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The Handmaid's Tale: Sabotaged Narrative of Offred

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Abstract:

"The Handmaid's Tale" (1986) is another vibrant novel by Margaret Atwood. Unlike her poems the novel is a fiesta of unique narrative technique. The novel deals with a very serious theme—decreased birthrates in Gilead and the preventive measures taken by the authority to maintain and increase the birthrate. On the contrary, the narrative layers perforate so many out comings of "casually held attitudes about women" which are "drawn to their logical conclusions" (394, 1986). Since the question of birth is intricately connected with the body and sexuality of women, hence the Gileadan system engineers very organized and selective methods to achieve its goal. The measures include a series of rejections for women-- they are not entitled for right to property, right to vote, right to speech, and right to movement and so on. In simple terms, they are reduced to non-individual entities owned by the State. In this paper, I would like to discuss the narrative of Offred, the main character in the novel, to show how Atwood has sabotaged the narrative of Offred while allowing Offred to tell her own story.

Keywords: Narrator, narrative, Gilead, commander, Latin, power

1. Introduction

The idea of Gilead is founded on some strong and coordinated rules. It is these rules which play a crucial role to connect and combine the larger idea of reproduction in Gilead. The control is spread over the state through a series of terminologies. Everything is pouched in a term. The terms like 'Handmaid' 'Angel' 'Econowives' and 'Commander' etc. suggests the softness or hardness of the positions. The specific dress codes like the handmaids in entire red, the Marthas in blue and so on are all aimed to reduce the individual identity into a single identity of Gilead. There are also specific goal-oriented foreign-policies. Jews and Catholics are not allowed in Gilead. The Jews, in order to get into Gilead should visit Israel to repudiate Judaism and the Catholics should convert them. Above all, Gileadan administration selects a political method for spreading their ideologies. The method is that of mouth to mouth advertisement. No one can write in Gilead. Writing in any form is forbidden. Hence there is mention of graffiti here and there. For example, the handmaid who stayed in Offred's room before her wrote in Latin, "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (65). Though Offred could not understand the meaning of the line initially. (I would like to discuss about the importance of this line in the narrative of the novel in the later part of the paper). And again the advertisement is all about the policies and guidelines of Gilead. The rhetoric is used for women against the women. One such example is Aunt Lydia who influences the narrator Offred in a great way in the novel.

Coming back to the question of the frame narrator of the novel Offred, we find that her past memories are almost foggy. There is a visible incoherence in the description of Offred about her past. The reason as far as she could doubt is because of the pill or injection given by the authorities to her. She woke up screaming after she was drugged. In the meantime the authorities had taken away her daughter. They showed her a photograph of her daughter where the girl was wearing a white dress and was walking away holding the hand of an anonymous woman. The emotional trauma has left Offred's past disjointed and it has also affected her present to a great extent.

So far, I have been discussing about the nature of Gilead, the way it rules and the personal life of the narrator's past. Undoubtedly the past of the narrator is a story of loss and suffering only. The point I am going to discuss here is how the narrator amidst these rigid rules explores her strength and uses the Gileadan narrative itself to establish her personality.

Before she was forced into the Gileadan system, Offred had been a very attractive and sexually active woman. She was conscious of her beauty very well. We learn that Luke was playing around with her even when he already had his wife and eventually they got married. She had been conscious about the kind of dress she wore: "I can remember what I wore, each blouse, each scarf" (62-63), and she would use perfume: "I would pace, waiting for him, turn the television on and then off, dab behind my ears with perfume, Opium it was, It was in a Chinese bottle, red and gold." (63). Later at one point in the novel, when Moira was being dragged into the Science Lab, Offred mentions the kind of punishment awarded in there. They used to beat the hands and feet of the 'wrongdoers'. "They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that, the hands. They did not care what they did to your feet or your hands" (114). The narrator remembers that Moira was unable to walk on her feet for a week, she could not wear shoes and her feet were swollen. Moira tried to escape. The narrator recollects Aunt Lydia who said, "For our purpose your feet and your hands are not essential." (114). But

interestingly, Offred does not feel her hands and feet to be useless. She steals pat of butter after the dinner in the toe of her right shoe in a paper napkin. She does this always: "Not the first time, because whenever there is butter or even margarine, I have some in this way." (119). She rubs the butter over her face and hands for butter keeps her skin soft. This is an action which she performs with full knowledge of the ideologies of the Gilead. In Gilead, lotions are considered as vanities and are forbidden. Above all, the best thing about Offred's action is a hope. She hopes to get out of the confinement some day. There is a strong belief in her mind. She says: "... we can believe that some day we will get out, that we will be touched again, in love and desire." (120), and along with that, she has the full consciousness about her existence. "I want to be valued, in ways that I am not: I want to be more than valuable." (120). We find that there is a constant reaffirmation of the awareness in Offred that she is a beautiful woman and there is a powerful conviction which drives her even when she is in a situation where there seems no exit at all.

Before I proceed further, I would like to provide some more information about the character of Offred as revealed in the narrative. Atwood's selection of Offred as a narrator is a remarkable one. Offred is aware of much small information. For example, she knows why there is a crisis of oranges in the Gileadan state. She can well connect it with the political crisis of the time. "I see they have oranges today. Ever since Central America was lost to the Liberthos, oranges have been hard to get, sometimes they are there, and sometimes they are not. The war interferes with the oranges from California, and even Florida is not dependable, when there are roadblocks or when the train tracks are blown up." (32). This information shows her knowledge about the situation around her.

In a place where friendships were suspicious and where reproduction was a mere ceremony of dull sexual activity which "has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other nations..." (117), it is very interesting to see how Offred makes her way up to the Commander. If we start looking at the narrative from the first meeting between Offred and the Commander, we find that Offred has a very clear understanding of the terms of the power equation. She is invited by the commander first into his office, which is forbidden to everyone, even to his own wife Serena Joy. The other important point to notice is he invites her to play the game of Scrabble with him which, again is forbidden in Gilead. Let's look at the whole situation bit by bit. Offred was little apprehensive about the secret invitation by the Commander. But she was sure about one thing that the Commander has some sort of weakness about her. Offred could rationalize it very well. "But there must be something he wants, from me. To want is to have a weakness. It's this weakness, whatever it is, that entices me. It's like a small crack in the wall, before now impenetrable. If I press my eye to it, this weakness of his, I may be able to see my way clear. I want to know what he wants" (171) But she controls the urge of her query. She rationalizes her 'want' as well. "What does he want? But I won't give it away, this eagerness of mine. It's a bargaining session, things are about to be exchanged. She who does not hesitate is lost. I am not giving anything away; selling only. (173).

As the game begins, Offred wins the first game. But she makes it very clear on what terms the game is played. "I win the first game, I let him win the second;" (175). These statements are very strong and assert the fact that Offred holds her attitude very high. She is conscious about the profit and loss and she is judging suspiciously every bit of the secrecy and the conspiracy. She knows the final motif is not Scrabble game. It is something else. "I still have not discovered what the terms are, what I will be able to ask for, in exchange." (175). This may be the reason why she allows him to win a game probably to understand his reaction to it. But she does not say she is not able to understand the terms of the game, she says she is just not able to discover it. This again shows her powerful persona. After the game the Commander demands a kiss from her. This is the point where I would like to reassert the point of my paper. Offred was a self-conscious woman. She is aware of her physical beauty and mental strength. The Commander must have been attracted by the former one or may be by the latter one as well. His invitation to play the game was a sort of IQ test for Offred. But his demand for a kiss was like as if he wants to win over her. He wants it for true. When she kisses him first, he says "Not like that, as if you meant it" (176). On the other hand, Offred was thinking an imaginary plot of murdering the Commander with a sharp lever in her mind. Because she knows that "after a request like that there is always a next time, whether you say yes or no" (175). She preserves the imaginary idea for a next time.

Thereafter, Offred and the Commander reached to an agreement. The agreement was about the meeting time. The signal was set as Nick polishing the car and his hat should be askew when Offred goes out for or comes in from shopping. Any alteration from these set of symbols means Offred would not meet the Commander.

On the second meeting, Offred and the Commander played the same games and added some more to the older ones. Then at the end of the meeting, the Commander offered Offred a women's magazine which were totally forbidden in the Gilead. Offred describes the content of the Magazines in these lines:

"What was in them was a promise. They dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities... replica after replica, to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, and endless love. The real promise in them was immortality." (195).

Offred threw a general question to the Commander. The question is why he was showing the magazine to her and not to his wife. The Commander replied, "She would not understand. Anyway she would not talk to me much anymore. We don't seem to have much in common, these days (197). Now if we look at these two events: the Commander's action of showing Offred the woman's magazine and Offred's question; two questions come up: Is the Commander trying to get an alternate companion in Offred? And if yes, we have to agree that the Commander is not trying to fulfill the need of his wife Serena Joy through Offred. There is something more to it. Offred was very careful about her situation in the whole drama. Even after the third and the fourth meeting when the Commander grants her the hand lotion and they discuss about the situation of the handmaids in Gilead, Offred was still clear and conscious about her position. She tells herself, "For him, I must remember, I am only a whim." (199).

On the other hand, things were taking shape in a different way in the triangular relation among Offred, the Commander and Serena Joy. Offred felt different about the Commander. She felt an unsettled jealousy against Serena Joy. She feels like an intruder who is entering "in a territory that ought to have been hers" (201). But the interesting thing in the novel is that it does not end on any

particular thought. While Offred was thinking all these another contrary set of thoughts were developing in her mind about the Commander. She was confident about her place in the Commander's heart. She says, "—for the Commander wasn't in love with me, I refused to believe he felt anything for me as extreme as that—"(202). Offred also noticed that the Commander's gesture and his look were changed for Offred. He tried to touch her face on the night of the Ceremony. Though Offred was afraid of the rules of Gilead and Serena Joy. But still she enjoyed a kind of anonymous power over Serena Joy. These are the series of analyses which helped Offred to cogitate about the future terms of the meeting with the Commander.

Here let me go back to the Latin phrase, which I kept in the earlier part of the paper to be discussed later. It is at chapter 29, when the meetings with the Commander have almost become a routine, Offred asked the Commander about the Latin graffiti: "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (65) because she knows that the Commander has a number of dictionaries and he has the knowledge of Latin too. Offred was curious about the meaning of the line since she discovered them on the wall of the cupboard in her room. But since she could not pronounce the words correctly so the Commander allowed Offred to write the lines on a score-pad. This moment is a very important turning point in the whole narrative of Offred. We have no mention of Offred writing anything in the whole novel. The story, she repeats time and again is an oral narrative. What Offred wrote after a long gap of time was not something of her own. These were the words of another Handmaid who already stayed in her room before her. As she finishes writing the words, the Commander says that the words are a joke. Offred insisted about the meaning of the words. 'Don't let the bastards grind you down' (235). The meaning of the words takes the narrative of Offred back to the beginning of the whole episodes. Offred understands at once the futility of her meetings or any terms of the meetings with the Commander. Offred says: 'I can see why she wrote that, on that wall of the cupboard, but I also see that she must have learnt it here, in this room.'"(235). Offred now sees the whole revelation. The Commander says the earlier handmaid committed suicide. She gets the point that she is just a part of the whole series of meetings which have been going on even before she arrived here. 'I have not been the first then' (235).

This revelation opens up the emptiness and the futility of Offred's meeting with the Commander. But Offred is a courageous woman so she struggles to find some openings for her independence and escape. She understands it well that the corrupt practice is everywhere in Gilead. It is on a much higher plane among the top officials. Serena Joy is even not untouched by it. She offers Offred to find a match in order to conceive. She indirectly accepts that the Commander might be impotent. Offred could understand well that the underlying corruption of the Gilead would open an opportunity for her goals. There were many times when she imagines ways of escape in her mind. She prepares herself mentally after every episode for a next task. Although they are imaginary but they fuel her physical existence. For example, when Serena Joy provides her with a cigarette stealthily, she thinks of burning down the house. "I could burn the house down. Such a fine thought, it makes me shiver. An escape, quick and narrow." (261). but on the other hand, she is very conscious about her schemes in reality. She says: 'Even as I luxuriate in the future this way, rolling anticipation around in my mouth. I think of something else.'" (261). The interesting thing about her strategy is that she tries her options wherever she can chance upon. She accepts Serena Joy's offer for a match to conceive quickly without the knowledge of the Commander, she accepts the Commander's offer without the knowledge of the Serena Joy. Also, she goes to meet Nick several times later on without the knowledge of Serena Joy.

On the night when the Commander proposed to her for outings to nightclub Jezebel, he offered Offred an old theatrical costume, Offred made him to turn his back on her while she puts the dress on. The Commander obeyed. "I want him to feel I'm doing him a favor" (291). This is one of the very important points of my paper. I have been trying to emphasize the point that Offred is conscious about her femininity and she could make the other person respect her consciousness. On the other hand, Offred also understands that these demands of the Gileadan authority may have an implicit meaning. She doubts that these people know the whereabouts her child, Luke or her mother. She is afraid and she believes that they might do any harm to them if she is not abiding by the orders of the Commander or Serena Joy. So in a way she is also keeping the chances open for her family as well as friends.

The call of the Eyes follows immediately after Offred's confrontation with Serena Joy. Serena Joy discovers the double cross. She shows the winter cloak and the sequined outfit as evidence and says: 'just like the other one... You'll end up the same' (359). The two men came to arrest her for "Violation of state secrets" (367). But as Offred goes out with the two men towards the van she talks about the Commander: "...now I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking." (368). Offred keeps silent. She knows that if she opens her mouth the violation would also involve the Commander and Serena Joy. She leaves both of them with the realization that she has saved them by saving their secrets within her.

2. Conclusion

Atwood, by placing Offred in the Gileadian State which has a complex conglomeration of so many ends and purposes, empowers the character to become a part of the system by subduing the Commander who is the symbolic head of the State in the narrative. Atwood does not intend to subjugate the policies of Gilead with the narrative, but she wisely uses Offred's sabotaged narrative to bring the character opportunities to freedom and escape from the dull ceremonies of Gileadian life to rationalize her existence in it. Offred evolves a powerful character, she uses the limited available resources to make her own space while uplifting her dignity all along and she keeps her chances open for all possible options and she succeeds in her approach to a great extent.

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