

Ecofeminism and Politics of “Triple Marginalization” in Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Abstract: *One of the crucial problems that we face today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human life and existence. It is in this term ecofeminism becomes highly relevant. As the term ecofeminism suggests, it is a combination of ecology and feminism. According to Greta Gaard, ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism opposes the patriarchal monopolization over women and nature. Ecofeminists point out that wherever nature is exploited, women are also seen to be degraded and vice versa. In the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood brings the clear picture of the new republic which throws away the U.S. Constitution and establishes the Republic of Gilead in which women are viewed only as reproductive machines. This is because of the low birth-rates due to environmental crisis such as various nuclear plant accidents, leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles, toxic waste depositional sites and the use of chemical insecticides etc... Thus the nature has been oppressed by patriarchal society which as a reaction leads to the oppression of women of the society. The readers can view this as the basic thread that runs throughout the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This paper concentrates on how the exploitation of nature brings a holocaust to the society leading to the exploitation of women.*

Key words:

I. Introduction

There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream. (Imitations Ode)

One of the crucial problems that we face today is the degradation of land and environment and its consequences on human life and existence. As the lines above by Wordsworth where he could recall the uncanny power and splendor of nature has become only a mere dream for the young minds of this modern world. It is in this term ecofeminism becomes highly relevant. As the term ecofeminism suggests, it is a combination of ecology and feminism. According to Greta Gaard, ecofeminism’s basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism opposes the patriarchal monopolization over women and nature. Ecofeminists point out that wherever nature is exploited, women are also seen to be degraded and vice versa. They argue that no attempt to liberate women will be successful without an attempt to free nature. According to Rosemary Ruether “the environment is a feminist issue” which is defended by other ecofeminists. Even the very creation myth highlights the patriarchal stance, where man was given the power to dominate and subdue women and nature, for his benefit. Both women and nature are life sustaining and resource giving, but their role in the progression of a society is neglected and ignored.

The term “ecofeminism”, as almost every article on the subject reminds the readers, was first coined by the French feminist Francois d’Eaubonne (1974). Notably, Rosemary Radford Ruether's *New Woman, New Earth- Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature - The Roaring Inside Her* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature - Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) contributed much to the development of the ideologies based on this theory. Yet, this does not emerge as a full-fledged awareness as it is today until 1980s. Exploitation of the earth and of the women’s body goes hand in hand, under the system of male dominance. Commercialization of natural resources has made necessary the application of technology in seed production and plant rising. Like nature, female body is seen as a resource to be colonized and commercialized. The new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technologies have affected the rhythms and regenerative capacities of women and nature. The

patriarchal capitalist production technology, using power and violence alienates women from her body and living forms from their basic environment.

Eco-concerned writers often give disturbing descriptions of nature and its decline, intended to impugn both our ignorance and our developmental greed. Moreover, the break neck pace of cultural, ecological and economic changes in the world provide creative fodder for the new literary voices and such writers leave ample scope for their writings to be viewed ecocritically. As a result, environmental literature and ecocriticism which were nonexistent three decades ago have now become immensely popular in the literary world.

The Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has in many of her novels, dealt with the issue of women and nature. In an age of environmental crisis, Atwood takes her writing as a mission to do some good, to ameliorate the crisis. In her works Atwood has performed the function of the artist to speak the forbidden, to speak out especially in a time when progress and development are the jarring jingles of Multi-national Companies that are swallowing up the earth and its resources. The relationship between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmental crisis is obvious in Atwood's novels. Images of nature and aspects of the natural environment have been Atwood's topics. With great dexterity she weaves together image patterns and themes that draw spontaneous ecocritical attention. Subjugation of woman in a patriarchal society and exploitation of nature in a capitalistic society are the themes which Atwood has quite often taken up for her writings. This paper attempts to take an in depth study of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) from an ecofeminist perspective where the woman loses their identity hardly remembering their name only identifies themselves as "handmaids". In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood gives an idea of what the future will be if the threat and damage to ecological balance continues at the present rate. It is a feminist dystopia of Gilead, placed in the turn of the 20th century USA.

One can sense Atwood's prominent concerns about the already abysmal world and her ecological commitment that is fed by a strong biocentric understanding of how people's survival links into the future of the planet at large. She narrates drastic stories of disaster, of reproductive risks and dangers to public health initiated and encouraged by corporate globalism. The Caucasian population has enormously declined due to the environmental crisis of the present times. In the academic discussion regarding Gilead, Professor Pieixoto comments that this could be traced back to the widespread use of birth control of various kinds including abortion practiced during the pre-Gilead period. He says,

"still births, miscarriages and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to various nuclear plant accidents, shutdowns and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period as well as to leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic waste deposital sites... and to the uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides and other sprays" (HT: 286)

The consequences of this hazard are suffered by the women in Gilead. They are triply marginalized. The first marginalization is that the women are marginalized in their own nation, the second is gender marginalization which is through the men of Gilead, and the third is the class marginalization which is by "women on women" that is, the women with a good social respect and order gains their power over the handmaids. Women with viable ovaries are forced to bear child to act as handmaids—for the childless Commanders. In this new regime, the word 'sterile' is banned. There are only women who are fruitful and fruitless. The protagonist Offred is one among the many handmaids in Gilead. The handmaids are dressed uniformly, and are given no name or identity. They are known only after the Commanders with whom they have to perform the impregnation ceremony, in a ritualistic and objective manner.

"The handmaids are desexed, dehumanized and are forbidden choice and desire. They are not supposed to think and feel. Thus Offred says, "I try not to think too much. Like other things now, though must be rationed". (HT: 7) The only emotion that they are enforced to bear is fear. They have lost their identity and the heroine who is depicted as a passive creature in this novel sometimes seems to live in her past. She thinks of her job, her life as an emancipated woman free roaming throughout the city, visiting clubs and her affair with a married man, who for her divorced his wife and remarried her, their happy life resulting with a child touched her feelings where now she is in a state who has lost their track. She had seen them when they are captured by the Eye- the police force of Gilead and was till then left unaware of their path. With the loss of all her identity and even her name she now realizes herself as a handmaid-the property of someone, which shows that she is not even sure of whose property. The only attitude they are supposed to adopt is passivity. As Aunt Lydia rightly says, "This is the heart of Gilead... this is the centre where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead... knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (HT: 23). This ideology of Gilead is again with the contrasting opinion of the modern world which deconstructs the centre with the belief that there is no centre. In this totalitarian regime, the handmaids are rendered powerless, passive and mute and subdued to their anatomical destinies. This powerlessness is proved when the handmaids subdue themselves to the doctors who treat them even danger awaits them if found out.

In this novel, Atwood depicts how patriarchy with its state controlled religion has exerted a total colonization of women's mind and body. The readers can also see not only men affect them but also they are treated as logs of wood by the women in power. This can be viewed when the commander's wife Serena asks Offred to sleep with her chauffeur Nick. The handmaids have become the complete property of the state and are utilized as a national resource. If they fail to produce a child within the three chances given to them, they will be declared as Unwomen and exiled to the colonies, where they clean toxic waste and act as slave laborers. The act of begetting a child for the upper class couple is called as an assignment in the Republic. Sex which is considered and celebrated as modest and with reverence in country like India becomes awkward and nauseating in the Republic of Gilead. Very often the offspring born are deformed ones, due to the ecological degeneration of the times. The effect is reflected in the animal world also, for the news says that the coastal areas are being "rested". Fishes have become extinct like whales. It is the fear for herself and for her lover and child that keeps Offred passive in the beginning. But her emotions and vitality are not to be suppressed for long-after the ceremonial fertilization, she aches for Luke, her lover. Her developing awareness of herself as a victimized woman kindles in her the desire to subvert the pervasive canons of Gilead. Her secret affair with Nick and with the Underground Network, meant for rescuing women and conducting sabotage are the results of that. Eventually, she is saved from Gilead by Nick, though the readers are not sure whether this freedom is everlasting or not.

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. For a handmaid using her name is denied by which she is silently denied of her own identity even to herself and she is called as a possession of somebody which means "of" followed by the name of the commander to whom she is working under. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood suggests that the society of today where choices are too many which may lead to a totalitarian future that prohibits choice. *The Handmaid's Tale* is often hilarious with Atwood's strong satire and dark and bitter jokes pervading the plot. This dystopian novel attempts to imagine the kind of values that might evolve if environmental pollution rendered most of the human race sterile. Once again the note of warning – that every aspect of environmental degradation and destruction and abuse of nature will translate itself into a serious menace to the life of future generation – is loud and clear in this novel. Atwood seems to affirm Vandana Shiva's statement that

"In the late twentieth century it is becoming clear that our scientific systems are totally inadequate to counteract or eliminate the hazards... Each disaster seems like an experiment... to teach us more about the effects of deadly substances that are brought into daily production and use" (Mies 82).

In the Republic of Gilead where the novel is set, due to nuclear accidents, repeated use of pesticides and leakages from chemical weapons most men have become sterile and women barren. The few fertile women are taken to be handmaidens or birthmothers for the upper class, to supply the barren wives of commanders with children. But the ecological disorder has also led to birth of 'unbabies' (deformed babies). The role of women, like Offred the protagonist, was reduced to bearing children. While fertile women were thus subjugated, infertile women were sent to 'the colonies' to clear toxic waste, where they are sure to die either of disease or of radiation. Offred craves for a world of love and beauty and her desperately in need of a comforter to comfort her. Though this Republic propagates in cleansing the religious beliefs and reform the people and gives biblical names to everything like Rachel-Leah centre for preparing women as handmaids, Marthas ect... God is no more in the Republic. This can be viewed in every circumstances of the novel like the club with prostitutes and the outlook on sex. Resound with her longing for a serene air, may be for the years she spent with her husband and her daughter, when she had a job and money of own and also had access to knowledge. Now Gilead has taken away everything from her. In an age of machines man has also become mechanized and utterly devoid of emotions - with neither love for humans nor for nature. Atwood has incorporated ecological disaster into the plot to warn mankind that

"no one can save herself or himself individually; it is an illusion to think that 'I alone' can save my skin... What modern machine-man does to the earth will eventually be felt by all; everything is connected. 'Unlimited Progress' is a dangerous myth because it suggests that we can rape and destroy living nature, of which we are an integral part, without ourselves suffering the effects" (Mies 93).

The cataclysmic harm inflicted by the swirling sweep of scientific advancement leads to sterility and barrenness and it was to compensate the dangerously declining birthrate the Gilead started recruiting women to repopulate the country. So, we can conclude that the ultra military regime and an extremely rigid totalitarian state and dangers of theocracy were all activated by an irreparable imbalance in the ecosystem. This novel gives a wakeup call and alerts the readers that misuse and abuse of nature and technology militates against a genuinely good quality of life. The abysmal world that Atwood paints makes us cognizant of the fact that we cannot have excessive chemical products or toxic fast foods without risking clean air and good health. This danger to the nature will surely lead to the struggle for identity of the population living

in this polluted world. This cautionary futuristic novel reveals Atwood’s ability to peer behind the curtains into some of the darkest and disturbing truths about environmental hazards that pose a perilous threat to the world which challenges the identity of human race which is competing with it. Yet this novel is not without hope and as critic Wilson remarks, “If we cultivated our Mother’s garden, the book implies possibility of rebirth: not a return to Eden or matriarchy, but harmony among animal, mineral, and vegetable worlds and peace within the human one”. The Handmaid’s Tale is both a challenge and an education which brings a deep realization that our own actions are not without consequences for the environment. Their identities are hidden with colours like dull green for Marthas (house workers), blue for wives, red, blue and green for Econowives (working class) and red for handmaids (bearing children).

Most of Atwood’s novels like The Handmaid’s Tale read like ecological treatises and form perfect ground for the study of the interconnectedness between nature and culture and of the negotiation between the human and the non-human. Atwood has so deeply been affected by the horrifying outcome of the capital intensive industrialism, exhaustion of the basic energy resources, general vulnerability of the non-industrial world and the deep deterioration in the living conditions of the people.

Thus this paper has come out to analyze the ecological imbalance which leads to the deterioration of women which results in their marginalization and identity crisis challenging them both mentally and physically endangering their lives.

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