CHAPTER IV

THE HANDMAID’S TALE: THE CARVING OUT OF
FEMINIST SPACE

The Handmaid’s Tale is Margaret Atwood’s international award-
winning best seller. 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 the
basic rights. The novel is a kind of anti-Utopia of the not-too-distant future as
reflected through the voice of Offred, a handmaid and one of the victims in the
theocracy.

Patriarchy and colonialism are both power structures which operate on
similar principles. Colonialism may well be seen as a paradigm of patriarchy
in feminist literary discourse. This is because gender relations provide the
“blue-print for all other power relationships” and are “the model for power
relations between generations, socio-economic classes, relations, racial and
ethnic groups as well as between imperial powers and their colonies.”

Both patriarchy and colonialism involve relationships of domination and
suppression, assumed superiority and imposed inferiority, where the dominated
is forced to take up the oppressed, exploited victim position. Both in patriarchy
and colonialism, various subversive tactics may be resorted to by the
dominated group – open rebellion, secret revolt, formation of defiant groups, outward submission accompanied by a slow carving out of inner independent space, acts of subversion and sabotage, and the creation of free space through written or oral language composition.

According to Northrop Frye, Canada is "the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology, as well as mercantile economics." According to Northrop Frye, Canada is "the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology, as well as mercantile economics." Just as colonial power structures seem to be built into the collective unconscious of Canada, patriarchal power structures too have left their impact on the female psyche. A sensitive and consciously self-aware writer like Margaret Atwood exposes these power structures and their effects on both those who exercise power and those who are subjected to it. While colonial domination is a recurrent theme with the Canadian male writer, women writers see colonialism as a metaphor of the gender power-struggle. In Linda Hutcheon’s opinion, “In all her writing, Atwood shows herself to be the tireless exposcer and exposes of cultural cliches and stereotypes, in particular of those that affect women.” 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. The protagonist's "own story" recalled from memory is transcribed by Professor Pieixoto, an activist. It cannot be the authentic version, yet it reaches us. It may be controlled and altered by patriarchy, but it is surely an approximation to and reconstruction of the protagonist's version.

Offred, the protagonist in The Handmaid's Tale, escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the Undergrowth Female Road to tell her tale of victimization. Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. She uses "language" as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences. Language is as well a "subversive-weapon" to tell her tale. Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization of women. She tells her tale with a sense of commitment to expose how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies like the Republic of Gilead. She also suggests ways and means to surmount the barriers to woman's individuality and autonomy. Offred's power of word triumphs despite the barriers constructed by time and man.

To comprehend the tale of Offred, a handmaid, it is important to evaluate the background that has led to the establishment of the class of handmaids in Gilead. The Republic of Gilead is governed by a Fundamentalist
Christian theocracy. A so-called Church-State regime, Gilead legitimizes and enforces the class of handmaids out of the dire necessity to overcome a fertility crisis among the ruling elite. On account of AIDS, syphilis and environmental toxins, many of them are sterile, their wives barren and the children mostly wretched mutants called "unbabies." Thus the birth rate, which is dangerously low among the ruling elite, has led to establish the class of handmaids, whose "domestic" duties form a degraded, obscene version of the flurry of sexual activity.

Offred, the protagonist, now the handmaid of Commander Fred, was picked up as she, along with her husband and daughter, was attempting to escape from this country. Her husband is probably dead and the daughter quite possibly is in one of the Morality Schools and is being adequately trained either to become the wife of some unknown Angel or to serve a Commander as a future handmaid. In either case, her womb is to be colonized. Like Rennie, the central character in Bodily Harm, Offred is placed in Red Centre for training. Such "speculative literature," as Atwood defines it, is built up from the experiences of the past and the present and extended to the future.

The Bible is used by the regime as authority for their laws. The polygamy of the Old Testament provides them with the sanction for handmaids. They regard themselves as latter-day Jacobs and use their handmaids in a similar way in this new Gilead. In this way, the Republic of
Gilead justifies its “sexist policies with the socio-biological theory of natural polygamy and legitimizes its racist and sexist policies as having biblical precedent.”

Gilead is a highly alienating structure of society, especially for women. Women are prohibited from communicating with one another under the “Divide and Rule” policy of patriarchy. Women are separated according to their functions, as wives, marthas (housekeepers), handmaids (child-bearers), aunts (disciplinarians), and jezebels (prostitutes), and kept in segregation. Marthas are forbidden to become friendly with handmaids; wives regard handmaids with hostility and envy; aunts are used to oppress handmaids; and handmaids are not supposed to talk with each other. There is a constant vigil to prevent the forging of relationships among women. Women however overcome the externally imposed interpersonal alienation and reach out to one another secretly. The bonding among women and the slow forging of a caring sisterhood is a strategy by which female space is acquired in the novel. As Olivia Frey points out, “The ethic of care and relationships is most commonly at the centre of women’s lives; it provides us with ‘space’ to think differently, another model for doing things.”

Despite the strict regimentation at their training centre, the handmaids communicate with one another “through whispers, lip reading and touch, while lying flat, each in her own bed.” The protagonist manages to communicate
with her former friend Moira who also arrives at the same training centre. Later too the handmaids, Offred and Ofglen, discover joyfully that they were both ‘non-believers’. The discovery makes Offred delirious with joy. Despite the ban on all communication between the handmaids and the Marthas, one of the housekeepers, Cora develops a liking for Offred and is even willing to lie for her once. For Offred, it is a triumph in itself, a subversive carving out of female space.

It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us. (160)

When Offred first arrived at Serena’s house as a handmaid, she had wanted to turn her into an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect her. But Serena, the wife, was hostile at first, though she later offers to help Offred and arranges clandestine meetings between Offred and Nick and gets a photograph of Offred’s daughter to be seen by her. Serena’s offer of a cigarette to Offred, Rita’s gift of an ice cube to her, and Offred’s compliments to Rita on her vegetable-carving for the dinner-table, all are examples of the growing goodwill among the women in Gilead, under restricted circumstances.

Offred, the narrator of The Handmaid’s Tale, is one of the several “handmaids” who, because of their ‘viable ovaries’ (135) are to be recruited
for "breeding purposes" of the "Commanders of the Faith" who are childless as a result of their wives' infertility. The Republic of Gilead is openly misogynistic, in both its theory and practice. The state reduces the handmaids to the slavery status of being mere "breeders." As Offred says, "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (128). If the handmaid becomes pregnant, the child she bears will be regarded as that of the Commander and his wife. After the delivery the handmaid has to surrender the child to her mistress. So the handmaid must act as surrogate mother and bear a child for the aging Commander with the collusion of his barren wife by a literal enactment of the device invented by Rachel in the Bible. In this way the handmaid is desexed and dehumanized.

The Handmaid is proclaimed an "unwoman" if she does not succeed by the end of her third two-year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment of banishment to the colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. Thus, the dictates of state policy in Gilead relegate sex to a saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival. In contrast, male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says, "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (57). So women are judged by double standards of morality in respect of infertility.

Offred in her autobiography, The Handmaid's Tale, "sets before us ... her desperate struggle to reconstruct her being across an all but unbridgeable,
violent severing of time before and after the imposition of Gilead. To do this she must insist upon her own script, in a world where her voice has been erased and her role in life rescripted for her by others, where her meaning, use and plot are totally controlled by other interest and forces."

Despite the call of authority to forget, to be silent and thus remain effaced, pilotless, Offred’s response is defiant. Her scripting of the self through memory and language proclaims the defeat of Gilead’s monologic authoritarian discourse. In this venture, Gilead is the fountainhead of all activity. Every action of Offred, like having a physical relationship with Nick, every symbol like playing of the scrabble, every image like that of the wall, square, church, shops, the use of Bilhah’s myth, the hint of chosen words like ‘ceremony’, ‘salvagings’, and ‘partcicution’ (the execution of male offenders through the participation of women by way of lynching), demonstrates a poet’s control of structures, symbols, and words. Atwood is more a poet than a fiction writer and her initial orientation as a poet has enriched her style. Her protagonist, explicitly and more often implicitly, sings her music that is perfectly audible and comprehensible to the discerning ear. “The Hadmaid’s Tale though written in the tight-lipped minimalist style that has become an Atwood trade-mark, conceals an ultimate insight that is far more complex and illusive.”

In Gilead, women are alienated from their own bodies by the elaborate clothes that have to be worn by them at all times, covering them fully in many
layers. The handmaid’s clothes are specially designed to hide bodily contours and the wings and veils are meant to prevent her “from seeing and also from being seen” (18). She is not even allowed to bathe by herself. Around her ovulation time, on the night before the “ceremony,” she is given a bath by a Martha. After the bath, she waits for the ceremony, feeling completely dehumanized – “I wait, washed, brushed, fed like a prize pig” (79).

Gilead women are alienated from the universe around them by the severe restriction on their freedom of movement. They are forbidden to read and write, for that is a man’s prerogative in Gilead. By thus being denied self-expression through writing and speaking and being denied perception of reality around them through reading, they are isolated from the world around them. However, they try to keep in touch with the world through furtive reading, whenever possible, and through a secret exchange of oral information with one another.

When Gilead first came into being, the very first step of the new regime had been to freeze women’s credit cards and bank accounts and take away their jobs and property rights, thus destroying their financial independence which is the primary requisite in any true liberation of women. With the loss of her job, the protagonist had felt stripped of her independence and individuality, perceiving herself as a doll-wife. Moreover, the state cancels the original names of the handmaids in order to erase their former identity and labels them
according to the names of their Commanders. It is metaphoric of the silencing of women that their names have been given by the state. Hence “Offred,” the narrator’s relational naming, is not a name but a tag that she wears to signify that she is the handmaid “of Fred.” As Offred says:

My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden ... name is like your telephone number, useful only to others (79-80).

Similarly other handmaid’s names are Ofglen, Ofwayne, Ofwarren. They are doomed to wear scarlet robes signifying their adultery.

The destruction of the individual name is part of the attempt to destroy the past and force the woman to live in the present moment alone, in a two-dimensional existence. But Offred carves out a free space for herself in her flashbacks, contrasting the past free and casual style of life with the present regimentation. She further contrasts the past friendship with other women like Moira and her own mother and the present enforced isolation. She often recalls the views and actions of her mother, a militant feminist, who believed that “A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (130-131) and spoke of “networking,” of forging ties with other women. She often recalls vignettes of her life with her husband, Luke, and their daughter, perhaps to convince herself of the objective reality of the former state of affairs before Gilead. As narrator, Offred apologizes for her frequent flashbacks: “You will have to
forgive me. I’m a refugee from the past and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I’ve left or been forced to leave behind me” (239).

Gilead’s aim is total annihilation of woman as a person. Offred discovers that even the memory of her has been erased from her daughter’s mind, as if she had never existed: “I have been obliterated for her ... you can see it in her eyes; I’m not there ... I can’t bear it, to have been erased like that” (240). Her “Being-for-others” has been destroyed. The Gileadean handmaids discover that one way of creating female space is by assiduously affirming one’s own ‘being-for-others’ and reciprocally doing it for others too. During the shopping trips, they show their recognition of each other: “I see several women I recognize, exchange with them the infinitesimal nods with which we show each other we are known at least to someone, we still exist” (295).

The separation of women according to their functions in Gilead promotes their fragmentation. The wives are mainly decorative in functions and are dressed in blue. The middle-aged housekeepers called Marthas are dressed in green. When they become weak and sick and cease working, they are deported to the colonies. The handmaids, dressed in red, are young women in their twenties or thirties and serve as child-bearers to elderly childless Commanders. In addition to the handmaids, the Republic of Gilead offers its own state-sponsored brand of sex prostitutes called the Jezebels whose sole function is to entertain foreign delegations. The Aunts, the police women of
Gilead who are clad in paramilitary khaki, train the handmaids. Thus women are completely controlled by men and are arranged in a hierarchy of value in Gilead. Therefore Offred’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* posits a “future culture in which such feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function.”

Offred, the handmaid, in her “reduced circumstances” (99) obeys “ritualized subjugation” to the ruling elite because she knows what the statement “Give me children, or else ... die” (Genesis) means. She is compelled to discharge her duties as a handmaid knowing fully well the consequences. Under the pressure of terrifying alternatives, Offred feels, “I resign my body freely to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object” (268). Offred is forced into pregnancy tests every month. The doctor who examines Offred and other handmaids periodically for signs of pregnancy never sees their faces. The Commander who attempts to impregnate her once a month is indifferent to her appearance. As appearance is unimportant for the commanders, the handmaids are not given face cream. Their bath is regulated by others. Their eating of food is not chosen by them. For minor offences like reading, their arms and legs which are seen as inessential for reproduction, are ruthlessly chopped off.

As a part of their “re-education” in submission, Offred and other handmaids are made to watch pornography films from the seventies and
eighties in which women appear in various attitudes of submission, brutalization and grotesque mutilation. To keep obedient to the regime, the handmaids are ordered to listen and utter the prayers which Soul Scroll machines say while printing them. The handmaids are also taught by the "Aunts," the police of Gilead, to walk with their heads bent down low. So silence and powerlessness go together in the lives of Offred and other handmaids.

Their predicament lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* about man's marginalization of women. This view corroborates Michael Foucault's observation about the "power sex" correlative. According to this observation, the regime assigns roles to handmaids, and issues decrees relating to the social, religious and cosmic concepts convenient to the interests and desires of the ruling elite. Consequently, Offred, the narrator-protagonist, becomes the victim of the ruling elite in the Republic of Gilead. Offred feels the indignity and terror of living under a futuristic regime controlled by Christian fundamentalists. She is aware of her present reality which is oppressive and which denies her individuality, nurture and autonomy. Her life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term.

According to Offred, language in the Republic of Gilead is officially forbidden because the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons
that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead only the ruling class has access to books. As part of the training, the handmaids are required to recite the Biblical injunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness. Biblical and Marxist teachings are blended and distorted in the effort to brainwash the handmaids: “From each says the slogan, according to her ability; to each according to his needs. We recited that three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said St. Paul again in Acts” (111). Offred’s ironic comment “or so they said” casts doubt on the authority of the statement and forces us to note also the use of the pronouns “her” and “his” as yet another evidence of the oppression of women in Gilead. So Offred questions the authority of patriarchal language which comes from the reservoir of male discourse. Women in Gilead are denied books, paper, pens, and even scrabble is a clandestine activity. Shops are identified by pictures rather than by names: “they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us” (24). Thus, words are themselves forbidden in a society governed by The Word.

Offred begins to break the slavery syndrome by transgressing the uniforms of Gilead. She steals into her Commander’s study the game of scrabble and discovers that there can be freedom even within the prison house of language. She is able to ask the Commander questions, criticize him, and even condescend to him. Offred imagines stabbing the Commander when he
asks her to kiss him. She says: “I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup, sexual, over my head” (131). She realises the power of “pen”. As she says, “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of words it contains ... just holding it envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It’s one more thing I would like to steal” (174).

Offred who witnesses the bloody “salvagings,” the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of women, begins to feel shock, outrage, nausea and considers them as barbarous. She is alert and seems to be put in jeopardy. She feels as if her stay were a prison sentence. She is filled with lassitude in Gilead. She would like to repent, abdicate, renounce, and sacrifice her life in Gilead. She feels her body no longer suited for pleasure. She does not wish to be a doll hung up on the wall. She occupies herself with nostalgic memories of her husband and daughter and strongly desires to escape from her present claustrophobic environment. She is not even free to die in Gilead. Ultimately, Offred decides to end up by hanging: “I could noose the bedsheets round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off” (274). But she considers suicide an idle thing, a timid action. Offred has a lot of patience and she does not believe in rumours. “I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumours of the future” (69). The cushion on which the word “faith” is embroidered is an image that reveals Offred’s profound faith in her life as a woman. Although she lives in man’s tyrannical world in Gilead,
she feels a sense of pride for having been born a woman. As Offred says: "Oh God, king of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man" (182).

Offred recalls her visceral connections to the husband and daughter from whom she has been so abruptly separated. She mourns a holistic love for them.

No body dies from lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from. There is nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere ... Where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too an a missing person. From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like th images of saints ... I can conjure them. (97)

In this way, Offred endorses a genuine and holistic love for her husband and daughter. She hopes she will receive a message that keeps her alive.

Offred’s gradual development of feminist consciousness towards initiating risky but assertive schemes breaks completely the slavery syndrome. As Offred says: I’m tired of this melodrama, I’m tired of keeping silent” (275). It is through Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur, that Offred associates herself with underground network which shifts her from “being a helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor.” Ultimately Offred is rescued by Nick, the Private Eye and the Underground May day resistance group who have come in the “black van.” Nick calls her by her real name and says, “It’s May day. Go with them” (275).
The Handmaid’s Tale is not presented as history or his story, i.e. a story from a man’s point of view, but as her story, the story of Offred, narrated by herself orally. The narration is made off and on, not chronologically, into a recording machine and preserved in tapes. Annis Pratt’s generalization about women’s fiction could perhaps be applied to Offred’s narrative: “Women’s fiction manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day-today life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology.”

Women in general are connected with the oral tradition and language. The entire nove, The Handmaid’s Tale, except for the Epilogue, is supposed to be orally narrated by Offred. The oral element of the narration is often emphasized: “It’s also a story I’m telling in my head as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden” (49).

The importance of oral tradition among women is indirectly suggested in the novel by the manner in which Moira’s story is placed together with what others have said, a story passed from woman to woman, by word of mouth: “part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Aunt Lydia” (139). This is not gossip. The reason for the spread of Moira’s story is that Moira’s daring escape served as a positive role model for all handmaids: “Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us. She was with us in
secret, a giggle” (143). When offred records Moira’s story on tape it becomes the oral narration of an oral narrative, and her purpose is to keep Moira alive through the narrative, “I’ve tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive” (256). In a way, narration confirms existence.

Atwood frequently reminds the reader that the narrative is an oral reconstruction by Offred, after the events, and as such can only be an approximation to reality at several removes and never the actual happening itself. Of course this is true of all narration and all history too, though one does not think of it as such: “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out there are too many parts, riders cross currents, nuances” (144). Sometimes later reflections are superimposed on the reconstruction of the original event. Thus “in fact, I don’t think about anything of the kind and put it in only afterwards. Maybe I should have thought about that at the time, but I didn’t. As I said, this is a reconstruction” (150). Sometimes three or four different versions of an event are given in the reconstruction and it is futile for the reader to grope for what ‘really’ happened. The author conveys the idea that all narration, both in real life and in fiction, is only an oral narration. And there will be always difficulty in achieving accuracy and strict veracity in it and it will be almost impossible to recapture in words all that had happened at a particular moment. After giving an account of her first rendezvous with Nick,
Offred adds, "I made that up. It did not happen that way. Here is what happened." But again she says, "It didn’t happen that way either," and adds, "All I can hope for is a reconstruction" (275).

According to Offred, the reconstruction of one's own life as a story gives a sense of control over the events in the story and hence a sense of control over one's own life: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling." "If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off" (49). Yet at the same time she also realizes her own lack of control over the story that she tells.

Another advantage of oral narration as perceived by Offred is that it presupposes the objective reality of a listener outside oneself and the possibility of communication, even one way communication, with this listener: "But if it's a story even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else" (49). A narrator implies the presence of a listener: "By telling you anything at all, I'm atleast believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (279). The above statement by Offred might as well be taken as the credo of every feminist writer who wills into existence her own audience of committed and enlightened readers.
In the hands of Atwood, language becomes a powerful weapon to wrench female space within the existing structures. She exposes the shortcomings of conventional patriarchal language and the encoded sexism in it. For example, after declaring, "The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us" (21), Offred adds, "there was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister," though one may coin "sororize." While the word 'fraternize' exists, which means "to behave like a brother" (22), there is no corresponding word for women. It was as if language, in collusion with patriarchy, conspired to deny sisterhood to women.

Sometimes Atwood takes up a traditionally used phrase and turns it inside out. For example, on the night of the ceremony, the Commander takes up the Bible to read to the household, "We are expectant. Here comes our bedtime story" (98). But the tone is deceptive. The Biblical story of Rachel and Bilha is meant to justify the use of handmaids in bed to produce children to aging childless Commanders. The phrase "bedtime story" becomes ambiguous. It is a story of the bedding of the Biblical handmaid and precedes the bedding of the Gileadian handmaid. Sometimes traditional linguistic structures of patriarchal origin, like proverbs, are taken and fractured and idioms are twisted out of shape: "Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?" (17). The proverb in the active voice, 'waste not' is twisted out of shape by being cast in the passive voice as "I am not being wasted."
Offred often plays language games by which perhaps Atwood tries to breathe new life into the existing fossilized patriarchal language. "I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others" (120). The perception of the simultaneous co-existence of plural meanings in a particular word may perhaps be related to the feminist rejection of the either....or binary opposition which typifies patriarchal discourse. Elsewhere, Offred imagines three possibilities about her husband Luke – that he is dead, that he is captured and alive, that he has escaped and is well: "The thing I believe can't all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me right now, the only way I can believe anything" (116). This pluralism is reflected in the multiple layers of language perceived by Offred. Atwood, like Dorothy Richardson, is seen to be a bold experimenter in feminist prose."13

The novel reveals a skilled use of images, metaphors and symbols to convey the chosen themes. The Ibsenite image of a doll is often used to convey a woman's estrangement in an alienating environment: "I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll" (26). "Without a word she swivels, as if she is voice activated, as if she's on little oiled wheels, as if
she’s on top of a music box” (53). The rug on the floor of the handmaid’s room, made of braided rags becomes a metaphor of the occupant who struggles to make something meaningful of her life, like the Black foremothers and their patchwork quilts, as perceived Alice Walker.

The novel concludes with an Epilogue, supposedly placed about 200 years after Offred. The Epilogue presents the male point of view of the woman’s story, which had formed the main narrative. This becomes the frame or perspective against which the novel acquires depth. There is much ambivalence in the Epilogue. The Epilogue gives hints and clues regarding the main story, in case the reader has missed them, and yet it laughs at critical interpretations of the story by posterity.

There is also ambivalence of another kind in this novel. There are moments when feminism itself seems to be viewed ambivalently and a woman’s culture is seen to be not an unmixed blessing. This is seen, for example, in Chapter 21, in the description of the natural childbirth, in which Wives, Aunts and Handmaids all participate. Offred apostrophizes her feminist mother in imagination.

Mother, I think, wherever you may be, can you hear me? you wanted a woman’s culture. Well, now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies” (157).
Perhaps it is such ambivalence and irony that distinguish the artist from the partisan. Perhaps the underlying message of the novel is that anything carried to an extreme has potential evil in it, whether it is patriarchal tyranny or feminism or religious fundamentalism in interpreting the Bible literally.

In The Handmaid's Tale oral/written paradox appears in the frame tale. Here it is the female who is associated with the oral, the male with the written. Yet the novelist in this case is female and readers (of either gender) know this, even as they realize the association set up in the novel. This simultaneous mixture of involvement and distance makes this perhaps Atwood's most postmodern novel to date.

Self-conscious about the fact that this is a dystopia created out of words (feminist rhetoric, consumerist advertising, liferalist fundamentalist ranting), it offers us a world carried to an extreme. Horrifyingly it gives us a vision of the implications of current ideological trends. Here men still rule; women still collude. It would not be hard to read this novel in terms of the catastrophic extreme of the imposition of a certain kind of female order. Women are respected above all for their mothering function; women burn pornography and punish deviation from the norm.

As the 'Historical Notes' at the end suggest, Gilead may be patriarchal in form, but in content much is matriarchal. An overtly political fable, The
Handmaid’s Tale foregrounds its female producer, but here Atwood attempts to offer us both process and product, life and act.

In all of Atwood’s fiction formalist concerns (such as parody and metafictive self-reflexivity) are never separate from political ones, and this is largely because of the very postmodern paradox that ties them together. In Atwood's own constantly repeated terms, this is the paradox of art as both product and process, as both artifact and part of life.
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