

Women Beware Women: Feminism and Other Influences to Atwood's *The Hand Maid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood needs no introduction. She is one of those writers who does not encourage the word, feminism but is someone who want to question subservience and patriarchy. **The Hand Maid's Tale** is one of her novel attempts to write a dystopian science fiction novel.

The word hand maid, is a self coinage, it is a replacement or rather a synonyms for surrogacy. In the novel, Atwood tries to present the theme of surrogacy and infertility in a more religious vein. The paper attempts to explore the various influences and instigations which had triggered the writer to write a novel which defied the conventions and boundaries of women's writing. She has attempted to question the second wave feminism on the one hand and the Islamic revolution on the other. All these incidents and instances have shaped the very kernel of her novel. The novel is a speculation and a warning to the ways of the world in case the current scenario of women revolution takes an ugly turn in the name of seeking sexual and societal rights for women.

Key words : Dystopia, Sexuality, Theocracy, Second Wave Feminism

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Margaret Atwood is one such writer who cannot be easily labeled or categorized into a specific realm of writing. Although she began her career with poetry, she experimented with almost all art forms. She is a short story writer, an essayist, a novelist and more importantly, the author of the most prolific guide to survival in Canada, called **The Survival**. Having been born into an era of what one called as the Silent Generation. The ones who were born between 1925 and 1945 were called, The Silent Generation and scientifically, the people of this time had lesser intellectuality, agility and were more fragile. Scientific justification thus entails their birth to the ongoing second world war and global depression.

Atwood did not belong to the voice of science or silence of the generation. She was rather a writer who wrote to bring out the ground realities and ensuing atrocities of her time. She was born in the year 1939, the time of World War Two to a nutritionist mother and an entomologist father. Her two other brothers were scientists themselves and therefore her family hoped that she too would explore the scientific space and prune her Scientifics. Little did her parents expect that

she would turn to writing. With the passage of time, she became the best known writer around the world. One of the innovations into writing which she ever made was to take plunge into writing which questioned the institutions of science and religion. She began to write her works with a subversive tone and the most celebrated and the most controversial of all her writings was the novel, **The Handmaid's Tale**. Although critics wanted to call the novel as a work of dystopian fiction, Atwood wanted to name her work as a piece of speculative fiction. She herself admits to the fact that every piece of information ingrained in the novel was not magnified or projected but was existent in her times.

During the Second World War, Hitler was on top of the world. He wanted to begin his fascist regime and his autobiography, **Mein Kampf**, roughly translated into, *My Struggle* endeavors to outline all of his political manifesto and justifies the maxim, end justifies the means. Atwood was greatly disturbed on her reading of Hitler's autobiography. On the other hand, she was influenced by the Islamic revolution which sweltered Iran. During the early eighties, the then government of Iran under Mohammed Riza Pahlavi was overthrown because the government had adopted and recommended western ways of life. The government was replaced with a more conservative and a more fundamental theocracy who had told the people of Iran that they would be governed by the laws of The Quoran. One on the one hand, Atwood found fascism coming as a compulsive force and on the other, The Islamic revolution had its share of degradation. The following quote from **The Mein Kampf** would justify the ways of fascism to invigorate world order.

It is more difficult to undermine faith than knowledge, love succumbs to change less than to respect, and hatred is more durable than aversion. And at all times, the driving force of the most important changes in this world has been found less in a scientific knowledge animating the masses, but rather in a fanaticism dominating them and in a hysteria which drove them forward. (123)

The Islamic revolution on the other hand had begun his regime in a more autocratic way by reducing the age of marriage. Any girl who attained nine years of age was forcefully married and was coerced to give birth to four children. In case, a woman failed to conceive, she had to give a written explanation to the government as to why she was not able to get pregnant. It was during the time when Atwood had a brief visit to Iran and was shocked to find children of ten and twelve carrying guns and armaments. The Islamic government were making children become fundamentalists in the name of obeying the word of God.

The third and the most integral influence was the coming of the second wave of feminism which questioned every aspect of the life of a woman and her freedom. The first wave of feminism was something which had a very lighter vein to the spirit of revolution. One could find that the first wave of feminism demanded voting rights and suffrage for women. The most famous work, **A Vindication of the Rights of Women** would be a testimony to the rights of women in polls. The second wave of feminism was more intense and intricate. The demands of the second wave included, birth rights, abortion, and was more career centered for women. The

other more important demand was the freedom to have their own sexual partners even if it were someone from the same sex. The second wave of feminism was more open and candid to the question of rape and molestations and wanted to have a sense of free spiritedness in establishing the rights of women. Barbara Molony in her work, **Women's Activism and Second Wave Feminism** records the changes which underwent and the transition which took place after the first wave feminism. She says,

There has been much discussion about the usefulness of the wave metaphor first used by the feminists active in women's movements in those decades. When American activists claimed that they were a second wave, they used the term to distance themselves from the first wave....this view of doldrums has changed as have the historical accounts for the period that followed the second wave, the 1980s and the era of Reagan, which had been described as a conservative backlash against feminism. (9)

Atwood accumulated all these influences and began to write her first feminist science fictional dystopia and had called it, **The Hand Maid's Tale**. One has to understand that the Mein Kampf, The Origin of Species and The Das Capital did not impact positively but rather had a very negative impact on the writers of the world wars. They had began to think that the world had ceased to be a place which had once offered a sense of belongingness and solace. These writers needed an identity and an affiliation to cling on to and what resulted was the books which had nothing optimistic to offer. Atwood was no exception to these skeptical influences and she therefore projected the what if syndrome speculating the consequences of fascism and Islamic fundamentalism to the futuristic United States. *The Hand maid's Tale*, was written imagining New England, Boston and New Hampshire, the places which marked one of the first settlers to the United States after they had reached New England from England by May Flower.

The ship, which carried them also, carried their aims to create a new identity after having had the pangs of the world War. One could find that the novel, *The Hand Maid's Tale* has a lot of similar traits to the novel by Harthorne titled, *The Scarlet letter*. Both the novels talk about the English leaving England in search of greener pastures and also that both the novels talk about the instances of leading a purer form of life and worship as propagated by Puritanism. The events of the novel take place in the fictional world of Gilead, a state which is more of theocratic, patriarchic, oligarchic, plutocratic and more importantly, theonomic. Atwood wanted to present the series of the events in the novel to have a more vigor and vitality so as to question the existing state of affairs which dehumanize women. Atwood ascribes power and politics to be the twin reasons for all the chaos which exist in the world. She wants to question the way by which a man over powers the other men thereby robbing him of his dignity and usurping his right to survive as an individual. On the other hand, there is also the system of patriarchy which does not allow a woman to have a life of her own and treat her as a mere sexual object. The concerns and issues of writing *The Hand Maid's Tale* permeates within these power structures and Atwood observes in one of her interviews where she stated the reasons for writing a novel which was banned and considered obscene for its explicit sexual overtones. She comments on power and politics in a

Women Beware Women: Feminism and Other Influences to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* interview which she gave to Jo Brans and observes

Politics for me is everything, that involves, who gets to do, what to whom.....politics really has to do with how people order their societies, to whom power is ascribed, who is considered to have power. A lot of power is ascription. People have power because, we think they have power, and that's all politics is. And politics also has to do with what kind of conversations you will have with people and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don't feel free to say. (47)

Atwood has had a thorough research on the politics of the time and that was when she began to write her novel after patiently waiting for three years to complete it. One of the most important transition she outlines as an author is the change from democracy to autocracy and oppressiveness. One could find that even in the fictional land of Gilead, the governmental system of democracy has now given rise to autocracy in the name of theocracy. She finds that religion is one of the most powerful tool to control an individual and the government be it fictional or real, uses spiritual force as a tool to subdue and subordinate people. Offred is the narrator of the novel and the entire novel is told from her eyes. This is one of the very first novels of Atwood where she had used a first person narrative thereby shifting away from the third. This is because, she wants her readers to be warned of the imminent threats in case the world continues to progress the same way as it had been doing in the 1980s.

Spiritual Revolution was one of the most important tents which Atwood had tried to attack and even question during the early 1980s. She was disturbed and perturbed at the thought that the Divine Right Theory was beginning to take shape with a more refined and subversive ways. The narrator Offred recounts the tragic incident where the president of the United States had been shot instantly and silently and the ensuing government had told them that morality would be the watch word for it. Offred observes on the assassination of the president as, "all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand" (182).

Gilead is also one of the archetypal science fictional dystopian societies where science and history are banned. When almost all of the dystopian texts try and insist of the fact that the past in the form of history had to be erased or the advancements in technology pose a peril to the lives of the people, it does ring a bell. The government be it The Stalinist Russia or the Nazi of the Hitler did not want the people to think or did not want their people to look back at the past. This was because, they did not want any of their citizens to question or even think of having another rebellion.

The new government thus formed at Gilead, called themselves as the sons of Jacob. They wanted to bring about a new revolution and restore the rights of women. One of the most unique features in the writings of Atwood is her change in the perception of women which had brought in her writings. Her earlier novel, *The Edible Woman* was an opposition where she wanted to question the role of women as edible or as someone who were exploited by men for their own selfish ends. When she began to write the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, she had come to a psychic space where women were against women. One could find that Offred's mother was also a

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thorough feminist but she was against the very entity of book burning or even the idea of women asking to have sexual freedom. The religious respite which the novel offered Offred was something which denied her any sense of sexual or social liberty. The novel on the whole, is an answer to the question as to what would happen in case women defied the existing codes of conduct and began to be fascinated with the demands of the second wave of feminism.

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