CHAPTER - 5

The Nightmare land of Dystopia : A revisionist tool of feminist exploration.

- The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood.

5.1 Where woman has been turned into 'a mute symbol' : Reconstructing the true story of feminist dystopia.

They sewed her face
shut, closed her mouth
to a hole the size of a straw
.... put her back on the streets,
a mute symbol. (True Stories and other poems. p.50)

Don't ask for the true story
Why do you need it?
It's not what I set out with
or What I carry.
The true story was lost
On the way down to the beach, it's something
I never had.

......
The true story lies
among the other stories,
like jumbled clothing
thrown off or away
like hearts on marble, like syllables, like
butcher's discards
The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue. (True Stories and other poems. p.11)

In her poetry, Atwood explores the world of agony and forms of abstract and concrete violence in the patriarchal world. In Atwood's True Stories and other poems (1981), "Torture", a poem about free will, politics and passion, depicts the terrifying metamorphosis of the woman into a "mute symbol" (p. 11). In the poem, the power that has sewn woman's mouth shut is male. The female body is

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“a flayed body untangled / string by string and hung / to the wall, an agonised banner
/ displayed for the same reason / flags are.” (p. 51) Giving a moving account of real
incidents of women’s persecution, Atwood exposes the misogynistic practices that
pervade the patriarchy. With deconstructive irony, she points out woman’s
alienation from patriarchal, logocentric truths. Atwood’s woman is an angry one
with a cynical disregard for “true stories”. She contemptuously dismisses the
unilateral ‘truth’ of patriarchal authority as a chimera, an absurd delusion. To the
female protagonist of Atwood, woman’s dream of authenticity of expression is as
elusive, insubstantial and chimerical as her “blurred footprints filling with salt
water” (p. 10), “the hollows made by lovers in sand a hundred years ago” (p.10)
because it is told in a biased masculinist language and carefully censored. This view
is most poignantly projected by Offred, the female protagonist of The Handmaid’s
Tale. For her, the essential processes of self delineation and narration are
complicated by debilitating prescriptions against uninhibited, fearless articulation of
her experiences. The metaphorical description of the self censorship enforced on the
woman by the intimidating forces of patriarchal society in True Stories effectively
elucidates Offred’s hesitation. It also explains the choicelessness and powerlessness
underlying the fabricated quality of her story.

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a recon-
struction. It’s reconstruction now, in my head, as I
lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or
shouldn’t have said, what I should or shouldn’t have
done, how I should have played it. (p.173)

Offred delivers flat statements that invite us to look beyond them for
complexity. When she says of her narrative, “This is a reconstruction”, she
challenges us to consider what she really means, for surely, all narratives are
reconstructions. And the ‘Historical Notes’ that conclude The Handmaid’s Tale give
the term renewed force by revealing that the story has been reconstructed from cassette tapes by scholars. As Offred confesses, it is a story "in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" (p.344). As Barbara Rigney suggests in *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*, Atwood portrays the conflicts and dilemmas of women who are being constantly torn between male society's prescriptions for female behavior, their own tendencies toward the internalization of these roles, and a nostalgia for the lost, more authentic self. Offred questions the fixity of conventional reality when she states, "I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born".(p. 51) Here, the text insists both on the importance of such self composition, and calls attention to its artificial nature.

I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

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.

It isn't a story I'm telling.

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. But if it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else.

Even when there is no one.

A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you, like an old love song. You can mean more than one. You can mean thousands. I'm not in any immediate danger, I'll say to you. I'll pretend you can hear me. But it's no good, because I know you can't. (pp.52-53)
By exploding the binary oppositional notions of story / fantasy vs reality, Atwood establishes a connection between the ‘fantastic’ mode of feminist dystopia and contemporary socio-political reality. She reveals that dystopia extends the worst features of contemporary social reality into a grim design. Just as the true stories of Atwood’s female personae in her poetry are the horror stories of atrocities committed on women and heterosexual relationships marred by violence, so is the nightmarish ordeal of Offred and other women who inhabit the dystopia of Gilead. Like the female personae of Atwood’s poems, Offred produces an agonized definition of female existence. She describes the violent abuse of the female body and torture of women in the post biblical patriarchate of Gilead. The fictional delineation of the dystopian world by Atwood becomes a feminist process of consciousness - raising. Acutely conscious of woman’s victimization in a patriarchal society, Atwood gives an unmistakably grim account of it in The Handmaid’s Tale. A heightened feminist awareness of woman’s oppression in patriarchal society necessitates a futuristic dystopian narration. The dystopia of Gileadean republic is also a travesty of the contemporary patriarchy where the objectification of women and commodification of their femininity are the menacing, repulsive realities. The feminist dystopia offers a potentially radical fictional space in which women can unravel and re imagine existing power relations. As Elisabeth Mahoney points out, there are two competing gendered narratives in the feminist dystopia of The Handmaid’s Tale: the narrative authority coded as masculine, silence as feminine which clash in a power struggle.¹

The ‘silence’ does not indicate the absence of the female voice. Adrienne Rich’s claim that “All silence has a meaning” is appropriate in this context. The silent female voices bear a parodic relationship to the authoritarian voice of
Gileadean patriarchy. They question the central, dominating ideological stance or closure represented by Gileadean patriarchal institutions, work within the dominant, prevailing values by subverting them consciously and by seeing through them. If we apply Bakhtin's principle of 'dialogism' to feminist acts of subversion, we can interpret that silenced voices of female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* compellingly initiate a dialogue with those others which are dominant and seek to repress or ignore them. In her essay “Gender in Bakhtin’s carnival”, Dale Bauer explores the potential in Bakhtin’s theory for re-articulating the silenced voices of women in the dialogue/discourse of social power.

Like the female ‘I’ of Atwood's poetry who problematizes the notion of truth, Offred, the female ‘I’ of *The Handmaid’s Tale* subverts the patriarchal authority of Gilead by her disruptive narrative and radically transforms our perceptions. She exposes the falsifying metaphysical nature of the ‘truth’ upheld by the dominant patriarchal ideology. Offred’s open ended narrative replaces the monolithic essentialisms of a Gileadean theocracy with a pluralistic vision. The fragmentary nature of Offred’s story which is open ended, full of diversions, concerned with pluralities and ambiguities, functions effectively as a revisionist feminist act of sabotage that undermines the narrative closure represented by the Gileadean patriarchal authority.

Atwood’s dystopia is a fundamentalist, Christian patriarchy in which gender linked biases and discriminations restrict the woman’s horizons and reduce her rights to dignity and autonomy as a human being. The ‘Commanders’ of Gilead believe in the sexual appropriation of women in the reproductive age group as handmaids. These women are forced into the role of reproductive machines. Coerced into submission and subjugation, their bodies become territories to be
claimed as a man's right. The handmaids function as 'wombs' or vessels for procreation. They have no names and are identified as personal property of the Commander to whom they belong. Therefore, Offred is not the real name of the protagonist. The dystopian cautionary tale posits a future culture in which feminist dreams and aspirations for egalitarian ideologies have been replaced by a Christo-Fascist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function: Wives, Marthas, Econowives and Handmaids. It is a society where the objectification of women is complete. The dystopian tale of the handmaid Offred demonstrates how precariously balanced is the feminist agenda over the waters of the regressive patriarchal tradition.

As told by Atwood to one of her interviewers, The Handmaid's Tale is organised partly by the repeated 'Night' sections 3. There are periods of action, punctuated by periods of reflection 4. The 'night' sections capture the contemplative, reflective mood of Offred 4. This is the only time when handmaids like Offred can have the freedom to remove their disguises, to be themselves and to indulge in the luxury of thinking and fantasizing.

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.

I lie, then, inside the room, under the plaster eye in the ceiling, behind the white curtains, between the sheets, and step side ways out of my own time. Out of time. Though this is time, nor am I out of it. (p.49)

This is when Offred's thoughts meander through the years before, when she lived with her lover Luke and their daughter, when she had a job, money of her own and access to knowledge. But the resurgence of misogynist theocracy, a terrorist biblical patriarchate changes everything abruptly. Offred's idyllic existence built on
domestic bliss and professional fulfillment comes to a bitter, nightmarish end. She becomes a sexual slave in the republic of Gilead. A totalitarian regime is established in what was once the United States of America, in which rigorous adherence to selected biblical precepts makes women the slaves of biological function.

5.2 The patriarchal sexual prison of Gilead and the dehumanisation of motherhood.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. - Genesis 30:1-3

The life of a handmaid in the Christian republic of Gilead is a re-enacted version of the life and destiny of Bilhah in the Bible. The depth of Gileadean patriarchate's engagement with scriptural tradition is revealed in the 'biblical' character of the practice of surrogate motherhood. The difference is that there is no other choice for the childless wife of a Commander of the Republic of Gilead. For her, the handmaid is a "reproachful necessity". The wife must give over the handmaids to her husband / master who shall impregnate them. The handmaids are not mothers but "ambulatory chalices" or two legged wombs who fulfill the Gileadian patriarchy's need for progeny. They are watched closely by 'Aunts', patrolling with "electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts". (p.4) The handmaids greet each other with codes. "Blessed be the fruit" and "May the Lord Open" - which emphasize their reproductive functions and duties. They are
indoctrinated by the 'aunts' to think of the life of a handmaid as a privileged existence. They are more fortunate than older women past their prime, who cannot bear children. These women are 'unwomen' who are sent to the colonies where they are exposed to obnoxious radioactive wastes and allowed to die a slow agonizing death.

It is a society where women past their reproductive age group cease to be of value even as commodities. But motherhood is not a joyous experience for the handmaids in thralldom. It may reassure them of their fecundity, thereby of the 'femininity', nevertheless, it is an entirely dehumanized function, a compulsory duty with accompanying feelings of anxious anticipation, apprehension and temporary relief. The only relief that it brings is the consolation that they will never be branded as 'unwomen' and sent to the colonies to die. In the Republic of Gilead many young women function as handmaids rendering reproductive services to their Commander, bearing him children over whom they do not have any rights as biological mothers. The impregnation itself is accomplished through a ceremony which is meticulously faithful to the precepts laid down in the Bible. The ceremony which is conducted once a month begins with a prefatory exercise of bible reading session by Commander. The handmaid Offred gives a grim account of the ceremony.

"And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband", says the Commander. ....

Serena has begun to cry. I can hear her, behind my back. It isn’t the first time. She always does this, the night of the Ceremony. She’s trying not to make a noise. She’s trying to preserve her dignity... The tension between her lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible....
I bow my head and close my eyes. I listen to the held breath, the almost inaudible gasps, the shaking going on behind my back. How she must hate me, I think.... (pp.116-117)

The Ceremony goes as usual.

I lie on my back...... what I could see, if I were to open my eyes, would be the large white canopy of Serena Joy’s outsized colonial-style four-poster bed....

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it : nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for. There wasn’t a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose....

What’s going on in this room, under Serena Joy’s silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary; they would be a symptom of frivolity merely, like jazz garters or beauty spots:

This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty....

One detaches oneself. One describes.

.... The Commander, who has been propping himself
on his elbows, away from our combined bodies, doesn’t permit himself to sink down into us. He rests a moment, withdraws, recedes, rezippers. He nods, then turns and leaves the room. ....

Serena Joy lets go of my hands. “You can get up now,” she says. “Get up and get out.” ... There is loathing in her voice, as if the touch of my flesh sickens and contaminates her. I untangle myself from her body, stand up; the juice of the Commander runs down my legs. Before I turn away I see her straighten her blue skirt, clench her legs together, she continues lying on the bed, gazing up at the canopy, above her, stiff and straight as an effigy.

Which of us is it worse for, her or me? (pp.120-123)

In this interminable interior monologue, a question of compelling intensity foregrounds itself, accentuating the horror, anguish and pain experienced by women. The women exist as mute objects of man’s need for sex and procreation. In the dystopia of Gilead, sex is a destructive force that is linked not only to the psychological death of the self, but to the physical death as well. The man - woman relationship is a site of physical and emotional violence on the woman. The protagonist of Surfacing (1972) overhears her friend Anna’s strangled cries and inhuman moans through the thin walls of the cabin and thinks that sex is “like death” (p.82). The female persona of Atwood’s Power Politics, bitterly remarks; “Next time we commit / love, we ought to / choose in advance what to kill.” (p.35)

Atwood’s strength lies in her capacity to explore the politics of the personal. Emotional states of dependence, resistance and resentment are explored in intensely personalised contexts. There is an intrepid, candid depiction of the woman in a reflective frame of mind. The dystopian feminist vision identifies the cause of women’s oppression as sexual subjugation and incarceration in a man made vicious
circle of “immanence”. Atwood’s poetry is replete with multifarious images of female victimization and discontent. In the first volume of Atwood’s poetry entitled, The Circle Game (1966), ‘Circle Game’ becomes the central metaphor of female immanence, sexual oppression and exclusion. It is a game which entraps woman in a sexual prison: “I am fixed, stuck / down on the outspread map / of this room” (p.40). This mapped impalement might as well be the description of the agony and horror experienced by Offred during the impersonal sexual act carried out every month as a ritual. “Forcing her universe to his geographies,” (p.18) the man appropriates her to suit his purposes. She is a “spineless woman in / a cage of bones, obsolete fort / pulled out” (p.43). It emphasizes the annihilation of her ‘self’ for all other purposes to the sole exception of those of the man who owns her. In Gilead, all the handmaids have tattoo marks which signify that they are the properties of their Commanders. Offred ironically refers to the small tattoo on her ankle: “Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally into another landscape. I am too important, too scarce, for that I am a national resource” (p.85).

In a regime, notoriously patriarchal, Offred and other handmaids are valued only if their ovaries are viable. They are often looked down upon contemptuously as despicable, debased women by the Marthas and wives of the Commanders. As reproductive prostitutes, they are forced to bear humiliation and hope for redemption through pregnancy and child birth. Offred nostalgically thinks of the past when there were independent women who were able to choose. The Gileadian society disapproves of such lifestyles and interprets them as signs of a decadent civilization “dying of too much choice” (p.34). In her observations, Offred documents the prescriptive tendencies of didacticism discernible in the Republic of Gilead modeled
on biblical precepts. Manifestations of prescriptive, purificatory impulses range from moderate measures such as restrictions imposed on women’s mobility to extreme measures like ‘salvagings’.

‘A handmaid is permitted to leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to the food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. Offred remarks ironically that it is a return to traditional values. The handmaids are trained to lead a frugal existence. Offred tries not to think much because she feels that like other things, even thought must be rationed. She knows that thinking can hurt her and she intends to survive. In the rooms of handmaids there are shatterproof glasses, windows open only partially. “It isn’t running away they are afraid of. We couldn’t get far. It’s those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge” (p.10)
The handmaids wear long, red robes which conceal their bodies effectively, they also wear a white headgear not only to prevent them from seeing, but also from being seen. Their white headgears shaped like wings make them partially blind; According to Offred for the handmaids “It’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of any thing. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps.” (p.40).

5.3 A diasporized ‘womanculture’.

The handmaids in the patriarchate of Gilead are forbidden to make friends. But despite these intolerable restrictions, they succeed in establishing an albeit tenuous bond of friendship and mutual sympathy. They learn to communicate with
each other in silence, to whisper and conceal their camaraderie before the
scrutinizing glances of the aunts.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed:

Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (pp.4-5)

Trapped in a grim, unenviable state of emotional starvation, Offred wistfully reminisces about her friendship with Moira in the past. In Gilead, it is hard to imagine having a friend. Offred impulsively wishes that if she could see Moira, just see her, know she still exists, she could still derive emotional sustenance from seeing her. She lugubriously thinks of her college days and Moira’s delightful escapades. Offred admires the courage and recalcitrant spirit of her lesbian friend Moira. Even as a handmaid, Moira does not lose hope of liberation. Though Moira has been brutally punished for her attempt to escape from Gilead, her temporary physical immobility does not unnerve her. Moira’s fearlessness and persistence kindle the fire of optimism in the hearts of Offred and other handmaids. Her example mitigates the pain and fear that pervade the lives of handmaids.

Moira was like an elevator with open sides. She made us dizzy. Already we were losing the taste for freedom, already we were finding these walls secure. In the upper reaches of the atmosphere you’d come apart, you’d vaporize, there would be no pressure holding you together.

Nevertheless Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a giggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life. In the light of
Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked. (p.172)

Memories of her lesbian feminist friend Moira also reawakened recollections of another strong woman who had the courage of her convictions; Offred’s mother. Offred remembers her mother wearing the kind of outfit typical of “Unwomen” in those days, overall jeans with a plaid shirt underneath and sneakers on her feet. She recalls the fervour with which her mother and other women campaigned for reproductive rights. Offred’s mother argues for reproductive freedom which includes the right to become a mother and to contraception and abortion. Their placards such as “Freedom to choose. Every baby a wanted baby. Recapture our bodies. Do you believe a woman’s place is on the kitchen table?” (p.154) with a line drawing of a woman’s body, lying on a table, blood dripping out of it, emphasize the message that control of reproduction is essentially a political struggle for women’s right to self determination. Those days Offred was embarrassed by her mother’s association with a radical feminist group and her ideologies which seemed trite and essentialistic. Now as a handmaid, hired by one of the Commanders of Gilead, solely for breeding purposes, Offred has bitter regrets. She wonders whether she made a mistake by not actively supporting her mother’s views. Offred realizes that her mother had been a remarkable ‘fighter’, a brave woman, who undaunted by the complications posed by her ‘Aged Primipara’ status, had resolutely decided to give birth to her daughter. As a single mother, she brings up Offred without taking financial assistance from Offred’s father. Offred’s mother is a resourceful woman who openly declares that she does not need a man. She shocks Offred and her lover Luke by her unconventional views. Offred presents poignant vignettes of her conversations with her mother.
I remember her like that, ... not young and earnest and pretty ... but witty, spunky, the kind of old woman who won’t let anyone butt in front of her in a supermarket line. She liked to come over to my house and have a drink while Luke and I were fixing dinner and tell us what was wrong with her life, which always turned into what was wrong with ours. Her hair was gray by that time, of course. She wouldn’t dye it. Why pretend, she’d say. Anyway what do I need it for, I don’t want a man around, what use are they except for ten second’s worth of half babies. A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn’t nice guy and all, but he wasn’t up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him. ... But there’s something missing in them, even the nice ones. It’s like they’re permanently absent-minded, like they can’t quite remember who they are. They look at the sky too much. They lose touch with their feet. They aren’t a patch on a woman except they’re better at fixing cars and playing football, just what we need for the improvement of the human race, right?

That was the way she talked, even in front of Luke. He didn’t mind, he teased her by pretending to be macho, he’d tell her women were incapable of abstract thought and she’d have another drink and grin at him.

Chauvinist pig, she’d say.

Isn’t she quaint, Luke would say to me, ...

As for you, she’d say to me, you’re just a backlash. Flash in the pan. History will absolve me.

You young people don’t appreciate things, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through just to get you where you are, Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?

Cooking’s my hobby, Luke would say. I enjoy it. Hobby, schmobby, my mother would say. You don’t have to make excuses to me. Once upon a time you wouldn’t have been allowed to have such a hobby, they’d have called you queer.
Now, Mother, I would say. Let's not get into an argument about nothing.
Nothing, she'd say bitterly. You call it nothing.
You don't understand, do you. You don't understand at all what I'm talking about......
I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected too much from me, I felt. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she'd made. I didn't want to live my life on her terms. I didn't want to be the model offspring, the incarnation of her ideas. We used to fight about that. I am not your justification for existence, I said to her once.
I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting. (pp.155-157).

As a handmaid in a terrorist patriarchate, Offred begins to comprehend women's oppression and appreciate the commitment that her mother had shown towards women's emancipation and empowerment. Atwood's delineation of the handmaid Offred's predicament in Gilead is a metaphorical justification of women's liberation movement. Atwood re-establishes the validity of women's pooled experience in consciousness - raising groups which expanded into a more specialised theoretical study of the social relations of capitalist patriarchy. Offred's mother's credos coincide with the basic premise of women's liberation which is that women are oppressed legally, economically, culturally and changes in law, social policy, and attitudes are needed to redress the unequal status of women. Women's emancipation has several aims: equal pay, equal educational and job opportunities, free contraception and abortion on demand, free childcare, legal and financial independence for women, an end to discrimination against lesbians and the right to self defined sexuality and an end to rape and violence against women.

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Atwood’s protagonist Offred belatedly comprehends the justness of these demands and the necessity for female solidarity to negotiate them. As Linda Kauffman notes, “Atwood dismantles received ideas and unquestioned assumptions about religion, sex, politics, women’s cultures - and feminism itself. Atwood audaciously creates a heroine who is in a very real sense responsible for the Gileadian coup: she is apathetic politically, complacent about women’s struggle for equal rights, absorbed solely in her individual existence. All around her she sees racial hatred, religious intolerance, and sexual repression intensifying daily.” By remaining apathetic and indifferent, Offred has unknowingly fulfilled some of the essential preconditions that contribute to the rise of a dystopian patriarchy such as the Republic of Gilead. The conditions are that women shall remain essentially unquestioning and unenlightened. The Republic of Gilead thrives on this “underemployment of female consciousness”. In Gilead, the handmaids are forbidden to read and write. Discussions between the handmaids are not allowed and speech is rationed. Friendships are suspicious. Women are denied access to intellectual pursuits. To be deprived of the freedom to use language is to be deprived of the power to speak against injustice. As Atwood points out in True Stories, “A Word after a Word / after a word is power.” (p.64) Revolutionary possibilities and emancipatory ideologies can be apprehended only through the medium of language. “The electric wisdom of once living phosphorescent unings” is lost in the “thin marooning air” of a terrorist biblical patriarchate.

5.4 ‘Caricatures of patriarchal culture’s image of femininity’ : Handmaids in Gileadian patriarchate.

As a handmaid in Gilead who is given a final chance the third time to prove her fecundity before being sent to the colonies to be exposed to obnoxious,
radioactive wastes, Offred suffers from a feeling of self alienation. She feels estranged from her ‘female body’ which can betray her during this critical period of crisis. It is a painful disintegrative process aggravated by intellectual and emotional deprivation which the handmaids have to endure. Offred’s account of her fearful anticipation is powerful and disturbing.

I sink down into 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 rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishings of tissue, the droolings of the flesh, these are signs, these are the things I need to know about. Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own.

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me.

Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. Inside it is a space, huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like that, though black-red rather than black. Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as stars. Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again. (p.95).

Offred’s account bespeaks of loneliness, the sense of abandonment, of being imprisoned, powerless and depersonalised. Offred’s sense of self alienation is a
reaction to the fetishization of the female body and its reproductive functions, in the Republic of Gilead. By analysing the way in which the female body has been situated in the Gileadian discourse of normative femininity, Atwood re-evaluates the ‘validity’ of an ideology implicated in that discourse. In her portrayal of Offred’s predicament, Atwood recasts in fiction, the theoretical observation of Patricia Waugh who argues that the ‘female body’ itself is a cultural construction. The woman’s perception of her own body is shaped by the culture to which she belongs or a culture which can dominate her to actualise its own objectives. Atwood’s feminist revisionist perspective is revealed in the way in which Offred uses her body to “articulate a caricature of patriarchal culture’s image of femininity which involves both rejection and subversion of its requirements”.

The objectification of the female body in patriarchy and woman’s experience of self alienation as its consequence, are major themes in Atwood’s poetry. In The Circle Game and Other Poems, the female persona confronts the man with an accusation; “....You / put together my own / body, another place / for me to live in”. (p.71) In Atwood’s poetry, ‘the female body’ is depicted as a patriarchal construct. The reification of the female makes her more often a sexual object than a person. The woman is trapped in a fetishized female body which she dare not call her own. She experiences a sense of disintegration of her unitary self. It threatens her notion of ‘selfhood’. The fears of a distressed, alienated female persona are expressed through phantasmagoric gothic images. In another poem, “Backdrop addresses the cowboy” (p.50) from The Animals in that country (1968) Atwood creates an interesting concept of woman as space desecrated. Woman in the poem is the landscape itself. She is the earth mother whose sanctity has been violated by the cowboy. By aligning the woman with nature against the man, Atwood does not
reiterate the nature / woman vs. culture / man dichotomy. The man sets himself apart from nature and woman both of which he seeks to control. In The Second Sex Simone De Beauvoir, illuminating this area of woman's oppression states: "Even when he was still perplexed before the mysteries of life, of nature and of woman, he was never without the power; when terrified by the dangerous magic of woman, he sets her up as the essential, it is he who poses her as such and thus he really acts as the essential in this voluntary alienation. Man remains woman's master as he is the master of the fertile earth; she is fated to be subjected, owned and exploited like nature." (pp.105-106) Sherry Ortner argues that the devaluation of women stems from women's association with reproduction and hence nature, while men participate in the projects of culture. Atwood's stark delineation of woman's alienation in a patriarchal society both in her poetry and fiction, forcefully demonstrates that "subjectivity historically constructed and expressed through the phenomenological equation, self / other necessarily rests masculine 'self hood' upon feminine otherness. The feminine thus becomes that which cannot be expressed because it exists outside the realm of symbolic signification." 11

In The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood illuminates some of the darker interconnections between politics, sex and reproduction. Feminist theoretical assumptions and speculations metamorphose into a fictional narrative. The dystopia of Gilead is a travesty of the contemporary patriarchy in which the woman is still denied sexual freedom and the biological control over her body through the ideology of chastity and prescription against abortion. The Republic of Gilead is a replication of the patriarchy outlined by Kate Millett in her theory of sexual politics. Sexual domination of women by men is the supreme ideology of Gileadian culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power. Sex is a status category with
political implications. The limited role allotted to the woman tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience. The women of Gilead are made to imbibe these values through rigorous indoctrination. The handmaids are repeatedly told that they are more well protected than the women of by gone times who got no respect as ‘mothers’. Unlike the career women of the past for whom motherhood had to be combined with a demanding career, the handmaids can fulfill their biological destinies in peace with full support and encouragement. Feeling drugged, Offred thinks that the life she is living is probably her paranoid delusion. For the handmaids of Gilead, ‘sanity’ is a valuable possession and Offred struggles to preserve her sanity. Acutely conscious of her precariously tenuous sense of mental sanity, Offred can only fervently hope that she may remain sane: “I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes” (p.140).

‘Sterility’ is a forbidden word in the Republic of Gilead. There are no sterile men anymore, not officially. “There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law”. The women are always made to suffer the oppressive burden of infertility. The handmaids are brainwashed by the aunts or older women serving as instructresses to feel that “it’s only women who can’t, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, defective”. (p.264) In the Gileadian sexual politics, male supremacy is grounded in men’s attempt to secure control over biological reproduction. Women are defined solely as reproductive beings and such a reductionistic view of women leads to a distortion of their self image and their devaluation. Aunt Lydia, one of the instructresses at the red centre tells the handmaids that they are aiming for a spirit of camaraderie among women. The Republic of Gilead does indeed produce a “womanculture”. It is a sorority of handmaids unlike the sororities started by the women’s liberation movement of the
1960s which created a new politics out of marxist and socialist feminism, radical feminism and other multifarious responses to the questions of social inequality, female exploitation and oppression. The feminist upsurge politicized issues of reproductive rights, female sexuality and sex role stereotyping, whereas the sorority of handmaids accepts biblical injunctions read out by the Commanders in women’s ‘Prayvaganzas’ in meek submission.

Women’s Prayvaganzas are for group weddings like this usually. The mothers have stood the white veiled girls in place and have returned to their chairs. There’s a little crying going on among them; ... the Commander continues with the service:

"I will that women adorn themselves in modest apparel,” he says, “with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array;

“But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works

“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection”

Here he looks us over. “All” he repeats.

“But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

“For Adam was first formed, then Eve.

“And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.

“Not withstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety”.

Saved by childbearing, I think. What did we suppose would save us, in the time before? (p.286)

The message “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” reminds Offred of another ancient biblical injunction: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception, 'in sorrow thou shall bring forth children”. In the Republic of Gilead, whenever a handmaid gives birth, all the handmaids are present to witness the event. A pregnant handmaid is a magic presence to them, “an object of envy and
desire, she’s a flag on a hill top”, showing them what can still be done, that they too
can be saved. But after the childbirth, the other handmaids who have congregated
there to watch the event, feel immense despair. They are haunted and distressed by
their failure. Reminiscing about her feminist mother’s dreams of a women’s culture,
Offred thinks of this community of handmaids which also ironically constitutes a
different kind of women’s culture.

We’re without emotion now, almost without feeling,
we might be bundles of red cloth. We ache. Each of
us holds in her lap a phantom, a ghost baby. What
confronts us, now the excitement’s over, is our own
failure. Mother, I think. Wherever you may be. Can
you hear me? You wanted a women’s culture. Well,
now there is one. It isn’t what you meant, but it
exists. Be thankful for small mercies. (p.164)

The ‘woman culture’ of handmaids is not a matriarchal cultural utopia. It is
not positioned against the socio-symbolic contract and does not promise a
harmonious women’s world without prohibitions which is free and fulfilling. It is a
fearful, anxiety ridden group where every member chants fervently a prayer. It is a
muted group which represents abject subservience and obsequiousness.

What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be
worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with
self-denial, semen and babies.
   Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not
creating me a man.
   Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify
my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be ful-
filled...
   Some of them would get carried away with this. The
ecstasy of abasement. Some of them would moan and
cry. (p.251).

5.5 ‘The politics of reproduction’: Feminist Theoretical underpinnings.

A radical reappraisal of the politics of reproduction in the patriarchy forms
the core of The Handmaid’s Tale. Atwood explores in her fiction some of the
thought provoking questions raised by second wave feminist theoreticians. The feminist theoretical analyses of Shulamith Firestone exert a generative influence on *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In her work *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), Firestone argues that it is reproduction and its institutionalisation under the patriarchy which are the bases of female subjection. Viewed from this angle, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a powerful manifestation of Atwood’s feminist consciousness and displays a radical awareness of women’s victimization and oppression in patriarchal institutions. Atwood reveals the ‘politics’ of sexed identities. She depicts how “the castration of women has been carried out in terms of a masculine - feminine polarity, in which men have commandeered all the energy and streamlined it into an aggressive conquistatorial power” 12.

The Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a replication of the patriarchy described by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex*. According to Firestone, biological mothering and the tyranny of heterosexual reproductive practices constitute the material bases of women’s oppression. Reappraising Marx’s concepts of class and production, Firestone argues that the ‘material’ of woman’s body is the source of her enslavement. Like Atwood, Firestone illuminates the dimension of ‘power politics’ in reproduction and its institutionalisation. To quote Firstone, “The problem becomes political, demanding more than a comprehensive historical analysis, when one realises that, though man is increasingly capable of freeing himself from the biological conditions that created his tyranny over women and children, he has little reason to want to give up this tyranny... just as to assure elimination of economic classes requires the revolt of the underclass (the proletariat) and in temporary dictatorship, their seizure of the means of production, so as to assure the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass
(women) and the seizure of the control of reproduction: not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility - the new population biology as well as all the social institutions of child bearing and rearing." 13 According to Firestone, the fundamental, the so called 'natural' duality of the sex class system seen in the biological division of the sexes for procreation constitutes the edifice for all other cultural divisions such as oppressing male / oppressed female.

In The Handmaid’s Tale Atwood also explores and develops some of the ideas of Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist. Dworkin argues that men value women not as unique individuals but as members of a class who serve them sexually and reproducitively. Dworkin provides two models that best explain what it means to be a woman within patriarchy: the brothel model which relates to prostitution and the farming model, which relates to motherhood. 14 In her dystopian fiction, Atwood delineates both these models. If the handmaids serve as reproductive prostitutes, the Jezebels are sex prostitutes. According to Dworkin, the brothel mode is, from men's point of view, incredibly efficient. Men get women under their control through alcohol, drugs, hunger, desperation and manipulation. Made to depend on men not simply for their livelihood but also for their very lives, prostitutes hand over their bodies to men who literally use them up on waste them.

In The Handmaid’s Tale, Offred’s lesbian friend Moira, who becomes a Jezebel in Gilead gives a similar account of her life as a Jezebel to Offred. She tells Offred grimly that a woman would have three or four good years before she wears out and then she will be sent to the ‘boneyard’. She also tells matter of factly that there is plenty of food, drinks and drugs, if the women want them. Offred’s Commander who takes her clandestinely to the Jezebels, justifies this illegal activity
that goes on surreptitiously in the Republic of Gilead. He tells her that although it is strictly forbidden officially, the Commanders have formed this club of Jezebels. He also tells Offred that it means that one cannot cheat nature and nature demands variety, for men. He argues that it is part of the procreational strategy and therefore they have formed a secret club where they can have access to different women. Here, again, Atwood, reveals, the 'politics' of sexuality. In a dystopian patriarchy, like Gilead, 'sexuality' is not a simple, natural experience of women and men, but a power game in which the women are subjugated.

In both Atwood's poetry and fiction, there is a sharpened awareness of woman's subordination and oppression in a sexual relationship. Atwood exposes the sexual politics that underlies the male supremacist ideologies of the patriarchy. She also shows that patriarchal power with its deeply entrenched politics of sexuality, beginning with psycho-social conditioning of women is ubiquitous. Yet there is also an affirmative, positivistic recreation of a compelling 'female diaspora': "A persisting female culture diasporized and splintered among the male cultures" which becomes a highly charged collective repository of women's experiences. Offred feels a sense of relief when she reads the message 'Nolite te bastardes Carborundorum' scratched with a pin or a fingernail by the previous occupant of her room in the darkest corner of the cupboard in her room. It becomes her private slogan although she does not comprehend the message. She is pleased that the message of the previous occupant has reached her. Behind her, she feels the presence of her ancestress, her double who must have shared her predicament. She learns about the 'May Day Support group' for handmaids through another handmaid Ofglen. She derives emotional and intellectual sustenance from the reminiscences of her firebrand friend Moira and her feminist mother.
In a brilliantly conceived epilogue to The Handmaid’s Tale, the retrospective analysis by Professor James Darcy Pieixoto emerges as ostensibly more authoritative than a participant woman’s eyewitness account. Furthermore, as Janet Larson points out, the objectivity of the scholarly enterprise of the 12th symposium on Gileadian studies is a chilling postscript to a story in which women have been totally objectified. To quote Larson, “Pieixoto trivializes the role of women in society. Women who could bear children are vital to the survival of the regime but prospective mothers are nevertheless the most controlled, powerless, and demeaned members of that society. In short, there is no necessary relationship between one’s importance to the perpetuation of society and one’s privilege within that society. Significance and status are both constructs manipulated by those in power. What Atwood has written is not just a history of patriarchy, but a meta history.” 16. Thus Atwood’s metafictional futuristic dystopia becomes a feminist revaluation of recognisable dystopian elements of contemporary patriarchy.

The ‘fantastic’ vision of dystopia can also be a powerful analytical tool for a feminist revisionist exploration. “The Historical Notes” effectively illustrates Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘carnival’ as masking or parody. The concept of ‘dialogism’ or ‘intertextuality’ provides insights into feminist re-visions of appropriation and its parodic relationship to male writing. Moreover, Atwood provides a sample of academic writing by Professor Pieixoto to demonstrate the parodic effect. In The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood makes us cognizant of feminist dialogism as a paradigm which acknowledges individual acts of reading as experience of ‘otherness’ and challenges cultural powers which often force us to
contain or restrict the ‘otherness’ of textual voices. In *Literature and Feminism* (1993) Pam Morris appropriates the Russian theorist’s notion of the ‘carnivalesque’. (pp.154-155). Carnival during the middle ages was unique time of licence from repressive authority. Its most typical form was parody: parody of all forms of official language. Morris suggests how Bakhtin’s analysis of parody which proves a further sense of intertextuality or dialogism can be appropriated for feminist revisionist approach. In the parodic strategy of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, two different texts are brought together in an oppositional relationship. The ‘carnivalesque’ feminist sub text of the handmaid’s tale challenges and subtly undermines the dominant ideological code represented by the academic discourse of Pieixoto.

5.7 Conclusion.

This chapter examines *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a feminist dystopian vision of the menacing future potentialities of the contemporary patriarchy. Atwood’s feminist, subversive, revisionist perspective ultimately dismantles the linear time framework of patriarchy by lifting the bar separating the present from the future. Atwood articulates her dissatisfaction with the place allotted to women in the patriarchy. The place occupied by women is seen as an unequal, frustrating one, the women’s task being merely to perpetuate the contract by transmitting it to the next generation. Atwood investigates the oppression of women by constructing a futuristic dystopia. In her portrayal of the dystopia of Gilead, Atwood demonstrates that “Women are not inferior by nature but inferiorised by culture and acculturated into inferiority” 17. Atwood’s feminist re-vision of dystopia coincides with Ruthven’s views on the construction of ‘woman’ in patriarchy. ‘Woman’ as Ruthven elucidates, “is not simply a female sexual presence in the domain of nature, but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, socially feminised, a dispersed subject, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted”. 18
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2 Dale Bauer, “Gender in Bakhtin’s carnival,” Feminisms: An anthology of
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3 Geoff Hancock, “Tight - rope walking over Niagara Falls,” Margaret
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4 Ingersoll 203.
5 Ingersoll 203.
6 qtd. in Nancy Walker, Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the
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7 Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and
10 Patricia Waugh, Feminine Fictions Revisiting the Postmodern (London;
11 Waugh 8.
13 Shulamith Firestone, “The Dialectic of Sex: The case for Feminist
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14 qtd. in Rose Marie Tong, Feminist Thought: A comprehensive
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15 qtd. in Peter Collier and Helga Geyer Ryan, eds. Literary Theory
16 Janet Larson, “Atwood and the future of prophecy” Religion and
17 K.K. Ruthven, Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction. (Cambridge:
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18 Ruthven 45.
CONCLUSION

6.1. Feminist Re-vision: A positive project of refiguring the ‘feminine’.

The struggle has for centuries been immobilized in the trembling equilibrium of the dead lock. It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech... that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence.¹

Traditional representations of ‘femininity’ have interpreted it variously as absence, lack, inchoateness, insatiability and nothingness, thereby showing female destiny to be the passive acceptance of restricted choices. A re-reading of traditional, canonized texts reveals a persistent construction of male centered, reductive meanings. These dominant ideological codes perpetuated by patriarchy are challenged by contemporary women writers of feminist fictions who discover a positive feminine identity through writing. Feminist Re-vision becomes a positive project of refiguring the ‘feminine’, hitherto signifying a muted culture as plenitude. In their fictional works, Bradley, Namjoshi, Piercy and Atwood reconstruct the subjectivities of many women, old and young, mothers, daughters and lovers. They expose the fallacy of the lofty, omniscient view expressed by mythological texts and stereotypical assumptions which inscribe patriarchal ideologies and pluralize meaning by an alternative construction of a feminine order of meaning that can interrupt the monologue of the symbolic order.

In her major work, The Speculum of the Other Woman (1974) Irigaray elucidates the ‘logic of sameness’ that pervades patriarchal social reality which is based on an exclusive privileging of the male as norm. This ‘logic of
sameness' operating within the symbolic order makes it impossible for women to represent themselves. According to Irigaray, within the dominant discourse, women are always "off stage, off side, beyond representation, beyond selfhood". (p.22). Making a fervent appeal to women writers, Cixous affirms in The Newly Born Woman (1986) that "Everyone knows that a place exists which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise, that is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing. If there is somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction." (p.72) Contemporary women's fiction appropriates and re-articulates such feminist ideas. Writers like Bradley, Namjoshi, Piercy and Atwood ingeniously rework ideas derived from feminist theory along with the strategies they utilize to treat the themes of feminist struggle and women's relationships. They reinforce fictional representation of themes and ideas which are of major significance to women.

By recreating myths and caricaturizing stereotyped representations of the 'feminine', the 'female Prometheuses' rediscover the female narrative space that is often subsumed within the male point of view. For them, fantasy becomes an inevitable part of reality rather than an escape from it. Feminist fantastic literature can also be justified by the fact that mainstream fiction with its preponderance of male bias does not offer freedom to women writers.

Feminist re-vision embodies many theories rather than being a single discrete theory and rather than being a politically coherent approach to the subordination of women, it is a political commitment or in some of its forms, more an ethical commitment to giving women their true value. The main
strength of contemporary feminist revisionist thought discernible in women's fiction is its interdisciplinarity. Its resistance to easy categorization is part of its radicalism. No aspect of women's daily, personal, social and political lives can remain unexplored and unscrutinized. Feminist thought emphasizes difference and plurality. It has emerged as one of the most creative and challenging trajectories of social thought.

Feminism is now too important and complex a phenomenon to be ignored by anyone. The issues which are commonly considered to be 'feminist' are among the most salient topics of public discourse. Many of the most troubled aspects of social life are addressed rather considerably in language heavily shaped by feminist consciousness. Viewed from this context, contemporary feminist fictions represent transcendence over the status quo and even the bleaker visions such as dystopias urge the possibility, even the inevitability of change.