

RETHINKING PERSONAL HISTORY AND MAINTAINING IDENTITY – OFFRED IN MARGARET ATWOOD’S *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore the aspects of reviewing personal history and analyzing personal identity presented in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Offred’s story, which is presented to the reader as a written narrative reconstructed from tapes two centuries after her death and the end of the dictatorship of Gilead, are discussed at a scientific conference held on June 25, 2195. As a Handmaid in a service of Commander Waterford and a prisoner in his household, Offred’s identity, her past and even her first name are taken away from her. Her role is limited to a child bearer only. Throughout the novel, Offred rethinks her former life, her tendency to live by ignoring, to take everything for granted and to trust fate. She remembers the days in the pre-Gilead society, where freedom to do something is replaced with freedom from doing in Gilead. She reviews her relationship with her mother and her attitude towards her mother’s values and feminism. She recalls her relationship with her husband, her role as a mother and her way of life in the pre-Gilead society. Offred compares her previous and her present status in a situation in which her personal freedom is almost non-existent. In her newly-discovered self-awareness, she finds ways to redefine herself as a woman, as a lover and even as a victim.

Key Words: identity, history, society, freedom, self-awareness, woman, *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian and feminist story published in Canada in 1985. The novel depicts the totalitarian society of Gilead, created on crumbling foundations of 20th century United States of America and fueled by the decreasing childbirth rates and dangerous level of environmental pollution. The Gilead regime is built on rigid principles which resemble Puritan society, restricting basic human rights, restricting the access to information and maintaining control and surveillance over its citizens. Above all, the regime in Gilead focuses on exploitation of women who are/ were still able to have living children, using them as surrogate mothers in families of the highest ranking state officials. In order to justify the policy of enslaving women,

the regime of Gilead uses the biblical story of Rachel and Jacob and their servant Billah.

Although the novel can be defined as a dystopian one, Margaret Atwood herself, in her interview for *Time* magazine in 2017, states the following:

The control of women and babies has been a part of every repressive regime in history. This has been happening all along. I don't take it lightly when a politician says something like a pregnancy can't result from a rape because a woman's body knows it and rejects it. There's an undercurrent of this [type of thinking]. And then it rises to the surface sometimes. But *The Handmaid's Tale* is always relevant, just in different ways in different political contexts. Not that much has changed.

The concepts which define Offred's identity and her perceptions in the novel are analyzed in detail. Apart from the review and analysis of the novel, pertinent articles related to the topic are also reviewed.

The Society of Gilead

The main character in the novel, Offred presents her perspective of Gilead and rethinks her life before and after the regime. Offred views her life in the following way: "This is a reconstruction [...] When I get out of here, if I am ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be reconstruction then too, at yet another remove" (134). Ferns (380) states the following regarding Offred's story and her memories from the previous society: "Offred is only one of innumerable individuals who can remember the way things were, who can recall the outrages perpetrated in the name of the new order, who can contrast now with then and consider the implications of differences." The differences and the sharp contrasts, between her former life and present reality, reinforce Offred's analysis and reviewing of her life, her identity and self awareness.

Offred's story, a continuous contrast between the present situations she is in and her previous life is presented to the reader as a written narrative reconstructed from tapes which were found approximately two centuries after her death. By that time, the dictatorship of Gilead has ended. Howells argues that Offred storytelling is: "one's woman story of resistance against patriarchal tyranny." But the irony is that Offred, the nameless Handmaid, becomes the only voice recording Gilead, as Howells (165) describes it: "Gilead's principal historian when that oral 'herstory' is published two hundred years later." Therefore, the society of Gilead is presented through the words and the voice of one of the women, handmaids, mothers, lovers, victims or rebels in Gilead.

Offred's Name

Various aspects of this society are discussed at a scientific conference held on June 25, 2195, including the content of the tapes and the identity of the individuals mentioned. As a Handmaid in a service of Commander Waterford and a prisoner in his household, Offred's identity, her past and even her first name are taken away from her. As she remembers her past, she also thinks about her name:

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past. (84)

Throughout the novel, her first name is not mentioned; although Offred recalls and rethinks her past by referring to her former, real name which is never revealed to the reader: "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something" (97).

Her words reveal her longing, not only to hear her real name again, but also to feel the same way she felt before Gilead: respected, valued and wanted. Offred makes a connection between her former name and her present name, which again signifies the loss of identity, freedom and self-respect. Her present name indicates her status in the society and Commander Waterford's home, in addition to the identity of the man who owns her. Her present name represents her life and the fact that she is deprived of her identity, her freedom and her personal history.

Offred's Role as a Child Bearer

In the society of Gilead, in which the number of healthy children is very low, Offred's role is limited to a child bearer only. Neuman (857) describes Offred's position as follows:

The novel's outwardly conformist and once independent Offred has seen her social value reduced to reproduction, and her personal freedom completely curtailed. But the retrospective monologue in which she tells her

story, reveals her as observant of the gendered configurations of power in both the personal and the political realms, in both the time before and the present of the novel.

Before the Gilead establishment rule, Offred already had a healthy child who was taken away from her, thus her fertility is proven. This automatically puts her in the position of potential Handmaids, pressured by the expectations of others to produce a healthy newborn. She analyses and redefines, with a hint of disgust, the way she sees her body and her fertility, as an unknown, deceitful territory:

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 diminishing of tissue, the drooling of the flesh, these are the 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. (Atwood 73)

Her body, once reliable instrument, of pleasure or transportation, a normal and functional body which she could rely on, is redefining itself and betraying her, focusing on one function, childbearing, only. Each month she fails to conceive, she feels betrayed by her own body:

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. I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time. (Atwood 74)

Her words reveal the fears of a woman who is trying to conceive and a woman whose position in the society, marriage or life depends on producing children. The fear of failure, intensified by months of unsuccessful attempts to conceive, the feeling of inadequacy and failure to fulfill the role given to her by the society of Gilead, reflects the fears that even modern women suffer from today. Countless women, even today, consider that being a mother and a wife is the only role which impacts their lives and bears significance in a society, regardless of their skills, qualifications and careers.

Offred's Relationship with Her Mother

Another aspect of Offred's analysis of her identity is her relationship with her mother. Throughout the course of the novel, Offred rethinks her relationship with her own mother, a feminist who had her at the age of thirty seven, despite of many warnings of birth defect rates and accusations of being a pro-natalist. A single parent and a strong woman, she never accuses Offred's father for leaving her. She emphasizes her lack of expectation from men and her tendency to rely on her own achievements, salary and work while raising her daughter. The relationship between Offred and her mother is strained, a typical mother-daughter relationship in which Offred feels even slight contempt towards her mother's passion, political attitudes and ferocious independence. On the other hand, Offred is aware that her mother disapproves of her conformity and affinity towards traditional values, or, as Offred describes it, perfunctory and routine ways. What Offred desired in her teenage years was a mother who would lead more ceremonial life, "less subject to makeshift and decampment" (Atwood 181).

However, alone in her room in Commander Waterford's house, Offred re-examines her relationship with her mother:

I admired my mother in some ways, although things between us were never easy. She expected me to vindicate her life for her, and the choices she had 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. (Atwood 122)

It is very clear that Offred's views her relationship with her mother from a different perspective in the society of Gilead. She sees her mother's views now as justified and her actions as appropriate. She is aware that in her present situation, it is pointless to hope for a chance to improve or change this relationship. Still, she is aware of her desperate wish to communicate with her mother again, which is a symbol of her yearning for the life and the relationships she had before Gilead.

Ignoring and Ignorance

Throughout the novel, Offred often reexamines her former life and her tendency to live by ignoring, to take everything for granted and to trust fate. Almost willfully, she chooses to ignore the events and the changes in the society that lead to the development of the society of Gilead, the destruction of the

Congress and the pre-existing government. She describes her way of reacting to the changes in the following way: "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance; you have to work at it" (Atwood 56).

Nevertheless, Offred becomes aware that this collective and gradual acceptance of the changes led to the rise of Gilead and describes them accurately with the following sentence: "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (Atwood 56).

She remembers her former life as a woman who was educated and worked in a library. A reader can sense a hint of pride and humor, when she describes her workplace and her duties. She was able to pay for her new, bigger apartment, an improvement from her small student apartment during her college years, with the salary she earned. In her present situation, she recollects those events. Readers can sense Offred's disbelief and her struggle to imagine and even to understand, that millions of women, she among them, used to have jobs and that it was normal for women to work and live by themselves, as if these events happened to someone else in distant past. This is a sharp contrast to Offred's life presently. Her days are spent in boredom and, as she describes it: "the amount of unfilled time, the long parenthesis of nothing" (Atwood 69).

Even identifying the groups or the individuals who introduced the changes is difficult for Offred- most of the times she refers to the Sons of Jacob as "they" and "them," distancing herself from the events preceding Gilead: "That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even rioting in the streets [...] There wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on" (Atwood 174). Neuman (859) defines Offred's tendency to ignore as follows: "Willed ignorance, Offred learns, is sister to victimization and to passive acceptance of blame for what is done to one."

However, her present life does not allow Offred to continue with this practice to ignore the conditions and the way of life Gilead imposes on her. She becomes aware of every minute detail of her surroundings; of every change of tone in the voice of the person she is having conversation with, of every hint of potential danger while she is informing the resistance movement called Mayday. She chooses to be aware; she chooses to change her approach of willful ignorance, simply because she knows that this change is desperately needed in order to stay alive in Gilead. The luxury of ignoring the unpleasant does not exist for Offred. This change of awareness is probably the most notable when she is reexamining her personal identity.

Marriage and Relationships

Similarly to her tendency to distance herself from the changes, Offred exhibits the same passive approach when accepting the overpowering author-

ity of men established in Gilead. Ferns (376) defines Offred as follows: "At first sight, indeed, she appears less of a rebel against male authority, than a helpless victim of it". Indeed, Offred analyses and rethinks her relationships with men and her attitude towards men through the perspective of a single woman, married woman and a Handmaid in Commander's Waterford house. She remembers her relationship with Luke, which started first as a love affair with a married man and developed into a real, committed relationship later. Luke's divorce is the reason Gilead establishment does not recognize their marriage and Offred is treated like a single woman, therefore available to be a Handmaid.

In her conversations with Commander Waterford, during their secret meetings and while they play the forbidden game of Scrabble, Offred rethinks the relationships and the position of women in relationships and marriages in general before Gilead. Commander Waterford provides arguments in support of male authority and established view in Gilead and his opinion that women are in a better position compared to the previous society:

We've given them more than we've taken away [...]. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't (219)?

He proceeds to defend the newly built set of values and norms, emphasizing the "equality" among women- since all of them "get a man." "Protection" is offered to women as well- at least the form of protection defined as "freedom from" according to the norms in Gilead, where very little is allowed for women. Yet, in the eyes of the officials in Gilead, women do not have to struggle with their jobs and daycare, to balance between work and family duties, to be left to look after themselves or their children on their own. As Commander Waterford argues: "This way they are protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace" (Atwood 220). Still, feeling that something is missing in the "perfect picture" of this society, he asks Offred the following question: "What did we overlook?" Offred's response is: "Love," to which Waterford counters: "But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, falling in love?" (220).

Offred scrutinizes her relationships, the moments when she was falling in and out of love with men, and the fact that human beings used to believe in love even more firmly when it was difficult to love their partners. There is a hint of displeasure and anxiety in her thoughts, due to the uncertain course and result of these relationships. Yet, she feels strangely comforted by these memories, memories of being in love:

And sometimes it happened, for a time. That kind of love comes and goes and is hard to remember afterwards, like pain. You would look at the man one day and you would think, I loved you, and the tense would be past, and you would be filled with a sense of wonder, because it was such an amazing and precarious and dumb thing to have done; and you would know too why your friends had been evasive about it, at the time. (Atwood 226)

However, a dose of cynicism can be also sensed as Offred recollects the challenges of a relationship or marriage, comparing them to: “a puzzle that could be solved” (Atwood 226). And if the puzzle couldn’t be solved, Offred recollects, it could always be changed, as our opinions and attitudes could be changed. Remembering the way people used to think, Offred says, with a sense of detachment:

If you don’t like it, change it, we said, to each other and to ourselves. And so we would change the man, for another one. Change, we were sure, was for the better always. We were revisionist; what we revised was ourselves. It is strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we free to shape and reshape forever the ever expanding perimeters of our lives. (Atwood 227)

Relationships with Other Women in Gilead

The attitude of the society she lives in towards women and the role that other women had in developing this attitude, in comparison to the previous society towards women, is also scrutinized by Offred. Foley discusses the role of women and their position as victims in the society of Gilead, as well as the role of women in the process of accepting this position. Analyzing the context in which women are victimized, Foley (51) states the following:

Deprived of their traditional networks of mutual support of the totalitarian atmosphere of Gilead, women are forced to accept a brutally enforced, yet recognizable approximation of what used to be called a woman’s sphere, the notion that their sole proper role is domestic, reproductive, nurturing, morally uplifting.

Yet, Offred realizes that comparing the past and comparing present situations reveals that occasionally, those differences are subtle. More often than not, women played a significant role when victimizing other women. Aunt Lydia

and Serena Joy identify and corroborate with the regime. Aunt Lydia, the primary enforcer of the Gilead rules and handmaids' training, skillfully justifies the philosophy behind the regime, presenting them as newly gained freedoms and rights. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia's words: "There is more than one kind of freedom, Said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 24).

Serena Joy, Commander Waterford's wife is a former TV personality. Offred remembers, that as a child, when she could not find any interesting cartoon on TV, would watch the Growing Souls Gospel Hour and the Bible stories for children included in the show. One of the leading sopranos, who could laugh and cry at the same time while singing hymns, was (or had been, as Offred phrases it), Serena Joy. The moment she realizes who the Wife is Offred is aware that she is in a worse situation than she thought she would be. Serena Joy does not show any compassion or understanding for Offred, although she is aware of the fact that the arrangement and Offred's arrival in her house was not Offred's, or any other Handmaid's choice Offred is conscious of Serena's hatred and envy. She summarizes their relationship as follows: "She does not speak to me, unless she can't avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity" (Atwood 13).

However, categorizing Offred as a victim or as rebel is not simple and straightforward. Ferns (379) discusses Offred's resistance to the authoritarian regime of Gilead as more effective than she realizes it is:

Simply by existing, however passive her own resistance, she provides an audience for the resistance of others, a space in which the implications of their actions can resonate. What Atwood stresses is that however powerless, however often defeated, the rebel is not alone.

Throughout the novel, Offred seems to accept her fate and the situation she is in with outward appearance of acceptance and conformism. She even defines this acceptance and the fact that many of the unthinkable situations before became ordinary presently, stating: "Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (Atwood 271).

On the other hand, she rethinks her role as a victim and defies this role, with her connection with the Mayday movement, as well as with her connection, even mental only, with her predecessor and her words written in Offred's closet. "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Don't let the bastards grind you down" (185), summarizes her defiance and acceptance of her faith at the same time. In the final chapter of the novel, when the black van comes for Offred, she is not sure if that is Mayday movement and her salvation, or she is arrested and sent to be executed.

She rethinks the options she had before entering the van: to commit suicide, to accept her fate or to set the house on fire. She describes her feeling of fatigue, thinking that she is tired of the drama or the silence in her life. "But I snatch at it, this offer. It is all I am left with" (294). As she sits in the van, thinking: "Whether this is my end or a new beginning, I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within, or else the light" (295). Instead of taking any action, she enters the van, choosing to believe her lover Nick, that this is the Mayday movement coming to her rescue, again confronting the reader with the unsolved dilemma of her position as a complacent victim or a rebel.

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ИСПИТУВАЊЕ НА ЛИЧНАТА ИСТОРИЈА И ОДРЖУВАЊЕ НА ИДЕНТИТЕТОТ – ОФРЕД ВО ПРИКАЗНАТА НА РОБИНКАТА НА МАРГАРЕТ АТВУД

Во овој труд се истражуваат аспектите на испитување на личната историја и анализирање на личниот идентитет представени во романот на Маргарет Атвуд, *Приказната на робинката*. Приказната на Офред, претставена на читателот како пишан наратив реконструиран од звучни записи, два века по нејзината смрт и крајот на диктаторскиот режим на Гилеад, се дискутира на научна конференција одржана на 25 јуни, 2195 година. Идентитетот на Офред, нејзиното минато, дури и личното име на Офред, се одземени од неа додека е робинка во служба на командантот Ватерфорд и

заробеник во неговото домаќинство. Нејзината улога е ограничена единствено на раѓање деца. Низ дејствието на романот, Офред размислува за својот поранешен живот, нејзината тенденција да живее и да игнорира, да ги зема работите здраво за готово и да ѝ верува на својата судбина. Таа се сеќава на деновите во општеството пред Гилеад и на тогашната слобода за дејствување, која во Гилеад е заменета со ослободување од сите дејствија. Офред го анализира и односот со својата мајка и сопствените ставови кон вредностите на нејзината мајка и феминизмот. Се сеќава на својата врска со сопругот, мајчинството и начинот на живот во општеството пред Гилеад. Офред го споредува и својот претходен и сегашен статус и нејзината положба, во која личната слобода речиси и да не постои. Со нејзината новооткриена самосвест, таа наоѓа начини да се рedefинира себе си како жена, љубовница, па дури и жртва.

Клучни зборови: идентитет, историја, општество, слобода, самосвест, жена, Приказната на робинката.