

Flowers of Survival: An Ecofeminist Reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempts to explain Margaret Atwood's famous novel The Handmaid's Tale in terms of Ecofeminism. Women and nature are always identified with each other and wherever the role of women and nature is neglected, the sterility of that society begins. By taking females as the leading characters and environmental crisis in its background Atwood expertly combines in The Handmaid's Tale the dual oppression of nature and women that exists in the Republic of Gilead. She points out that the injustice meted out against women and nature is alike and no attempt to liberate women will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature.*

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, dualism, female protagonist, oppression, patriarchy*

I. INTRODUCTION

To live a peaceful and balanced human life on this earth, preservation of environment is necessary. Throughout history nature is portrayed as feminine - their reproductive capacities make women closer to nature than men. Both women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving but their role is often neglected and sidelined in society. Oppression has been an issue that has affected human life for a very long time. The power that is leveled upon nature causes the same harm that is similar to that resulting from the oppression of women. A society based on cooperation and balance rather than dominance and hierarchy is necessary for survival on this planet and seeks to end all forms of oppression. Degradation of land and environment is one of the crucial problems that we face today. Senseless human interventions, modern industrial developments and technology, the green house gas emissions, degradation of water resources, deforestation, senseless use of pesticides electronic wastes, radio nuclei and their emissions etc are some of the issues that results in the sterility of nature and the sterility of society comes from men's hostility towards women. Women are hurt most as they suffer double oppression of patriarchy, education, race and poverty. It is in this context, that the term Ecofeminism becomes highly relevant.

The term Ecofeminism was first coined by French Feminist Francoise d' Eaubonne in 1974; who has called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save earth from destruction. Ecofeminism is a concept that attempts to study the exploitation of nature as similar to the exploitation of women and visualizes a new humanism that resists and subverts all political hierarchies, social and economic structures that oppress women and all that do harm to organic life as a whole. It does not seek equality with men as such, but aim for liberation of women as women. Ecofeminists believes in the interconnectedness of things and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected. Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Alice Walker, Star Hawk, Sallie Mc Fague, Luisah Teish, Paulo Gunn Allen, Greta Gard, Kasen Warren and Andy Smith are among the prominent Ecofeminist voices.

Margaret Atwood is a prolific, controversial and innovative writer has substantially contributed to the growth of women's writing who 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).¹ Most of her novels have female characters as protagonists dealing with particular problems that women face and there by reflecting universal social problems. Her novels deal with environmental crisis as well as the oppression of women in a male dominated society. Margaret Atwood presents her women characters as victims of male domination and oppression, trying to create a female space for themselves and her novels are filled with characters who are all seeking something, whether for freedom, answers, revenge, understanding, equality or fulfillment.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood depicts the adverse effect of environmental degradation on the life of women. Gilead, the biblically-inflected nation Atwood imagines is a totalitarian country which features taming and ruling of females. The natural world is denatured by man in the Republic of Gilead and pollution of environment has resulted in sterility and deformity of the offspring. Females are forced into a submissive position and are used for procreation and to bear children for the childless commanders and to act as handmaids.

These handmaids who are degraded to the level of mere reproductive beings are not even supposed to think or feel and have to ration their thoughts. "The handmaids are de sexed, dehumanized and are forbidden choice and desire. They are not supposed to think and feel" (7).² They who are the complete property of state have no name, identity or emotion other than fear and are known after the Commanders with whom they have to perform the impregnation ceremony. "We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels ambulatory chalices" (146)² explains the whole situation. They are denied the right to possess or to have control over her body and are proclaimed as unwomen if they fail to produce a child within the fixed time allotted to them.

The female protagonist Offred is one among the many handmaids in Gilead. Caught up in a world of rules, strict regulation, oppression and extreme punishment, the novel's protagonist, Offred attempts to get through each and every suffering, each and every day by holding on to the belief that she will someday be reunited with her husband and daughter. Like other women she too is considered as a mere natural resource, as a mere reproductive being and is utilized to the maximum. Her life in Gilead is no better than a confinement in a jail. She refers to herself in plural, indicating that her individual identity has been subsumed by a collective identity. As Sharon R. Wilson says: "Through Offred's Tale Atwood presents a timeless vision of sexual/gender politics in a fallen world"(294).³

The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood's sixth novel depicts people who are suffering from tragic environmental pollution in a totalitarian country. Nature in Gilead is oppressed due to the repeated use of pesticides and nuclear accidents, where men rape and destroy living nature and women for their own sake. As K. Balachandran observes: "every aspect of environmental degradation, destruction and abuse of nature will translate itself into a serious menace to the life of future generation".⁴ Likewise most women in Gilead are infertile after repeated exposure to nuclear waste, pesticides and leakages from chemical weapons. "Still births, miscarriages and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear plant accidents" (179).² Often the offspring born were deformed ones due to the ecological degeneration. The birth rate is dangerously low among the ruling elite. And with a view to increase the population fertile women are taken to camps and trained to become handmaids. Male infertility is unthinkable in that society.

There are frequent references to animals, plants, smells and other objects typically associated with nature in the novel. Flowers and plants suggest confining circumstances of sexuality and reproduction. The handmaids are told to think of themselves as seeds- seeds and fruits are associated with manipulated, not natural reproduction. Nature in Gilead is thus seen as a justification for male sexual dominance and female oppression. In the novel the natural creatures and phenomenon are seen as the incarnation of females and the product of civilization such as guns, cars and books are the incarnation of males.

Both women and nature suffer under patriarchal domination and are treated as objects to be controlled, subdued, consumed, exploited and tamed. In order to know their secret, to control and tame them, men of Science struggled to subdue nature and women and thus women, as well as nature, came to be dominated, controlled and exploited. And women become scapegoats for those exploiting the environment. The master slave role which marks man's relation with nature is replicated in man's relation with woman.⁵

Society has taken ownership of all bodies especially handmaids. According to Aunt Lydia women are merely bodies for men to use and abuse as they please. This attitude echoes men's objectification of women as one of the prime reason for the social oppression of women. Another of the novel's most important themes is the exploration of relationships between women. Though Offred lacks freedom to actively form new relationships or to spend too much time remembering past ones she forms her pattern of understanding herself through her observation of women around her. Offred's mother marched for abortion rights, the banning of pornography and many other issues and has served as a mouthpiece for a different sort of feminism. At first she was quite embarrassed at the strange acts of her mother but later she understands how the lack of rights changes one's perspective.

Women undergo a slow transformation and refuse to be a victim. Offred's passivity changes after she develops an awareness of herself as a victimized woman. She identifies herself with nature and longs for her lover. Her secret affairs with Nick and with the underground network in order to rescue other women are born out of this awareness. It was the fear for herself and her lover that kept her passive. But her developing awareness of herself as a victimized woman kindles in her the desire to subvert the fixed canons of Gilead. Offred uses language as a means of communication in order to depict her inner agonies, pain and bitter experiences. Her affair with Nick and with the Underground network is meant for rescuing women. They present the mission of Gilead as: "Women united for a common end! Helping one another in their daily chores as they walk the path of life together, each performing her appointed task" (162).²

II. CONCLUSION

The ideology of dualism is the chief reason for Gilead's falling into crisis. Ecofeminism attacks dualism and patriarchy to develop harmony nature and human beings, male and females. When men focus on

the strength and power that technology and civilization bring to them, females hope to find harmony, equality, wholeness and mutual benefit by getting close to nature which shows the nature's healing power upon women and the closeness between women and nature. The thought provoking ending of the novel indicate that although Gilead is horrible, the female friendship and closeness to nature is the greatest strength that they have in their hand to control the patriarchal and dualistic ideas.

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