



## **A CRITICAL STUDY OF FEMINISM IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S SELECTED NOVELS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The most well-known writer to come out of Canada is Margaret Atwood. The works she has written make her feminist philosophy very plain. She displays her feminism in an overt manner by illustrating her views on human rights equality and freedom of choice. The concepts of human rights and basic freedom may be found across all of Atwood's novels. Her works of fiction, in general, accurately show women's rights as being on par with the rights of men. The books written by Atwood take aim at various social conceptions of gender. Her writings are emblematic of the repression and sexual prejudice that are prevalent in female characters. She is not only seeking the eradication of the gender system, which she defines as the enslavement of women, but she is also attempting to place men and women on an equal level in society. From Atwood's perspective, female bodies have been appropriated by patriarchal civilizations. The selected novels each include a female heroine who offers an explanation of observable physiological signs of anxiousness. In Atwood's works, female characters are almost always presented in a demeaning or objectifying light. Women are treated as if they had no emotions, thoughts, or rights of their own; as a result, they are seen as a tool or toy. The female character's body is a representation of their sexuality and plays a significant role in the plot. In the selected tales by Atwood, the male body exerts a brutal power over the female body. This is something that Atwood strives to represent, regardless of the context, in terms of sexual politics. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate sexual politics via the lens of the female body in a selection of Atwood's writings.

**keyword:** *Feminism , Margaret Atwood's*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The common definition, straight from Merriam Webster, describes feminism as "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes." Since the start of this ideology in 19<sup>th</sup> century this term has become very wide and has many offshoots and waves. First wave of feminism which focused on legal issues, primarily on gaining the right to vote moved to second wave in 1960's which broadened the debate to include a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, defacto inequalities, and official legal inequalities. After two decades came the third wave. Now feminist came online and reached a global audience with blogs and e-zines focused on abolishing gender-role stereotypes and expanding woman to include women with diverse racial and cultural identities. The third wave saw the emergence of new feminist currents and theories such as intersectionality, sex positivity, vegetarian ecofeminism, trans feminism, and postmodern feminism. Around 2012 started a new fourth wave with the belief that all humans are equal. It demands justice against

assault and harassment, equal pay for equal work, and the freedom to make individual choices over own bodies. These feminists speak publicly against their abusers and harassers.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood whose birthday is November 18, 1939 belongs to this third wave of feminists. She was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada and she still resides in Canada. Margaret Atwood is a very well-known and highly acclaimed poet, novelist, essayist, literary critic, inventor and environmental activist. Atwood is also an award winning humanist. She was awarded by the American Humanist Association – Humanist of the Year in 1987. Atwood writes in many genres including historical fiction and science fiction. She has even written three television scripts. She is the author of more than 65 books of fiction, poetry, non-fiction children's books and critical essays. Margaret Atwood has won more than 55 awards, including being awarded with 19 honorary college degrees. She has won the literature awards, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Prince of Austria's Award. She has won the Booker prize once, and the Governor General's Award twice. Atwood was inducted in the Canadian Walk of Fame in 2001. She also founded the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that supports Canada's writing community. As an inventor Margaret Atwood has developed a platform called the Long Pen and other technologies associated with it and it is based on remote robotic writing technology.

Margaret Atwood has written books in many genres, but science fiction seems to be a genre in which she does extremely well. Her novels are all about women. So basically she is a known feminist. She writes about mythology, history, and power of language. She has been steadily producing work of incredible literary quality and imagination since her first novel in 1969 *The Edible Woman*.

Atwood wrote about women only. Her women protagonist are the Centre of every universe. The men in Atwood's books are appendages. They appear in the background, unfocused and blurred. Her female characters inhabit contemporary Canada, an ex-British Colony-which still needs to get independent from both its past (from the mother country: the Great Britain) and its present dominant neighbor (The USA) in order to redefine itself.

She was 16 when she made her commitment to pursue writing as a lifetime career. She did her graduation in 1961 from Victoria College, University of Toronto and completed her Master's at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1962. She also studied at Harvard University. Professionally she became an English Literature Lecturer at the University of British Columbia, New York University, and Williams University. However, her teaching career did not side-lined her dream as a young girl to become a professional writer. She first published *The Circle Game*, a collection of poems in 1966 which brought her immediate success and also earned the Governor General's Award. Although she had published many volumes of poetry and short stories but her forte remained novel writing. The scope of her fictional work ranges from realistic fiction to historical to science fiction. Her highly praised fictional works include *Surfacing* (1973), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1989), *The Robbers Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996). She won Orange Prize for literature for the last one.

Atwood's novel show how daily life gradually wears women down. The little battles won or lost reduce the resilience of women.

### **Objective**

1. To have a deeper understanding of Atwood's creative world.
2. To undergo the feministic point of view in her fiction.

### **WOMAN AS SILENT AND VICTIMIZED GENDER**

In Margaret Atwood's novel "*The Handmaid's Tale*," there is a prolonged stillness that envelops the women characters, as well as their memories and the environment they inhabit. Atwood makes an effort to

demonstrate and shatter this silence. This book demonstrates how important it is for women to have a voice and a say in situations in which they are dominated by the government. The reader is given a glimpse into a more macho world via the eyes of the novel's female heroine, who lives in a culture in which women are expected to keep quiet. In point of fact, it illustrates what the author calls a "victimised and subjugated feminine gender" (Soofastaei and Mirenayat). Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* sheds light on oppressive constraints that stifle women's uniqueness and reveals that these limits target women. The characters' internal monologues reveal the instability that exists within them. Offred, the protagonist of this tale, has now reached her breaking point with her silence. She had had enough of all of this melodrama. I can't continue to be quiet much longer. (305) Offred, the principal female character in the community of the Republic of Gilead, is the focus of the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is the responsibility of handmaids to provide children for affluent families who are struggling. It has been decided that Offred will become the commander's wife. In the tale, she does not go by her own name. In point of fact, the names of the handmaids are preceded by the word "of," which appears at the beginning of the names of all servants. Offred reveals, "My name isn't Offred. I have another name, but it's banned for everyone to use it now" (37). In the patriarchal society portrayed by Atwood, the subjugation and marginalisation of women is patently clear. Offred, however, is provided with a voice thanks to Atwood. In a rage, she proclaims and searches for a solution to the problem at hand. On the other hand, Margaret Atwood's conflict in her novel is not only meant to depict a woman's participation in the processes that lead to her victimisation; rather, she wants to investigate the possible ties of fighting patriarchal structures to power and supremacy, which rejects a female's equal asserts as an individual in society. Another one of Atwood's stories is titled "Bodily Harm," and it depicts the female protagonists as flawed individuals. Because Lora and Rennie had to squeeze into the same little room, they were forced to develop some sort of bond. The primary character, Rennie, who has breast cancer, considered herself as a broken sex machine. Rennie's condition prevented her from having children. The stories that Lora tells include Rennie in some way. While Lora is relating the tales that she has heard, Rennie pays little attention to her and instead focuses on the movements of Lora's lips as it opens and closes. When Rennie learns that Lora is engaging in prostitution in order to purchase some pleasures from the guards at the facility, she looks down her nose at her. Rennie does not show sympathy toward Lora or society in general until Lora rebels against those who are holding them captive. Lora comes from a family with a history of immoral deeds and habits associated with the working class.

She is subjected to a social and sexual repression that is distinct from that of Rennie. In a culture dominated by patriarchy, women's voices such as hers are not heard. The final straw is when the watchman sexually assaults her. The sex roles that women are forced to play in Atwood's books often leave them in a vulnerable position, and this often leads to their acting in a harsh manner. As a result, this issue creates a culture in which female characters are finally the gender that is relegated to the background and persecuted. In point of fact, Atwood made us aware of this by including the following passage at the very beginning of *Bodily Harm*: The very appearance of a guy raises questions about what he is capable of doing for or against you. On the other hand, a woman's presence...sets the boundaries for what may and cannot be done to her. (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*) It's possible that the reason that edition also mentions on the back cover of the paperback wouldn't be unrelated to this situation in any way. According to him, Margaret Atwood's new novel is an exploration of human defensiveness, the lust for power both sexual and political, and the need for compassion that goes beyond what we ordinarily mean by love. He describes it as having comedic, satirical, relentless, and terrifying elements all rolled into one.

### **The Handmaid's Tale**

The Handmaid's Tale is Margaret Atwood's international award winning bestseller. It is a critique of female brutalization articulated in Bodily Harm. The Handmaid's Tale is a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied basic rights. The novel is a kind of anti-Utopia of the not-too-distant future as reflected through the voice of Offered, a handmaid and one of the victims in the theocracy. Patriarchy and colonialism involve relationship of domination and suppression, assumed superiority and imposed inferiority, where the dominated is forced to take up the oppressed, exploited victim position. In The Handmaid's Tale, "the colonies" are mentioned in a purely negative sense as a symbol of exploitation, isolation and alienation, where people are used as objects or functions.

Atwood's dystopian novel, The Handmaid's Tale, imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference: it is recorded and not written - a cumbersome exercise in the twentieth century with all technical amenities at our command. Writing or recording, both a form of speech, is denied to our protagonist in the theocratic society of Gilead, situated in South Dakota, U.S., and established by religious fanatics. Atwood in her definition of politics and means "who gets to do what to whom" [or] "who inflicts violence on whom" both in the political and sexual domains" (Howells, 2006, p.44). By using women against women oppressing each other, the Gilead regime prevents feminist activities and resistance to the oppression.

### **The Blind Assassin**

Three stories are intertwined in this complex novel; in the end, they become one. In a series of flashbacks, the elderly Iris Chase Griffen writes of her long life. At the outset, newspaper clippings present three tragic deaths from 1945 to 1975: sister, husband, and daughter.

Iris's pretty younger sister, Laura, died at age 25 when she drove her car off a bridge. Two years later, Iris published Laura's novel, Blind Assassin, to critical acclaim, projecting the author to posthumous fame. Only weeks later, Iris was widowed when her husband drowned. Then many years later, Iris's daughter, Aimee, breaks her neck and dies from the ravages of drug and alcohol abuse. Iris also loses care of her only grandchild, four-year old Sabrina. Iris looks back on the circumstances before and after these deaths.

Growing up in a small-town Ontario without a mother, Iris was expected to look after Laura. But the younger girl's guileless intensity inspired exasperation and jealousy, as well as affection. In the 1930s, the sisters managed to hide a young radical, Alex Thomas in the family attic before he escaped to Spain; they both fell in love. But at the age of nineteen, Iris is forced to enter a joyless marriage to wealthy Richard Griffen out of obedience to her father who hoped that the union would save his factory. It did not.

Laura is bossed by the politically ambitious Richard and his domineering sister, Winifred. Defiance and maternity allow Iris to carve out her own space within the confines of the social situation. But she is increasingly estranged from the romantic, inscrutable Laura who is eventually sent to "asylum" where she has an abortion. Upon her release, the sisters reconnect, only to hurt each other with painful revelations.

The other two of the three stories stem from Laura's acclaimed novel "Blind Assassin," parts of which are interspersed. On the level, it relates the passionate affair of a refined woman (very like the author) and a political fugitive (very like Alex) who meet in his sordid hiding places. On another level, it is like a fairy tale, invented by the lovers, about a cruel society in which child-labor, ritualistic rape, and human sacrifice routine. The Killers are children who have been blinded by their enforced work knotting beautiful rugs.

The Blind Assassin is, indeed, a world of women. Most of the novel comes from Iris Chase Griffin's perspective. Her primary interactions are with her woman relatives only. However, this is a world of women run by men. Richard's happiness and good reputation are the women's primary concern: although Winifred,

her husband's sister, seems to hold the reins of the family but in reality she is not really in control as she is portrayed as the one who focuses solely on Richard's desires.

### **Oryx and Crake**

This was the first in the MaddAddam Trilogy and is now being developed for HBO by Darren Aronofsky. Atwood had headed into dystopia before with *The Handmaid's Tale*, but with *Oryx and Crake* she is straight up prophetic. In a world that has been destroyed by a single mad genius, a man known as Snowman appears to be the only survivor, living alongside a tribe of genetically engineered, peaceful almost-human creatures. The novel flashes back to when Snowman was a young boy called Jimmy, playing video games in a corporate compound with his best friend Crake, who grows up to be the mad genius of the story.

Even though the story features a male protagonist, the feminist lens is perhaps one of the most interesting lenses to apply to Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. The society seen in the books is quite different, but it gives us all too familiar reminders of our own.

The main character, Jimmy is very comfortable with manipulating women. He doesn't see them as beings worthy of respect, but as toys that he can play with for fun. He has no respect for his mother, his girlfriends, or any other women in his life. The only one that he sees differently is Oryx. He cannot manipulate her, so he is forced to appreciate her as a real human being.

Jimmy's disrespect for women starts at a young age. He looks for praise from his mother, but he usually does not receive it. His mother's moods are very unstable, meaning that Jimmy never knows how she will react to his actions. Instead of continuing his constant search for approval, he begins to search for any emotion that differs from the usual.

His disrespect for women is apparent in most of his memories. When describing his time at school. He does not remember his teacher's name. He only addressed her by her most defining physical characteristics. He also mentions that the other boys in the class treated the teacher the same way, meaning that Jimmy's disrespect of women was partly because of his society. This attitude continues into young adulthood, when Jimmy enters college.

The area where Jimmy's disregard for the emotions of women is most prominent is in his dating life. In his college years, he relies solely on manipulation for sex. Jimmy's relationships are built solely on pity, he has to be very careful not to improve too drastically; he needs his girlfriends to see some improvement, so they think they are helping, but not enough that they will expect any real commitment.

When Jimmy gets out of college, his dating style doesn't change too drastically. His relationships are still relatively void of meaning, as he only dates women who are already in relationships. He still sought out damaged women to manipulate. He maintains this same attitude until he meets Oryx and everything that he could rely on in the past about women and relationship is turned around. Jimmy had seen Oryx before as a young teen and he became obsessed with her. Jimmy and Crake first saw Oryx on a child pornography site, which was common in their desensitized society. Despite Oryx's extremely difficult childhood, she remained positive and refused to be manipulated by Jimmy; making him fall for her like he hadn't yet fallen for anyone else.

### **The Year of the Flood**

In the second book of the trilogy called *The Year of the Flood*, it mainly focuses on a group of people called the God's Gardeners, a small group of survivors of the same pandemic that wiped out most of the Earth's population in *Oryx and Crake*. It answers some of the questions that were posed in *Oryx and Crake* and it

also reveals the Identity of the three real human beings who appear at the end of the first book, which will be explained in the last book of the trilogy.

This dystopian science fiction focuses on a religious sect called the God's Gardeners, a small community of survivors of the biological catastrophe in *Oryx and Crake*. Here, everything is submitted to the corporation's control, no freedom of choice exists, where various sects promising salvation appear daily and almost of them find their audience and devoted followers. These sects like the God's Gardeners exploit the loneliness of their followers promising a false feeling of comfort and brotherhood. Fortunately, Toby despite being repetitively physically abused and disappointed with her past and present, saves herself from landing into this dangerous and destructive trap. The world depicted by Atwood is ruled by violence. In this world your riches are directly proportionate to your power and in the absence of laws, this power is abused.

It is a novel that focuses on the contemporary issues of ecology too. Here, Atwood, presents a picture of the deteriorating condition of the planet and of the deeper structure that oppress women. The violent activities of men have changed the course of nature and destroyed its beauty. Atwood tries to show that that nature is being treated like a woman. Both are bonded slaves of men.

### **MaddAddam**

Margaret Atwood's post-apocalyptic Trilogy ends with *Madd Addam* examines a near future in which the impact of corporate profiteering, climate change, continuous surveillance, and genetic manipulation result in a hostile environment for humans.

Months after the Waterless Flood pandemic has wiped out most of humanity, Toby and Ren have rescued their friend Amanda from the vicious Pain ballers. They return to the Maddaddamite cob house, which is being fortified against man and giant Pigoon alike.

Accompanying them are the Crakers, the gentle, quasihuman species engineered by the brilliant but deceased Crake. While their reluctant prophet, Jimmy – Crake's one-time friend-recovers from a debilitating fever, it's left to Toby to narrate the Craker theology, with Crake as Creator. She must also deal with cultural misunderstandings, terrible coffee and her jealousy over her lover, Zeb.

Meanwhile, Zeb searches for Adam One, founder of the God's Gardeners the pacifist green religion from which Zeb broke years ago to lead the Maddaddamites in active resistance against the destructive CorpSeCorps. Now under threat of an imminent Painballer attack, the Maddaddamites must fight back with the aid of their newfound allies, some of whom have four trotters. At the Centre is the extraordinary story of Zeb's past, which involves a lost brother, a hidden murder, a bear and a bizarre act of revenge.

### **CONCLUSION**

Margaret Atwood is obviously related to the coalition of power that applies physical, political, economic and social control over woman to splinter her. In her writings she confirms, the things that man do, woman can do better. They are neither incomplete physically nor mentally. They hold the bridles of power tightly in their hands. In her feminist writings growth of her protagonist is not very soft nevertheless they conquest eventually through many calculated retreats. It becomes gradually more obvious that man's powerful position has been destabilized and he is losing out in the match of power as he is finding himself unable of victimizing and threatening women for his individual again. Her writings concentrate on woman's recognition of power control and selfawareness. As an artist she recognizes the situation of women painting

in patriarchal society. Through her paintings she wishes a society, which does not damage and exclude women from superiority. Characters in the novels of Margaret Atwood, give us with a map of the spiritual circumstance of contemporary Canadian literature with exact reference to their physical and social environment. The most remarkable feature of her stories is that her characters problems and sufferings, requirements and mistakes and their capability to knowingly or unknowingly hurt others and makes her readers respond to them not as imaginary characters but as live human beings.

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