



THE DEPICTION OF WOMAN IN “THE HANDMAID’S TALE” BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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Kadirova Durdona Dilshadovna

Phd Student Of Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the representation of woman and the image of the society in the novel “The Handmaid’s Tale”. The Author paid an attention on the issues which women of the US faced and wanted to show their lifestyle in the dystopian society. This novel have been investigated and analyzed by many critics and researchers and their opinions about the novel have been given in the introduction part of the article. The main aim of this article is to show the attitudes towards woman in the dystopian society. Besides that, restrictions, discrimination and prohibition towards women in the novel have been analyzed with examples from the novel.

KEYWORDS

Handmaid, society, dystopia, feminist dystopia, utopia, woman, prohibition, reproduction, invasion, violence.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood dedicated "The Handmaid's Tale", which has become one of the noble works of world literature, to Mary Webster, a woman convicted as a witch in New England in the 17th century.

[<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/04/17/margaret-atwood-the-prophet-of-dystopia>]

Margaret Atwood's grandmother was also a Webster, and their family line goes back to John Webster. Mary Webster is not taken as a



prototype for the novel, but her fate is to become a victim of a society that uses religion as a tool for oppression, like that of the novel's main character, Offred. The novel was awarded with prizes in several countries. [

<http://www.worldscientificnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/WSN-123-2019-114-123.pdf>]

She decided not to use any source or information that people had not already seen and learned when she was preparing to write "The Handmaid's Tale". [Atwood, M. ,2022,252].Margaret Atwood had several reasons for writing this novel: American Puritan theocracy; Political events taking place in the United States in the 80s; women's movement; reading dystopian works by writers such as J. Orwell, A. Huxley and R. Bradbury. In addition, the work is not only an artistic text, it also reflects the consequences of the Nazi uprising during the Second World War and the flow of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. [<https://bookanalysis.com/margaret-atwood/the-handmaids-tale/historical-context/>] Also, the rules of order of different religious sects that appeared in that period, classification of women according to their origin or body color are depicted in the work by wearing different clothes according to their duties.

This work has been evaluated differently by literary critics: "Feminist dystopia" [Malak, A.,1987, 11] ,"dystopian nightmare" [Ketterer, D,1987,17], "global feminist fable" [Bouson, J. B. ,2010,3.], "political work condemning anti-feminist behavior" [Lehmann-Haupt, C. 1986] ,"feminist

approach to dystopian prose" [Wisker, G.2012,95], "slave story" [Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl.,2000.], "future prediction" [Larson, Janet L.,1989,27.] Although Atwood objected to the work being presented as a feminist dystopia, as Anna Howells notes, "The story of the handmaid has an undeniable feminist warning." [Howells, A.C. 2008,161.]Some critics consider the novel to be a frightening "prophecy" for women. Fiona Tolan, in her description of "the role of the story in the creation of historical writing" in "The Handmaid's Tale", states that the work provides an opportunity to carefully study the feminist movement, and Offred's story is the basis for studying the history of the feminist movement.[Tolan, F.,2007,144.] Gayle Greene comments that "Feminism is too a target of Atwood's satire," [Greene, G.,1987,14.] while Barbara Ehrenreich says, "The work warns theocratic ambitions of the religious right but about a repressive tendency in feminism itself". [Ehrenreich, B.,2004,80.]

"The Handmaid's Tale" is not a "pure dystopia" [Moylan, T. 2000,190]as Tom Moylan says, but Raffaella Baccolini calls it a "critical dystopia" [Moylan, T. and R. Baccolini, eds. 2007]: "Critical dystopias go on to explore ways to change the present system so that such culturally and economically marginalized peoples not only survive but also try to move toward creating a social reality that is shaped by an impulse to human self". [Moylan, T. 2000,190] According to Moylan and Baccolini, critical dystopia does not only depict an unwanted society in which the characters are desperate to overcome the hegemonic rule, but also have a negative view of



society along with the idea that there is hope for change. Critical dystopia is a form of dystopia that also has hope for the future. [Moylan, T. 2000,190] The utopian mood is also present in modern feminist dystopias, which Mohr called "transgressive utopian dystopias". [Mohr, D. M. 2007,4] Transgressive utopian dystopias are a product of the postmodern approach to literature. Such stories represent the traditional form of utopias and dystopias, presenting a world that is far from perfect but offers hope for change. This represents the rebirth of utopia in the guise of dystopia.

[<https://www.nedaaria.info/post/transgressive-utopian-dystopias-the-postmodern-reappearance-of-utopia-in-the-disguise-of-dystopia>]Larson calls Gilead in the "The Handmaid's Tale" a post-historical, post-human era based on rich layers of literary, historical, and biblical interpretation. [Larson, L.J. 1989, 34] The author himself considers "The Handmaid's Tale" to be a "ustopia" [Atwood, M. 2011, 66.] by combining two terms in a hybrid form. Ustopia is a representation of elements of both dystopia and utopia in one work.

MAIN PART

The main reason why the work is described as a feminist dystopia by literary experts is that the main characters are women and their role, problems and tragedies in the dystopian society are described. The play is told in the first person narrative, and her real name is kept a secret throughout the novel. And the reader recognizes her by the name given to her in the newly

established state - Offred. But in the first chapters of the work, the writer refers to her name:

"In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed: Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June." [Atwood, M. 1985,6] Handmaids such as Janine and Moira are mentioned many times in the play, and Dolores and Alma are also given a few passages. But there is no information about June. Therefore, we assume that the real name of the main character was June. The novel tells the story of Gilead, a newly established state after a political invasion and the way of life in it. Offred, the main character of the novel, loses her work, home and family in one day: "I have to let you go, he said. It's the law, I have to. He said this almost gently, as if we were wild animals, frogs he'd caught, in a jar, as if he were being humane... you can't work here anymore, it's the law." [Atwood, M. 1985,160]

The fact that Offred's money in her bank account has been frozen is directly related to her gender. "They've frozen her account, she said.....Any accounts with an F on it instead of an M" [Atwood, M. 1985,162]From sentences like that Offred's money is frozen in her bank account and this is directly related to her gender, the goal of the new society is to subjugate women by depriving them of their rights and forcing them to enter the image that society wants. In a society like Gilead, a woman's role is defined and categorized by her reproductive functions and health. A healthy and young woman serves men as a handmaid. Unlike women in other roles, they are dressed in red. Women who do housework are called Martha, and women who manage the handmaid with a certain power are called Aunts. Only they have the right



to read and write, and they train the handmaids for their duties. Each woman wears a different color according to her role. It refers to the society's aim which isolates women from women. Men are also grouped according to their commitment. Guardians, Angels, Eyes and Commanders. It is the duty of each to observe the other, and society, by imposing such obligations on men, makes man the enemy of man. For instance, Offglen, Offred's constant companion on outings, is also appointed by the government and forbidden to engage in friendly relations. Because, they are forbidden to walk alone. "We aren't allowed to go there except in twos. This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd, we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers." [Atwood, M. 1985,20] From their sentences, it can be seen that they are not only companions but also spies for each other. The narration of the novel and the thoughts of the protagonist Offred tell the experiences of a woman in a dystopian society. The government aims to make women illiterate by prohibiting them the right to read and write. Notes on the streets are also replaced with signs. "In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order dresses. Some people call them Habits... The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily, Lilies of the Field, it is called... Now places are known by their signs alone." [Atwood, M. 1985,25] Also, we can see from the following sentences that the government is having a psychological effect on the handmaids, as well as announcing that they are building a utopian society by prohibiting

violence against the handmaids. "Once a week we had movies, after lunch... If we were lucky they wouldn't get the film threaded upside-down." [Atwood, M. 1985,125] That is, in the movies that are shown once a week, the screen is mostly turned upside down, only in some cases they watched the movies in the upright position. Movies have the movie title and other information blocked to prevent them from being accidentally read. And this makes us realize another feature of dystopian society, the fact that Gilead limited women to read, write, and at the same time acquire knowledge. During the reading of the work, we witness such prohibitions several times. In particular, in the room reserved for handmaids, there are no items necessary for a woman: a comb, a needle, a pencil, a mirror, it is forbidden to use lotions or creams for hands and body, it is forbidden to rub oneself with them, their appearance suggests that they are not above fulfilling their duties: bearing children for the community:

"There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities." [Atwood, M. 1985,89] Or "we are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut." [Atwood, M. 1985,89] The films shown to handmaids are mainly about violence, invasion, and humiliation of women, and by showing such films, they aim to increase the prestige of the society where they live, to prevent possible uprisings in the society by broadcasting that life is peaceful. In the process of reading the book, the reader gets acquainted with



the experiences of Offred's previous life and witnesses that she was a happy woman with her own family, home and her own work. In the newly established state of Gilead, She lives under constant surveillance and control in a room reserved for her as a handmaid.

CONCLUSION

In novel, in the section of the dystopian society, the author, while giving a broad and deep description of women's problems, describes the various religious trends that took root in the society of the time she lived in, and their rules of procedure, the laws implemented by the government, violated the individual's will and rights. In the work, two governments are opposed to each other, one rejects and condemns the other and considers its own policy as utopia. But the fact that women remaining unhappy in both societies represents a feature of feminist dystopia, and the author attributes this unhappiness to the absence of a woman as a person in society, the collapse of traditional family values, restrictions on freedom (physical and linguistic restrictions), social discrimination of the women. It is associated with such situations as alienating women, not allowing friendly relations, putting people against each other, illiterating women, affecting women's psychology. The novel not only embodies the existing political system and religious views of the 80s, but also reveals the politics, state management and women's problems prevailing in some countries today, which is one of the main reasons why this work retains its value even today.

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