

**“Spinster Syndrome : A Study on Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of God* ”**

A project work submitted to Madurai Kamaraj University in partial

fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of

**Master of Arts in English Literature**

By

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## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the project work entitled, “**Spinster Syndrome : A Study on Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of God* ”** submitted to Madurai Kamaraj University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Master of Arts in English Literature** is a record of original research work done by **JOSPHIN RANI.J (Reg. No. B8T15952)** during the period (June 2018 - April 2020) of her study in Mary Matha College of Arts and Science, Periyakulam under my supervision and guidance and the project has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree / Diploma / Associate ship / Fellowship or similar title to any candidate of any University.

Signature of the Guide  
(**Miss B. ANNA POORANI** )

Head of the Department  
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Principal  
(**Rev. Fr. ISSAC PJ CMI**)

## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the project work entitled, “**Spinster Syndrome : A Study on Margaret Laurence’s *A Jest of God* ”** submitted to Madurai Kamaraj University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Master of Arts in English Literature** is a record of original research work done by me during the period (June 2018 – April 2020) under the supervision and guidance of **Miss B. Anna poorani** Assistant Professor, Department of English, Mary Matha College of Arts and Science, Periyakulam and that it has not formed the basis for the award of any Degree / Diploma / Associate ship / Fellowship or similar title to any candidate of any University.

Signature of the Candidate

**(JOSPHIN RANI .J)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Margaret Laurence, a reputed Canadian novelist of the inner weather powerfully presents the mysterious working of the human mind. She explores the consciousness of her characters and reveals the problems faced by them authentically. Laurence universally admired for her Manawaka fictions the most prominent writer of Canadian literature seals with the predicament of women in the patriarchal society. She plunges deep into the minds of her protagonists and analyses the inner conflicts experienced by them. This study aims to analyse the journey of the protagonists towards a woman struggling in the constructed society.

Chapter One gives a description of Canadian literature with its main themes and also gives an account of the major Canadian writers, It focuses on the women writers and highlight the life, the works and the contribution of Margaret Lawrence to the world of literature.

Chapter Two talks about the women syndrome as well as spinster syndrome experienced in Manawaka society. It depicts the inner self of Rachel and how she has been alienated from the society. Women are considered inferior even though they are well qualified. Men try to change women's identity and want them to fulfill their desire with regards to their norms. Rachel search her identity and individuality to be get shine . She understands her plight and failure's so she plans to move away from the Manawaka Society to start a new life.

Chapter Three talks about the Lawrence introducing a female protagonist who pours out of her experience as a frightened and timid human being, Spinster who lives in Manawaka. She shows her step stone of her life through the unexpected love affair in various ways at last she faced only the failures.

Chapter Four is 'Summing Up' – Lawrence has presented a fine study of a woman's dilemma because of her fear complex psyche and her liberation from the forces that tangled her.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“It is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression”

- Alfred North Whiteland

Literature is a peeled book of life that reflects the souls of humanity which enunciates customs, tradition and lifestyles of people lighting up the thread of identity. It is a periphrastic mechanism to approach language that replenishes cosmopolitically. Life is expounded in the constellation of literature. Deprived of literature, life culminates to persist. It is an incarnation of words implanted on human afflictions, cravings, and amorousness. It propagates miracles, stimulates a generation, and nourishes information. Even though it is emphatic, ceaseless, and ambidextrous, literature contributes conspicuous purposes to the world we prevail.

Canadian literature is the evolution of compilation of two languages explicitly French and English that seems to be the milestones of Canadian era. The word ‘Canada’ is derived from the Spanish words ‘aca’ and ‘nada’, which means ‘nothing’ here. It is out of this nothingness that a pioneer of new socio – cultural history evolved. In spite of this, Canada had developed a vibrant of literary forms and genres promoting their culture through baffling variety of literatures. As part of huge immigrations, there landed multiple grains of multiculturalism that portrayed an international presence to Canadian identity. ‘Unity in Diversity’ seems to be the best space given to announce the role of Canadian Literature in just one sentence.

According to Ajay Das, Canadian Literature whether written in English or French reflects three main parts of Canadian experience. They are nature, frontier life and Canada’s position in the world. Canadian Literature is a progeny of an expression of a multilingual, multicultural group of humanity shimmer the collision of miscellaneous ages, races, religions and influences. Like other Colonial Literature, Canadian Literature urbanized slowly and gradually. It began pretentious implication in the early twentieth century. Canadian writings were fashioned by cosmopolitan allegiances with native vitality

and uniqueness. The writings were predominantly based on Canadian way of living and language, portraying the experience of an average man and woman tethered to a dull routine way of life.

John Richardson is considered to be the first Canadian novelist of note whose notable work *Wacousta*, published in 1832 popularized the genre of the national historical novel. Meanwhile, J.C. Haliburton on the other hand began his humorous series on Sam Slick, the Yankee peddler which sorted out his major work with *The Clockmarker* in 1836. William Kirby, author of *The Golden Dog* (1877) and Sir Gilbert Parker, author of *The Seats of the Mighty* (1896) are included in the Historical novelists writings in 1900. The novels of Sara Jeannette Duncan were noted for humor and satire such as in *A Social Departure* (1890). The Rev. C.W. Gordon produced *Black Rock* (1898) a series of novels on pioneer life in West Canada. Animal stories became popular in the works of Ernest Thompson and Margaret Marshal Saunders

Margaret Laurence, a founding member of the Writers Trust of Canada is known for her progressive feminist stance and fervent endorsement of peace. Although the writer spent much of her adult life in England and Africa, her upbringing in rural Neepawa, Manitoba is apparent in many of her most important works. One such example is her 1974 novel *The Diviners*, which is evidently inspired by the author's own story. As her last major novel, the book won her the coveted Governor-General's Award. Laurence helped to usher in a new era Canadian literature through her universal appeal, allowing her work, and Canadian literature as a whole, to be considered for the first time within a wider, international context.

Michael Ondaatje best known for his Booker Prize winning novel turned Academy Award winning film, *The English Patient* (1992) is a Sri Lankan born Canadian writer. His broad range of work, which covers the territories of fiction, autobiography, poetry and film, has found its way into school curricula across Canada. Alice Munro, winner of the Man Booker International Prize, three time recipient of the Governor General's Award for fiction and a long time contender for the Nobel Prize is an icon of Canadian literature. An expert writer of short stories, Munro's skill lies in her truthful examination of human relationships viewed against the mundane backdrop of ordinary life.

Margaret Atwood, the daughter of a forest entomologist was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939. She has spent part of her early years in the bush of North Quebec and moved to Toronto at the age of seven. She studied at the University of Toronto and then took her Master's degree at Radcliffe College, Massachusetts, in 1962. She is Canada's most eminent novelist, poet and short story writer, and also she writes critical studies, screenplays, radio scripts and books for children. Her works have been translated into over 30 languages. Her reviews and critical articles have appeared in various eminent magazines and she has also edited many books, including *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1983) and with Robert Weaver, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1986). She was the President of the Writers Union of Canada from 1981-1982 and the President of PEN, Canada from 1984-1986. Her first publication was a book of poetry, *The Circle Game* (1964), which received the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry in Canada. Several more poetry collections have followed, including *Interlunar* (1988) and *Morning in the Burned House* (1995). Her books of short fiction include *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* (1982), *Wilderness Tips* (1991) and *Good Bones* (1992).

She is perhaps best known for her novels, in which she creates strong, often enigmatic, women characters and excels in telling open-ended stories, while dissecting contemporary urban life and sexual politics. Her first novel was *The Edible Woman* (1969), about a woman who cannot eat and feels that she is being eaten. This was followed by *Surfacing* (1973), which deals with a woman's investigation into her father's disappearance, *Lady Oracle* (1977), *Life Before Man* (1980), *Bodily Harm* (1982), the story of Rennie Wilford, a young journalist recuperating on a Caribbean island and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), a futuristic novel describing a woman's struggle to break free from her role. She subsequently published *Cat's Eye* (1989), dealing with the subject of bullying among young girls.

*The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), the tale of a woman who is convicted for her involvement in two murders about which she claims to have no memory; *The Blind Assassin* (2000), a multi-layered family memoir and *Oryx and Crake* (2003), a vision of a scientific dystopia, which was shortlisted for the 2003 Man Booker Prize for Fiction and for the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction. *Alias Grace*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*

were all shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction. *The Blind Assassin* won the Booker Prize for Fiction in the year 2000.

Some of Margaret Atwood's books have been adapted for stage and screen. A television series based on *Alias Grace* was broadcast in 2017, and a television film for *The Robber Bride* appeared in 2007. *The Edible Woman* has been staged, while *The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted for screen by Harold Pinter in a film directed by Volker Schlöndorff, released in 1990, staged as an opera by Poul Ruders - the British Premiere was performed by English National Opera at the Coliseum, London, in April 2003 - and became a television series in 2017.

Margaret Atwood is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, has been presented with the Order of Ontario and the Norwegian Order of Literary Merit, and has been awarded 16 honorary degrees. She has lived in many places including Canada, England, Scotland, France and currently lives in Toronto.

Atwood holds numerous honorary degrees from various institutions including The Sorbonne, NUI Galway as well as Oxford and Cambridge universities. Atwood has won numerous awards and honors for her writing, including the Booker Prize, Arthur C. Clarke Award, Governor General's Award, Franz Kafka Prize, and the National Book Critics and PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Awards.

Some of her recent books are *Stone Mattress* which was published in the year 2014, concluding the dystopian trilogy started with *Oryx and Crake* in 2003 and *The Year of the Flood* in 2009. *The Heart Goes Last* in 2015 and *Hag-Seed* in 2016. *The Testaments* published in 2019 returns to the fictional world of *The Handmaid's Tale* and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. In 2011, she published a book of essays about science-fiction, entitled *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and The Human Imagination*

Most of Atwood's novels deal with the problems of personal identity and contemporary life. It deals with gender and the way patriarchy occupies space in between the gaps of humanity. She explored the crisis of identity that prevailed during the time where women were summed up to satisfy the deeds of men and being marginalized in the

society as a whole. 'Discovery' is the process of journey to awaken 'self' where a person's security is being questioned and threatened.

*Life Before Man* which was published in 1979 is a very different novel from Atwood's early works as it generates three eminent characters named Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje. The characters experience apathetic and dreary lives. In the novel, it is not Nate, the man, but Elizabeth, the woman in her overwhelming aspiration for real-bound and logo centric life signify patriarchy power-structures. Elizabeth's male-like behavior destroys Chris and her marriage. Each character has moved away from reflexive acceptance to active participation.

*Cat's Eye* which was published in the year 1989 is the story of Elaine Risley, the middle aged painter. She returns to Toronto after many years of absence for a retrospective of her paintings. Elaine makes retrospection of her life and the long sequences of life from early childhood, a disastrous love affair and failed first marriage are the memories which culminate in the exhibition of her paintings. She feels more comfortable with boys and social convention makes her to speak and act like other girls. Her behavior makes her the object of ridicule among her girl friends – Cordelia, Grace and Carol.

In *The Lady Oracle* published in 1976, the central character, Joan Foster is corpulent. Her mother always quarrels with Joan and it is about her physical appearance. The theme of the novel highlights the identity crisis. Society is reflected and renovation is portrayed through the self disparaging submissiveness of Joan. Joan's passivity relates to Canada's similar patterns of passivity and powerlessness and the dominating culture of United States.

*Bodily Harm* published in 1981 portrays Reenie Wilford as a young journalist, who undergoes physical and mental torture. She suffers from cancer, which acts as an obstacle to physical survival. She constantly lives in the nostalgic memories of her home land. Flashes of consciousness make Reenie leave home, in search of her individuality and place in society.

*Surfacing*, which is published in the year 1972 demonstrates a simple story of the unnamed protagonist. She goes to Quebec in search of her father. She works as a commercial artist and has returned to the place after nine years and marries a man out of

losing her parents love. The man soon leaves her after her pregnancy for which she has to suffer alienation. The central theme of the novel brings out the female protagonist's arousing from a personal, sexual and national alienation to an integrated sense of identity. It also presents an eco-feministic obligation and careful analysis of return to the natural world. It focuses on man's dilemma in the problem-ridden modern world. Man has estranged not only from others, but also from himself.

*The Handmaid's Tale* which is a dystopian novel published on 1985 is Margaret Atwood's international award winning best seller. "With *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood seemingly reworks the dystopian vision of Orwell's classic tale to fit an American Puritan ethic and, indeed, she has described the novel as 'a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-four*'."(Fiona 18). The novel is centered upon fertility crisis and the over ruling of men over women arousing patriarchal domination among the united states of Canada. The novel reveals the chain of incidents that traces how women are oppressed and put out of power as well as sovereignty. They were treated as instruments of child bearing machines and walking uterus, which is the only purpose they serve for. This is the story of handmaid's who are meant for the purpose.

The protagonist as well as the narrator of the story is Offred of which the name suggests that she belongs to the commander Fred. Usually the handmaids are being trained in the red centre under the control of Aunt Lydia and the sent to commander's house, who names them to their own interest. The original name of 'Offred' is 'June' and she too had family from which she is being separated in the name of breeding for their masters.

Offred is being portrayed as daughter of feminist activist, who as a single mother brought up her child. She was accompanied by her close friend Moira, who is later found as working as a prostitute. In the early stage of life, Offred is found in having relationship with a man named Luke, who is already married and then divorced. They had a child living together. Accidentally women were fired out of their job at the library because they were no longer permitted to work anywhere and have a private account of themselves. The money they had will be automatically shifted to their spouse's account, as a first step of

loss of power and individuality. When the government came into power, both Luke along with his daughter and Offred tried to flee from Canada. But they were caught and trapped.

Under the reign of supremacy and power, women are ranked according to their positions of which consists of childless wives of the commanders, the housekeeping Marthas and the reproductive handmaids, who are called by the name assigned by the commanders. Angels are the ones who are meant to guard and have the power of police, who are ranked under commanders.

Offred who is being unsuccessful in her previous two begins her third assignment. Her present commander is Fred, and his wife Serena Joy, who is a former singer on a televangelist program. Offred is being accompanied by Ofglen, who is her neighboring handmaid. Whenever they return from the grocery, they would see the executed prisoners who are displayed. As a handmaid, Offred had to visit the doctor frequently, after each time she attends her menstrual cycle so as to conform that she is healthy and they doesn't have any complexities of their own. The doctor once warned her that the commander may be sterile and he doesn't have the ability to make her pregnant, for which she refuses his words. Every month she had to attend the monthly ceremony by the commander who leads it by reading the Bible verses to the household. After that Serena Joy as well as Offred will be waiting in their bedroom for the commander to arrive and have sex with them.

The following night when Offred comes downstairs to steal the flowers, she notices Nick, who is one among the guardians of commander. He asks her to meet Fred as he had informed them to be so. They play scrabble that night without the notice of anyone and soon that turned to a tendency for which the commander later asks her to kiss good night. Women are forbidden to read and write but according to the wish of the commander she wants to do so. Offred feels uncomfortable with her commander as she continues her personal visits with him. One day Ofglen reveals the secret that she is the member of an underground resistance movement. It is from the commander that Offred learns the phrase on the closet which means "Don't let bastards grind you down" and the handmaid who carved it hanged herself and committed suicide.

Serena Joy finds the secret relation of Offred with the commander and arranges Offred to have sex with Nick hoping that she could have an offspring out of their relation. The next day commander wants Offred to attend a club wearing sexy costume and takes her unofficially where Offred eventually meets Moira working there as a prostitute. After some days all the women are required to attend a public execution where Ofglen reveals the information that the rapist is one among the members of the resistance. The next day of their shopping, Offred finds herself being accompanied by a different Ofglen. The new one admits that the old Ofglen hanged herself when she found the policemen rushing to arrest her. Offred when arriving to home finds that Serena Joy had already discovered the party costume that she wore on a sex club. Soon after the revelation she found a van of men coming forward to arrest Offred. Nick, who comes forward, informs Offred that the eyes are really resistance fighters. Thus the novel ends without declaring the fate of Offred.

*“One version of this objection asserts that the novel is not simply dystopian but antiutopian in that the novel’s ironized ending, the “Historical Notes,” shortcircuits any hope for political effectiveness that Offred’s open-ended conclusion might hold out.”(Jennifer 83)*

Second chapter ‘Weaving the web of marginality’ deals with the oppression of women in the society and how she is alienated ,denied from basic rights and being treated as mere child bearing machine. Gender and identity crisis plays a major role in self realization of their position in the society. Third chapter is about the styles and techniques used to mould the novel to a mere identical presentation that fires the reader to generate their own creativity to think along. Fourth chapter is the summing up of all the events from the beginning to the end.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **WEAVING THE WEB OF MARGINALITY**

The term feminism means equality that serves to circulate the proposal of providing equal rights for men and women. It is about challenging the patriarchal environment on the basis of gender equality. Feminism is a school of belief that express the universal oppression or exploitation faced by women and a commitment that is set to uncover and understand the causes and sustainability of oppression and thereby working individually and collectively in day to day life.

*The Handmaid's Tale* which is a dystopian novel is merely portrayed upon the walls of feminism which struggles for gender equality and how the society is being shaped under its tale emerged from patriarchy. The roots of male supremacy and power in their hands prove to be the tool that chains women and abandon them from their freedom. The novel as referred above is a dystopian that secretes the futuristic vision of Canada and its pathetic situation as a result of Patriarchy and Sterilization. A situation of sterility is not for women alone but also it is dominant on men. The issue of women's sexual role in the society is being portrayed in the novel and has been evoked as a central argument. The novel presents the feministic subject where the identity of a woman has been destroyed in a hard situation. It is deeper and more expansive vision of bleak ending for women. The novel is set amid war and corruption, and destructive political power across the fictional republic of Gilead. It refers to a bleak scenario of a totalitarian state of theocracy reflecting freeing from moral values. In fact, Atwood's definition of politics accommodates her abiding thematic concerns of her scrutiny of the relations between men and women, which has always been taken by the author as a form of power politics, her engagement with the question of Canadian national and personal identity, and her wider humanitarian concerns with human basic rights and their protection (Howells 6-7).

In this novel, the most fascinating parts are undoubtedly the ones in which Offred portrays the city and its aspects. One can notice the extended contrast between Gilead before oppression and the Gilead she is describing. Also, there is something very confusing in the novel and it is how women are sorted by colors interrelated to their social position. It is as if religion or the color of the skin, which are today the human aspects that inspire prejudices, were replaced by the color of clothes. Atwood, with this detail certainly wanted to indicate the irrelevance of our Prejudices. "With the recent success of HULU's video-

on-demand adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* and widespread use of its imagery by political action groups like the Handmaid Coalition, *The Handmaid's Tale* has become a transmedia property whose dystopian storyworld extends beyond the bounds of any single text.”(Amanda 216)

*The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a dystopian fiction set in North America centers around a female character in a totalitarian society which is a world of oppression and constant surveillance, completely consumed by government control and manipulation. The novel presents the world which wrong people acceded to power. Even though the story takes place in only one state of America, it nevertheless can be connected to the rest of the world. If a situation like that truly happened, it would spread very easily. The dystopian genre flourished in the nineteenth century primarily as an antithesis to utopian literature.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is considered a highly feminist vision of dystopia, a society in which women's rights have been completely revoked and women are forced to contribute to their own oppression by conforming to very strict gender roles and restrictions, but at the same time enforced sexuality. “Presenting a dystopian society in which women's lives are governed by reproduction and gender roles are enacted strictly and imposed forcefully, Atwood's novel examines the purpose of human life, particularly for women, in a world of devoid of free will.”(Aisha 637). The novel explores a reality in which our society has developed in a negative direction, away from the ideal utopia, exploring problems that were relevant at the time they were written. Atwood imagines a dystopia where environmental issues are at the core of the changes in society, as climate change and pollution has rendered a large part of the population infertile.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Margaret Atwood offers a different perspective on the relationship between men and women. She expresses the complex relationship between sexuality and power and argues how power dominations on sex.

Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* reclaims power and liberty by utilizing the three attributes and in the process defects the destructive manipulation of the power brokers. There is a strong religious stand in the narrative as quotations from the Bible find their place in the text, especially in the title. The place is named the Republic of Gilead after the biblical land where Jacob went into the Handmaid Billah because his wife Rachel was

infertile. The following biblical epigraph used in the opening of *The Handmaid's Tale* affirms the religiosity of the novel:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no Children, Rachel envied her sister, and said unto Jacob, Give me Children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of thy womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Billah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have Children by her... (Genesis, 30:1-3).

The leaders of Gilead have found scriptural justifications for their treatment of women. As a thirty three year old Handmaid, Offred had one role in her society, one function to perform that is to produce babies. She is not someone able to have her destiny in her own hands. Unfortunately she does not have the power to change her future at any time. She could be called a heroine because she is strong but she could also be called an anti-heroine since she rather puts up with things that happen to her, she does not have the power to influence them. Offred speaks as a character who has partially become accustomed to this new world. She is aware that it came about because of the social chaos of American democracy. There was too much violence. At least this is how the United States is viewed from the perspective of Offred's authoritarian society.

Offred is afraid of being punished for her independent thoughts. She also mentions her studies at the university. This proves that she is rather smart and is able to understand how wrong everything is as the oppression takes place. Her description of her life while she was a student shows the contrast with her life as a Handmaid. Her personality completely changed since she was a rather open minded, well-adjusted woman and she was later forced to become someone withdrawn and sad. She has a friend, Moira, who represents everything that Offred would like to be. Moira is described as free and open-minded character throughout the novel. The fact that she is bisexual strengthens even more the feeling that she is someone confident. She is represented as someone who is ready to fight for her beliefs and that is why Moira represents strength and hope for Offred. What is interesting to consider in Moira's destiny is that, like Offred, she is punished, but not for the same reasons.

Moira is sent to the Red Center because she is bisexual. Like Offred, Moira is to become a Handmaid but her strong character makes her fight against what appears to be fatality as she decides to escape the Center. As Moira escapes, she is an exception that proves to Offred that it is possible to fight oppression. Offred also remembers fragments of their friendship, before oppression. Every fragment has a specific purpose, either to give her strength or to make her laugh or, often, to give her hope. Moira is outspoken and rebellious. She does not accept the subjection of women for a moment or believe that any class of people has the right to rule others. Offred is wistful about the past. While describing her past, Offred remembers the big steps she made in her life when she married Luke and when she gave birth to her daughter.

It is hard to recall, however, when her present is so filled with her duties as a Handmaid. Eleonora Rao in her book *Strategies for Identity: The Fiction of Margaret Atwood* notes that Moira is one female who “survives intact the programme of conditioning into the acceptance of female guilt and evil imposed on the handmaids at the Centre” (Rao 20). She is surprised when the Commander takes an interest in proposing her as they attend a costume party and then making sexual advances to her.

In the Republic of Gilead, Handmaids such as Offred are only meant to be procreators that is, they have sex with their masters only for the purposes of childbearing. The Commander obviously chafes under the rigid, puritanical regime, and he looks to Offred to relieve his frustrations, even though he is breaking the very rules that he is pledged to uphold. Offred uses the Commander’s attentions to win a few freedoms for herself, realizing that to the Commander. She is merely a plaything and that he cannot be trusted with her real inner feelings. She must also be cautious because Serena Joy, the Commander’s wife, would surely have Offred punished if she were to discover that Offred and her husband had a sexual relationship outside of their officially sanctioned mating sessions.

Offred finds true love in Nick, who is also employed by the Commander and his wife. Nick risks death if his liaison with Offred is discovered, yet the couple is compelled to express their humanity by carrying on their secret affair. In each other they find an outlet for expressing all those emotional human needs that their society represses by restricting

both males and females to prescribed roles. Serena Joy is also a very important character in the novel. She is an anti-feminist. She thought that it was the perfect position for a woman. For her, a woman does not need to be anything more important than that. It is enough that she is a good housewife, takes good care of her house and children. The only problem with Serena is that she does not fit her own description since she does not have the possibility to bear children. Therefore she is not considered as a good wife by society. That explains why she is so frustrated throughout the novel. Atwood seems to prove through this character, the shallowness of our prejudices as far as women are concerned since, even today, a good wife is sometimes defined that way. She seems to be willing to show that a woman would become if she tried so hard to be this kind of wife.

The novel shows the ruthless and dogmatic picture of religious society which religious values are announced to isolate women even from the basic human rights. "Body in this society is the device distorted to the wishes of leaders. Offred is a woman trapped in a horrible reality from which no immediate physical escape is present. Even suicide is off limits" (Gulick 72). Reshmi writes in *Eco feminist Vision: A Study of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing and The Handmaid's Tale* that "In the Gileadean patriarchy, a woman is denied the right to possess or to have control over her own body. Her body is segmented and her value is determined on the basis of her reproductive capability" (qtd in Mouda 4).

The dichotomy of freedom and security is at stake where woman is marginalized as merely a sexual being. Society subjugates women and curtails their freedom that engenders fear of security in them. Upper class men, besides the opportunity to sire children are assured their women are well controlled, kept rigidly in place. Each woman is allowed to do only one thing each of which Marthas perform housework, Handmaids reproduce, Wives raise children and provide pleasant company, Jezebels have non reproductive sex and Aunts train Handmaids. Kept occupied by and allowed to do only one thing, no woman can venture into men's territory producing goods by working outside the home or information through writing. Poor men have Econowives, who "are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can" (24). They produce nothing significant, they probably cannot reproduce either, or they would have been conscripted by the government.

The use of women as tools in industrializing domestic work requires that both genders internalize a new perception of women. In order to sustain the political system, women must be taught to regard themselves as commodities. This perspective, enforced on Offred at the Red Center, is evident in her self-descriptions: “I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape,” she says, because “I am too important, too scarce, for that. I am a national resource” (65). In order for women to be citizens of any nation, they must possess a clear legal identity as individuals with rights. This is impossible in Gilead, since “the right to human dignity for women entails the cessation of the commercial exploitation of their bodies in advertising, and preventing the exploitation of motherhood by the state or religious bodies” (Martin 32). While Gilead dramatically reduces the exploitation of women’s bodies by mandating modest dress, it exploits their bodies for motherhood. Ceasing to be individuals with legal rights, they are reduced to resources. “Freedom from violence” is a deception that protects a woman only as a reproductive device owned by others. Offred’s fate is not entirely clear because the novel ends with an appendix that reveals that Offred’s narrative has been discovered by a later society one that apparently has restored something like the equality of the sexes and individual liberties that Offred desired. From the perspective of the appendix, then, Offred’s narrative becomes a kind of Old Testament, a record of the human quest for self-expression and redemption.

Offred is, in some respect, a rather weak person. There are several examples of other women in the novel who have not been nearly as affected by the “truth” of Gilead as Offred. They are active and determined not to live by the rules of the Gilead discourse. Luce Irigaray, claims that man’s “social existence, his economic structures and his sexuality are always tied to the work of nature” because only through nature can he produce anything lasting. Before Gilead, however, women not only reproduced, but were involved in the production of goods, technology, and information. Offred worked and supported herself, as had her mother, who raised Offred alone. But men felt threatened by women production outside the home. Thus, as Offred tells Luke, the government decreed that “Women couldn’t hold property anymore” (178).

Because they could no longer own property, they became possessions themselves. Offred’s mother was involved in the feminist movement in the society before, burning

pornographic material and marching in support of women's right to abortion. She was frustrated about Offred's lack of interest in the women's movement and her habit of taking her rights for granted. "You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are" (131). Offred's mother fears the consequences of slacking in this area, a fear that would prove to be justified, and after the creation of Gilead she is sent to the Colonies. Furthermore, Offred's fellow Handmaid, Ofglen is another woman who is seemingly much braver than Offred. Ofglen is involved in the resistance and she is the one who pushes their relationship beyond what is generally accepted among Handmaids. She gives Offred information about the resistance and wants Offred to pass on information received from her Commander, which is something Offred does not dare. When Ofglen hangs herself instead of being arrested by "The Eyes" (the secret police in Gilead) Offred is relieved since Ofglen then cannot reveal anything about her. "She did it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later" (298).

The Aunts have very clear goals that they want to accomplish with their training of the Handmaids. The first is to delete the women from history: "All official records of the handmaids would have been destroyed upon their entry into the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center" (387). The second goal is to teach women how to betray other women. The Aunts are women charged to teach the Handmaids how to be obedient and submissive. They are also highly respected in society because they are considered wise women. Marthas, on the contrary, find themselves very low in the social ranking. Their role is exclusively to take care of the house, to cook and clean. Marthas are almost non-existent but not as much as the Handmaids, that are below everyone in society. These Handmaids are, ironically, the most important part of this story. They are also a part of the following very important characteristic of Gilead. Atwood intentionally created the Aunts as powerful females in a dystopia.

In the Handmaid's Tale, in Gilead, birth rates have plummeted as a result of widespread contamination of the air, water, and earth. Also, Christians, sickened by divorce, pornography, and abortion, outlaw all three. They also take away a woman's right to own property or have money of her own and everything is in her husband's name.

Women who have been divorced but who are proven to be fertile, such as the main character in the novel, are found guilty of the crime of adultery, and are given to the rulers of Gilead in order to provide children for childless couples. Gilead has become a city of oppression. The regime in Gilead uses two main devices to control women. At first, they use a certain type of language to maintain the oppression of women. Secondly, they use actions or violence, which represent a more direct and harsh type of oppression. By combining these two the regime maintains its control of women in Gilead. From the first page, as the narrator begins describing the gymnasium, one can feel that terror and uneasiness are very present feelings among its inhabitants.

Gilead does not want women to be aware neither of the situation nor of the problems in the Government. In fact, they are no longer allowed to read because it could encourage them to have their own opinions. Female press, especially is dangerous because in general, these kinds of papers deal with free women who can dress or live the way they want to. One understands that this kind of press does not follow the rules established by the Government according to whom women have to be submissive.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **STYLES AND TECHNIQUES**

Novel is a very effective medium for portrayal of human thought and action. The novel has no rigid framework, and authors have taken full advantage of it. Every serious novel is sure to reveal the author's own view of life and its problems. The style in writing can be defined as the way a writer writes and it is the technique which an individual author uses in his writing. It varies from one author to another and depends upon one's choice of

word, tone and syntax. A unique literary style can have great impact on the work on the readers.

A novel is an author's canvas, allowing him to paint whatever picture he desires by using literary tools in the way an artist would use various types of brushes. Among these tools are creative writing devices such as plot, characterization, point of view, description, dialogue and voice. The artist mixes colours to create a different effect, likewise the author may blend multiple techniques to add further dimensions to the novel.

Margaret Atwood in her novels, short stories and even poetry uses a similar style of writing. It is a style that is not only distinctive but also effective. Her sense of description is one of her best talents. It allows her to create pieces of work that constantly reinforce her themes of political chaos and the effect that a patriarchal society has on women. As a feminist writer, much of her work deals with how men not only empower women but how they manage to hurt each other. Using parallelism and symbolism as springboards, Margaret Atwood writes to inform and perhaps warn her reader of the exploitation of women and sometimes even helpless men who exist within a society.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is written in first person narrative where Offred herself narrates it as in the form of a short story. We are not able to collect information other than what Offred knows because she is the narrator. The passage given below is told by Offred herself about her own appearance which shows she is tired of being what she is and not much energy is left to push up her to the next stage of life. She herself had reduced her to nothing and nothing is left.

That is how I feel: white, flat, thin. I feel transparent. Surely they will be able to see through me. Worse, how will I be able to hold onto Luke, to her, when I'm so flat, so white? I feel as if there's not much left of me; they will slip through my arms, as if I'm made of smoke, as if I'm a mirage, fading before their eyes. (106)

Narratives are works that provide an account of connected events. Narrative techniques provide deeper meaning for the reader and help the reader use imagination to visualize situations. Narrative literary techniques are also known as literary devices. The narrative technique may include setting, plot, theme, style or structure, characterization and

perspective, since literary techniques are best understood in the context of one of these elements.

Atwood is quiet deliberate in her choice of characters. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood has developed a detailed characterization of the protagonist Offred and has chosen a limited number of people to represent that society, and it is intimate relationships which largely concern her. It is in the initial stage in which the writer introduces the character with noticeable emergence. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter."(90). This shows Offred's reflection of herself. Due to the fact that she is constantly degraded and treated badly, she believes that personal information, even her name is not relevant. This quote proves that this society is corrupting handmaids' opinions on themselves. In Offred's case, this quote shows that her personality has been taken over by self-consciousness and vulnerability.

The structure of a novel depends on the organization of events in the plot of the story. Plot is known as the foundation of a novel or story, around which the characters and settings are built. It is meant to organize information and events in a logical manner.

Offred and Ofglen are standing by the Wall, looking at the bodies of people who have been hanged by Gilead. The sight horrifies Offred, but she strains to push aside her repugnance and substitute an emotional blankness. As she represses her natural revulsion, she remembers Aunt Lydia's words about how life in Gilead will become ordinary. "Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary."(39) Aunt Lydia's statement reflects the power of a totalitarian state like Gilead to transform a natural human response such as revulsion at an execution into blankness, to transform horror into normalcy. Aunt Lydia's words suggest that Gilead succeeds not by making people believe that its ways are right, but by making people forget what a different world could be like. Torture and tyranny become accepted because they are what you are used to.

Offred's struggle for power in a society where women are subjugated is the main conflict in the story. Offred remembers a documentary that she watched about a woman who was the mistress of a Nazi death camp guard. She recalls how the woman insisted that

her lover was not a monster and she compares that woman's situation to her own, as she spends her evenings with the Commander and comes to almost like him. The Commander seems like a good person because he is kind, friendly, genial, and even courtly to Offred. Yet he is also the agent of her oppression both directly as her Commander and indirectly through his role in constructing the oppressive edifice of Gileadean society. Like the concentration camp guard, he is not a monster to her yet he is still a monster. Offred's mind goes on in dilemma, when she thinks of the commander, She says:

He was not a monster, to her. Probably he had some endearing trait: he whistled, off key, in the shower, he had a yen for truffles, he called his dog Liebchen and made it sit up for little pieces of raw steak. How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all. What an available temptation. (151)

Offred suggests that it is easy when you know an evil person on a personal level to invent a humanity for them. It is a temptation she says meaning that no one wants to believe that someone they know is a monster. But in the case of the Commander, that temptation must be resisted. He may be kind and gentle, but he still bears responsibility for the evil of Gilead.

The style used in *The Handmaid's Tale* is reflective and non-linear, knocking the roots of narratives from Offred's past and present. This technique is called Stream of consciousness. It is a method of narration that describes happenings in the flow of thoughts in the minds of the characters. Throughout the novel, Offred detaches from her present environment and recalls past events such as her marriage to Luke and her time at the Red Center while admitting that she constructs her descriptions from memory since she has no way to write anything down.

It is only at night that Offred chooses to remember her vivid memories of past because she is by herself, quiet and in her own personal territory. She says, "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet" (43). She feels that this is the only time she is totally cut off from the oppressive society and regime that she is living in. As a day ends and Offred's bedroom door closes, it is then that her mind wanders her sea of memories and feels at one with herself. Offred's mind holds precious memories of her past life and former self. They also give the reader information about her family

background, her relationship with Luke and escaping over the border to get away from the rapidly changing society.

Flashbacks are used to show contrast between life in Gilead society and the United States society in the before time. It is a psychological phenomenon in which an individual has a sudden, usually powerful, re-experiencing of the past experience or elements of a past experience. In this novel, flashback gives us lot of information Offred's personality and also emphasis the loss of morality in Gilead in comparison to the early period.

Offred often feels nostalgic about her past. "Luke was in the living room. He put his arms around me. We were both feeling miserable. How were we to know we were happy, even then? Because we at least had that: arms, around." (198) She is sensitive because when remembering her memories, she frequently has to stop telling the reader what happens next because she finds them too painful to remember. This also conveys to the reader that Offred may be slightly nostalgic about her past, but stops herself remembering too much. Her memories help her to stay strong and deal with her current situation. "It's been a long time since I've seen skirts that short on women... they seem undress. It has taken so little time to change our minds about things like that. I think I use dress like that. That was freedom. Westernized, they use to call it." (28)

There are multiple point of views in the story. This point of views centers on Offred and her experiences. At one point in the book, Offred is telling a first person view of her world at her present time. Then at other points in the book is about Offred's memories. Offred can be considered an unreliable narrator because we only know her ideas and opinions. With Offred wearing the mask that covers her old self up and allows her to live as she now must, we cannot even assume that her memories are reliable, and not just how she wants to remember them.

Atwood makes it very clear to her readers that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a construct. She makes it clear through her character Offred, "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." (140)

Handmaids were given the names of their Commanders with the prefix 'Of' to show possession. For example, Offred was Fred's Handmaid and Ofglen was Glen's Handmaid.

Women lost their names, tattooed with an identification marker on their ankles and put into the same, shapeless clothing. Makeup was forbidden as was any hint of a past identity. The start of the fertility crisis in Gilead had its roots in a few events of biological tampering for warfare purposes, a new super strain of syphilis along with the AIDS epidemic, widespread availability of birth control and nuclear spills, toxic leaching from nuclear stockpiles and irresponsible use of pesticides. While there were many factors, the environmental mishaps played a large role in why women and men found themselves sterile. It does seem to be a clear warning to take better care of the planet and the things we create.

Among other things, it is a political tract deploring nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist attitudes. In a criticism about Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* under the title *The Books Of The Time*. Lehmann had left a hope of survival in which the novel allows us to the imagination of readers.

“But it so much more than that — a taut thriller, a psychological study, a play on words. It has a sense of humor about itself, as well as an ambivalence toward even its worst villains, who aren't revealed as such until the very end. Best of all, it holds out the possibility of redemption. After all, the Handmaid is also a writer. She has written this book. She may have survived.” (Lehmann 24)

Climax is a structural part of a plot and is at times referred to as a crisis. It is a decisive moment or a turning point in a storyline at which the rising action turns around into a falling action. Thus, a climax is the point at which a conflict or crisis reaches its peak, then calls for a resolution or denouement. The climax of the novel is undefined. It doesn't have a proper ending whether Offred is caught red and subjected to hang or she is permitted to live with her husband Nick to continue a stress free life is left to the imagination of the reader.

The language used by Atwood in the novel is both figurative and visual which brings light to certain themes and overriding ideas. Figurative Language consists of similes, metaphors, personification, alliteration, onomatopoeia, hyperbole and idioms. Figurative language can be used to describe different settings. Offred's experience at night in her bedroom quoted below is a form of simile.

The heat at night is worse than the heat in daytime. Even with the fan on, nothing moves, and the walls store up warmth, give it out like a used oven. Surely it will

rain soon. Why do I want it? It will only mean more dampness. There's lightning far away but no thunder. Looking out the window I can see it, a glimmer, like the phosphorescence you get in stirred seawater, behind the sky, which is overcast and too low and a dull gray infrared. The searchlights are off, which is not usual. A power failure. Or else Serena Joy has arranged it. (243)

A recurring device in *The Handmaid's Tale* that Atwood uses to demonstrate the inferior position of women in Gilead is the use of names. Offred's name is symbolic of her subjugation to her Commander, Fred. The two syllables of the name 'Offred' can be divided into the preposition 'of' and the name of her Commander, Fred, thus implying Offred's subordination as a woman in Gilead. Offred says, "I must forget my secret name and all ways back. My name is Offred now, and here is where I live. ... I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without heels. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance." (143) The onomatopoeia of 'Offred' suggests being of the colour red, thereby emphasizing the specific restricted position of handmaids in Gilead, who are categorized by the red garments they are forced to wear and therefore limited from social mobility.

Imagery creates visuals for the reader that appeal to one's senses and usually involves figurative language. Atwood has also used imageries in the novel to evoke the sensory experience, some of them are clothing, colour, fertility, garden, flower, light and dark, eye, mirror, environmental, palimpsest, etc. Clothing is supposed to be a means to express oneself and being individualistic, yet the people of Gilead are stripped of this freedom as they are forced to dress according to which social group they belong to. The social hierarchy layed by Atwood can be seen in the novel. The colour red symbolizes Handmaids, black symbolizes commanders, stripes for econowives, blue for wives, green for marthas and white for daughters. "There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red." (15)

Offred is drawn towards nature, particularly Serena Joy's garden and the flowers within. She makes many references to the sexual nature of red tulips. "I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden,

towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal.” (39) Flowers symbolize fertility, life and renewal. It is seen as being individualistic and brings forth the concept of standing on one’s own and represents freedom. Garden reveals the more human side to Serena Joy, the commander’s wife and she nurtures her garden instead of a child. The house is doused with flowers and floral decals, along with Serena Joy’s robes and veil that are embroidered with flowers. Even in the harsh totalitarian regime of Gilead, humanity is still present which gives rise to themes, such as rebellion.

The next imagery used is Mirror which is supposed to reflect who you are as a person, so without them, identity is lost. Offred’s identity is taken away from her and she becomes the property of the commander. She is in an endless battle with herself over her true identity and whether to fight to keep it intact or to let it disappear along with everything else of pre – Gilead days. Offred and Ofglen use the window of Soul Scrolls as a mirror, which allows for a connection between the two.

Eyes in the novel are a symbol and a motif that turns into imagery in that you are always being watched wherever you are. Offred is aware that even Nick or the doctor might be an Eye, which instills fear in Offred and leads to paranoia among the other citizens of Gilead. The eye is reminiscent of the ‘eye of God’ and how it is perceived as being one with the totalitarian state of Gilead. It draws attention to the extreme forms to which the state will go to control their citizens. Handmaids are to be protected from the malicious gazes of men, yet the invasive nature of the eyes appears to be even more uncomfortable.

Handmaids are only valued based on their fertility. Women are stripped down to their physiological offerings. Offred’s role in life is to serve the commander and his wife. The outward appearance of the handmaids is not relevant. It is the inner workings of their bodies that are pertinent. Offred relishes in the warmth of the egg and how it almost seems to have energy of its own, making a clear reference to the handmaids themselves and the egg of an unborn child that is to be formed within them.

The next imagery used in the novel is Environment which serves as a mixture of bleak and isolated environment surrounded by piles of toxic waste. Those who does not fit in society is either executed or exiled to the colonies to clean up the toxic waste that poisons

the country. This highlights the harshness of the unstable society in which the citizens of Gilead live in, which mirrors the cruel nature of the new totalitarian regime.

Palimpsest imagery is the one which explores the old world has been completely erased and replaced with that suits the needs of the theocratic government. The high school in pre-Gilead days is now the Red Center. The government refurbished Harvard into a detention facility run by the Eyes. Signs have been painted over to cover the words. The Bible has been distorted in that countless excerpts have been rewritten for political gain. By repurposing everything, complete control is established over the citizens of Gilead, which demonstrates the concept of extremism and its harsh outcomes.

The wings are what Offred and her fellow Handmaids call the bonnet that goes up and around their faces. It keeps others from being able to see their faces unless they are looking at them directly. It also prevents the Handmaids from being able to see their surroundings well. Sometimes, Offred expresses her frustration at the wings blocking her view of the world. However, at other times it offers opportunities to hide her feelings or thoughts in a veil of safety.

There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood. (15)

The Gileadean society revolves around the Ceremony. Each month, after reading Scriptures that justify this proceeding from the Bible, the Handmaid would lie in the lap of the Wife while the Commander would have intercourse with the Handmaid. The intertwined hands of the Wife and Handmaid was supposed to represent being of one flesh. “My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product.” (100) After the Ceremony, the entire household would wait with baited breath to see if the Handmaid became pregnant. It was typically humiliating for all parties involved, but they believed it necessary for the survival of the society.

One can also see Atwood's usage of similes in the novel. For instance, when Luke and Offred's plan is backfiring on them and they have no way to escape. Offred tells, "It was like being in an elevator cut loose at the top. Falling, falling, and not knowing when you will hit."(199). The cut lose part represents them getting caught and the falling part leads to them unsure of what their punishment is going to be.

Atwood has also added humour to the story. Humour is a literary tool that makes audiences laugh, or that intends to induce amusement or laughter. Its purpose is to break the monotony, boredom, and tedium, and make the audience's nerves relax. The writer uses different techniques, tools, words, and even full sentences in order to bring to light new and funny sides of life. When Offred meets her friend Moira in the club long after she escaped from the Red Center. Offred tells Moira, "You look like the Whore of Babylon." (250) To which Moira replies, "Isn't that 'm supposed to look like?" I say. "You look like something the cat dragged in."(250) It serves as a sort of relaxation from the serious situation into a break of laughter

In a literary work, a motif can be seen as an image, sound, action, or other figure that has a symbolic significance, and contributes toward the development of a theme. Gender roles and the constant absence of a double standard between men and women is one of the motifs in the novel. Offred goes on to explain that boredom is a tool for sexual desire. Only women do it to men. She says, "But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men."(75). This novel is constantly degrading women putting the idea of patriarchy as the head of their society. Therefore, the constant appearance of gender roles and the unequal treatment of men and women is a motif in the novel.

Irony is a contrast or incongruity between expectations for a situation and what is reality. This can be a difference between the surface meaning of something that is said and the underlying meaning. Atwood has used situational irony in the novel in which Offred shares a story from her college days about animals that were devoted to science. "I read about that, in Introductory to Psychology; that, and the chapter on caged rats who'd give themselves electric shocks for something to do."(75). She explained the procedure of each animal's death with a sort of pity and sorrow. However, in the sense of suffrage and oppression. Offred and her fellow handmaids would be the caged rats that electric shock

or impregnate themselves for something to do. Therefore, the fact that Offred said this is situational irony, being that she is representative of a caged rat.

Repetition is a literary device that repeats the same words or phrases a few times to make an idea clearer and more memorable. During the ritual of testifying, Offred and Moira says, “Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison.”(78). Several terms such as ‘cry baby’, ‘teach her a lesson’ and ‘her fault’ were repeated in the novel.

Foreshadowing is a literary device in which a writer gives an advance hint of what is to come later in the story. Foreshadowing often appears at the beginning of a story, or a chapter, and helps the reader develop expectations about the coming events in a story. If Gilead was seemingly excluded from all of the conflict going around them, then this quote is going to come back to them. Additionally it states except on television, therefore a possible way of destruction for Gilead could be perhaps its emergence into warfare. “This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television.”(29). This quote stated rather early in the novel is an example of foreshadowing.

Allusion is a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers. It is just a passing comment and the writer expects the reader to possess enough knowledge to spot the allusion and grasp its importance in a text.

“Rita is in here, standing at the kitchen table, which has a top of chipped white enamel. She’s in her usual Martha’s dress, which is dull green, like a surgeon’s gown of the time before. The dress is much like mine in shape, long and concealing, but with a bib apron over it and without the white wings and the veil. She puts the veil on to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha.”(15).

The term Martha, the title given to cooks in Gilead, is an allusion to a biblical story from the New Testament (Luke 10:38–42) in which Jesus visits two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha is so distracted by making preparations for him that she fails to listen to his teachings, as her sister Mary does.

Hyperbole, derived from a Greek word meaning over-casting is a figure of speech which involves an exaggeration to evoke strong feelings and create an impression which is not meant to be taken literally. Atwood has used this device to emphasize a real

situation. “Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary” (39). This passage seems to relate to the meaning of the work as a whole. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia telling her this while she stares at the hanging, dead bodies of the Wall in repulsion. The fact that Aunt Lydia expects Offred to assimilate to this society and view it as ordinary is a hyperbole illustrating that gradually through time, extreme views may become accepted and viewed as common culture. Each generation is assimilated to their own culture and traditions and there is always a possibility that an extremist society can be created through acceptance of an extreme concept over an extended amount of time.

Any literary genre is said to be meaningful only in the presence of the lively literary tools that gives life to the new world of literature. Thus Atwood’s use of technical devices and employment of distinct style give a different colour to her novel.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **SUMMATION**

Margaret Atwood is one of Canada’s most distinguished literary figure. She is an internationally acclaimed novelist, poet, critic and cultural activist. Most of her works reflect a profound respect for nature. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a thought provoking novel which reveals about the domination and governing of women by men. In 1984, when Atwood began writing *The Handmaid’s Tale* it seems, women in the United States were experiencing a reduction in various aspects of social, political, and economic gains they had made during the 1960’s and 1970’s. It depicts a dystopia where freedom for women is restricted because of the new Christian Government’s extreme policies.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* is set in the history of The United States, especially the age of Puritan New England. Atwood through her work explores the various historical issues

that represent subjection and injustice to women all over the world. Lucy M. Friebert calls the novel in his book *Control and Creativity*, as a “Political-Science Fiction” (Friebert, 280).

*The Handmaid's Tale* narrates the dehumanization and objectification of women for the sole purpose of reproduction in a totalitarian and religiously extreme society. The setting of the novel is Gilead, a dystopian town in Massachusetts in the USA, where radiation and STIs have greatly affected fertility and only a handful of women left in society can conceive. The narrator of this story, Offred takes us through the daily life in Gilead, comparing it to life before everything changed. Atwood, by virtue of writing the novel in a female's voice in such a male dominated genre, already gave power to Offred. It is through her narrations and her descriptions of everyday life in Gilead, running concurrently with description of pre-Gilead life that one can see the horrors of a society where women are reduced to property and individualism is destroyed in a vain attempt to save society.

Atwood tells the story through Offred in such a way that her complicity and her refusal to voice out and revolt against subtle injustices in pre-Gilead society makes her partly responsible for her current situation. Incidentally, in Gilead society, through her illicit meetings with the Commander and her sexual and romantic relationship with Nick, she revolts against the system of oppression, defies it and through Nick, she find solace and regains her humanity. Victimization is partly the fault of the victim because they refused to question oppression. Nevertheless, Atwood uses Offred to portray a duality that Gilead society has deprived her from displaying. The role of women in society and how patriarchal societies continually devalue women and think it is for their own good can be explicitly in the novel. The power imbalance in the novel is what makes it such a striking commentary on human society, especially gender. Lindsey asserts that feminist ideologies even from the 1960s viewed patriarchal family systems as harmful to the egalitarianism for women to achieve what men were.

In Gilead, extreme patriarchy, religious oppression and totalitarianism has engineered society in such a way that a woman's worth is only attached to her husband or her ability to bear children. It is so ironic that the Handmaids in whose hands rest the power to perpetuate society and they are the ones who are treated so poorly but their pregnancies

and birth of a child is always celebrated. This validates Offred's referral to handmaids as two-legged wombs because they are only valued for the ability to bear children, failure to do this will be called as unwoman and will be banished from society.

In the social hierarchy, the handmaids are the lowest individuals, the power structures are rigged against them and their only choices of social mobility are linked to their fertility. The leaders of Gilead equally believe that a woman's role in society is to cook, clean or to be at the beck and call of males. Ironically, Gilead has been able to achieve some feminist aims such as the eradication of pornography as objectification of woman. The societal hierarchy in Gilead clearly places men above women with the Commanders being the most highly ranked, followed by the Guardians, Eyes and Angels. Even among the women, there exists another hierarchy where the Commander's wives are regarded as the highest followed by Aunts, Econowives and finally Marthas. The Handmaids are not even included in this hierarchy because it is believed that they are not even worthy of being added into it.

The dehumanization of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* is so extreme to the point where it strips them of their identity, independence and any form of empowerment. Handmaids do not have names, they are referred to as the property of their Commanders. The novel depicts the bond between a name and identity and how the presence of a name guarantees a person's acceptance and recognition in society. By taking away the protagonist's name, by calling her Offred she is devalued and her identity is forcefully taken away from her. In order to protect a part of herself, she holds on to her name as it is one of the only things she has to remind her of her old life of liberation. Furthermore, Handmaids as well as all the other females in Gilead are ascribed clothing, what they wear is dictated to them. The attire of the Handmaids' is red and extremely covering, not an inch of skin is allowed to show, they have veils and wings that prevent them from seeing the world around them. They are dressed in a way to be hidden from the world. Extreme repression of identity is perpetuated by dressing the Handmaids in this certain way as well as the rest of society being colour coded preventing any form of individuality.

Perhaps the greatest privilege taken away was the right to read or write. Women, especially handmaids were strictly forbidden from writing and their means of communication were extremely limited. In the Red Room, where the handmaids are trained

and prepared for a life of perpetual servitude and submission, they are told that castration complex by the Aunts who portray pre-Gilead life as evil. Re-working Freud's idea that women feel castration complex, Atwood sees the ability to communicate through language as the really desirable power. It could also allude to the phallic power of the pen, especially in the novel where it is only men that can wield pens and have the power to write. This is what makes Offred's tale so important and revolutionary. She goes against the demands of society to point out the injustices done and to leave a message for posterity, she wields true power in this sense as she is able to immortalize her experience and serve as a warning. This is Offred's greatest act of resistance. Whereas she lacks the physical power of Moira to attack the Aunts and fight her way out of the system or Ofglen's tenacity to join the resistance, with her word and with her message she defies the invisibility that society has forced upon her, she exits and she tells her story.

*The Handmaid's Tale* being a product of third wave contemporary feminism not only considers the plight of women but the sufferings of the whole society. Both men and women suffer in Gilead, in fact irrespective of class, suffering is a universal phenomenon" (Howells 95). Atwood showcases how basic human rights are stripped from all members of society. Gender roles in Gilead are rigid and distorted. No form of self-expression is permitted and society has boxed up individuals and conformity. The most significant deprivation is love. Offred says "people do not die from a lack of sex, they die from a lack of love" (113). The Commander seeks secret meetings with Offred to play Scrabble with her; he seeks the form of intimacy that the government has prohibited. The Guardians whom Offred teases by swinging her hips are also victims of Gilead's oppression because they are forbidden from exploring sexual pleasure. The Commander's Wives themselves are also victims because society still boxes and oppresses them, even Nature is not allowed to express itself and grow in Gilead. Howells emphasises Offred's heroism as a female character damned to insignificance and oppression in Gilead but yet she creates possessions for herself in the rigid patriarchal setting which is constrained to her room

Even though Atwood has dealt with the oppression of women as one of the recurring themes in the novel, She has artfully reminded readers that women are not always victims and that sometimes they are the instruments of oppression to their fellow women. The

Aunts are the greatest examples of this phenomenon in the novel. The Red Centre where women are transformed into Handmaids is run by the Aunts. Here they brainwashed and the most dehumanizing and false ideologies are forced into the minds of the handmaids. A foil to Offred and her complicity is the character Moira who is exposed to us through the revealing flashbacks interspersed through the narrative journey. Where Offred is hesitant and docile, Moira is fearless and fights against oppression. She physically attacks one of the Aunts and escapes from the Red Centre.

The narrative structure of the novel is fragmented and often times Offred, the flawed heroine expresses her fatigue and her desire to discontinue the story due to how much pain it causes her (138). The narrative style adopted by Atwood in the novel is rife with postmodern features such as Offred's narrative consciousness in which she is constantly drawing the reader's attention to her storytelling process, the fragmented storyline which actually represents her scattered and panicked state of mind as well as the open ending susceptible to interpretation by the readers (Howells 101). These factors as well as the inability of the novel to be classified under one generic genre due to the rules and conventions being broken all give credence to the postmodern labelling often accorded to the novel. The narrative style is also interspersed frequently with flashbacks of pre-Gilead life where we are introduced to perhaps the fiercest character in the novel Moira as well as her mother.

These three characters including Offred, her mother and Moira are all women who fight but all in different ways. Offred's mother belonged to the early activist group who advocated for women's sexuality, legal abortions and those who burned pornographic material. Then there's Moira, a radical feminist who wanted a world devoid of men altogether and finally Offred who represents the complexities of contemporary feminism (Howells 98). These two display similar but equally different feminist ideologies. Notwithstanding Offred's flawed nature she emerges as such a strong heroine due to her refusal to be silenced and her creation of her own audience and most importantly, her will to survive, to exist even in the midst of so much destruction and obliteration of individuality. She persists and she makes herself heard. Atwood herself defines politics as power who owns it and who can get away with what. In Gilead, the true owners of power

are never clear and many times are ironic. Everyone is trapped including the commanders and those that created the system, hence the inherently flawed nature of the system.

This project has discussed the main themes of female oppression, the illusion of power and social hierarchy as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Feminist and Marxist interpretations have been provided and features of postmodernism in the novel have been highlighted. The narrative structure interspersed with flashbacks and significant fragmentation have been analysed to represent the mind-set of the narrator as well as her desperate longing for her previous life. This paper has concluded that even though the society in the novel did its best to silence and oppress women, the narrator, Offred uses her story to empower herself, to break free from the bondage and to give herself a voice. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a satirical piece of work warning against injustices and oppression of any single individual, providing a prediction of how horrific things would be if society allows the inequalities to thrive.

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