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Violence on Womb and Selfhood in Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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This research analyses the violation of woman's body, especially the womb in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. It exposes the mechanical and problematized relation of Offred-the handmaid with the Commander linking especially to her womb. Capturing of women's womb under fundamentalist regime indicates complexity accompanying gender deterioration due to the historical silencing of women on the one hand and on the other, it shows humanity's failed attempt to understand women's body, particularly the womb. In this regards, the paper takes the womb figuratively as the natural entity because women and nature share an age-old association. Violence on body through womb by the dominant Gilead subverts the selfhood of Offred which she cannot escape. This paper is qualitative in nature and brings theoretical insights from feminism. Many things are forbidden in the Gilead society for women, they are often called handmaids if they could bear children. They struggle to maintain the identity as a human being but this is in vain due to the oppressive regime or nation of the Republic of Gilead. Drawing the theoretical insights of Helene Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, and Judith Butler, the paper argues that women's domination under the tyrannical rule further degrade nation itself where the seed of resistance is visible in the character 'Offred'.

Keywords: Body, handmaid, politics of dualism, violence, womb

Introduction

The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* set in a near future America where the sons of Jacob replaced the American government to the Republic of Gilead – a dictatorship run by a religious group, exposes dark sides of society where women are denied of any agency to speak against the rule of Gilead and they are limited to machinery work of breeding. In the Republic of Gilead, men and women are behaved in different ways. For example, those married couples who could not conceive children, suffer the identity of wife as barren woman. The rich infertile couples are assigned a Handmaid who is a single woman with ability to bear a child and is she is duty-bound to have sex with the husband of a “barren” wife. The handmaid then is taken as machine that must function as per the desire of operator. In the novel, Offred, the narrator, works as a handmaid.

Offred, a handmaid, is one of the few fertile women amidst the large number of infertile people in the fictional country Gilead. She is forced to bear children for the barren couple like that of Serena and the Commander. Experimentation and consumption of womb in the novel foregrounds the classical humanistic emphasis on Man as a measure of everything. It further deteriorates females as they are submissive subjects to the republic of Gilead. Caught up in repressive Gileadean practices of totalitarian regime, one of the characters of the novel *Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is confined to the act of her maximum utilization of her womb for the state as most of the parents in Gilead society are sterile including the Commander and Serena Joy—the Commander's wife.

The study explores and analyses Offred's personal painful and horrific experiences in Gilead society which is oppressive and patriarchal. Thus, it critically examines her relation with the womb as it is the thing that defines her in relation to man and society. It assumes that with science and technology, one can enter into the womb but cannot understand the mystery and intrinsic worth associated with it because it is something inherent which is not comprehensible. It further reexamines the inter-relationship between historical silencing of women and Gilead's totalitarianism for women.

Statement of Problem

Throughout the novel, the female protagonists relate themselves with the blood and womb—the only source for horrible survival in the repressive totalitarian regime. The state looks for the healthy womb without much caring about women in general. It triggers me with some questions given as: (1) Is the womb an issue of women and (un)women as suggested in the text? And (2) Why does the state represented by the Commander look for eggs and womb in women's body?

Review of Literature

Several critics have analyzed the various aspects of the novel—*The Handmaid's Tale*. Howells (2006) in "Margaret Atwood's dystopian visions: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*" discusses about the handmaid's predicament. Offred finds herself in the trap similar to the dystopian predicament, "However, during her lifetime Offred finds herself in the familiar dystopian predicament of being trapped inside a space and a narrative where she is denied any possibility of agency" (p.165). The space where Offred lives is a space where mechanical sex is practiced. As a person deprived of her own name and identity, Offred has no rights as an individual but instead has been restricted into a sex machine with women's womb. Howells further writes, "Offred also uses memory narrative as a deliberate escape strategy which she repeatedly indulges in the 'Night' sections as she lies alone in her room at the Commander's house" (p. 167). With the memory narrative, Howells suggests that she tries to escape the present horrible picture. She is intensely conscious of her body as well. Offred is forced to make love with the commander in presence of his wife. Since it does not work, Serena— wife of Gardener suggests her to sleep with the gardener— Nick. Macpherson (2010) in *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* discusses how Offred has been dehumanized by the state or authority, "Offred, known

to be fertile because she'd borne a daughter, becomes a handmaid when her marriage is annulled by the state" (p. 55). Her forced physical relation with commander is devoid of love, "She is touched in ceremony, but not in love, and there is a lingering sense of shame and guilt around the handmaid's role" (p. 55). She has a sense of guilty feeling but she could not escape due to the strict rules made on behalf of women.

Macpherson (2010) further talks about how Offred is devoid of agency which is reflected even in naming because Offred means 'Of Red'. He writes, "Offred's very name indicates her role. offred is literally 'of Fred'. Her connection to her Commander is one of belonging (to, not with); the echo of former rituals is not accidental. After all, many women still change their surnames upon marriage, indicating another kind of possession" (p. 56). The handmaids like Offred are the possession of the state. Set amidst the dystopian world where fertility rate is very low or even critical, women are trained as handmaids so that they can breed children for the sake of other sterile people, and it is ultimately for the state. Offred, unable to escape to Canada with her husband and daughter, is trapped inside a space where she is compelled to breed for the commander – Fred. She lacks money (her job is snatched), education (She can only go to shopping for household chores) and identity as she is named after Fred (Of Fred).

In the novel, Offred defines herself including other handmaids as two-legged wombs. Atwood (1985) writes, "We are two-legged wombs that are all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices ..., I could become an Unwoman" (p.142). Gilead society cares them due to the womb they have, otherwise she could become an Unwoman. Womb is symbol of fertility. Pieixoto towards the ending of the novel also comments on breeding purpose of handmaids echoing the fertility rites of Earth-goddess, "There are echoes here of the fertility rites of early Earth- goddess cults" (p. 316). He compares women with Earth-goddess as done by Merchant (1990) in her book *The Death of Nature*, "For most traditional cultures, minerals and metals ripened in the uterus of the Earth Mother, mines were compared to her vagina, and metallurgy was the human hastening of the birth of the living metal in the artificial womb of the furnace- an abortion of the metal's natural growth cycle before its time" (p. 3-4). Carolyn Merchant compares earth with uterus as both contain the invisible minerals. Both are the sources of life for other and are represented as peaceful fertile scene or a garden, "Depicted as a garden, a rural landscape, or a peaceful fertile scene, nature was a calm, kindly female, giving of her bounty. Against an idyllic backdrop, sheep grazed contently, birds sang melodies, and trees bore fruit" (p. 7). The bountiful nature of woman and earth has been ignored in the Gilead because it was patriarchal in structure, though it understood the power of mother and was matriarchal in content. Carolyn Merchant (1990) again talks about how conception takes place, "The female supplied the nutriment-the catamenia, or menstrual blood on which the qualities of the male could operate. The combination of semen with menstrual blood was like the curdling of cheese, just as rennet acts by coagulating milk" (p. 13). For conception of baby, both male and female are equally important, but Gilead society calls a woman 'Unwomen' if plantation does not take place in the womb.

Hanso (1994) in "Selves, Survival, and Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*" shows the strength of Offred at the old age despite the environmental degradation, "In Gilead, a society devoted to the elimination of sexuality beyond what is required for procreation, Offred is separated from her husband and daughter. Despite widespread ecological and nuclear contamination, her age and child indicate that she may still be fertile" (p. 57). She is separated from her husband and child as an outcome of totalitarian practice of Gilead society. She has a survival which is horrible. She reviews her memories, "Offred's re-viewing of her past and present is a moral and intellectual exercise, as well as an exercise in survival" (p. 59). She regains her strength reviewing past and present time.

In the same way, Stillman and Jonson (1994) in "Identity, Complicity, and Resistance in *The*

Handmaid's Tale" discusses the novel as a dystopian novel, "Gilead is also a distinctive dystopia. Facing plagues and ecological crises that caused widespread sterility, the founders of Gilead generated a right-wing fundamentalist reading of the Bible, grafted it onto patriarchal attitudes, and imposed it throughout society" (p. 71). The Gilead society is patriarchal and it imposed certain rules over women and if they could not fulfil the assigned job, they will not be called women, "If a Commander's wife is unable to bear children, a fertile woman must be brought in to be impregnated by him" (p. 71). The barrenness in Commander's family is to be fulfilled by a woman like Offred. Her sense of self in Gilead's society is very weak, "Offred faces Gilead's terrible might as she tries to survive with a sense of self and with constructive social interactions" (p. 72). She tries to face the hard reality with a faint hope of freedom through memory and social interaction.

Finally, Armbruste (1990) in "Memory and Politics? A Reflection on The Handmaid's Tale" discusses about the nature of Gilead society, "Gilead is a rational society for its misogynist, racist purposes" (p. 147). This Gilead society practices misogamy and racism. Armbruste further talks about how handmaids are trained, "After training, Offred and the other handmaids are sent to bear Caucasian children for high-ranking officials. Execution is the penalty if they fail" (p. 147). If they fail to reproduce children, they will be executed. Brute force and fear are torture handmaids. A group of women control another group of women. Commanders' wives recruit handmaids into their households. Such practices lead women devoid of human feeling, "Ultimately, social control and the very existence of Gilead depend upon suppression and manipulation of human feelings. With feelings denied, Gileadeans have no experience of knowing they belong in a human community" (p. 148). Suppression and manipulation of human feelings is common in Gilead society.

From the body of literature, it is identified that the novel deals with dystopian predicament of narrator being trapped inside a space with identity denial. She is devoid of agency. Howells's dealing of novel as dystopian text, Heidi's attempt to show Offred as pain receiver and possession of other, Hansot's focus on memory of the past and Jane Armbruste's analysis of suppression and manipulation of human feelings indicate hardships of Offred who could not control her body. The issue related to violation of women's body is rigorously discussed, however, the body-womb dualism as envisioned in Gilead society opens a new avenue for the discussion as it womb cannot be separated from body. Based on this body of knowledge, I want to further study more on womb. It is assumed that womb cannot function well if body is violated.

Methodology

The research design follows qualitative interpretative methods to analyze data collected from the primary text—The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood. The tool for data collection revolves around extracting textual lines from the novel and analyze them with the theoretical insights based on research questions. The collected data will be analyzed using the theoretical insights. Since, it is a library research; the nature of the research is interpretive, critical and analytical.

Theories related to women's body and value dualism gives a way to my research problem. Beauvoir (2003) brings the womb reference in her essay talking about women's identity, "Woman is a womb" (p. 149). Women are identified as two-legged womb. Body-womb dualism can be discussed with Karen Warren's idea of value hierarchies. Carolyn Merchant's idea of science and technology leading to the degradation of women body and mechanical world. B/Jerry Mander's idea of mediated environment represent the space where the ceremony of mechanical sex of the Commander with Offred takes place.

Susan R. Bowers (1990) argues that "Rediscovering and remembering the vitality and dark power of that Medusa can help women to re-member themselves" (p. 217). It means to say that women

need to know their original identity as powerful agents who could shape not only their future but also the future of society like Medusa. Cixous asserts that woman's identity is not easily understandable, it is complex, a blend of mystery and power.

The way Offred is classified into handmaid matches to the traditional gender role but this is challenged by new feminist ideas where she is not considered as male sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes of society. Hélène Cixous, et. al., (1976) argues, "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executant of their virile needs" (p. 879). The oppression of women is designed and planned by males to meet their desires. This is seen in novel where Offred is violently behaved and hated in the disguise of love.

Simone de Beauvoir is concerned with masculine history that considers women as second sex. She argues that one is not born but becomes a woman. Beauvoir brings the womb reference in her essay talking about women's identity as womb. Butler (1986) also brings the concept of Beauvoir. Butler argues, 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' Simone de Beauvoir's formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired" (p. 35). Drawing on Beauvoir, Butler argues that one's gender is decided by society and it is repeatedly performed. Butler (2005) also argues that woman needs to account herself to claim her identity.

Specifically, the conceptual framework consists of figuring out notable quotes or lines from the primary text and look those lines applying theoretical insight related to violation of women body. For example, Offred in the novel says that she is two-legged womb. This concept raises issues related to women's rights, body politics, and fertility rights. So, these issues will be addressed using the theoretical insights into the primary text in rational manner.

Woman's Body as Machine in Gilead

The government the Republic of Gilead—a Bible-thumping, racist, capital-punishing, and misogynistic rule that uses women as child bearing machine is a practice of masculine tendency. To consider women as ones who bear babies is an essentialist argument. In this regards, Beauvoir argues (2003), "Essentialists believe that Women biologically different from men, they are also psychologically and emotionally different (p. 322)", but she is against essentialism. She says that women should be free and proud of themselves. The Gileadan society is facing one problem that women, pure and true (as opposed to all the nonbelieving women, those who've ever been adulterous or married more than once), are found rarely fertile. So they have the problem in population. The state then uses violence to impregnate women. Then the question that comes is related to female subjectivity or selfhood. To meet the goal, the class of "handmaids," is made whose function is to bear the children. The issue of women and un-women is fake one but it is forcefully materialized in the story where women below handmaids were un-women.

The agency of women is lost when and she becomes property of others as seen in the name of Offred (Of Fred), it means she (Offred) is of Fred. They are evaluated on the basis of eggs or ability to bear children. In this regards, the feminist critic Daly advised that "women to reject the tools of patriarchy, including religion and language, and 'wildize' themselves (p. 324). Women, in the novels are used as resources that could not resist either. The women are the political subjects for the powerful nations. Atwood is also accusing the developed country for this. DiPaolo (2018) asserts that, "Perhaps the most unsettling thing about both *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy is the extent to which they appear to be works more about modern America than a future America" (p. 179). The powerful nation like America's policy shows dark future for women in future according to DiPaolo, "Atwood recently joked about hearing reports that librarians across America were moving her works

from the science fiction and literature sections to the current events and political science sections because of the way Republican legislatures in particular were moving to ban all forms of birth control in an alarmingly *Handmaid's Tale* manner" (p. 179). The move of Republican legislatures in particular to ban all forms of birth control in an alarmingly *Handmaid's Tale* manner as seen in the Gilead state is problematic.

Women's agency is denied. Women are similar to the citizen in the novel called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. This is a dystopian novel where the characters suffer at the hand of tyrannical government. This is similar Offred who suffers at the hand of Gilead. In this regards, Landies (2025) mentions, "Compared to other novels of the genre, 1984 includes a similar element in form of Winston's secret diary; he is recording, for himself and for some kind of hoped-for postor extra-party reader, the objective truth as he knows it, somewhere where he thinks that the Party cannot alter it" (p. 95). The secret or private life is controlled by the state so women are mere objects, "Still, the part of the novel in Winston's own words is relatively small, with the bulk of the novel told in the limited third-person. The result to the reader is similar to *The Handmaid's Tale* as we hear Offred and Winston's thoughts and fears as they live in these dystopic cultures, but only Atwood's novel places her main character in the position of final narrative power, and gives her own voice" (p. 95). Offred is devoid of voice and subjectivity. The body Offred is totally controlled (and violated) by Gilead, and while attempts are made to control her mind or education (ban on reading, the Re-Education center, etcetera), is full of dystopian world. She tries to claim her personal agency with narrative agency. She does so by using her story to help create her identity and self as well as establish her personal power as indicated by feminist scholars. Women are considered as women if they produce baby. Thus, it is womb or healthy womb that make them women.

Women are presented two-legged wombs that are all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. However, female critic rejects this notion. In this regards, Cixous (2004) states, "You can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes- any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, and writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible" (p. 541). Women cannot have fixed universal personality. In the novel, Offred thinks, "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (p. 79-80). The quote justifies that Offred when she is naked, and thinks about her body, she realizes that her body was an instrument, an extension of her self. She learns that her body is only important to the state because of its "central object, i. e, her womb. It shows that Gilead's attitude toward women is narrow and negative devoid of subjectivity. The state is not fair to treat them not as individuals but as objects important only for the children that they can bear. Women's wombs, similar to "national resource," of the state dehumanize women.

The narrator reflects upon her body and her identity. Atwood (1985) mentions, "It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference" (p. 145). She is important to the state because she has her body but the body is owned by the state. Without this womb, she will be doubly considered as lack. Beauvoir states, "Therefore, a woman is lack, a negative- she lacks the phallus that confers subjectivity" (p. 321). This pessimistic expression of a woman applies to women in Gilead. For Offred, it is her fertility matters to the state. In this wry observation, Offred assumes the blame for not producing, differentiating between herself and her body, her ability to conceive a child, but the child will not be her. She further argues, "Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied" (172). She is in confusion if she owns her body. She

cannot do anything for her family. Neither she can give nor receive any physical affection to her daughter, she experiences dislocation. Thus, she feels “disembodied” as she is separated from her husband and daughter.

Conclusion

The unjust practices imposed upon women denying their agency leads the country towards the dark side which is self-destructive. The womb an issue of women as a part of identity, the concept of (un)women is patriarchal as represented by the Gilead state that thinks only for the eggs and womb in women's body. The commander's sex with Offred proves this reality. The body-womb dualism degrades the Gilead rule as envisioned by the state. In nutshell, it is observed that the womb is an issue of women's identity, and it has been misinterpreted as (un)women. It is unjust to look for eggs and womb in women's body for profit and it continues masculine discourse, and body-womb dualism is promoted in the Gilead. It further deteriorates the state and its citizens. The way women body is violated, it further deteriorates the situation in the society. It also highlights that the solution for maintaining balance between womb and body as well as state and citizens before we reach to apocalyptic situation as Margaret Atwood envisions in the novel — *The Handmaid's Tale* is that women like men should be equally valued.

Thus, the womb is not an issue of women and (un)women as suggested in the text. Womb is natural gift to women on the basis of which, they should not be evaluated. The state Gilead is cruel one representing the theme of dystopia. The state represented by the Commander looks for eggs and womb in women's body and side by side pleasure on her body. This is a subversion of women's identity. While reading these issues from the perspectives of feminist scholars, it is argued that the body-womb dualism promote the Gilead rule as envisioned by the state tends towards limiting individuals into the objectification.

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