The Nightmarish World of Gilead—An Analysis of the Dystopian World in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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**Abstract.** *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood is one of her most popular novels. It’s a dystopian novel criticizing the current society. This paper offers an analysis of the novel from the perspective of dystopia, revealing women’s fate as well as their resistance against power in the nightmarish world of Gilead.

**The Dystopian Tradition**

As early as 1970th, anti-utopia or dystopia came into being, opposing to the previous traditional, constructive, positive utopian ideal. "A dystopia is more than a bad place; it is a familiar, yet unfamiliar, malevolent place where good or at least average people suffer deprivation of basic freedoms required to be fully human, and this suffering occurs at the hands of a faceless system, either social or governmental or both, that is beyond the protagonists’ power to control or change.”[1]. "While utopian literature portrays ideal worlds, dystopian literature depicts the flaws and failures of imaginative societies. Often these societies are related to utopias, and the dystopian writers have chosen to reveal shortcomings of those social systems previously considered ideal”[2].

Many critics rank George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* as two model works of dystopian literature[3]. George Orwell, the master in this genre, wrote his masterpiece *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) which presents a totalitarian regime where history is altered to suit the purpose of rulers and citizens do not have any privacy and individual freedom. Orwell’s *Animal Farm* depicts an animal kingdom established after an animal revolt and animals lead a far more painful life under the new leadership. Aldous Huxley creates a hell-on-earth vision of the brave new world in which the society takes on a queer appearance with the perversion of science and technology.

**Feminist Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Handmaid’s Tale**

*The Handmaid’s Tale* which has won worldwide applause since its publication in 1985 is Margaret Atwood’s sixth novel. It has been translated into more than thirty languages. The narrator of the novel is Offred, a handmaid who is drafted into the service of childbearing after the establishment of the new regime. Her taped story is discovered by future historians as an archive for the research of that historical period. Through her fragmented narrative and frequent flashback to the past, readers manage to unveil the mystery of Gilead. The story is set in a futuristic United States after a military coup undermines the state power and wiped out the president and the congress. Afterwards, they establish a totalitarian regime Gilead which is governed by a group of elite.

Written after the second wave feminism dating from 1960s to 1970s [4], *The Handmaid’s Tale* bears the long-oppressed voice of women and reflects their sharp whipping of the patriarchal society. This novel is also called “Feminist Nineteen Eighty-Four”, inheriting dystopian traditions formerly established by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. It depicts a nightmarish atmosphere, a gloomy vision and the depressing social condition in the totalitarian state of Gilead, but focusing on the fate of women in the nightmarish futuristic new world. To be exact, this novel can be included in the category of feminist dystopia. Feminist utopian literature dates back to the 18th century during which
time there existed in British literature some fictive world where women led a communal living in a perfect world far away from the harassment of patriarchal world and it has a tint of optimism[5]. By contrast, “as the name suggests, feminist dystopias deal with oppression of women. The feminist dystopia is built on patriarchal structures and the role of woman has been diminished, e.g. to house-keeping and breeding”. By describing a nightmarish vision of the world for women and by magnifying the vices of the patriarchal society in the imagined world, feminist dystopias assume a tint of pessimism and warn people of the possible dreary fate for women. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, Animal Farm and Oryx and Crake, the protagonists are male, which inevitably makes them view the dystopian world from patriarchal perspective. The Handmaid’s Tale’s narrator is Offred who is one of the victims forced to serve as handmaids who are described as “walking ovaries”. The story is presented by flashback, meditation and present tense narration from the perspective of a female victim of the dismal new world, unveiling the living conditions of the vulnerable women in the so-called utopian world claimed by the rulers of the Republic of Gilead.

“The anti-utopia or dystopia, Atwood demonstrates, realizes utopian ends by unexpected means” [6]. In the Republic of Gilead, women aren’t whistled at on the street, men don’t come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. “There are male bodies hanging on the Wall, while homosexuals, Roman Catholic priests and Quakers of both sexes are regularly executed, and male sexual activity is severely restricted as well”[7]. Women lead a communal life and they are supposed to feel great security. However, the Republic of Gilead is by no means a utopian world to women who long for liberty and equality. In spite of its gorgeous outfit for veiling the reality, the so-called utopian society takes on a suffocating and frightening look. The establishment of a totalitarian regime brings them to a world where life is monotonous and static. The fear of sexual abuse disappears of course, but it is replaced by the repression of desire, passion and enthusiasm. The potential infertility of those handmaids poses new danger to their life, which means they will be sent to the colony to clean up toxic nuclear wastes. It brings them internal insecurity, though they are nutritiously fed everyday and are at the protection of guards. What is claimed as a feminist utopia by the advocator of the new social system turns out to be a feminist dystopia where citizens lead dehumanized lives in terror.

The Dystopian World of Gilead

The Creation of Nightmarish Air

Generally speaking, the atmosphere of an entire novel plays an active role in dystopian depictions. It is not only a fancy background, but also helps to convey the message. In the totalitarian regime, nightmarish atmosphere permeates, shadowing the shattering soul of women restricted to private domestic spaces. The nightmarish air the author contrives to create make the novel’s characteristics of feminist dystopia even more evident. (1) Of the fifteen sections, seven of them are entitled “night”. This is not a coincidence and it is by no means the result of the novelist’s whim. The frequent employment of “night” as the title of each section helps to create a dismal atmosphere. Night is associated with darkness, helplessness and emotional suppression. One can only blindly grope for his way in the darkness of night, trembling at the thought of falling down into the abyss. Citizens of the Republic of Gilead are potentially under such kind of threat. Before reading the text itself, readers are already immersed in an air of ominousness, anticipating the oncoming nightmarish events. (2) The red robe, red gloves and red flat-heeled shoes wore by handmaids are a very impressive part of the novel, contributing to the creation of nightmarish atmosphere. “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. They look like ‘a sister, dipped in blood’[8]. Red, the color of blood, can be easily associated with killing, cruelty, horror, anguish and death. All the year round, the handmaids wore clothes of the same color, shadowed by the terror of being sent to the infamous colony when regarded as unwomen or becoming the dead body hanging from the hook on the hundred-year old Wall. The red clothes of the handmaids, though voiceless, record the nightmarish incidents going on in the dystopia. (3) There is a cruel Men’s Salvaging as well as
Women’s Salvaging for those who have defied the state laws. Dead bodies hang from hooks on the wall with white sacks around their head to warn the rest against the similar behavior. “But on one bag there’s blood, which has seeped through the white cloth, where the mouth must have been. It makes another mouth, a small red one, like the mouth painted with thick brushes by kindergarten children. A child’s idea of a smile. This smile of blood is what fixes the attention, finally. These are not snowmen after all”[8]. The novelist focuses on the trace of blood on the white sack. She employs a seemingly relaxed tone to depict the scene. However, it’s by no means something doing for fun. It’s something about death that will make a lively person anguish and vanish from the world forever. Offred goes to see the Wall every time she runs her routine shopping errands. The wall scene and salvaging scene appear several times in the novel. Handmaids are forced to be present on the scene of Salvaging to witness the frightening and suffocating scene, which can greatly control their mind and stifle possible rebellion. An absolutely terrifying dismal picture of Gilead is presented in front of every reader through the eyes of Offred.

**Women’s Fate in Gilead**

With the creation of the nightmarish atmosphere, the story unveils a feminist dystopian world which is “in the hands of a power-hungry elite who have used their own brand of ‘Bible based’ religion as an excuse for the suppression of the majority of the population” [7]. Rulers of the new state assume their power functioning to its totalitarian limit. Citizens, especially female citizens, are suffering greatly from the bizarre way of life devoid of love, friendship and freedom. In the Republic of Gilead which assumes a dreary and depressing vision women are strictly classified into different roles according to their functions. Individualism is replaced by uniformity. They are deprived of the right to have their personal choices for the color and style of the clothes; each group is allotted uniform clothes typical of their prescribed roles instead and their social status is color-coded. “There are other women with baskets, some red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they’re called”. [8] Women’s desire is suppressed and their freedom of sexual choice is totally denied. They are valued only as child-breeders in a society where national birthrate declines sharply on account of the environmental pollution, AIDS and natural disasters which are all outcomes of blind human activities. What’s more, there exists no privacy for handmaids. It is a dangerous act to hide anything forbidden in their so-called private bedroom and there are always guardians holding searching torches making regular patrols. In the re-education centers, handmaids are subject to the power of the state, which exercises complete control over all areas of life. There is no individual freedom, no right to communicate, no right to read, write or speak freely, furthermore, they are indoctrinated by the Aunts. The rebellion of the rules of the regime will bring about cruel slaughter of the unfortunate rebels. The feminist dystopian world with power functioning to totalitarian limits can be summarized by Shirley Neuman’s words: “Gileadean government maintains its power by means of surveillance, suppression of information, re-education centers, and totalitarian violence”. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* this is accomplished through such means as doublethink, the transgression of solitude, the regulation of privacy and the conditioned values instilled in society[9]. In the totalitarian regime run on patriarchal lines, not only handmaids who are defined as “two-legged wombs” serving for the patriarchal elite are suffering a lot, but the Wives who are at a high social hierarchy are also victims of the society. They live in separate bedrooms with their husbands and have almost no communication with them. They are a group of infertile and unattractive women. Serena Joy, a typical Wife in the Republic of Gilead, is by no means joyful as her surname indicates. She is always seen knitting in the sunshine in the garden which is the archetype of mother, fertility and romance. Her fading looks and infertility form a sharp contrast with the garden, which is very ironic.

**Women’s Resistance against Power**

The obliteration of the past enables the feminist dystopian world take on a grim look. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *the Brave New World*, information concerning the past is falsely conveyed to
citizens or be kept obscure, so that people know little about the real situations in the past and are likewise led to believe that the present society far surpassed historical conditions. Similarly, in The Handmaid’s Tale, handmaids and the Aunts are confronted with the same situation. Their previous identity is obliterated after a military coup wiped out the President and the Congress and built up a totalitarian regime Gilead. They are obliged to cut off any relations with their past. They were compelled to tear apart from their parents, lovers and children, who are the part and parcel of their past life. Their roles as mother, daughter, wife as well as employee no longer exist. In the totalitarian regime, there is not a moment when handmaids can have a sense of belonging. They have no access to materials which reflect the reality and embody life philosophy and may serve as spiritual tutor to guide them in their life. The Aunts, a group of childless or infertile or older women who escaped shipment to the infamous Colonies, formed a quasi-police institution. To keep the handmaids in control and enable them to gradually erase their original spiritual values from their memory, the Aunts brainwash the handmaids into believing things that fit the demands of patriarchal society. They inculcate new beliefs into the minds of handmaids. Restricted to private domestic spaces, handmaids totally lose their previous social identity. They are not only not allowed to wear everyday clothes as they do in the former days but also forbidden to use their previous names. “Such names as “Offred”, “Ofglen” and “Offwarren” were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the house household of a specific commander”[8]. Though in possession a little power, the Aunts are also the victims in the new society. They have also experienced the loss of identity through the government’s measure to wipe out everything familiar to them in the past. Their previous names are replaced by “names derived from commercial products available to women in the immediate pre-Gilead period” [8]. Rulers make great efforts to erase past from the life of the citizens and place them in a nightmarish new world. Their connection with the past exists only in their internal refusal to forget their name, their family members and past events. At the Red Centre where the handmaids are indoctrinated, they are shown old porno films which are full of sadistic and violent scenes. ‘Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then’ [8]. The implication of her words is that they are now living in a more ideal society where citizens can feel great security when violence and sexual abuse are strictly forbidden. The government hoodwinks their citizens into thinking that their present society is far better off and erase their former experience from their memory.

The erasure of speech is an important theme in twentieth-century dystopian fiction, as in George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four dystopian fiction. “Feminist dystopias often deal with women’s loss of language” [10]. In the patriarchal world, woman is mute in language. In The Handmaid’s Tale, handmaids are silenced by the totalitarian rules of Gilead. They are supposed to “do their duty in silence”, walk in silence. Communication, reading and writing are strictly forbidden. According to Stein [10], “to speak, to write, is to assert one’s personhood, inscribe one’s subjectivity. To lose language is to lose subjectivity”; however, handmaids always secretly defy the rules. They whisper to each other with their heads lowered while they are doing their shopping errands. They kept mormuring during the occasion of Women’s Prayvaganzas (group wedding) and Salvagings. Furthermore, the narrator create her subjectivity through her narrative. The act of story-telling itself in a society that has particular constraints on women and regulates their bodies is an “écriture feminine” advocated by feminists. Characterized by puns, ambiguity, indeterminacy and fragmentation, the style of the story fit the uniquely feminine style of writing which disrupt “the linear, logical, authoritative and realistic masculine language”[11]. Though the story is told in a borrowed masculine language of the patriarchal world, the act of story-telling itself is a rebellious and even heroic behavior. The repressed voice of women can be heard and their thoughts and feelings can be felt. It offers women an unthinkable space for survival in the man-dominated society and renders them hope.

“Literary works usually reflect social situation and embody author’s worry and concern for the present society. “When describing the origins of her book, Atwood has acknowledged a variety of influences both literary and historical, though always emphasizing contemporary social issues and anxieties. She kept a clippings file of items form newspapers and magazines which fed directly into
her writing” [7]. The feminist dystopia described in The Handmaid’s Tale is not far from us. Margaret Atwood seems to warn us of the dreary future for women and the tendencies of the relationship between men and women. Atwood is not absolutely pessimistic about the fate of women. The Handmaid’s Tale does not offer a definite closure. Offred ends her narration like this: “Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”. Open ending characteristic of postmodern writing invites readers to think and renders them a sense of hope. By forewarning people of the dehumanizing tendencies of women’s life, Atwood obliquely increase women of the awareness of the possible danger and calls for them to seek equality and freedom which form the basis for a harmonious relationship between men and women.

References


