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EN 590 Major Authors

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The Feminist Dystopia in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

In Margret Atwood’s works, the feminist voice is the voice. From the perspective of the narrators, who are mostly women, we see the world in the novel or the short story. Atwood presents the feminist perspective associated with different themes such as mythology and fairy tales. In one of her works, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she shows the women's voice in a dystopian world. In that world, dehumanized women are living a fearful life. The women, who have been restrained and oppressed, are telling the story of their lifeless life. In this paper, I aim to analyze the feminist voice in the dystopian world in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Through this analysis, I’ll show the importance of having a dystopian fiction and how this fiction can guide us to a better world. I will start from life in a dystopian society, then the life of women in this society, and lastly the women's fight against this life.

The *Handmaid’s Tale* is a story of a maid in a dystopian world. She tells her story, her feelings, and her hopes. In the world she lives in, Gilead, the rules are derived from the Bible; however, the Bible used in an improper way. Words are used out of their actual contexts, such as, when Sarah used her handmaid, Hager, as a surrogate womb for an heir for Abraham. Based on that, handmaids were forced, legally, to fornications with their commanders. Patricia Goldblatt, in her article *“Margaret Atwood's Protagonists,”* describes this world, “acts of love are reduced to institutionalized rapes, and random acts of violence, banishment to slag heaps, public hangings, endorsed public killings, bribery, deceit, and pornography all persist under other names in order to maintain a pious hold on women endorsed by the Gilead Fathers” (279). *The Handmaid’s Tale,* like any other fictional dystopia, focuses on the fear. Fear that the government will make all its citizens the same, no differences. A fear that they will take their citizens’ rights, not only that, but they will take the different qualities in the individuals.

Women in the dystopian world are required to keep their eyes downcast, to ask for male permission to speak, to refer to themselves in the third person. Their work is related only to the childcare and the cooking, and being good wives to their husbands. They are not allowed to read or write, or to think. Silence is the ideal characteristic of women in a dystopian world. Women are restrained and oppressed. They are required to be silent. However, in these fictional, women break this silence to find “their individual and collective voices” (Jones 7). Atwood chooses to present the story throughout the vision of the weakest voice in the story. In that story, Atwood presents the life of a weak woman in dystopia, and her fight against this life. The handmaid talks about herself, “I am a blank, here, between parentheses” (205). She is no one in the society she is living in. She will be omitted in the history, in the memories of her children.

The handmaids voices are lost. They have been taught when to speak and what to say. She says, “Aunt Lydia said it was best not to speak unless they asked you a direct question. Try to think of it from their point of view she said, her hands clasped and wrung together her nervous pleading smile. It isn’t easy for them” (21). The handmaids cannot talk whenever they want, they should be asked a direct question. The answer; moreover, should be satisfied with the commanders and their wives. What the maids think, what they feel is not important and no one cares about it. This forced silence makes her, Offred, wish to hear the women’s conversations that she used to hate. She says,

we would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get up to. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other’s voices, signalling that yes, we know all about it… I know what you mean, we’d say. Or, a quaint expression you sometimes hear, still, from older people: I bear where you’re coming from, as if the voice itself were a traveler, arriving from a distant place. Which it would be, which it is. How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts (17).

She, now, misses any type of conversation, even the ones that she used to “despise”. As she says, “at least it was talk.” She needs someone to listen to her. It does not matter what is the topic of the conversation. She needs to break the isolation and “exchange” voices.

This isolation does not stop at this point. Her body has been isolated from her soul, too. Offred is treated dehumanizingly, she says, “they can do what they like with me. I am abject” (256). She does not feel herself as she used to. In her former life, she refers to her body as an “instrument,” and now, it is “a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black” (72). She does not feel that she owns her body anymore. It is theirs to do what they want, not hers anymore. Everything she does with it must be supervised, watched, and reported. Because she is the child-bearer, she is treated based on this child’s needs (Goldblatt 278). She is a surrogate womb, and that is her value. Offred, the handmaid, has no name, she has been called after her commander, “Of Fred.” She talks about her hopes, dreams, and wishes, 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. I want to steal something” (93). She repeats her name to keep the hope in her soul. She used to be a person with value. She keeps this hope alive because one day this darkness will be ended. She knows that ideas in her head are not just ideas. She says, “I don’t even close my eyes. Out there or inside my head, it’s equal darkness. Or light” (177). She reaches a point where it is equal to her, life, and death. She does not fear anymore the darkness. It is inseparable, it is inside her head.

She at some point does not feel the fear anymore. She starts building new hope. In her thoughts, she starts a new life, enhancing her world. A better place is created in her imagination and thoughts. She moves a little forward in her life and starts changing her reality. She says, “Here is a different story, a better one... This is what I'd like to tell” (120). A love story with the chauffeur, Nick, “enhanced by memories from her earlier life in order to conjure an outcome of happiness” (Goldblatt 281). She has a friend, Ofglen, with whom she can share the resistance feelings. About this friend, she says, “It occurs to me that she may be a spy, a plant, set to trap me; such is the soil in which we grow. But I can’t believe it; hope is rising in me, like sap in a tree. Blood in a wound. We have made an opening” (155). Hope is stronger than fear now. She wants to move forward to achieve her freedom. Even though the Gilead state has taught them to spy on each other, to fear each other, she wants to follow the hope that has been rising in her.

Offred, the handmaid, moves from the state of a weak person to a resistant person. She recalls how Gilead started. After having financial security, government officials were assassinated. The next step is to declare the martial law for a while, then finally, the new regime deadens the dissent and reinforce its power. She recalls that there was not any noticeable resistance. When women’s rights were suppressed, her husband, Luke, who is described as a decent man, did not fight against this suppression. But rather, he told her not to worry, he will take care of her. Moreover, he told her to stop participating in the marches and take care of him and their daughter. She, now, knows that she should fight for her own right, not waiting for someone else to do so.

She thinks of joining the resistance, even though she does not feel safe with them. She does not know anything about this group, but she wants to feel that there is a way to end this world. She wants to follow any light of hope whether it leads her into a new life, or just to the end of this life. She says, “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” (262). She moves to action, as she says, “I step up,” because she learned the lesson from post-Gilead days. It is her life, her war. As she learned from before, it worth the risk, because ending her life is much better than living it this way. She reaches the point where darkness is the same as the light for her.

She, even though she says the resistance might lead her to darkness, still have hope for a better life. She thinks that it is time now to follow the light of that shadow she sees. She is not sure where is it, or what its source, though she believes in it. She says, “I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light” (99). She is just a handmaid, yet she knows that her beliefs give her power. She decides to believe in the resistance, to feel the power they have, so she can have power too. She is resisting as much as she can. In the night, when she goes to bed, she expresses her thoughts and feelings to herself. She keeps her individual alive. She says, “I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me” (93). They, the government, lose against its citizens if they cannot erase their former identities. She knows that, and this is the first step of her resistance.

When her friend, Ofglen, killed herself, Offred feels the danger of being a rebellion. She, now, knows that it is not easy to resist. She sees how Ofglen’s rebellion scares them that they killed her or led her to commit suicide. However, she thinks that any kind of rebellion, even the small ones, should be valued and appreciated because it does scare them. Acts like telling the story, recalling her former name, old memories are valuable. On the other hand, what happed to Ofglen has affected her to be a suspicious person. She says, “Now that Ofglen is gone I am alert again, my sluggishness has fallen away, my body is no longer for pleasure only but senses its jeopardy” (254). She knows that her life is in danger. She rethinks of the idea of resistance. It is amusing to rebel, as much as it is risky. Therefore, she should be careful with them. She does not want to be killed.

The handmaid, Offred, tells us the story for a reason. She needs to tell someone, anyone, about her feeling. She says, “But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one” (44). And that is true. Someone needs to hear this story. It should be told. The dystopian fiction is important because if we want to live in the eutopian world, we should imagine the world in the opposite way, so we can avoid all the elements that would harm anyone in the world. To listen to these voices that have been forced to be silent, and give them what they need and protect them from what they fear.

Indeed, we wish to live in the eutopian world. For that reason, we have to act toward the necessary politics of liberation: “before we can make things different, we have to be able to imagine them different” (Jones 7). Libby Falk Jones, in the article, “*Breaking Silences In Feminist Dystopias,*” writes, “The construct of dystopia is needed to draw attention to the fragility and newness of women's voices, to keep us from taking our freedom to speak for granted, to urge the need for continuing the fight, and to highlight the courage and beauty of those who break silences” (11). I agree with her. Dystopian fiction is a way to show the world the importance of human rights, women's rights. In this way, we can imagine what would happen if we allow the dictators rule some parts of the world. And, what we would lose if we, women, stay silent.

Atwood emphasis that women’s silence is not absence. Women forced to be silent, yet it gives them power. In dystopia, women are powerful even though they are silent. Their silence is positive because they break it when it is the right time to speak, to show power. They do not waste their voices in unnecessary conversations. The silence gives their voices more power. When we see that in dystopia, we know that women need to talk when it is the right time, and what to say. The importance of having the freedom to speak, to keep the fight until women have equal rights as men are presented in the dystopian fiction. In these fictions, we see “the beauty of those who break silences” (Jones 11).

In conclusion, the feminist voice in Atwood's works is giving the reader a better view of the female perspective of the world. Throughout different themes, she shows what women need, think, and want. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, she gives the weakest person in the dystopian world a voice to tell the story. She expresses the fear, pain, and dream for women, in general, and handmaids in particular. The silence of women has been broken when the handmaid tells the story. Atwood gave her narrator the power to talk about everything, so the reader can see the dystopian world correctly, to expresses her resistance and her fight to reach freedom. The aim of dystopia fiction is to feel the pain and avoid it, to show that people will follow the hope until they reach the end of that painful life, whether they die or start a new life.

Work Cited

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