

## **ECOFEMINISM AS THE CENTRAL THEME IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**Dr. Anchal Jain**

Associate Professor, Department of English  
Digambar Jain College Baraut (Baghpat)

**Abstract:** Ecofeminism has gained considerable significance in the last few decades. It is because of the deteriorating state of women and the environment which is becoming a threat to the peaceful existence of mankind. Margaret Atwood addresses this problem very beautifully in her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. With a very gripping storyline, the novel talks about many sensitive issues and their place in our society. The novel deals with the problem of environmental degradation and also highlights the plight of women. The story has a very unique and innovative concept. Margaret Atwood does a very good job of showing her readers a glimpse of the future if humanity does not mend its ways. This research paper aims to analyze the significance and place of ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

**Keywords:** feminism, women, environment, future, theocracy.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

A celebrated novelist and poet, Margaret Atwood is a Canadian literary critic and environmental activist. She has authored a huge number of novels throughout her literary career. It would not be wrong to say that all of them have had a huge impact on us as a society and continue to inspire a great number of people worldwide. Margaret Atwood is a very innovative writer and her novels always come with a very different and unique theme that can not be found elsewhere. Her ideas and fictional creations are very distinctive and remarkable. The same applies to her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was published in 1985. This dystopian novel talks about a very idiosyncratic political regime and its impact on women.

The story is set in the Republic of Gilead. Gilead is a totalitarian state which is run by theocracy. The story is set in the near future in the United States of America. A military group called The Sons of Jacob has overthrown the government and democracy in the States and has taken over all the control of the country. This group believes in very regressive ideas and it is completely patriarchal and orthodox. This new state gives no rights to women and treats them

as mere creatures destined to give birth and take care of children. The novel also talks about the issue of environmental degradation and its impacts on humans and their everyday lives. This makes the novel ecofeminist as it combines two most important issues of the time, feminism and environmentalism.

### **OFFRED'S MISERABLE LIFE IN THE REPUBLIC OF GILEAD:**

The novel revolves around the life of a woman named Offred. Offred is a handmaid. However, the protagonist's real name is not Offred. Every handmaid is simply assigned a name corresponding to the commander for whom she works. Even their identity is taken away from them.

*“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. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day.”*

Offred works for a commander named Fred and his wife Serena Joy. In this new Republic of Gilead, the social order is very different. At the top are the commanders who established the republic and now run it. They are accompanied by their wives who are also considered elite but have no actual rights. Below them come The Eyes. They answer directly to the commander and they are a form of secret police. Then come the aunts who train the handmaids and control them. After them are the handmaids. And at the last are Marthas (servants) and normal people who work to support the lifestyle of the Commanders. Now the question arises as to who these handmaids are. The handmaids are a group of young women who are fertile and they are captured from all over the country to reproduce with the commanders.

### **THE FORMATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF GILEAD: AN THEOCRATIC DICTATORSHIP:**

The Republic of Gilead was formed because a huge portion of the population was infertile and the reproduction rates were falling greatly because of the environmental pollution and degradation. To counter this, the Sons of Jacob, decided to establish a new regime to ensure reproduction took place to sustain the human race. They chose reproduction over democracy as it was a bigger concern for them. The environmental pollution led to a rapid increase in

sexually transmitted diseases and this was the cause behind low fertility rates. While this whole arrangement is definitely questionable, the Sons of Jacob justified it on the grounds of theocracy and claimed that it was backed by the Old Testament. They ensured their control through strong military and spies. They organized a new social order whereby men took the military roles and women were confined to the boundaries of their homes.

The handmaids were women who were fertile. Because of the low fertility rates, many women could not carry children and hence, handmaids were in great demand. One such handmaid was Offred. Offred worked for Fred and Serena and led a miserable life. Her past is only known through flashbacks that occur at different points in the novel. Offred faces a number of restrictions in her life and she is not allowed to do some of the most basic things. Offred is not allowed to close the door of her room or even read or write. She can not speak and express herself freely and she faces extreme restrictions. She is not even allowed to go out of the house by her own free will. The only time she gets to go out of the house is when she has to go to the doctor. Even these visits are supervised.

#### **THE RESTRICTIVE LIFE OF HANDMAIDS:**

Her life, like all the other handmaids, is extremely controlled and scary. Every month, during her fertile period, she has to engage in sexual intercourse with her commander in hopes of getting pregnant and giving a baby to the couple. This is called the ceremony. She has no human rights at all. This is as disturbing as it sounds. Offred is a woman, she is a human being. But she is surely not treated like one in this new world. She is treated as a machine for reproducing children and taking care of them. For the commander, she is just a vessel for his baby. This is very questionable and wrong. Bahman Zarrinjooee writes in his research paper titled, *Women's Oppressed and Disfigured Life in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*;

*"In Atwood's novel women are considered as nothing more than ambulatory wombs. In Gilead, women are deprived of their gender identity if they do not have the capacity to bear children. In The Handmaid's Tale biology is clearly the key factor for women's oppression. Patriarchy has always convinced women in relation to their biology. In patriarchal societies, maternity is a woman's biological task. Women in Gilead are devalued and they are worthy only for their fertility capacity."*

The new regime does not believe in human rights at all. They only consider women as objects. The only importance that women have in the Republic of Gilead is their ability to reproduce. The handmaids are only required because they have the ability to reproduce. This is not only regressive but it is also very derogatory. The attitude that this new regime has adopted is only a reflection of how people actually think of women in a closed space. This is not the thinking of a few people but a huge number of them. The handmaids have no existence of their own. They are not even allowed the simple pleasure of reading and writing. Their human rights are violated to the extent of no return. They have no privacy whatsoever. They are expected to keep their doors open at all times which is very wrong. They are not treated as human beings. Instead, they are only treated as vessels for carrying the child of their commanders. This is very harmful to their psychological development and mental health as well as physical health. To expect a woman to have sexual intercourse with a man as a duty with the sole aim of getting pregnant and carrying his child is very disturbing in itself. Practically, the handmaids are violated by their commanders who manage to do so because of their immense power.

The Sons of Jacob justify their regime and thinking on the basis of the teachings of the bible. They tell the people that in the Old Testament, there is a story called the Story of Jacob. Jacob had two wives and they could not bear children. So, they prayed to God to give them children and God sent them handmaids to carry their children for them. The handmaids were young women who were fertile and they were inducted into the Red Center. It was a place where the handmaids were taught and trained. They were subjected to force, violence, and biblical teachings. All of this was done only to force them to accept their roles as handmaids. This is a very regressive regime where women are not even given basic human dignity. It seems as if the only important thing about women for these people is their ability to bear children. It is as if they have no identity of their own. They are not allowed to learn or have hobbies. They are only expected to be objects for the use of men.

#### **OFFRED'S PAST LIFE OVERTURNED BY THE NEW REGIME:**

Offred's past life was also not perfect. As a young woman, she fell in love with a man named Luke. She had an affair with him but he was married. He soon divorced his wife for Offred and got married to her. They had a daughter together. Offred grew up with a single mother. Her father was never in the picture. Her mother was a very strong and brave woman. She

raised Offred all on her own and she was a feminist. She was an activist and she bravely fought for the rights of women.

As a young girl, Offred was almost always surrounded by women who were strong and brave. They had an identity of their own. They were not mere objects and they refused to mold themselves into what men desired of them. Her best friend, Moira, was also a very strong character. She was not only independent but she was also very fierce and brave. Her seemingly perfect and happy life collapsed with the rise of the theocratic regime of the Sons of Jacob.

When the group came to power and overturned the democratic government, they also restrained women in unprecedented ways and they were not even allowed to hold property or jobs. They were treated like animals with their sole aim being reproduction. When Offred saw these developments taking place, she decided to run away. She and her husband, Luke, decided to flee to Canada with their daughter in hopes of a better and more secure life. Unfortunately, while they were attempting to cross the border, they were stopped and it was declared that their marriage was void since Luke was a divorcee. Offred was taken away and she had no way to find out what had happened to her husband and her daughter. Since Offred was fertile, she was sent to the Red Center, Rachel and Leah Re-education Center. The center was used to train women to become handmaids. Offred's fate was no different and she was also forced to become a handmaid. A woman named Aunt Lydia conducted frequent lectures and seminars justifying this new regime. At the same Red Center, Offred also met Moira. Moira had also been captured but her free spirit could not be contained or bound by such a center and it was not long before she escaped the center. Offred never heard of her again until she saw her in a club called Jezebel's. It was a place where the commanders mingled with the prostitutes. Moira was also working there as a prostitute. This sight shocked Offred to a great extent and she asked Moira how she had ended up there. Moira told her that she was soon captured and she refused to go to the Colonies, where the political prisoners were kept. She chose to work at Jezebel's instead and chose this life. This was Offred's last interaction with Moira. It is very sad to see how Moira, a free-spirited, independent, and powerful woman, has to have a fate like this. Her whole life is torn and taken away from her.

Offred's life is nothing but an example of how women's lives are overturned and ruined by men with an outdated and conservative mindset. The Republic of Gilead was nothing but the vision of every conservative man who was against feminism and women's rights. Offred led a

happy and free life before the advent of this new regime. She had to do away with all her rights and could not even see her own family. Forced to get pregnant with someone else's child, Offred led a life of misery and fear. This is symbolic of the struggle women have to go through because of the questionable ideology of a few men. For such men, women are not human beings, they look at them as their slaves. For them, the whole point of the existence of a woman is to make a man's life easier and give him children. This seems to have come true in the Republic of Gilead.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION: THE ROOT CAUSE OF ALL PROBLEMS:**

The novel also involves an element of environmental degradation and conservation. The novelist includes this element very smartly and cleverly. If we analyze the novel, we find out that the root cause of all the problems can be traced back to the environmental pollution caused by human beings. Margaret Atwood does a very good job of enlightening her readers about the possible effects of environmental degradation. It is not news to anyone that if the degradation of the environment continues at the present pace, it is not long before humans will have to face the irreversible effects of this degradation that will change their lives completely. This is exactly what Margaret Atwood is trying to convey to her readers. She is trying to tell the readers that the environmental degradation that is happening in the present is a threat to life in the near future. It is not only true but it is also very horrifying. Dr. D.L. Jaisy writes in her research paper titled, *An Eco-Feminism: A Study Of Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*;

*“Atwood portrays Cultural Feminism, Separation, Materialist Feminism, and Radical Feminism in this novel. Thus the warning is against essential biologism and economic production. The eco-feminist should transform international economics and international politics. For eco-feminists, this is an ideology that destroys the earth's life through the leading countries. Remember that Margaret Atwood's Gilead is an exploited environment.”*

If we look at it closely, we find that the main reason the Sons of Jacob came to power was because of the falling fertility rates. Because of the low reproduction rates and declining number of fertile women, the Sons of Jacob claimed power and gave the people the hope that they would solve the problem of a falling fertility rate. It was because of this that the Republic of Gilead came into being. Because of the condition of society where pornography and other



social evils were prevalent, the Sons of Jacobs came to power claiming to have a solution. What was presented to be a short and temporary seizure of power soon turned out to be one of the most horrific regimes.

The main concern of the Sons of Jacobs was the problem of fertility. It was this problem that they used to justify their seizure of power. In short, it can be said that it was the falling fertility rates that led to the formation of the Republic of Gilead. How did this problem arise? This problem arose because of rapid environmental degradation. It can never be denied that environmental pollution has severe effects on humans and society. It is a huge threat to human existence. Margaret Atwood tells her readers how environmental pollution can have effects that can start a domino effect and completely ruin the lives and existence of humans. This is exactly what happened in the Republic of Gilead. The sole reason why the Sons of Jacobs rose to power can be traced back to the degradation and pollution of the environment. It impacts the lives of humans in unprecedented and unforeseeable ways.

#### **OFFRED'S ATTEMPT TO IMPROVE HER LIFE: THE MOMENTARY LIGHT BEFORE ULTIMATE DARKNESS:**

Offred's life is already very miserable and it only gets worse when she does not get pregnant with the child of the commander. She engages in "the ceremony" with the commander every month. It is very absurd. Every month, she is taken into a room with the commander and his wife, Serena. While she has to engage in intercourse with the commander, his wife holds his hand. But poor Offred's suffering has no end as she fails to conceive.

When Serena realizes that Offred is not getting pregnant, she starts thinking that her husband may be sterile. But this is something that she can not say in public because it is considered that only women can be infertile while a man possesses all the qualities only because he is a man.

***"There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law."***

She suggests that Offred should sleep with the chauffeur, Nick. Not only is Offred disgusted by this idea but she also opposes it strongly. But Serena is very persuasive and she has her own ways. She tells Offred that if she gives in to Serena's plans and ideas, she will give her a photo of her daughter. Offred has no choice but to agree and she says yes. She is also very agitated as she realizes that Serena had known about her family and her past all along but she did not tell her anything. One time, after the ceremony, the commander asks Offred to meet

him in his study. He talks to her and plays scrabble with her. He also gives her a copy of the Vogue magazine to read and look at. Offred seems to be very happy as all this is not only a special moment for her, but she has also longed for these things for a really long time. Women were not allowed to do any of these things and she felt really good. The commander also asked her to kiss him, another thing which was prohibited. Offred was only supposed to engage in the ceremony with him and have no other contact or relationship with him. These secret meetings become more frequent and he starts kissing her every time after such a meeting. There is no doubt that he is attached to her and has developed a liking towards her.

In the meantime, Serena forces Offred to have sexual intercourse with Nick to get pregnant. She promises to keep this a secret from the commander lest he should get very angry. Soon, Nick and Offred start getting closer and they start liking each other. They develop an emotional connection and they start sleeping together out of free will and not because Serena said so. All this shows how Offred gets a taste of life for the first time in a really long while. She gets very happy doing the simplest of things like playing Scrabble and looking at a magazine. This is because all these simple and basic things are also snatched away from her. She lives a life of complete despair and misery. She has no say in her own life and she has to do what is asked of her. She can not have a hobby, a partner, or even a connection with her family. She is stripped of all her rights and happiness.

#### **MAYDAY: A SOLUTION TO THE SUFFERINGS OF WOMEN?**

Offred also has a friend called Ofglen. She is a part of Mayday, an organization that worked towards removing the Sons of Jacob from power. She tells Offred a lot about their mission and also asks her to gather information from the commander. Soon, Ofglen also commits suicide when she realizes that she has been caught. She hangs herself when the secret police come for her. The wall outside Harvard University was also turned into an exhibition of the power of the Sons of Jacob and the bodies of the ones who chose to rebel hung there.

*“The Wall is hundreds of years old too . . . Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, barbed wire along the bottom, and broken glass set in concrete along the top. No one goes through those gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out . . . Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging by the necks.”*



One day, Serena discovers that Offred has been meeting with the commander and had an affair with him. She is very furious upon hearing this and she sends Offred to her room and tells her to wait for punishment. Offred is very anxious and scared as she waits to find out what her fate holds for her. As she stands in her room, she notices a van on the Black Eyes outside the house. She is very scared and she fears the worst. But Nick walks into the room and tells her that he is also a part of Mayday and this van also belongs to the people working for Mayday. He also tells her that they are there to help her and that she should get in the van as they will take her to a safe place. Offred does not know what to believe but she has no other option as well so she goes to the van and goes away. The readers never find out what happens to her. The story leaves the readers wondering.

### CONCLUSION:

This novel is very innovative and interesting. The fact that the readers never find out how the story ends gives them a way of making a decision and deciding their future. Margaret Atwood delivers a beautifully and flawlessly crafted story with a plot that is not only unique but it is mindblowing. She weaves a very interesting plot in the fabric of feminism and environmentalism, ideas that are very dear to her. The novel leaves the readers with an opportunity to decide their own future. In a way, this novel is a warning for people to mend their ways. The novel highlights the plight of women and the pitiful state of our environment. Margaret Atwood creates a full circle moment and shows us how humanity is headed for doom and how things will go back to the way they used to be if no action is taken.

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