

# “Denay Nunavit”: Come See Real Flowers of this Painful World in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

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Set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a story of a thirty three year old narrator Offred, who describes her life as a Handmaid in the house of the Commander, Fred, her master, to whom by law she is to bear a child. In order to comprehend the saga of Offred, it is important to analyze the circumstances that led to the creation of the Republic of Gilead in general and to the categorization of women according to their performatory roles as Wives, Handmaids, Aunts, Marthas and Econowives, in particular. A result of a staged terrorist attack that assassinates the President and results in a movement that calls itself the “Sons of Jacob,” self-indulgently tries to restore order by launching a revolution following which it suspends United States Constitution. Stein adds that “that state-controlled religion of Gilead believes in a system of “harsh theology based on a judgmental father god rather than on a nurturing divinity.” The powerful axe of this theocracy permits the military dictators to freeze women’s bank accounts, rob them of their independent existence and hence, legitimize one of the classes amongst them as “handmaids” or “concubines” for perpetuation of progeny of their respective elites. So dismal is the scenario that even the “written texts are subject to state control” and only men are legally allowed to unlock and read the Bible whose words fall on deaf ears just as the heroine’s request to hear her point of view falls on deaf literate ears—towards the close of the novel (Kouhestani 130; Stein 61-62; Newman).

Critical analyses of *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Howell’s suggest that this story of Offred, the Handmaid, is an imaginative response to current cultural situation. She also suggests that a critical reading of the novel may begin with the beginning of Cixous’s statement in her polemical feminist essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”: “I shall speak about women’s writing: about *what it will do*.” This statement implies that Offred’s “fictive autobiography” is the written text, derived from her oral narrations which have been transcribed and reconstructed through the re-visioning of fictive historians in the year two thousand one hundred and ninety five (165). Perhaps, this journey of Offred takes off from the oral to the written form to demonstrate the “historical

problem of women’s silencing,” which Cixous discusses at length as the story of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s protagonist’s effort to “seize it [the language], to make it hers.” Described from Offred’s point of view, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the tale of one Handmaid’s resistance against patriarchal tyranny. According to Howells, by “an irony of history,” it is the silenced Handmaid Offred “who becomes Gilead’s principal historian” when her story is published almost “two hundred years later,” long after her death (165).

*The Handmaid’s Tale*, Harold Bloom states, arises from the “strongest strain in Atwood’s imaginative sensibility,” which is the Gothic. “A gothic dystopia is an oddly mixed genre,” but Atwood’s effort to bring out the perils of the familiar real world makes it work in Offred’s story in a tone that is “consistent, cautious, and finally quite frightening.” The entire Republic of Gilead, recalls Offred, looks like a Gothic prison, being constantly watched over by the secret police, the Eyes of God with informers everywhere; an inferno where “language is coded, thoughts seem policed” and all the physical, social, psychic, emotional and sexual freedom seems a thing of the past (Wisker 11). It is a society in which the defaulters are punished publically for citizens to take note of the strict rules that are mandatory for them to follow.

Trapped inside this misogynistic Gileadean culture, Offred finds herself existing in a claustrophobic space, imprisoned in a narrative that altogether denies any remote possibility of liberation. For instance, the narrator’s Gileadean name Offred (literally Of-Fred), says Sheila Conboy “literalizes her sense of entrapment and lack of control: she is both ‘Of Fred’ and ‘Offered,’ a kind of fertility sacrifice in a sterile household.” This modification of narrator’s newly acquired name is evidence enough that her body is a property that belongs to her immediate master. And sadly, the heroine confesses that she recognises other Handmaid’s like her in correlation to the men they belong to, for example: Ofglen, Ofwarren to name a few (Howells 165). Amid namelessness and displacement, Offred continues her physical, emotional and psychological struggle for survival and her persistent

denial of this state name that in no way is hers, is her silent defiance against the rules.

Poignantly, she recapitulates how in the former times women were free to live and “shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeters” and were portrayed in the women’s magazines as bright, strikingly independent. In contrast, life in Gilead is much harder for Handmaid’s like Offred, who are “infantilized” (Bouson 138). Suffering a live-burial, in Commander’s household, Offred is almost treated like a child who must “not be told” certain things; yet, before the ceremony, as a norm, she is permitted with others to watch the news just like “a child” who is “allowed up late with the grown-ups” (HT 66, 101). Also the space that is allotted to Offred in the Commander’s house is a room that cannot be locked. Rather she compares it to a nunnery in which she, like the nameless narrator of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” gets trapped. Accordingly, this room is just like her body which in Gilead is certainly not her own but that of the State. Henceforth, she begins to deny having any authority over her room and her body rendering both as “an uncanny space that is both familiar and strange.”

A sexual slave of the Commander and his wife, Offred has no choice but to be the receiver of his seed, and Bouson adds: “If the narrative risks victimizing readers by positioning them as voyeurs and subjecting” them to the sexual drama of the Ceremony, then it also “partially conceals what it reveals as it minimizes the horror of what is being depicted” (144). And Offred critically distances herself from the mandatory state-duty that she has to perform in the Handmaid’s role and treats this duty as mere obligation for survival. Though Offred confesses that she had a lot of choice but she chose to be a Handmaid; yet, in this consensual sexual exploitation act that may be referred to as a kind of consensual rape, Atwood encourages the readers to participate in “narrative’s defenses by recognizing [her] parody of Gothic form in this scene.” In context of this pornographic and voyeuristically disturbing scene of the monthly ceremony Bannerjee remarks that the novel “deliberately and with parodic intent deflates the Gothic suspense it has invoked in the description leading up to the Ceremony by depicting the impregnation ritual as ‘not so much dreadful as boring’” (qtd. in Bouson 145). Interestingly, Atwood presents this unconventional ceremony as a “thinly disguised incest drama,” in which Offred the Handmaid enacts the role of an obedient daughter in the house of the daddyish Commander, husband to a barren wife, who haplessly plays an active/passive role in the script. Also the mother is another character in this dehumanizing Ceremony along with the “sexually violating father” and the “sexually abused—and mute, silenced—daughter” (Bouson 145). According to Colette Tennant, the Commander in this Atwoodian contemporary Gothic script is an altogether a different kind of “comic book hero.” A middle aged former marketing researcher, who played a crucial role in the creation of this dystopic state in which he holds a position of authority in the Gilead administration. Amid all the extended secret meetings

with the Commander, Offred discovers his true nature, and realizes that he too like her is imprisoned in the Gileadean Empire of his own making.

Apparently, the average women in Gilead, like the Wives, the Marthas, and the Econowives, have already accepted their victim positions as something that is inevitable; rebel women like Moira and Offglen who resist the patriarchal dictates are forcibly pushed into sexual exploitation for denial of their roles. But Offred out of the four victim positions seems to occupy position three, that is, “acknowledgement of the fact of being a victim, but a repudiation of the victim role,” and then with her continuous effort to reclaim her subjectivity, she chooses to narrate her tale in her own secret creative space in spite of her reduced circumstances, a fact that hints at her evolution into a creative “non-victim” position, as with sheer determination she moves from the third to the fourth position (Tandon 152).

Another dare-devil act that Offred performs against the strict rules of the state where love is absolutely forbidden is that she “[falls] in love” with Nick. Indeed, Nick risks his life to save Offred, he is Atwood’s real Gothic hero as he is the one who “redeems” all men by acting as a saving grace, and plans her escape. Since both reading and writing are forbidden in Gilead, Offred reconstructs her version of the Republic of Gilead via the medium of oral narrative/reconstruction. A fact that becomes quite obvious in the “historical notes” tagged at the end of Offred’s tale in which it is made clear that her narrative is a reconstruction, a “palimpsest of unheard [woman’s voice] sound” a transcription of recording the “superimposition of voice” upon some “thirty tapes” (HT 3, 376, 374).

Although the ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is ambiguous but the addition of the “Historical Notes” section at the end of the narrative somewhat acts out the rescue fantasy, as Offred’s story is discussed by a group of historians in an academic conference after nearly two hundred years. However, Professor Pieixoto seems disinterested in Offred’s recorded version of her-history, as he addresses the tale of Offred the Handmaid to be “soi-distant . . . whiff of emotion recollected, if not in tranquility, at least *post facto*” (HT 373, 376; Bouson 154). In other words, he threatens to erase the significant struggle of Offred, as thoroughly as “Gilead had tried to erase her identity.” Thus, as Offred had taken the risk by surrendering herself to the strangers similarly her tale is left at the mercy of some learned strangers because it can’t be helped (Howells 169; Tennant 253).

Therefore, Atwood’s purpose in appending the “Historical Notes” as tail to Offred’s story is to make the reader’s aware of author’s intention behind this dark tale of a woman’s life is to forewarn the reader: “Do we, as scholars, contribute to the de-humanizations of society by our own critical work . . . ?” In addition, Davidson examines in Professor Pieixoto’s reconstruction of Offred’s tale the stink of Gilead’s philosophy: “Is this what history is for? To round out the vitae

of historians?" Bouson adds more weight to this argument by stressing the fact that history is an important document that one must decipher as it indeed is a lived experience.

Thus, via Offred's lived experience Atwood is spreading consciousness amongst her readers to be on guard and be prepared and beware of the future (qtd. in Bouson 157). In this regard, Das suggests that Offred's "time out" is the time we live in. "Ours is the world she attempts to conserve in memory." Indeed, "we are the alternate possibility brooding over Gilead," for "ours [is] the realm of potential interpretation." So, the need of the hour is to attend to the warnings in her tale and "recognize that we are Offred's ultimately fantasy of escape" since to do "otherwise is to measure Offred's future suffering in the magnitude of our present complacency. The alienation and torment of the victims" struggling to survive in such dark places causes "unease in [the] minds" and hence, ignorance would be a mistake (267). But Offred's unfinished story puts forth a significant question: "Do we understand more about the past (or is it the future?) from her story or from the official history?" For this enigma, Howell's suggests that probably "it is the female author's voice at the beginning of the Historical Notes which offers readers two coded words of Atwoodian advice," on "how to read Offred's dystopian narrative: 'Denay, Nunavit'" (169).

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