she is in labour, much like her surrogate mother did. “In what seems to be a monthly variant of the ‘ceremony’ that the handmaids must suffer, the expectant mother partakes in a ritual” (Harrison, 2016). The commander said women would be safeguarded and allowed to “fulfil their biological destiny in peace” (219). Biology cannot explain women's subjugation, argues Beauvoir. It is possible to take her most often mentioned argument from *The Second Sex*, that a woman changes with time, as her feminist ideal. Beauvoir says, “no biological, psychological, or economic destiny dictates the female figure in society; civilization as a whole does” (274). She argues that biology is one of the main reasons for women's subjugation in society; consequently, there is a masculine human type. She argues that biology contributes to women's social oppression.

A woman's ovaries and uterus tie her to her subjectivity and nature. Her testicles control her thinking and hormone release. He views his body as a cosmic link. He sees a woman's distinct physical appearance as a barrier and an enslavement. Offred's body ‘decides me so thoroughly, “According to Beauvoir, a woman's body keeps her prisoner while she serves a man. In society's eyes, ‘women’ are the ‘Other,’ Beauvoir explains how women suffer in a male-dominated society from this perspective in *The Handmaids* are ‘Others’ in Atwood's novel. They are ‘related entities’ in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Because of their biology, notably their capacity to breed, they are not humans. Beauvoir thinks a Gilead man is a ‘subject’ and a ‘free person,’ while a woman is a ‘Manichaeism’ (104). The handmaids are among Gilead's most downtrodden. Offred suffers from patriarchal household tyranny, so she labels her bedroom ‘My Jail.’ She thinks, “I won't do it all at once; I'll make it last.” I would investigate the plaster beneath the paint. Offred was thoughtless before Gilead (HT 58). It conveys her anger as a Gilead slave and victim.

Gilead's culture, “keeps the handmaids weak and treats them like children” (Hudock, 105). They are the commanders' property, “In Gilead, dictatorship robs women of their identities and transforms them into discarded items” (Brooks, 1993, p.259). No genuine names; names identify people. Throughout her writing, Beauvoir stresses that “humanity is masculine and man” (16). A woman is not seen as an autonomous entity since she is defined as a man. The Handmaids' titles show who owns them; patriarchy is based on total male ownership” (598). Women, usually the biological mothers, in Gilead are persuaded and taught at the Red Center to become handmaids before leaving, “the global majority of males” (70). Their education (in schools) supports their belief that men are superior to women.

Men exploited the women of Gilead, particularly the handmaids. Handmaids must fulfil parenting obligations despite being infertile. This is society's expectation. They think having kids is natural. The Handmaids are abused and made to perform menial labour by men. It is suggested in *The Second Sex* that a woman's sense of self is inextricably related to her physical appearance. Handmaids teach their aunts motherhood and responsibility. Gilead distinguishes women from men based on their uteruses.

7. Sexual Oppression of Women

In Atwood's writing, males manipulate and appropriate women's sexuality. Because of their restricted tasks and poor status, the handmaids of Gilead are sexually persecuted. This is true even while mother is a pregnant. The system of heterosexuality and its idea of love may have destroyed the sexuality of women in Gilead. In Atwood's writing, the female body is sexualized, disrespected, and viewed as her identity. Secondly, “the ability of those who control extractive institutions to gain demonstrates that political power inside extractive institutions is highly sought, causing several organisations and people to compete for it, sometimes at the expense of the rest of society” (Daron & Robinson, 2013).

Women are objects in heterosexual partnerships. Beauvoir argues that men consider women as sexual objects and that everything exists for their satisfaction; she opposes heterosexuality as the cultural norm. She believes women's main function is motherhood and that men's expectations determine female sexuality. Males in Gilead consider women sexual objects and transgress their sexual boundaries to satisfy their wants. In patriarchal societies, men and women are dominant and submissive. Their sexual bond is important. Beauvoir says man's dominance is expressed in the very posture of copulation—in almost all animals, the male is on the female, and certainly, the organ he uses is a material object, but it appears here in its animated state—it is a tool—whereas in this performance, the female organ is merely an inert receptacle. The male supplies sperm to the female, which is then devoured. The coitus, in which a man enters and fertilises a woman from the inside out, breaches the female's autonomy and adds a foreign element, despite the female's essential role in reproduction. According to Beauvoir, heterosexuality is one of the characteristics that contributes to women's sexual subordination. Because of Gilead's heterosexual system, men sexually objectify women. Men see women as sexual objects and mistreat them based on their needs and wants. Pregnancy, according to Beauvoir, is both a blessing and a curse for women. The two main points are that women are powerless in a patriarchal society. Women, according to Beauvoir, should

‘participate’ in sexual pleasure with men and ‘produce’ children for man's generation.

Gilead uses sexual violence and exploitation to control women's sexuality. In order to mistreat and abuse a woman, heterosexuality, sexual agony, and prostitution are used. In Gilead, men control women and their bodies, and women suffer consequently. Men's sexual cravings keep women hostage in their bodies. As the quotation says (Bouson, 1993, p. 139), *The Handmaid's Tale* continues bodily harm's condemnation of women's poor sexual value and brutality. Gilead is patriarchal; thus, men dominate the female sex. Gilead's women are supposed to be prostitutes for men. As Simone de Beauvoir says, “A woman appears here as an object of pleasure, and the prostitute is denied the rights of a person; she sums up all types of feminine subordination at once. Beauvoir thinks “a prostitute's rights are denied” (171). Moira's notion of ‘Butch Paradise’ (249) is Jezebel's, a hidden residence in Gilead where women's sexual subordination in patriarchal civilizations is emphasized in Jezebel's home. Gilead's males have a ‘master-slave’ relationship with women, which victimises, brutalises, and dehumanises them, “everything is in favour of the oppressor master and against the oppressed slave” (Beauvoir, 20).

Offred's position as the commander's mistress identifies her as a prostitute within the patriarchal society of Gilead. The commander has discovered his desired partner in Offred. According to Beauvoir, prostitution resembles servitude. She says, “public or social power always belongs to males, and women are a component of (men's) property and a channel of transaction” (96). The Commander wraps a purple tag on an elastic band around Offred's wrist and instructs her, “If anybody asks, pretend you're an evening rental” (233). The identification tag on Offred's wrist indicates that she is a slave, an object, and the commander's property. Moreover, under patriarchy, women are marketable goods, “women are commodities in Jezebel's male-controlled society. *The Handmaid's Tale* is representing women as ornaments and commodities” (Gaines & Agee, 2008, p.40). Beauvoir maintains that women are treated unequally because of heterosexuality in a patriarchal society. She says it adds to women's subjugation. Under Gilead, the handmaids are sexually dominated and biologically operated as sexual objects by heterosexual males. As Beauvoir says, “It's difficult to regard a woman merely as a creative force: she's his sexual partner, reproducer, erotic object—another through whom he discovers himself” (85). The impregnation ritual symbolises patriarchy, which fosters male sexual exploitation of women. In Gilead, pleasure sex is banned, and men regulate sexual behavior.

In Ceremony, Atwood suppresses the sexual urges of her women characters and depicts both sexes as lower-class, “The handmaids are forced to have monthly sexual relations with their commanders to conceive, but sexual desire and love no longer exist, at least officially” (Macpherson, 2010, p.55). Sexuality, in Gilead, only reproduction and pleasure are permissible sexual behaviours. According to *The Handmaid's Tale*, sexuality is only a tool. Beauvoir argues that women are kept hostage, “by men's needs—sexual desire and the yearning for offspring” (10). Tidd Ursula writes in Simone de Beauvoir that women's roles were shaped by masculine desire and parenthood. In Simone de Beauvoir's (54) Gilead, ritual satisfies the masculine desire and facilitates reproduction. In Gilead, the impregnation ritual is purely for reproduction and fulfils men's sexual desires, “man's biological purpose in reproduction does not conflict with his desires. Both issues may be interrelated” (Beaur, 200, p.219).

Since reproduction is the fundamental objective of Gilead's patriarchal society, heterosexuality is seen as the standard. Members of the state cannot use their right to choose their sexual orientation. Due to the inherent biological relationship between sexuality and reproduction, the state of Gilead offers priority to heterosexual couples over LGBT couples. In Gilead, a woman's biology is a social and political construct. In Gilead, women are primarily mothers. Moira resists the heterosexual conventions the state created to enslave women. Some feminists believe; “homosexuality is a woman's most politically acceptable alternative” (Walters, 2005, p.107). By doing this, Moira shows she does not think men are better off under Gilead. Moira's homosexuality stands out in Gilead's heterosexual society. Offred is a typical lady who seeks heterosexual affection from men. She is non-traditional. So, both spouses and handmaids are required to care for children, so society may keep producing babies. The state seeks to convince women that their fates are established by nature and that having children fulfils their function and goal in life. Due to Gilead's heterosexual culture, the commanders see the handmaids as sexual objects and molest them constantly.

8. Limitations of the Study

Feminist themes and notions abound throughout the novel of a dystopian civilization selected for this research because of its focus on women's roles and its challenge to patriarchal power. However, there have been certain limitations to the study since Atwood's perspectives in terms of feminist principles are established only from the point of view of the selected single work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The study's limitations stem from the fact that it did not make use of all the works of Atwood and the relevant prior research carried out on feminism.

9. Conclusion

The marginalization of women in a patriarchal society is a central theme in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this dystopian future, women have been reduced to the status of the property and are subject to strict controls in every aspect of their lives. Through the narrative of this novel, Atwood illustrates women's subordinate position in society. She

depicts females as having second sexuality as well as other sexual orientations. She paints a picture of a society in which women have neither independence nor the ability to exercise choice or opinion. Atwood paints a disturbing picture of a future society in which women are held in mental and physical servitude. Men are their lords, while women serve as their slaves. This novel by Atwood depicts a world where males govern and women are considered second-class people, where women are portrayed as passive objects who are molded by society according to the desires of men. She seeks to demonstrate that women in a patriarchal society have no purpose other than childbearing and the sexual gratification of men. Women are the property of males, and the principles of patriarchy have bereft them of everything, even their identities. By reading this work, Atwood hopes that the reader will understand the changing socioeconomic situations that women have faced throughout history.

Atwood and Beauvoir contend that women in our society are regarded as second-class citizens. They then claim that the primary root of women's subjugation is their ability to bear children. In their respective works, both authors demonstrate that the world and women are predominantly assessed by the male standard, albeit one does so academically and the other does so via fiction. Both emphasize the otherness of women and the quest for a solution to the dilemma of women's inferior place in society. They contend that this social construction results in an idealized, universal view of women. These societal forces define, oppress, and impose their expectations on women. These two philosophers demonstrate that women's subjugation, oppression, and victimization in male-dominated societies are mostly due to their sexuality. This data suggests further that sexual orientation is the primary driver of the gender gap.

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