Chapter 3

‘Logic of Domination’ in *The Handmaid’s Tale*
‘Logic of Domination’ in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

*Militaries, multinationals, governments, the eco-establishment. When I write down this list of institutions on a piece of paper, the first thing that I notice, as a feminist, is that these are all institutions of men.... The institutional culture that is responsible for most of the environmental calamities of the last century is a masculinist culture.*

(Seager 4-5)

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) narrates the story of women, who were politically, socially, and economically controlled by men in the Republic of Gilead. Gilead was the new name given to U.S. after its take-over by military. Taking females as the main characters, and environmental crisis as its background, the novel depicts the suffering and exploitation of women in an environmentally polluted country ruled by totalitarian government. Patriarchy dominated in every sphere of the lives of people. Men had made women the scapegoat of their desires. The novel reflects upon the consequences that women may have to bear, if patriarchal practices and policies would remain unchecked. The tyranny of the military regime is also the focus of the novel. The officials of the military rule were not answerable to anyone for their actions. Atwood has highlighted the oppression of women by military soldiers. The oppression by them has been commented upon by Joni Seager also. She writes, “When forced into a confrontation, sexism is their first resort. Women community leaders repeatedly report that they have to endure arrogant, patronizing, and sarcastic military officials who try first and foremost to denigrate the authority and knowledge of the women challenging them” (Seager 32).
Karen J. Warren has argued that ‘logic of domination’ plays a central role in oppression and exploitation. She defines it as that structure of argumentation which leads to a justification of subordination. The logics are given by men in order to justify their power over women and nature. This justification is given on ground of some characteristics like rationality that are supposed to be present in men and lacking in women. The following logic is given to justify the domination of nature by human beings:

(A1) Humans do, and plants and rocks do not, have the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which they live.

(A2) Whatever has the capacity to consciously and radically change the community in which it lives is morally superior to whatever lacks this capacity.

(A3) Thus, humans are morally superior to plants and rocks.

(A4) For any X and Y, if X is morally superior to Y, then X is morally justified in subordinating Y.

(A5) Thus, humans are morally justified in subordinating plants and rocks. (Warren 22)

The above logic provides a justification for subordinating nature. Ecofeminists are of the opinion that the twin dominations of women and nature (in the oppressive conceptual framework) are patriarchal in nature. The following argument is given by men as the ‘logic of domination’ that justifies power over women:

(B1) Women are identified with nature and the realm of the physical; men are identified with the “human” and the realm of the mental.
(B2) Whatever is identified with nature and the realm of the physical is inferior to ("below") whatever is identified with the “human” and the realm of the mental: or, conversely, the latter is superior to ("above") the former.

(B3) Thus, women are inferior to ("below") men; or, conversely, men are superior to ("above") women.

(B4) For any X and Y, if X is superior to Y, then X is justified in subordinating Y.

(B5) Thus, men are justified in subordinating women. (Warren 22)

‘Logic of domination’ constructs prejudice in society and breaks it into various dualisms. Ecofeminists argue that the logics that are given to justify domination must be broken down in order to achieve total equality. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, ruling men have their logics to justify domination and exploitation of women in an environmentally ruined country. The novel is a dystopian masterpiece in which fascist rule by men has given rise to biased policies, reducing the status of women to prisoners. Many restrictions imposed upon them, directly or indirectly, have left them completely paralyzed. The oppression of women is linked to deteriorated environment also. The failure of the administration is proven by the fact that the health of people has severely gone down and they are no more capable of giving birth to healthy children. Most of the new born babies suffer from congenital abnormalities. Men and women have become infertile and the whole blame has to be accepted by women. The novel is identified with dystopian genre, in which people
live in constant fear and control of their governing body, live meaningless lives and have very little hope for any amount of change to take place.

The connection between women and environment that is emphatically stressed upon by ecofeminists coincides with the major theme of the novel. Women become the sufferers and have to accept the whole blame of consequences, after an irreparable imbalance in the ecosystem. The environmental destruction is the cause of the torture inflicted upon women. Many of them have become infertile and those who are fertile are mostly giving birth to abnormal babies. In the new military regime, men have imposed strict rules upon women and pushed them in the corner. The tyranny of the military regime and the rigid rules imposed by them on women, have been activated by the environmental crisis. The environmental cause of the torture of women in the novel implies the need to check the increasing environmental imbalance in the world. Ecofeminists have stressed upon finding solutions for environmental imbalance as it is connected to the oppression of women. Karen J. Warren opines, “I suggest that from an ecofeminist philosophical perspective, it is important for all of us interested in finding solutions to the problems of environmental destruction and the unjustified subordination of women and other subdominant groups to take these connections seriously” (Warren 3).

There is strong evidence that environmental toxins affect women more than men. A research shows that “Persistent toxic chemicals, largely because of their ability to cross the placenta, to bioaccumulate, and to occur as mixtures, pose serious health threats disproportionately to infants, mothers, and the elderly” (Warren 10). In the United States, Native American women face health risks because of the presence
of uranium mining. The pregnant women suffer from more than normal rate of miscarriages. The birth defects are found more in number in the new born babies. One of the ecofeminist challenges is to identify the gender inequalities working in powerful institutions. Women are not given equal rights by men in these institutions and as a result, they cannot take important decisions and cannot participate in forming policies. Women consider environmental balance as their priority agenda but they cannot implement their suggestions because they are not made a part of decision taking bodies. WEDO (Women’s Environment and Development Organization), founded in 1990, has emphasized on the need to bring women into the policy making institutions that take decisions on the environment.

Atwood has highlighted her ecological concern by painting the dystopian picture of society. The dystopia in the novel is representative of the degrading values in the contemporary world. Today’s dominant world view neither values women’s work nor nature’s phenomena. Various activities related to new development practices have proven to be detrimental for the environment. The need of the hour is to take proper measures to save the planet from destruction. A view of earth from space through satellite reveals:

    The view from space reveals this change mercilessly, across all landscape zones and environmental systems: in the atmosphere as smog, a hole in the ozone layer and extreme weather events; in the oceans as warming and the discharge of pollutants; in the polar regions and high mountain ranges as retreating glaciers and melting sea ice; in the terrestrial ecosystems as forest-clearing, ground degradation and
mining; in the biosphere as the loss of natural ecosystems and
biological diversity; in the hydrosphere as the shortage of freshwater
resources and deterioration in the quality of drinking water, and
eventually as increasing desertification. (Dech et al. 38)

The novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* begins with a gloomy note as women are
suffering in America (now called Gilead), due to their being women. The nature of
sex determines the fate of the individual in the new military regime. Women have
been completely subdued under the pretence of keeping order. Stains comments on
the dystopian setting of novel by Atwood, “Society has returned to a constricted re-
creation of Puritan New England.... Perhaps only a Canadian, a neighbour as well as
an outsider to the United States, could create such an unsettling vision of the
American future” (Stains 21). The protagonist of the novel is remembering her past
time when she was kept imprisoned with other women at a place that was once a
gymnasium. While leading suffocating lives, they yearned for some hopeful change in
the circumstances. Women had become prisoners in their own country, without doing
any offence or committing any crime. The handmaids were trained under tight
security and they were not even allowed to talk to each other. They had to secretly
talk to each other to introduce themselves. They had to leave their families and bear
upon the task imposed upon them, of producing children in a mechanized manner.
They were being trained in the training camps to always remain inferior to men.

In the new regime, men had completely overpowered the country as the
tyrannical rulers. All women were supposed to remain inferior. The birth rate had
severely gone down due to environmental degradation. Many men and women had
become sterile. Consequently the fertile women, charged with false crimes, were turned into handmaids. The handmaids were allotted the duty to bear children for elite men. The protagonist has been posted in a Commander’s house as a handmaid where she is leading a monotonous life, bound by many rules and restrictions. She can wear only a particular red dress while going out, which is allowed once a day to buy things that are ordered by Martha. “Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us.... The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen” (11). Living almost completely in isolation, she longs for some change to take place.

Atwood has portrayed a picture of the society in which men enjoy the privilege of freedom and women have been reduced to the status of slaves. Simone de Beauvoir comments on the concentration of power in the hands of men:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other. (Beauvoir 171)

In the novel, besides common women, the curse of the deteriorated environment falls upon the elite women also. They have to become a part of the process of reproduction unwillingly. Those elite women who are sterile have to employ handmaids to increase the birth rate of their country that has fallen at an alarming rate due to toxins in the environment. The rich women have to allow the intercourse between their husbands and the handmaids. They have to be present
during the act, with the head of the handmaid between their thighs. The humiliation involved during the act fills their hearts with hatred for handmaids.

All kinds of decision taking powers have been reserved with higher ranking men. Women have been reduced to the level of almost being non-existent. The murder of a woman going on a road by two young men, out of a misunderstanding, is not taken seriously. Working women have been divided into classes – Marthas look after the kitchen work, some women have been allotted cleaning jobs, and handmaids are issued to rich men for producing children. They have to focus on their jobs without having close relationship with anyone. They cannot talk freely and are always bound by fear. They can’t walk on the roads alone according to the rules. The handmaids have to wear red cloaks and go on foot in the groups of two. Their faces are always covered with white cloth, called wings. “Given our wings, our blinders, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything” (40).

In the novel, men want to assert their supremacy by restricting the freedom of women. Any kind of intellectual or social freedom has been completely denied to women. This is the reason behind the unrest and stagnant condition of the country. Analysing the role of freedom, Amartya Sen critiques in his book *Development as Freedom* (2000) that freedom plays an important part in the development process of a country. He writes, “Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states” (Sen 3). Sen argues that sometimes lack of freedom is due to economic poverty and at other times it might be due to lack of public
facilities and social care. There can also be lack of freedom due to denial of political and civil liberties by authoritarian regimes and from imposed restrictions on the freedom to participate in the social, political and economic life of the community.

The tyranny of the military regime in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the cause of social unrest, revolt, and mismanagement. People have been denied even the basic freedom related to their personal lives. Atwood indicates that the development of a country is only possible if it is planned with prime importance given to social values. Sen comments, “Shared norms can influence social features such as gender equity, the nature of child care, family size and fertility patterns, the treatment of the environment and many other arrangements and outcomes” (Sen 9). Sen is of the opinion that people across the world suffer from unfreedom in its various forms. Famines, undernutrition, improper health care, polluted water, unhygienic living conditions etc. force people to suffer and die unnatural deaths. Inequality between men and women is also a major cause of premature deaths of millions of women and also restricts the freedom that women should have as their basic right.

Not only women have been denied freedom in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but men at lower ranks also suffer from restrictions that are imposed upon their personal lives. They are not allowed to entertain themselves with anything like magazines, films, or sex. Only if they are promoted to Angels, they get the permission to marry. Handmaids are allotted to powerful men who gain success in reaching to the top positions. The division of people into classes becomes a tool in strengthening the power structure and tyranny of the government.
Women have to act cautiously as they are always being watched for any crime they might commit. They are not allowed to go to the river, over bridges, or on the subway. They are considered unfit for doing anything important and they can never act with their free will. They have become aliens on their own land. Sterile women, who do not belong to elite class, are considered completely unfit and they have to lead miserable lives. Men can’t be sterile, according to the rules. “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (79). The protagonist remembers the time before the present government’s rule when women were free to go anywhere they felt like. They were not treated like brainless objects. They had goals to fulfil in their lives.

‘Night’ is the only time when the protagonist can feel easy. It is the time when she can feel free to think. “The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don’t move. As long as I lie still” (49). She remembers her daughter who has been snatched from her and she does not know about her whereabouts. She sometimes cannot believe that she is living like a prisoner in somebody’s house. “I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it” (52). In the new totalitarian regime, women are always watched as if they are criminals. They greet each other by saying “Under His Eye.” The fertile women who once enjoyed economic, social, and political liberty have been turned into handmaids, having no independence and opinion.

The different classes of women feel hatred for each other. All of them are supposed to do work like workers in a factory. They are not allowed to think of any
kind of entertainment or of personal care. Women are bound to feel inferior, or almost non-existent. They are the ‘other’ – weak, powerless, useless, and unimportant. The handmaids are taught to give up the desire for material things. “I’ve learned to do without a lot of things. If you have a lot of things, said Aunt Lydia, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values” (84). This was another way of curbing their freedom.

In the past, the protagonist lived a peaceful life with her husband and daughter. She remembers that her husband, Luke, liked to choose the kind of meat they were going to eat for the next week. “He said men needed more meat than women did, and that it wasn’t a superstition and he wasn’t being a jerk, studies had been done. There are some differences, he said” (83). Ecofeminists have critiqued upon the issue of meat-eating. They claim that women are sensitive towards killing animals, for the purpose of food or any other purpose. They can associate their own oppression by men with the oppression of animals. They feel that both the oppressions should be condemned. Ecofeminists suggest that the best way to help animals is by adopting broad ecofeminist values. Marti Kheel comments:

I draw on ecofeminist theory to subject the dominant norm, meat eating, to closer scrutiny. I examine the socio-cultural substructure that supports the practice of meat eating and, in particular, its foundation in patriarchal modes of thought. I focus on the Western world, since that is the area where meat eating predominates and where the connection between meat dominance and male dominance is most apparent. It is also the area where the most widespread abuse of nonhuman animals occurs, that is, on factory farms. (Kheel 327)
Kheel argues that food is considered to be incomplete without the addition of flesh. Is the killing of animals necessary for the diet to be considered healthy? Many people wonder how vegetarians find dietary fulfilment without meat. Meat has been associated with affluence, opulence, prestige, and power. Traditionally, hunting was a practice reserved for royalty and they had a privileged access to the meat obtained from the hunt. “Men are typically given a disproportionate share of meat, and men who do not eat meat are often viewed as effeminate. During warfare, it is considered especially important for men to eat meat” (Kheel 330).

Besides the practice of hunting, male dominance is also visible in the occupation of ‘animal husbandry,’ depicting the connection between oppression of women and animals. The term ‘animal husbandry’ suggests the connection between ownership of women and ownership of nonhuman animals. Just as a husband possesses a wife, the producers of animal flesh possess the animals on their farms. A wife is dominated and restricted to keep her under control. Similarly, animals are subjected to torture and their natural processes are altered. The animals that do not comply with the continuous demand of animal products are discarded and slaughtered.

Women, in the novel, suffer from severe exploitation and are treated like animals. They are kept by elite men for their reproductive capacity and the infertile women are forced to die. The handmaids have to live lonely and monotonous lives since they are restricted from having any kind of entertainment or enjoyment. They are also accorded inferior status as compared to other women. The infertile women live in Colonies under extremely inhuman conditions. Marti Kheel opines that
“Women’s fertility is also increasingly being exploited by the male-dominated medical establishment, which now routinely “harvests” women’s eggs. The underlying idea behind both operations is the same—women’s bodies and animals’ bodies belong first and foremost to men” (Kheel 334).

The consumer culture not only allures men to consume material things, or animal flesh, but the consumption extends to women also. Kheel comments, “Men consume women’s bodies in sex shows, houses of prostitution, and pornographic magazines. Their sexual “appetites” are aroused by women’s bodies in the same way that their taste buds are aroused by animal flesh” (Kheel 334). Marti Kheel is an ecofeminist who has devoted her research to find out the causes of killing of animals and their association with other types of oppression. She sheds light on the connection between the domination of women and animals and argues that the people who are opposed to the domination of women should be equally opposed to the torture inflicted on animals. “It is empathy, not abstract norms, that provides the motivation for vegetarianism in this invitational approach. Vegetarianism thus becomes part of a larger resistance to violence and domination” (Kheel 334).

Some people defend non-vegetarianism by the logic that predation is a natural part of the life cycle. They fail to realize that domestication of other animals in order to breed them for their flesh and other products is nowhere found in the natural world. Concluding her argument on vegetarianism, Kheel relates this practice to ecofeminism and ecofeminist peace politics. She suggests that ecofeminist philosophy can give birth to a new relationship with food. She comments, “… people are drawn to vegetarian food by its positive allure. The appeal of vegetarian foods flows at once
from an urge to resist patriarchal forms of dominance and control, and from positive feelings of empathy and care for the other animals with whom we share the earth” (Kheel 338).

The patriarchal dominance takes a very cruel and sinister form in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Women are in a strange situation in which they are not allowed to come close to anyone. They have to live in isolation, leading a robotic life. They have to live only to serve men and to please them. They have to kill their desires and also their identities. The protagonist remembers how they were bound to strict rules in the gymnasium. The place which was meant to be for entertainment, amusement, and recreation was now used for training women about how they could lead their lives totally subordinate to men. They were not even allowed to go to washroom freely and they could do that only for fixed number of times. Janine tells everyone in the gymnasium about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. Others were made to shout by the trainers that it was her fault only because she led them on and God allowed such a terrible thing to happen because He wanted to teach her a lesson. Aunts had taught them that it had to be woman’s fault only, even if she was gang-raped by men.

According to a research done by Larry May and Robert Strikwerda on rape by soldiers, it has been highlighted that men consider rape as their ‘winning’ strategy. In the article “Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape,” the psychology of men who rape has been explained:

Catharine MacKinnon has recently documented the link between violence and rape in the war in Bosnia. Young Serbian soldiers, some
with no previous sexual experience, seemed quite willing to rape Muslim and Croatian women as their reward for “winning” the war. These young men were often encouraged in these acts by groups of fellow soldiers, and even sometimes by their commanding officers. (May & Strikwerda 175-6)

The only purpose of training women by Aunts in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is to teach them that they have to dedicate their lives for the pleasure of men. The protagonist’s life in the Commander’s house has only one purpose – to become pregnant by him. “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure” (95). She feels that her own body betrays her. “I sink down my body as into a swamp, fenland, where only I know the footing. Treacherous ground, my own territory. I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future” (95). Her body is like a swamp and she has to come victorious out of it. The journey is very treacherous and she is not sure of anything. She relies on her natural instinct and feels her body as identical to the whole universe. Now she has to hear and watch for any change happening inside her. Nature is her only support during this desperate time.

It is apparent in the novel that men have completely overpowered women and they want to prove that they are superior and only their authority would rule. The new government promotes violence practiced by guards and spreads fear among people. The guards are called Angels, giving them a divine power too. They are arresting many people against various false charges. The names of the handmaids have been changed. Now they are called by names which show that they are someone’s property. The protagonist had to leave her small daughter and now her name is Offred.
(belonging to Fred). “My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden” (108). Women have been robbed of even their names, to leave them empty, powerless, and confused. “I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark” (108).

The dictatorship in the country has very methodically set up the hierarchical structure at every social level. The men at the top enjoy maximum power and privilege. Among women in their houses, the wives of the Commanders hold maximum power and rule other women. The Marthas (housekeepers) hold the next position and the handmaids are at the lowest level. The division of the whole society into various classes has brought sterility in the thoughts of people and they are no more creative. Becoming pregnant has become only a job for women; an event of pride has been turned into a forceful act.

Reading Bible or any other book is only men’s privilege in the new regime. ‘Reading’ is another freedom that women should be abstained from, according to new rules. Men didn’t want to spare anything for women that could be a source of pleasure for them. Reading anything is considered as a sin for them. The power of words and language has been removed from women’s lives. They are supposed to remain silent and obedient. The Commander prays, “Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent.... Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (115). Women have to remain weak and grief-stricken. Under such circumstances, Offred longs for love; real love. “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” (125). Neither women nor nature was valued in the newly created mechanized culture.
The whole environment had slowly filled with pollution in Gilead, until the situation got worse. “The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells” (143). The dystopian situation in the novel is the outcome of extremely polluted environment. Atwood has metaphorically stressed upon the need to keep a check on the degradation of environment. The infertility caused by toxic environment in the novel, has made women to live miserable lives. They prefer death rather than this type of maltreatment. They are treated like child producing machines, having no connection to any other intellectual activity.

The dystopia in the novel depicts the dark picture of the contemporary world. Environment is becoming increasingly toxic leading to the origin of many new diseases. The research on radiation from medical procedures has proved that U.S. population’s exposure to medical x-rays is also a factor in causing over half the deaths from cancer and over half the deaths from heart disease. Scientific research on the connection between cancer and contact with pesticides proved that farm workers who spray pesticides display a clear increase in the incidence of gastro-intestinal cancer. Many other blood diseases and cancers can also be the result of contact with pesticides. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that 25% of the world’s food crops are affected by mycotoxins, especially aflatoxins. These toxins have been detected in milk, cheese, and various other foods also. They have acute toxicological effects in humans. The human activities like the release of CFCs have
resulted in the depletion of ozone in the upper atmosphere and UVB rays reaching the Earth’s surface at an increased level. Increase in skin diseases has been found in such areas. There is an expected increase in skin cancers also.

Exposure to environmental pollution remains a major source of health risk throughout the world. The risks are higher in developing countries where poverty and weak environmental policies combine to cause high pollution levels. In recent years, several attempts have been made to find the global burden of diseases caused by environmental pollution. It has been found that human fertility has deteriorated due to exposure to pollutants. Waterborne diseases are a major cause of deaths in many parts of the world, particularly in children. Many areas show high levels of arsenic, fluoride, or contamination by pathogens in water. The exposure to ionizing radiation increases the risk of cancer and hereditary diseases.

The deterioration in the environment is the cause of decreased population in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Women give birth to deformed babies. “What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet” (143)? The only hope of the handmaids is that one day they will become pregnant and give birth to a normal baby. The handmaid who luckily gets pregnant is treated with respect and others envy her. Women are bearing the burden of deteriorated environment, although they are not responsible for it. They long for giving birth to a normal baby.

Offred remembers the training they got and the movies they were made to see. “... women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging
from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed” (152). Aunt Lydia explained that the condition of women was worse earlier. Anything that aroused desire was removed from the lives of women. They were not allowed to even look at any reading material. Men made them weak in every possible way and treated them as they treated animals. Offred thinks about the smile that Commander gave her, “It’s merely a smile, a formal kind of smile, friendly but a little distant, as if I’m a kitten in a window. One he’s looking at but doesn’t intend to buy” (178). When the Commander offers Offred to play Scrabble with her, she looks at the letters and words with lust, whichever she remembers from the past.

The Commander is a man of rules and reason. He is one of the masterminds behind the oppression of women in Gilead. But he finds it logical to break the rules he has himself made. He calls Offred to his study room although it is illegal for a handmaid to be alone with him. Offred has no other choice than to obey him. Utter helplessness of a woman under man’s domination has been depicted in the novel. Simone de Beauvoir opines about such helplessness:

The privileged place held by men in economic life, their social usefulness, the prestige of marriage, the value of masculine backing, all this makes women wish ardently to please men. Women are still, for the most part, in a state of subjection. It follows that woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her. (Beauvoir 169)

Offred has to force herself to recall her identity in the present situation. “I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have
trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance” (186). A woman’s state of existence depends only upon her fertility. She has been left with no other choice to define herself. In the male dominated society, his rules determine the identity of a woman. Amartiya Sen opines upon such adverse circumstances, “Our desires and pleasure-taking abilities adjust to circumstances, especially to make life bearable in adverse situations” (Sen 62). Offred is not allowed to apply any cream or lotion, since it is associated with luxury. To suppress the mental ability of women is the sole aim of the new regime and women have adjusted themselves to this forced situation. Sen argues that “The deprived people tend to come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival, and they may, as a result, lack the courage to demand any radical change, and may even adjust their desires and expectations to what they unambitiously see as feasible” (Sen 63).

Women, in the novel, are facing a critical time. They are the victims of the new political rules imposed by men and the degraded condition of the environment. At such a time, they are struggling hard for their survival. The rich women idle away their time as they are not allowed to do anything important socially, politically, or economically. They can only visit somebody’s house when another woman is ill. So they take their turns in falling ill. “As for us, the Handmaids and even the Marthas, we avoid illness” (198). Marthas have no future after the retirement. Sickness found in the handmaids could be fatal for them. Sick women are not needed anywhere, so they are afraid of falling sick.

Offred now values the freedom that she had in the past. She could stay in hotels whenever she felt bored up of her usual routine. Moira, Offred’s best friend,
did not want to get involved with men. She had the sixth sense that men would be the cause of their destruction. “Moira was always more logical than I am” (222). The change in government took place when the President was shot dead and the Congress was machine-gunned. Army had declared a state of emergency. The entire government had been wiped out and women were reduced to the level of complete dependence. Newspapers were closed down and the roadblocks began to appear. The totalitarian rule disapproved of any sort of freedom for women. The power of words and expression was the first one to be banned. Offred was fired from her job like other women. “I have to let you all go. He said this almost gently, as if we were wild animals, frogs he’d caught, in a jar, as if he were being humane” (228). The rule of weapons had begun that was cruel and inhuman. All the accounts that belonged to females were frozen and they were cut off from the economic power. They couldn’t own any property now. They were stopped from going anywhere on their own. Any kind of freedom that they could have was immediately banned. Men had to exercise their control over women in every possible way. Women felt paralyzed after leaving their jobs and after having no control over their lives. Every woman was scared of whatever was happening in the country. The dictators had their ‘Eyes’ everywhere to watch and punish the traitors.

The balance of power that existed earlier had turned into complete imbalance. Now the whole weight of power had shifted towards the side of men. Women were suddenly powerless and cut off from the system. Offred remembers that her relationship with her husband had suddenly changed. “But something had shifted, some balance. I felt shrunken, so that when he put his arms around me, gathering me
up, I was small as a doll. I felt love going forward without me.... We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his. Unworthy, unjust, untrue. But this is what happened” (236). Men started feeling pleasure in their newly acquired power. They were feeling happy, even if they didn’t show. They wanted to have an upper hand and they had succeeded.

Women were no more needed for taking important decisions. Atwood indicates that women, who have to bear the consequences of degraded environment and who have to face difficulties during pregnancy due to toxins in the environment, are the ones whose opinion is not made part of environmental policies. A research made by Annam Suresh on “Gender Tilt to Environmental Degradation” claims:

...the impact of environmental degradation hits women, particularly the rural and urban poor, far more than it hits men. It impacts negatively their health, income-generating options, education and even domestic life. And yet, women are not at the forefront of policies that will safeguard their environment and their well-being. (Suresh 11)

Offred remembers the time when her family had to leave their house to escape from the harsh treatment of the new government. They had to kill their cat since they could not take it along with them. The killing of the cat was symbolic of the changed circumstances that were cruel and inhuman. Offred realized that when men kill animals they first think of them as lifeless objects. In the same manner, they must have considered women as lifeless objects before killing their personal, social, and economic freedom. The Independence Day had been abolished. Handmaids were made to live like workers in children producing factory – mechanical, emotionless,
and lifeless lives. “That’s one of the things they do. They force you to kill, within
yourself.... What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled:
with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies” (250-1).

The handmaids are taught to live in a disciplined manner and behave like
robots. They are not supposed to talk while they are walking in their groups of twos.
They can’t walk alone; they are accompanied by another handmaid to keep an account
of every activity. This is the rule so that no one can think of running away. They are
not even allowed to stand at one place for a long time; in that case they may be picked
up for loitering. They cannot choose death for themselves and all the things that can
help them in committing suicide have been removed from their rooms.

The Commander, who is at the top ranking position, explains his ‘logic of
domination.’ He justifies his decision of dominating women by telling Offred that
men had nothing left to fight for. They were feeling bored as everything was easily
available. Anyone could buy sex easily. There was nothing exciting they could do
with women. “There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats
from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to
feel. Men were turning off on sex, even. They were turning off on marriage” (273).
By setting rules for the domination of women, the Commander was giving men the
purpose of their lives. Now they could exercise their superiority over women. Atwood
indicates that men’s desire to control women and their activities encourages them to
suppress women. By dominating them, they acquire a special purpose of their life.
Women are deliberately excluded from higher positions and their opinion is not
counted while making important policies. A research by Suresh, on exclusion of women from policy-making bodies, states:

Women’s absence from policy-making bodies limits their influence over governance. Worldwide, women hold less than 20 percent of seats in government. And though women are keenly affected by environmental degradation, they are rarely involved in policy decisions at the local and national levels. This limited participation means their perspectives, vulnerabilities, risks, needs, knowledge and best solutions are often ignored. (Suresh 11)

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women have no right to express their opinion. Feeling handicapped as a woman, Offred says to the Commander, “There’s hardly any point in my thinking, is there? ... What I think doesn’t matter.... I have no opinion” (273). The totalitarian regime does not want opinionated women. They are required to keep their thoughts to themselves and to keep their mouths shut. They cannot agree or disagree on any issue. The Commander replies, “Better never means better for everyone.... It always means worse, for some” (274). He had chosen to make the condition of women ‘worse.’ Feeling shocked at the Commander’s justification, Offred turns to nature to find solace. She immerses herself in nature as she associates her body with earth. “I lie flat, the damp air above me like a lid. Like earth.... I feel buried” (274).

Ecofeminists claim that the societal constraints forced on women create a corrupt society. The psychological mentality of the logic of domination must be destroyed. The novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflects the way patriarchal culture values
hierarchy and power structure. Men behave in a dominating manner to conform to the logic of domination. Everything has been mechanized in the new rule. The handmaids are required to walk in such a manner that the view looks good. “We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans...” (275). Even nature has taken the shape of systematic pattern. At every place there are Guards, arms at their sides. The seating arrangement at the ‘Women’s Prayvaganza’ justifies different categories of women: Wives and daughters of high-ranking officials at the top, the Marthas – the caretakers in the middle, and the handmaids at the lowest level. Offred thinks, “Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope, like the kind they used to have in movie theatres to restrain the customers. This rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us, makes for us a corral or pen ...” (277).

Ecofeminists have analysed the structure of oppression and they argue that the liberation of the oppressed is a preliminary process for establishing peace. The studies have revealed that there is a ‘colonized’ identity which is common to the oppressed groups. Val Plumwood opines that the oppressed groups have been excluded from the sphere of intellect – the sphere Western elites themselves represent. Nature has also been exploited by conceptualizing it as non-living, unimportant and weaker entity. “The story of the control of the chaotic and deficient realm of “nature” by mastering and ordering “reason” has been the master story of Western culture” (Plumwood 74). The oppressed people and nature are considered as separate and inferior from the sphere of reason and intellect by the dominant people. This turns out to be the cause behind the hierarchical structure, dualism, oppression and domination.
The novel highlights the web of oppressions that plays various roles in a society. Women are treated far inferior than men, the wives of higher officials further dominate other women, and infertile women are also made to live miserable lives. The imbalance and disharmony reflect the incapacity on the part of human beings in creating a loving and caring world. The emotions that dominate in such a society are fear, anxiety, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction. Women have to idle away their time in useless activities because they are not allowed to participate in the important works and to take independent decisions. Handmaids have been kept alive mainly for the process of reproduction. The rate of congenital abnormalities is so high that very rare babies turn out to be normal or viable. This has been the result of abuse of nature and environmental degradation. The link between oppression of women and abuse of nature is prominent in the novel.

Men, who are responsible for deterioration of environment by their oppressing policies regarding industries, wars, and nuclear power, do not own the responsibility of the fallen health of women and high birth mortality rate. Women have to own the guilt of giving birth to abnormal or deformed babies. “It’s like Janine, though, to take it upon herself, to decide the baby’s flaws were due to her alone” (279). By restricting and imprisoning women, men have forced them to accept the guilt for the destruction of any kind. They are supervised everywhere, as if they are thieves or aliens from space, and not a part of society. Those who try to revolt are immediately killed and burnt like garbage.

Atwood has portrayed the picture of a dystopian society in which all the restrictions have been imposed on the freedom of women. The deteriorated
environment is an aftermath of the continuous oppressive policies. Women have no right to give their opinion on the important or even trivial matters. Amartya Sen comments upon this kind of restriction on speaking by women. He writes, “Even a very rich person who is prevented from speaking freely, or from participating in public debates and decisions, is deprived of something that she has reason to value. The process of development, when judged by the enhancement of human freedom, has to include the removal of this person’s deprivation” (Sen 36).

In The Handmaid’s Tale, the girls have to get married at an early age, without seeing the face of the man they are going to spend their life with. Men enjoy and celebrate their victories – either military victories or the victories over women. They repress women and girls to magnify their political victories and power. Love is nowhere in the air; it has been prohibited. Men have organized the society without the permission to love, in order to create a disciplined society. Women are required to live in the simplest manner. The Commander says, “I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array” (286).

The freedom to love has been denied to women so that their whole concentration is focused on childbearing. A wife is not expected to love her husband. “Just do your duty in silence. When in doubt, when flat on your back, you can look at the ceiling” (287). There are no answers for the inquiring minds. Women have to silently accept the rules imposed by men. Falling in love has been excluded from the functioning of the society. Love has been replaced by organized and disciplined mind. Girls can wear only white dresses. Offred says:
Falling in love, I said. Falling into it, we all did then, one way or another. How could he have made such light of it? Sneered even. As if it was trivial for us, a frill, a whim. It was, on the contrary, heavy going. It was the central thing; it was the way you understood yourself.... (292)

Just like the protagonist, ecofeminists place the emotions of love and care as central to their agenda of peace. Men have dominated women and nature by diminishing the value of these emotions. Roger J. H. King argues, “Ecofeminists have expressed dissatisfaction with the dominant approaches within environmental ethics on the grounds that they reflect a typically male set of experiences of the world and replicate aspects of patriarchal thinking” (King 83). The rationalism and the rationalist-derived conceptions of the self by men form the basis of the neglect of emotions. In the novel also, ruling men have rationalised the functioning of the society and falling in love has been prohibited. Val Plumwood critiques, “It is in the name of such a reason that these other things – the feminine, the emotional, the merely bodily or the merely animal, and the natural world itself – have most often been denied their virtue and been accorded an inferior and merely instrumental position” (Plumwood 157).

Atwood has highlighted the man’s desire to position himself at the top and to create a hierarchical structure by diminishing the status of everything else that exists. The Commander in the novel likes to diminish everything including Offred. The handmaids like her have been assigned the work of producing children, like goods are produced in a factory. The men at the top positions have diminished the aesthetics
involved in love, marriage, and giving birth. They have also reduced the value of freedom that was once enjoyed by women. The domination of nature is also a part of the same mentality. Ariel Salleh comments:

Now it is precisely this attempt to gain dominion and control over nature that gives rise to class society, as men harness the labour power of Others to help subdue the wild. (Salleh 72)

The Commander, being an officer of a higher rank, makes the rules and considers it his special right to break them. He takes Offred to a club which is illegal and where women are kept for some extra excitement. “He is demonstrating, to me, his mastery of the world. He’s breaking the rules, under their noses, thumbing his nose at them, getting away with it” (307). Breaking the rules for personal interests has also been the cause of exploitation of planet Earth. Man has privileged himself with the right to exploit women as well as nature. The connection of the similar oppression of women and earth grounds the theory of ecofeminism to strive for a non-hierarchical structure of society. The ecofeminist movement condemns those men who manipulate and twist the rules for their personal benefit, while working at powerful positions. Offred thinks about the Commander that “Perhaps he’s reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely anything you feel like, anything at all” (307).

Atwood indicates that environmental crisis is the outcome of unethical practices by men at the top positions. Rules are broken and manipulated in favour of personal interests. Joni Seager argues, “The environmental crisis is not just a crisis of
physical ecosystems. The *real* story of the environmental crisis is a story of power and profit and political wrangling; it is a story of the institutional arrangements and settings, the bureaucratic arrangements and the cultural conventions that *create* conditions of environmental destruction” (Seager 3). In the ‘New World Order,’ military might and deadly weapons control the global economic and political system. The political leaders have become puppets in the hands of multinational corporations. These are significant reasons behind unchecked pollution of the environment and the sick planet.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale,* the Commander takes Offred to the secret club where higher officials flirt with women. The ruling men had formed many rules against the liberty of women. But they needed prostitutes to add excitement to their lives. The Commander brings Offred to the club because his relationship was very formal with her in his house. Simone de Beauvoir writes about this ‘extra’ need of men. She comments, “There is a double demand of man which dooms woman to duplicity: he wants the woman to be his and to remain foreign to him; he fancies her as at once servant and enchantress. But in public he admits to only the first of these desires; the other is a sly demand that he hides in the secrecy of his heart and flesh. It is against morality and society; it is wicked like the Other, like rebellious Nature, like the ‘bad woman’ ” (Beauvoir 221).

In the novel, females are not allowed to be educated or choose their own husband. The control and abuse of women and girls give men the power to serve their interests. Men hold the all the decision making positions and they construct oppressive culture to control women in public and private spheres. On one side,
women have to cover their bodies and hair and their freedom is totally restricted and on the other side, they are used for men’s sexual gratification. Men exploit nature also for their greedy demands, putting pressure on the planet. Instead of considering natural resources as limited, and feeling the need to conserve them, man has excessively used them for their personal profits. Women are dressed as rabbits in the secret club. It signifies men’s interest in linking women and nature to a weak status and hence their right of over-powering them.

There is another class of women in the novel – those who are infertile. They are made to live in the Colonies, where toxic pollutants are thrown as waste. The infertile women perform the job of burning the dead bodies and have to live amidst toxic dumps and the radiation spills. “They figure you’ve got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves” (323). Offred realizes that men have got real power as they can kill. She thinks, “I don’t want pain.... I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject. I feel, for the first time, their true power” (368). The power of men that can create violence and oppress women with the help of weapons has been highlighted in the novel. The intoxication of power in men can reduce women to mere objects.

The novel sheds light on the ‘logic of domination’ that men use as a justification for domination. Men create various logics to make their domination appear justified. Freud explained a theory about the logic of domination. He said that people develop various discourses in society. Dualisms are created through these discourses and ‘logic of domination’ decides which side of the dualism is inferior.
People suffer if they fall into the weaker group. These dualisms place the white heterosexual male above everyone else. For society to overcome the logics of domination, it should first understand its discourses and work jointly to destroy them. This will lead to the elimination of discrimination in society.

Women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* have been pushed to the edge, symbolizing the oppression by patriarchal power structure and indicating towards the imbalance that exists at the social, political, and economic levels. The imbalance of power has brought ecological devastation and the situation calls for an urgent need to reframe political tenets. Atwood has, through this dystopian vision and by exposing ‘logic of domination,’ attempted to stress upon the need to destroy the structure of domination from its roots. As Ariel Salleh opines:

In times such as these, when the lifestyle of a few brings ecological devastation and poverty to many, there is an urgent need to reappraise economic alternatives to industrialisation, to reframe our political tenets and to start taking small everyday steps away from the folklore of self-loathing and its pitiful gadgetry. Concepts such as ‘management’ and ‘control,’ paternalistic beliefs that western technologies are essential to the good life, these are the most insidious forms of invasion.... (Salleh 194)

By making use of dystopian vision in the novel, Atwood reflects upon the poor political policies. People who are marginalized in the Colonies have no choice other than to live in an environment that is full of fatal toxins. Belonging to the lowest class, they automatically become the victims of the exposure to hazardous wastes. Their
untimely death is not a matter of concern for the authorities. They have got no right to challenge and question this biased attitude towards them. The role of politics in planning a healthy environment has been suggested by Atwood. A healthy and clean environment can, in turn, contribute to peace and harmony of the nation.

The novel sheds light on the fact that in a system where men are privileged for social and economic power, women are bound to suffer from structural oppression. Patriarchy pervades political as well as personal lives. Men, in the novel, who enjoy the maximum power, lose all sense of ethics. The restrictions imposed and violence inflicted upon women appears normal to them. To reject the male dominance and ascertain the value of women’s experiences and their individual identity, is the major aspect of ecofeminism. It seeks to liberate women from the structures of dominance.

The positive role that democracy plays by granting political freedom and civil rights, is an important issue related to the novel. Under dictatorial rule, people are bound by many rules that restrict their freedom. In democracy, public debates and discussions play a major role in the formation of values. People can collectively work towards the over-all development of the country. A more informed public discussion of environmental issues results in a healthy environment and a better system to maintain it. Sen argues, “The permissive role of political and civil rights (in allowing – indeed in encouraging – open discussions and debates, participatory politics and unpersecuted opposition) applies over a very wide domain, even though it has been more effective in some areas than in others” (Sen 158).

Mary Wollstonecraft writes in her book A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) that “Independence is the grand blessing of life” (Andrew 120). She refers to
economic independence as well as independent opinions. She emphasizes upon the education of women for their development and freedom. She locates political oppression as a principal cause behind the hierarchical organization of society. Private and public are co-related as both affect each other. The type of relationships at home reflects the structure of society. Similarly the effect of political oppression is also visible in the relationships at home. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, political oppression and hierarchy, both at home and in the society, define the relationships and structure of over-all functioning.

Ecofeminism raises important questions about the relationship between the domination of women and environmental abuse. ‘Logic of domination’ is the false justification given in both types of domination. This insight brings the feminists and environmentalists together in the fight against ‘logic of domination.’ The traits that are devalued in women and are thought to be appropriate in the justification of domination need to be reconceived in a non-patriarchal context. In the novel, motherhood has been institutionalized and has been made a tool of oppression of women. Due to the extreme situation in which population has decreased drastically as a consequence of environmental abuse, women have become the victim of ‘logic of domination.’ Men find the oppression of women justifiable and appropriate, considering them weak. Female identity is bound intricately with motherhood and motherhood is forced on women as the only way to have meaningful lives. Women’s options of life have been severely limited. Christine J. Cuomo argues in her article “Ecofeminism, Deep Ecology, and Human Population”: 
Women must be empowered with regard to their own bodies, their role as creators of culture, about their role and power in sexuality, and about their self-creation of identities other than as mother. (Cuomo 102)

Environmental classism which is an ecofeminist concern has also been highlighted in the novel. The lower class people have to bear the dumping of toxic waste in their living area and it is considered justifiable by the elite class. This pathetic condition of poor people in the novel resembles a real situation that occurred at Love Canal, United States and turned a woman into an activist. Lois Gibbs, in 1978, became concerned about the health of people in her neighbourhood when she found out that her son had become epileptic and her daughter had developed a rare blood disease. She was shocked to know that there were an unusually high proportion of miscarriages, stillbirths, and birth defects in that area. She claimed that it was due to a dump of more than twenty thousand tons of toxic waste nearby. When the state authorities refused to believe her, she had to raise her voice in the form of protest. She found that women who became active for any social cause were seen as a threat by men.

Similar incidents of the dumping of toxic wastes at particular regions, leading to health problems in people have been noticed and criticized. In United States, dumping of toxic wastes in poor, Black, and Native American lands is a matter of concern for them. One large dump that takes waste from forty-six US states is sited at Emelle, Alabama where 70 per cent population is African-American. Waste dumps and noxious industries are sited in communities of the minorities like African
American or Hispanic communities. Many analysts have tried to explain why industrial corporations act so irresponsibly towards the environment. The decision-making bodies in industries concentrate on the profit motive and they have nothing to do with environmental issues. It is cheaper to dump toxic wastes in the rivers than to build purification plants. The newer technology keeps polluting the environment more than the old one. Since World War II, the USSR and most Communist states in Eastern Europe have been heavily militarized. Military controlled much of the industrial sector and environmentalists were considered the enemies of those states. Radioactive waste in huge quantity was dumped into lakes and rivers. “Government repression of environmental activities appears to be on the rise worldwide, and in countries where military-controlled government repression of the citizenry is the norm, environmentalists are even more likely to suffer government attack” (Seager 119).

The power of men is linked to the web of relationships among men in government, military, and commercial elites. When they repress environmentalists, they are actually protecting their selfish interests, their networks, and private wealth. In the US, the military controls many nuclear production facilities, and thousands of nonnuclear military installations. They are the prime source of toxicity in the form of chemicals, solvents, propellants, fuel, oils, cyanides, acids, heavy metals etc. Cancer is a disease that has emerged as a serious global problem. It is increasing at a fast rate because appropriate measures are not taken to reduce the poisons that modern industry produces. The pharmaceutical and research divisions that benefit the cancer research are the largest polluters of the environment. They focus on the treatment
procedures and not on the prevention strategies of cleaning up the environment. Such unethical practices are creating an environment for a major disaster to take place in future.

Through the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood wants to convey the message that rationalism takes the form of tyranny and people are made to suffer under oppressive rules, if the value of emotions and ethics is completely neglected. The sudden take-over by military rule brings an oppressive order in the country. People are divided into classes – males and females; lower class males, Angels, and elite class; Marthas, Econowives, and Handmaids. The distribution of people into classes is done to bring order and discipline. But the emotions of love, friendship, and kinship, are banned and the liberty of personal life is restricted. Revolution by the lower classes is inevitable under such circumstances. The brutal domination of women is also bound to create unrest and revolt.

The parallel deterioration of women and nature in the novel forms the ground for the ecofeminist analysis. Ecofeminist theorists critique that patriarchy and rationalism create oppressive practices that are against the welfare of women and nature. Women must be raised to an equal level as men and their empowerment is necessary for the development of a country. Nature also needs to be preserved and environmental ethics need to be followed for health to be restored. Ecofeminist peace politics paves the way for peace by adopting such practices. Peace should be achieved by removing social inequalities and making efforts for equality and inclusivism. Dominating practices only lead to violence, murders, and disasters. The social inequalities as depicted in the novel give rise to revolt and unrest. Ecofeminist agenda of peace demands non-patriarchal, ecologically balanced society in order to avoid any dystopian situation to arise in future.
Works Cited


