

A Beacon of Hope to Women in Margaret Atwood's the Testaments

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Abstract: Women subjugation, religion, power are all the tools in the hands of the authority to keep their society under their control. Gileadean authorities don't even allow their people to think of their selves and insists to act upon the wishes of the society only. They also use religion to fortify their plugs. In this article I would like to describe how cruel the Gileadean authority was to their people to maintain their power and the realization of some people about the injustices they are facing which result in the collapse of the kingdom. Men are not the enemies and the religion is not an evil but the society which makes twists and turns in their teaching makes so.

Keywords: Religion, subjugation, power, realization, self

1. Introduction

Women had to face many injustices throughout history and it was same in the case of literature as well. Even now the conditions are not much different. Women had to face many injustices like cruelty because of dowry, female infanticide, rape and all. Gilead is a totalitarian regime tracking back to Old Testament in the Bible and 17th century Puritan patriarchies. Gender roles have nothing to do with one's abilities but when a society wants control over everyone and they are having power, they might take the help of religion too to strengthen their rubrics. They also try to subjugate women and mute the people over the injustices and finally they succeed in gaining power over the people by terminating the thoughts of their own from their minds. But when the suppression surpasses, the people might stand up for their voice. Such a corrupted authority was there in Gilead, a place described by the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood in her novel, *The Testaments*.

2. Discussion

Gilead's social structure promises on its belief that men and women are unequal. They are not ready to accept the abilities of women. The place of women in the society is divided into four stages as Aunts, Marthas, Handmaids and Wives. Aunts are considered to be the highest position and they are assigned to control and teach other women. Marthas are the house servants and Handmaids, the lowest position in the society. They are fertile women forced to bear children for powerful and married men in the society as a punishment for their misbehaviors. They believed that only men are intelligent, sophisticated, and natural leaders where as women are

considered to be stupid, infantile and weak ones. Even the women were not ready to think above this believes and teaching of the society and they teach the younger generation to follow the rules as it is and not to think beyond that. When the men getting jobs like: leaders, doctors, scientists or any other professional jobs according to their wishes and abilities, women are denied to choose their work according to their wishes and capabilities. They are forced to be wives at a young age that too an arranged one. For that the society cooks them up from their childhood itself.

The novel was narrated by three women characters from the perspective of three different life styles and their struggle to get an identity of their own. The first narrator of the novel Aunt Lydia narrates from the standpoint of the upper class women with the privileges they are having yet lack of self-recognition and freedom. The second narrator named Agnes living in Gilead where the women are not allowed to have any privileges except those of the Aunts and the Pearl Girls. She also wishes to achieve an identity of her own and for the freedom of all women living in Gilead to have a life of their own. The third narrator Daisy, a young woman living in Canada with all freedom also wishes to find her real identity and her real parentage. Thus three women, from three entirely different life styles, join hands in their quest for identity, and for the liberty of people from the corny beliefs of the society.

Aunt Lydia, one of the novel's three narrators is considered to be the most powerful Aunts in Gilead. Aunts are the female administrators over the other women who were chosen by the commanders. They are the only women allowed to read and be educated. "Reading was not for girls: only men were strong enough to deal with the force of it; and the Aunts, of course, because they weren't like us" (156). They are forbidden from marrying. The Aunts residing in Ardua Hall and are led by Aunt Lydia. The introduction which Atwood gives to Aunt Lydia, through the unveiling ceremony for her own statue substantiates her as a powerful woman. The Aunts teaches the girls to obey the society and its rules by telling them stories which related to the Bible. The story of a Concubine, who was physically abused by a gang of men and died in the middle of their journey, where her master was taking her back after she had escaped from her master. The Aunt teaches other girls not to run away from their fates, otherwise the same thing should happen to them also and

is legible. There is nothing to regret about the women but the sufferings of the men is more important in her point of view. Even the father of the woman is disappointed with the act of his daughter not with the pathetic condition of his daughter. Thornton Wilder says in his novel *The Women of Andros* (1930) that “We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasures” (34). In that sense women in Gilead don’t live their lives, they are just dolls in the hands of men or the society who act upon their wishes only except some educated women.

The Gilead society is not ready to educate women as education would give voice to the subjugated people. Khaled Hosseini shares his view in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as, “Marriage can wait, education cannot... A society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated” (67). But the parents in Gilead were not ready to give their children good education but husbands. They believe that the daughters would be safe in early marriages and it is their duty to find a husband for them soon after their puberty irrespective of their daughter’s wishes rather than educating them. Even if they admit their children in schools, there also the Aunts teach the children how to become a good wife and nothing else even to read or write. Becka, one of the characters believes that there is separate rule for men and women. She advises the Pearl girl, Jade that, “This is how women sit” (323). Through her words it is clear that there are rules to follow for them just because they are women. When Jade complains about the food, Becka whispered to her that, “Shhh... Be thankful for what you are given” (323). They are not even allowed to choose what they want to eat or not to finish food and were considered disrespectful. They also taught to obey the rules strictly; if they don’t cover their hair properly they might lose it. The authorities want the complete power on people and for that they use religion as a weapon. When the Bible is mapped onto a culture of domination, that’s how we get the horrors of Gilead. Through her writing Atwood wants to portray Christ as an activist, who broke the unjust laws so that the poorest, the most vulnerable, the most marginalized groups would have a spot at the feast and in the conversation. He told stories of how we are to live together in beloved community. He was gentle and surprising and a wicked good story teller. And He was a prophet speaking truth to power. In Gilead, they have women to promote their religious views and to attract others to their views. “These were the young women in long silvery dresses and white hats who called themselves Pearl Girls and said they were missionaries doing God’s work for Gilead” (44). They are Aunts who serve as Gilead’s missionaries, travelling to Canada and other nations from Gilead, to find young women to convert to Gilead’s faith and transport back to Gilead. They were very kind to the people around them in a notion to convert them to the beliefs of Gilead.

Gilead’s religious teaching delivers the story of Job and the bad luck which was sent by God as part of a test. He had lost all his sons, daughters, property and whatever he had with him. But he doesn’t leave his faith behind and God has given him more than what he had lost. Gilead teaches the people as if they become obedient and trustful to God irrespective of the situations He will bless them abundantly and not that, for God

everything is possible. Thus in every phase the teaching twists and elevates the position of men in the society by the false morals from the Bible stories. Here the Aunts reflects Harper Lee’s idea in her book *To Kill a Mockingbird* as, “Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of another”(41). The whisky bottle in a person’s hand won’t ruin a society but the Bible in the hands of Aunts which is forbidden to read by the other girls would ruin the entire younger generation as they twist and turn the events in the Bible to fit them to justify their actions.

Aunts used to present a series of embracing illustrated lectures which would inform them about the role and duties of a woman and a wife in a household. But the Aunts were not much informative about all those things and the girls won’t ask any questions as, “I wanted to ask why it had to be like this, but I already knew the answer: because it was God’s plan. That was how the Aunts got out of everything” (82). Thus for everything which the Aunts wanted to impose on girls, they would take the name God.

The authority of Gilead always teaches that it is the God’s kingdom on earth and the women who tries to escape from Gilead or to break any rule prevails in Gilead were killed by saying it as the God’s will and the sinners were visible to the Divine Eye and they should be removed from the God’s kingdom just to keep the country from the evil eye. The religious authority has done everything and anything to mute the people of Gilead to the injustices.

Aunt Lydia craved to live as who she was, but she couldn’t as she is a reputable lady in the public and has the position as Aunt. Amanda Lovelace wrote in *The Princess Saves Herself in This One* as, “The only thing required to be a woman is to identify as one” (124). The circumstances Agnes lived doesn’t teach to think of their own and she lived by following the rules of Gilead as she believed that disobedience to rules is equal to disobedience to God and the consequence of any disobedience is huge. But when it comes to the identity and of her blood relations she couldn’t control herself and yearned for the presence of her mother even if she knows that the joining of the Handmaid and their kids is illegal there in Gilead.

The Gileadean society doesn’t value one’s self or their wishes and forced everyone to follow their rules and be like slaves to the society. They want each person to obey them without questioning and for that they make them not to think beyond what they want. The life of Crystal is renamed as the Handmaid Ofkyle offers a picture-perfect example of muted women in the society. Ofkyle is never valued for her intelligence, insights, or virtues, but when she becomes pregnant they began to consider her. Agnes noticed that Paula and Kyle and their friends only express admiration for Ofkyle’s pregnant belly but not for Ofkyle herself, thus dehumanizing her and treating her not as a person, but only as a womb.

The impact of the teaching of the society to the younger generation can be realised through the characters of Nicole and Agnes. Agnes suffers everything even the injustices towards her just because she believed that women were just the dolls in the hands of men for their personal pleasures which is laid in her mind when she was in the school by the Aunts, where Nicole

was taught to live on her own wishes and help the needy. She believed that everyone should have their own freedom to choose whatever they want and the choices should not be limited according to the wishes of the society. Canadians realized the real plight of the Gileadeans and wanted to save them from the evils and made them to capable of doing whatever they want to do without considering their genders.

Mayday is the anti-Gilead resistance movement that operates in Canada. It has team up with the people in and outside of Gilead to smuggle oppressed women out of Gilead and label them as refugees. Mayday organization is hated by Gilead and recognized as a terrorist organization by Canada due to the power and influence that Gilead exerts on the Canadian government, though civilians in Canada seem to support its work. Mayday actually does not hate Gilead for their power but for their suppression of women for a male dominated society and for their cruelty towards the people by taking away all their rights from them including education and freedom. They even make the people in Gilead not to think for themselves or to the family and they were supposed to leave their family and cut of every relation they had when the Gileadean society asks them to without questioning.

Aunt Lydia wanted to save every people in Gilead and she longs for the destruction of Gilead even after being in a respectable position in Gilead. The struggle of people and their loss of identity constantly from generation to generation is witnessed by Aunt Lydia and she also felt that they are all beyond limits which led her to think of their welfare and for a new world. She knows well that she cannot survive there in Gilead for a long but she pleaded for some more time to God for the wellbeing of the people around her. Aunt Lydia had documented everything, every crime and about the real identities and fears what the new world would think of her and she may have been part of the new world with people of their real identities. She hopes for a new world and she witnesses the beginning of Gilead's downfall.

3. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood tries to explore the idea that men are not the enemy. Rather, the enemy is an extremist ideology that

gives men power and women a series of terrible choices. She clearly shares the idea that women are not the angels and men are not demons. Both are human beings and it's normal to commit mistakes. The mind to accept and change is all we need. After all, life is not a competition between men and women. It is a collaboration of both and for a brighter society we need the support of both men and women. The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie expresses a fact in her book *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, "Teach her that the idea of 'gender roles' is absolute nonsense. Do not ever tell her that she should or should not do something because she is a girl. 'Because you are a girl' is never a reason for anything. Ever" (98) should be taught to every generation. Atwood doesn't blame any religion rather argues that Gilead's understanding of the Biblical God is misconstrued and that religious hypocrisy is rampant within Gilead's leadership, suggesting that such a totalitarian regime built in religion is abusing that religion and bastardizing it, rather than embodying it as it was meant to be practiced. The need of removing wrong religious practices and the consequences of those teachings were described. Atwood also tote up that there is an existential necessity for every individual. Through the novel she conveys the fact that no one can lose their self and freedom for anything. The subjugation for a long beyond limits cannot be suffered and the voice of the voices will be so powerful that might lead to the complete destruction of the community. The realization of every injustices happened to them in the name of religion, gender roles and also the blind trust towards society, made the people to think of their own and of their fellow people which resulted in the downfall of Gilead.

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