THE ANGUISH OF THE DYSTOPIAN HEROINE IN "THE HANDMAID'S TALE" BY MARGARET ATWOOD

Simina Ana Pop
Phd. Student, Tehnical University of Cluj Napoca

Abstract: The dystopian Gilead, the totalitarian Earth depicted by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood, is the unfortunate examples of how the corporatist state could find ingenious ways of creating and at the same time, destroying the human individual. The author creates a world that is a grotesque implementation of the Biblical dogma. The theocratic state of Gilead tries to create an earthly Heaven. Using the Bible, twisting and bending language and fundamental believes in order to imbody the ideas of a group of people, the state of Gilead has apparently found the perfect world for men, that accept and take on the teaching of the few, and the less perfect structure for the women who lose the small thread of independence they fought so hard for. The earthly Heaven has failed, just like everything mean to be ideal, but built by man.

Keywords:dystopia, theocratic, feminist, oppression, body,

In 1985 Margaret Atwood publishes one of the most famous and controversial feminist novels of the century, *The Handmaid's Tale*. By doing an X-ray of a society that has totally destroyed the women's individuality and erased her already frail victories for independence, Margaret Atwood relises a remarkable novel, whose obvious intention is to criticize a world in which the women still struggle for human rights.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939. Her writing career is built by published books that include poetry, prose, criticism, fiction, history and children's books. The amount, the variety and the quality of her lifetime work made her one of the most appreciated Canadian writer and one of the best known feminist fighter. The society imagined by the author in one of her best works, *The handmaid's tale,* is a totalitarian world in which mainly the women feel the oppressive and torture of a false utopia.

Gilead, like all dystopias, is built on the structure of a utopia but it is far for being one. The theocratic power that took over the state has implemented its own apparently perfect perspective of the world. In their vision, utopia is the present. But for the people, and especially for the women, the Power's utopia is nothing else but a failed perfection, a dystopia.

Atwood sets her dystopian society in a near future, in the United States where the balance of power has shifted and the Extreme Right movement has taken the power and established a totalitarian regime. Gilead's society is ruled after strict rules that alienate individuals. Criminality has been eradicated. Despite all that, the official executions are common. Pornography is banned and the newspapers are inexistent (except for some official documents). The cities have become real fortresses. No one is allowed to wonder through the urban space without a passing permit that will be checked at different points by armed solders. The universities were transformed in education centers where the handmaids are trained or other people are re-educated. The food is missing and most of the jobs have disappeared. The women have become an asset and each of them has a specific job, recognizable by the color of their clothes. Religion has become the prime principle of this dystopian society. Everything considered illegal is in fact based on the Bible. Imagination, thinking, questioning are all considered sins and are treated as illegalities. The oppressive systems operate through The Eye, a kind of Orwell's Thought Police that controls everything. All these were supposed to be temporary, as a measure against the cover up story of the Islamic terrorists that had

BDD-A29532 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:16 UTC)

killed the government and in order to prevent the collapse of the state. But the temporary became permanent. The theocratic power that implemented its religious utopia is the present and the future of Gilead. The misogynist society that understates women has all the characteristics of a dystopia.

The striking feature of the dystopian society of Gilead is the structure of women according to their disposition. Totally reduced to their most organic competences, the Gilead's women are stripped of their economic power by an overnight action in which all their money was transferred to their closest male relative. Without economical power or any other kind of authority, the women's role is completely tied to her ability to give birth. The rulers of Gilead have created a strictly hierarchal society in which women and men are assigned to castes according to their usefulness. The gap between sexes is more obvious than ever. Women may be *handmaids*, which serve as surrogate mothers for the rich families, such as Offred, the heroine of Atwood's novel; *Wives* of those in power, the ones that decide whether a handmaid is suitable or not; *Aunt*s, the unmarried women who oversee and educate the handmaids to became obedient; *Marthas* are unmarried women who perform household chores for those in power and *Econowives*, who are married to lower class men who do not merit Marthas or handmaids and have to perform the tasks of both handmaids and Marthas. The men are either Commanders, those in charge of the government and afford all kind of luxuries like handmaids and Marthas, Angels, elite soldiers fighting Gilead's wars, or Guardians, lesser rank soldiers who provide security to the community as well performing other menial tasks as assigned. Anyone – man or woman – who does not adhere to this social structure is either killed or sent to the Colonies, to work with radioactive material. (Boulware, Style Upon Style: The Handmaid's Tale as a Palimpsest of Genres, 3)

This church-society régime condones such an unorthodox practice out of necessity to overcome a fertility crisis amongst the dwindling Caucasian population; as one of the novel's epigrams suggests, the polygamy of the Old Testament provides the sanction. True to the precedent set in Genesis, the Commander's Wife arranges and supervises these sex sessions, in which the handmaid, de-sexed and dehumanized, is obliged to participate. The dire alternative for the handmaid is banishment to the colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave-labourers. (Bloom, Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, 4)

A woman's usefulness in this dystopian society is determined according to whether she is fertile or not. The ones that had the ability of giving birth were, fortunately, placed under the direct coordination of a Commander's Wife who could not procreate. I say fortunately because the other women, who were not fertile, called Unwomen, were sent to work in horrible conditions on the very edge of society. Others, who refused and fought against the oppression, ended up in brothels, as sexual toys for men.

The main character of the novel is Offred, a handmaid. Her job is to give birth. She is, like many others, the incubator for the child of a rich family. She lives near the campus of what was Harvard University. Her real name is unknown and the appellative of "Offred" could be explained as being the genitive "of Fred" (the Commander's name), an evidence that she is a mere object belonging to someone.

Monica-Mirabela Zara speaks about the denial of identity in The Handmaid's Tale and the name of the heroine and says that " her name emphasize the idea of subordination and passivity traditionally ascribed to the women but brought to the extreme in Atwood's dystopia" (186)

This society destroys the feminine existence and erodes the very concept of woman. It un-wraps the fair-genre of any individual or emotional feeling and brings them at a purely biological level. It is impossible to see them more than what the general view lets them to be, house-women, child-bearers or merely entertainment.

The handmaids and Offred herself live in a totally closed world. They aren't allowed to speak to anyone outside their homes because this is an illegal activity. They are also not allowed to read or use any luxury items like hand-creams or other clothes than the ones given by their social

BDD-A29532 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:16 UTC)

status, all red in colour. Their only purpose for existing in Gilead is to keep their bodies healthy and to procreate for the wealthy families that can afford such a "rare specimen".

The women were forbidden to think because it was considered to be a sin against the religiousness of the state. Under the close surveillance of The Eye, such crime was punished by exile in one of the many colonies of Unwomen. These were forced to work with radioactive materials to ensure the economy of the state.

The executions were something common even if the Power affirms that criminality has been eradicated. Death was the punishment for the ones that rose and refused to see the "realities" provided by the system, especially men because women had other kinds of castigation.

Reading was also forbidden in the Gilead society. Except the ritual of reading the Bible by the man in charge, the women were not allowed to have access to any kind of lecture. That was also punishable.

Zara notices that "Offred's security and even her life depend on how well she can manage the enforced relationship, namely with the Commander and with his wife or with her shopping partners" 193). The idea is that handmaids were supposed to be obedient and make their presence as silent as possible. Not doing this and offending or angering in any way the Wives would lead to displacement or exile in the colonies.

Another punishment is for the ones that refuse to be educated or to adopt willingly the rules of the male power, is prostitution. One of these women is Moira. She was in the same Red Centre with Offred. From here she tried to escape many times but failed. When captured she was subjected to a cruel beating from the Aunts that was supposed to calm her down. That never happened. She kept trying until she finally managed to escape. When Offred encounters her again, she is a prostitute, the lowest condition a women can have, "selling her body to offer transient pleasures to men" (Zara, 193)

In order to keep the illusion of the perfect world within a distorted society, the totalitarian power has resorted to some very creative ways of mass control. Dystopia's main propriety is the harsh way through which the control over the masses is maintained. Having in view the things that would make aperson believe without asking, dystopia uses the oppression and physical re-education to destroy the human individual and to reduce to silence any kind of rebel reaction.

Boulware is the one that resumes very well the ways of coercion in the Gilead society in his thesis "Style Upon Style: The Handmaid's Tale as a Palimpsest of Genres". He affirms that "while the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the economy pd the state, the injustice of Gilead does not only apply to the handmaids. All women, and almost men, are under the strict control of the government, who maintain power through violence, terror, coercion, and surveillance.. In her daily walks to town to buy the house's groceries (which are, of course, rationed in this time of war), Offred and her assigned companion handmaid, Ofglen, pass through military checkpoints commanded by Guardians; everyone must live under strict adherence to Biblical law, as all forms of secularism have been banned. Offred and Ofglen often go to look at the Wall, the brick enclosure around the university where traitors to the Republic are hanged as a public warning. When the reader first encounters this, six male doctors have been hung. The placards around their necks that show their crime reveal that they were abortionists in the time before. Offred notes, 'These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive'" (33)

These ways of controlling the crowd were established in order to consolidate absolute power, but they could do so only by creating the most stable society possible, the greatest contentment distributed among the largest number of people. For being able to do that, control was very important. For many citizens of these lands the utopian project of the totalitarian systems was a success. For the satisfied citizens, no better society can be imagined, and none could more skillfully

BDD-A29532 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:16 UTC)

manage human desires and needs. These are utopias that have come to pass, presumably in our own world. And that turns out to be the problem, for all of these paradises are really varieties of hell.

The Gilead world is ruled by what Taylor J. Boulware calls, in numerous situations, "sons of Jacob", the man. The soil of their ideal society is the Bible and the principles promoted by it. No second marriages were allowed and the ones that were married the second time were deported and their children relocated in other families. Offred is one of these "second married women". She has lost her husband and daughter due to this religious ideal and now she is forced to become a cell from this hideous organism called Gilead.

Offred was this unidentified, faithful wife of Luke, mother of a daughter, and successful clerk or computer operator working in the displacing room of an office or possibly a library among eight or ten other female employees before becoming a handmaid. Early in the novel, before she has become "Offred," she is separated from work and loses control of her finances, feels the pangs of paranoia, and agrees to attempt flight across the Canadian border. The failure of her family's escape leaves her uncertain as to the safety and disposition of family members, who may still survive in the society of Gilead. After becoming the psychologically conditioned Handmaid and mistress of Commander Frederick, she fails her state-mandated mission—to conceive a child. Agreeing to the urging of Serena Joy, Offred becomes the lover of Nick, the family chauffeur. At Nick's instigation, Offred flees with double agents posing as the secret police. Evidence suggests that she departed the Boston area via the Underground Femaleroad, settled in a Quaker way station in Bangor, Maine, and taped a narrative about her servitude in Gilead. Like other escapees, Offred may have relocated in Canada or England, possibly to live in seclusion. (Snodgrass, 17)

Offred's destiny is tied to her being a fertile woman in a society that exploits especially that female's physical abilities. Because of her "job" design by the new Power, she ends up in the house of a Commander that isn't willing to see her more than a "walking womb" (Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, 136). The women, but not only them, are sacrificed for a theocratic utopian ideal of a few.

But in order to maintain the "religiosity" of the State, every evening, the Commander reads to his entire household from the Bible. The ceremony implies all women and men of the house and it is obligatory. After this, "copulation" happens, where Offred's obligations are simple and imply total objectivity and and no emotional implication. The Commander, his Wife and the handmaid go upstairs and try to procreate. The process is very impersonal and it implies that the handmaid is an intermediary between the Commander and his Wife during the actual process of reproducing. It is a procedure that tries to reduce to the minimum the status of a handmaid and tries to give a false idea, that the Wife is the actual bearer of the child, so Offred and other handmaids are not even allowed to keep their absurd social status during this physical interaction.

The dystopian heroine of the novel, Offred, is extremely complex and it astonishes the reader with her strenght and determination. Her character creates a glimpse of light in the dystopian darkness. She manages to escapes. She becomes a heroine by proving that escape from dystopia is possible.

Florin Irimia talks about Offred as an anti-heroine because she is not as the reader would like her to be. She "accepts her own limits" ("Povestea cameristei"; trans. mine). Indeed, she seems to be at peace with her dystopian life maybe because she wasn't very militant for the woman's rights before the state of Gilead. She, unlike Moira (who fought hard and endured punishments for her desperate attempts of escaping) is a fortunate victim of the circumstances. Her fight is carried by others and she is someone else's victory over the system.

Offred is trapped in a world that tries to destroy them as individuals. They struggle to escape and question the social and political system that governs the state. The dystopian character is alienated because he is different. The definition given to alienation by Robert Tally serves our purpose and shows very well the condition of the hero of a dystopian world: "The term alienation has its simple meaning—a condition of being estranged from someone or something. […] In social

BDD-A29532 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:16 UTC)

psychology, alienation refers to a person's psychological withdrawal from society. In this sense, the alienated individual is isolated from other people. In critical social theory, alienation has an additional sense of separating the individual from his or her self, a fragmenting of one's self through work. […] In literature, the theme of alienation most often appears as the psychological isolation of an individual from the community or society." (Reading the Original: Alienation, 2)

As Tally very well notices, the alienated dystopian hero is isolated from other people, isolation that comes from the dread toward the totalitarian power. Because he is part of an oppressive system that controls through fear, the dystopian character is special in respect that he chooses to fight or to escape. He cannot talk to other people about his disobediences so he isolates him/her self up to a point. Both Winston and Offred have a journal which hides their most inner wishes and thoughts.

Offred, on the other hand, has no choice. She is part of a cast of women that are invisible for the others. No one can talk to them or even look them because the Power says so. It is a state of existence that has nothing to do with her choice. The loneliness and need for normality is so deep that she says: *I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me and spoke to me. I want to be noticed. I want to steal something*. `(97)

In Gilead, being infertile is a crime and it is punished with hard work in terrible conditions. The women are the ones responsible for reproduction and the only ones guilty if this fails. Offred notices: *There is no such thing as a sterile man, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law*. (61)

Even if men are the reason for the failure of the reproduction process, they are never blamed or punished. They transfer all their inabilities upon the frail figures of women, them being often punished for the men's deficiency.

By doing so, the society that dehumanizes people strips itself of its own core because the notion of "human" implies two important elements. The body that is the material organized substance of a human and the soul, the spiritual part. The Bible considered our bodies to be weak, a perishable structure that only limits us in our relation with the Supreme Perfection- God, since God himself is a spiritual existence.

Used by all totalitarian structures, the weak body controls the mind and breaks the soul. As a powerless component of the human, the body cannot resist to prolonged and continuous pain and it will finally crash. The end result might be death. If the body does not give up to torture or to any other kind of pain-inflicting process, the mind will eventually renounce.

The body seen as perfection itself by Greek artists is no more. In the dystopian society, the body is just a tool of manipulation. The re-education process involves the help of the body. It becomes a prison of the soul, of the thought, of everything a person is. If the mind tells you to stick to your principles, the dystopian world will destroy them by subjecting the individual to a process of torture until the burden is so strong that the mind gives up.

Offred thinks at her frail body and notices with sadness: *I can't think of myself, my body without seeing the skeleton…. A cradle of life, made of bones; and within, hazards, warped proteins, bad crystals jagged as glass* (Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, 107). Boulware notices that "Offred cannot think of herself without thinking of her damaged body. Again, how she conceives of herself is intimately connected with her body; because her conception of her body has been so radically altered by the regime, so too has her identity. Atwood's exploration of identity's relation to the body, and in particular, how power structures work to control bodies, especially the bodies of women, reveals that to lose control of one's body … means losing control over identity". ("Style Upon Style" 72)

The women that live in Gilead are the most oppressed social cast within the state. Offred's totally particular existence is reduced to a certain biological ability, that is, to give birth. She is no

BDD-A29532 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:16 UTC)

longer a person. The dehumanization process is simple and it consists in the loss of all economical power, the change of the name, the rupture from the family, alienation, surveillance and the placement in rich families as a surrogate mother, if fertile, or as Marthas, if lucky. The dystopian society has destroyed the concept of an independent women. They are now proprieties of the state, marked like cattle with a tattoo.

Beginning with Plato's *Republic*, More's *Utopia* and continuing with other ageless literary utopias, the existence of the ideal world as more than a literary genre is proved to be impossible, since our universal history has at least three major episodes to carry forth: Communism, Fascism and Nazism.

Adapted to the needs of the age, utopias are neither ideal, neither perfect. Being the result of the human intellect, limited by a perishable body, utopia will always have as a result a dystopia.

As flipside of the coin, dystopia is also the product of the human mind. Its particular creation can coexist with the concept of idealness and create a sort of utopia but for the few, while the majority is victim of an oppressive implementation of a personal ideal.

Offred, a literary dystopian heroine lives someone else's ideal. A failed implementation of it puts pressure upon the individuality of the human and forces her to either accept or rebel. By rebelling she becomes a heroine, she rises above the system and proves once more that the human spirit survives the anguish of an oppressive man-built universe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid's Tale. Boston: Houghton Miflin Company, 1896
- Bloom, Harold. Margaret Atwood's: The Handmaid's Tale. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001.
- Booker, M. Keith. Dystopian Literature. A theory and Research Guide. Connecticut: Greenwood Press.1994
- Bouchard, Guy. The Female Utopia in Canada. Canadian Science Fiction & Fantasy Literature. Andrea Paradis (ed.). Canada: Quarry Press & National Library of Canada, 1995
- Boulware, J. Taylor. Style Upon Style: The Handmaid's Tale as a Palimpsest of Genres. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Oregon State University, 2008.
- Irimia, Andrei. „Povestirea cameristei sau drumul lung al nopţii către zi". [The Handmaid's Tale or the night's long way to the day]. Observatorul cultural, Sept 2007 (391). web. 6 ianuarie 2019.
- Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. Margaret Atwood's: The Handmaid's Tale. New York: Hungry Minds, 1994
- Tally, Robert T. Jr. "Reading the Original: Alienation, Writing, and Labor in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'". Alienation, Harold Bloom (ed.). New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009.
- Zara, Monica-Mirabela. "Feminity vs. Masculinity in Sinclair Ross's As-For-Me and My house and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale".Virtual Canada. Marie-Claude Villemure (ed.). Baia Mare : Editura Universitatii de Nord, 2006.

BDD-A29532 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:40:16 UTC)