



Multiple Jeopardy in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract:

This article deals with multiple jeopardy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian feminist novel set in the future New England under the Republic of Gilead. Marginalization is a common problem due to class discrimination, especially in postcolonial societies. Under one type of marginalization, people are further discriminated against in other aspects as well. This concept of double or multiple marginalization can also be conceptualized in the various works of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. The Republic of Gilead is highly patriarchal and takes up a totalitarian regime with various new class discriminations. Though marginalization is usually analyzed in the subalterns, this article focuses on bringing out the triple marginalization undergone by the women of the suppressed dystopian world.

Keywords:

Multiple jeopardy, double marginalization, dystopia, feminist, suppression, patriarchal, discrimination.

Introduction:

Oppression of a particular community of people due to various reasons like caste, gender, sexuality, financial status, and professional status against the superior community come under marginalization. For instance, people belonging to the Dalit community are already discriminated against because of their caste. Even then, in the community, women are oppressed by men, and even the poorer are oppressed by the rich people. This second level of marginalization is termed dual or double marginalization. A further level is termed multiple jeopardy. This term was coined by Dr. Deborah K. King to indicate the various prejudices a person encounters as an individual.

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, people are categorized into various classes, unlike the ones in our present world. Among the already discriminated class, there are cases where women are oppressed and a few instances where women are suppressed by other women as well. The lower the class of women, the more prejudice they face.

Overview:

"*The Handmaid's Tale*" is a Science-fiction fable and a futuristic feminist nightmare" (Atwood).

The story is set in the totalitarian theocratic regime of the Republic of Gilead in the early 21st century in the United States of America. It is narrated from the point of view of a handmaid Offred. In this dystopia, women are categorized into various categories: Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, Econowives, Marthas, Unwomen, Jezebels. They are given uniform attires that go with their roles. The women and their behavior are watched over by other men who are categorized in a hierarchy who come under The Eyes of God, a secret police unit in the Republic. Nothing related to the past is

seen in the Republic; both women and men lose their past identities and are given new names, tags, and responsibilities. The way of living, the infrastructure, the environment, and the stores are all changed.

Categories of women:

Handmaids:

The story, as the title suggests, is predominantly about the Handmaids, whose primary and only purpose is to bear children to the Commanders, whose wives are infertile, pertaining to the effects of radiation and pollution in the Republic after the setting of it.

Wives:

They are the highest ranking. Wives of Commanders enjoy the most privilege among their gender. The wives are seen as 'pure' and are given the privilege of marrying. Most wives in the book are infertile.

Aunts:

Like Wives, Aunts have an upper hand in the Gilead society. They train handmaids, monitor prisoners, and sustain the rules of the Gilead Republic.

Econowives:

The wives of lower-ranking men like the Guardians or the Economen are classified as Econowives. Unlike the wives, they enjoy no privilege of Marthas or Handmaids.

Marthas:

Marthas are servants in the household of the commanders or employees in domestic work. They may be maids, cooks, and housekeepers, who go shopping, cook, serve, and maintain the household.

Unwomen:

The Unwomen are the lowest ranking in this hierarchy, seen as useless for anything the Republic has proposed and hence not given any rights.

Jezebels:

Jezebels are women forced into being prostitutes to entertain the Commander and his associates. They are seen as immoral and are sterilized. Unlike other women, they are still allowed to wear make-up and participate in entertainment, but to an extent, they are monitored by the Aunts.

Marginalization:

There is no form of entertainment in the Republic of Gilead. Places like game stadiums, theatres, and shops are altered. The shops do not even have fancy typography. There is no real money and the matters of the day happen through passes and tokens. Without any regard for gender, the people of the Republic are oppressed and treated like prisoners.

Homosexual people are punished as "gender traitors". The individual assistants of Commanders and the Guardians of the Faith are forced to control their natural instincts and urges. Nick, the assistant of Offred's Commander, though forbidden, whistles and winks at her. There is an instance when Offred goes shopping with another handmaid, Ofglen. When they had to cross a security post, she noticed one of the two young Guardians there trying to peek at her face. They watched her going past the gate and she sensed that they were deprived of a woman's touch.

"As we walk away I now they're watching, these two men who aren't permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little..." (Atwood, 24).

Men who are homosexual, and who have operated abortion procedures even before the revolution, are hung on the Wall and are displayed to show what happens to those who do not go by the propositions of the Gilead. As quoted in double marginalization of female characters in the novels of Toni Morrison by Aniksha M and M John Suganya, female characters are oppressed and marginalized twice.

Oppression on Women:

While the distinction in itself is a form of marginalization, the various classes of women have not just specific attires but also specific rules and duties. They are constantly watched by men, who are a part of the Eyes. Offred also doubts Nick that he might be an Eye when he takes a chance to wink at her. It can be identified from the names Offred and Ofglen that they are named after their commanders. For instance, Offred is the handmaid of Fred.

The Aunts who train the Handmaids have succumbed to the new way of the world and promote it through their lessons and advice. Offred states that her present house is her third posting, and hence Offred is her third name after the establishment of Gilead.

The oppression of women, which is the second level of marginalization starts from here. Their identities are linked with men. The Wives and the Econowives are entirely dependent on their husbands and should submit to them. The handmaids' duty is just to bear children for the Commanders whose wives are infertile. This conception happens through an act called the "Ceremony", where the wives are also present. Apart from this, they are not allowed to indulge in any activity other than shopping. There is no source of entertainment for women. Even the Wives who are the highest class have extreme restrictions, though comparatively less. The Wife in Offred's household, Serena Joy has got cigarettes that she would have sneaked from the Black Market. She has limited activities to indulge in every day, like gardening, reading, and kitting.

The Econowives enjoy no privilege except that she can gain the position of a "Wife" if her husband gets promoted to Commander. The Unwomen belong to the lowest social class, including women who are gender traitors, feminists from the pre-Gilead times, and Handmaids who fail to conceive. They are put through so much hard labour. Traitors of the laws are taken to clean toxic waste in colonies are made to become prostitutes in Jezebels as a punishment.

Multiple Jeopardy:

Though people are marginalized by the Republic of Gilead, women are further Marginalized. Furthermore, women are further oppressed by other women. The Handmaids are detested by most women of other classes because they are like Mistresses. Even among the Handmaids, if one is pregnant, the others look at her with a frown and not gladness. When Offred was at the store to buy meat, a pregnant handmaid came, flaunting her ability to conceive.

"Show-off," a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that's pregnant doesn't have to go shopping" (Atwood, 27).

The Wives naturally boss over the other class of women, starting from their household. When Offred first arrived at the house, she expected her new Lady to be a sisterly figure. However, Serena was a media personality who supported the oppression of women even in the pre-Gilead world and even her welcome was unpleasant.

"She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so...Don't call me Ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha" (Atwood, 16).

In this way, women put other women through multiple jeopardy despite the oppression they already face together as women.

Conclusion:

Marginalization and oppression of people are prevalent in all fields, even in the current world. Through this analysis of the triple marginalization of women, it can be understood that despite getting oppressed for other reasons, women are put through double-fold trouble just because of their gender. Even among the oppressed women, comparatively privileged women enjoy their position by dominating other classes of women. Though this

novel is a speculative story, these forms of marginalization and oppression against and among classes and women are persistent.

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