Offred's Dejected Past and an Oblivious Future in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*.

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Abstract

Women in general are often subjected to experiences which keep them haunted forever in life. The trouble can be from known sources or unknown choices. Offred, the protagonist in *Handmaid's Tale* experiences some dark truths which keep her future immersed in oblivion. Exploring various reasons behind the present mental and physical state becomes the crux of this paper. Touching upon the feministic approach the author has successfully portrayed the character in this novel with utmost perfection considering the nuance that makes her exude the individuality as protagonist.

Key Words: Trauma, Post colonialism, cultural, feminism

Introduction

Margaret Atwood a Canadian writer was born in Ottawa, Ontario. She has been interested in writing since her childhood. At the age of sixteen she realized her passion for writing. Some of her well known works include *Bodily Harm* in 1981, *Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, *Cat's Eye* in 1988, *The Blind Assassin*, it won the Booker Prize. *Oryx and Crake* in the year 2003, and *Madd Addam* in 2013. She won numerous awards, recognitions and Honorary degrees. She best known for her feminist and diasporic approach.

This paper also offers a reading of the post colonized conditions of the minorities who are dominated by the elite group. The novel's major theme is feminism, confinement and passivity under superior class, at the same time post-colonial conditions can be associated with suppression of the protagonist and the class to which she belongs. The denial of the fundamental rights such as reading, going out freely or even rights of reproducing keep her haunting her present.

Review of Literature

Zhao, Meijiao (2020) in his work "Power Analysis in *The Handmaid's Tale*" Posits, "As a dystopian novel, it describes an absurd society in the future and explores themes of subjugated women in a patriarchal society and the various means by which these women resist and attempt to gain independence." (249)

Heidarizadeh, Negin (2015) in the article "The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis" says "the haunted subject who is muted in different field of the study no longer wants

to be hunted by the hunters and she makes a decision to get rid of anything. It is widely supposed that she rejects to be victimized and to be dominated or controlled by the hunters. Significantly, she breaks the rules. She makes a distance with trauma; after that her aim is to free herself from the boundaries of the society.” (794)

Claassens, L. Juliana in her article “Reading Trauma Narratives: Insidious Trauma in the Story of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah (Genesis 29-30) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*” says, “Margaret Atwood's novel can be said to be one attempt to give voice to the experience of the original handmaids, so not only honoring their suffering but also imagining signs of resistance amidst the descriptions of insidious trauma. It is evident in the great appeal of *The Handmaid's Tale* in today's context that contemporary readers are emboldened by the small instances of resistance amidst the overbearing descriptions of insidious trauma that signify the characters' refusal to succumb to the dystopian world imagined by its orchestrators.” (28)

Offred's Past and Future

The struggle for ethnic, cultural, physical, psychological and biological autonomy is prevalent throughout the novel. Post colonialism is mainly associated with conditions of colonization and post-independence in the political and cultural arena. Whereas in *The Handmaid's Tale* Post colonialism has a different perspective and the application of it varies too. The supreme powers or the Ruling class pioneered the “slave class” by devoting a class of fertile women for the purpose of reproducing, and were kept as mere concubines or the Handmaids.

The name every individual is given to be addressed establishes the supremacy of the elite class over the downcast. Offred is the main character through whom the story has been presented. Offred literally meant of – Fred, handmaid assigned to be with Fred a Commander with high rank and powers and participate in the ceremony to reproduce. Doubly trapped by their low social statuses and their fertile bodies, Handmaids barely get to do anything. Their bodies' fertility both enforces their confinement and paradoxically promises them a kind of freedom. Offred through her narration describes the structure of the Gilead society and how several different classes of women were subjected to the circumscribed lives in the new Theocracy. “They used to have dolls, for little girls that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll. She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands.”

The novel at its commencement gives an overview of the change in the powers, the overthrowing of supreme powers of the United States of constitutions and establishing the Republic of Gilead a theocratic military dictatorship. Under the pretext of restoring order, the new republic tends to impose and reorder certain hierarchical, compulsory Christian regime of Old Testament inspired social and religious conservatism which denies women of their basic rights. Almost all women are forbidden from their basic rights and to hold property or jobs too. In order to survive in the Republic of Gilead, characters have to be blank slates. Post-colonialism can be considered as the relationship between colonizing nations and their former colonies and also the effects of cultural imperialism, as depicted in literature. Atwood is particularly conscious of her role as a Canadian writer, and the nature of colonialism in various forms is very evident in her novel.

Offred is portrayed as a woman caught up in the clutches of New Republic of Gilead wherein women are suppressed to the core. They are devoid of the rights to go out, read, write or even lead a married women's life. They are the maids of those higher-level officers whose wives cannot reproduce. In her present she keeps harping upon the past life. She is happily married to Luke and has an eleven months old child. Though her past does not torment her, it becomes a solace in the tormenting present. She tries to flee into an unknown future.

Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems being trapped in the past and makes her realize what kind of life she has led in the past and what is happening in the present. She keeps lamenting thinking of what she has lost. She does not know the whereabouts of either her husband or her baby. She just keeps the hope for a better future alive within her. In order to survive in the Republic of Gilead,

characters have to be like blank slates. "They have to be willing to take on new names and go where they're told. They can't complain if their children are taken from them or cry over their loved ones' sad fates. Acting out—even by doing something as seemingly harmless as reading—results in brutal punishment or even death." Offred feels love and excitement and wonder. She keeps imagining for things unknown. She expects her future to be certain way. The past does not allow her to move ahead in life, yet her mind is in constant search of a meaningful future.

So. I explored this room...I didn't want to do it all at once, I wanted to make it last...I saw the stains on the mattress. Like dried flower petals. Not recent. Old love...when I saw that, the evidence left by two people...I covered the bed and lay down on it...I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me...I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me, but there wasn't room (52).

Offred longs for a better future in which she can get united with her husband and kid. In her present she belongs to commander named Fred thereby getting the name Offred. Contacts with Nick makes her memories of her husband persistent and its through Nick she tries to hope for a future; an escape from the dark present. She develops a physical relationship with him and towards the end we see her escaping in the dark van emerging out in the dusk and as she boards, she does it with the belief that she is heading towards the dawn of a bright future. Towards the end of the novel Offred is taken away by the secret police. The Eyes of God, known informally as "the Eyes", under orders from Nick. Before she boards the black van Nick ensures her that she would be safe, and wants her to trust. Finally, she enters the van with her future uncertain. She doesn't see what is in store for her in the future, but moves on with hopes for love, peace and respect which she seems to be devoid of in the present condition.

The van waits in the driveway, its double doors stand open. The two of them, one on either side now, take me by the elbows to help me in. 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. (307)

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood with the touch of feminism has brilliantly carved the character with much elegance. The narrative technique employed by the author illustrates the connectivity between the pre and post colonized nation. The differences that have crept in after the new imperial powers came into prominence proves how the story narrated could become an imitation of any colonized nation. The protagonist fits in to the niche maintaining the individuality. The bottom line retains the quality of stream of consciousness technique. Offred is shown as the sufferer under different circumstances and emerge from such tormenting condition with hopes of bright future. The trauma of her past has deeper impact on the present and it is sure to have on her future as well.

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