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Utopia Or Inferno: *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Speaking about prose to Linda Sandler, Margaret Atwood postulates, “A Novel is something you see and the primary focus of interest is people” (Conversations Series). She describes herself as a “bemused sometimes disheartened observer of society”. In her address at the Amnesty International meeting in 1981, Atwood comments on the perception of the artists craft, “we are not good at analyzing it in terms of his politics and by and large we do not do so,” (Fraser 170), inviting a political reading of her text. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dark dystopic novel depicting the America of the 1990^s, transformed into a totalitarian theocracy called the Republic of Gilead. In creating this feminist dystopia, Atwood employs distortion rather than direct attack to critique. Utopias are not imagined as conclaves which are enclosed regulated and rationalized systems, but rather as progressive processes of relationships between human beings. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a distortion of all utopic impulses. We accost, in the nightmarish world of the Gilead, human beings whose marginality in gender, race, class and economic power renders them a ‘non subject’ in terms of the dominant social formation.

Keywords

Utopia, Dystopia, Patriarchy, Parody, Regulatory Impulse,

Introduction

The concept of Utopia, which has historical precedents in the Greek and Roman philosophies, finds robust resonances in the early twentieth century in the theories of socialist utopian thinkers like Sir Thomas Moore. Parodying the concept of utopia, Atwood achieves the mood of post-war years, with her insistence on the brutal and the irrational in man. The idea of utopia is an expression of faith in man's capacity for perfection and a striving towards a just, peaceful and ideal community. The republic of Gilead, as W.H. New observes, illustrates the dangers of reconstructing society while leaving freedom, individuality, choice and imagination, in short people, out of count (294). In this dystopic universe, desire and pleasure, the two core utopic impulses, are viewed as subversive and adversarial to the regulatory impulse of social organisation. Foucault's work has shown that desire has replaced coercion as a dominant mode of social regulation in the modern State. It's utopic impulse, gratified through department store window and advertising image, have largely a regulatory rather than subversive effect.

Among the first acts of the Republic of Gilead is the burning of all magazines and removal of any advertising whatsoever, even from the shops. Betty Friedman in *The Second Stage* (1981) warned of a resurgence of Nazi's antifeminism that is "rising again in the resurgent religious fundamentalism of Muslim nations" (Frazer 170). Her description of Germany under Hitler describes the historical precedent of Gilead. Hitler told women that the right of personal freedom recedes before their duty to preserve the race. Analogously, the initial steps of the new republic of Gilead are to take away this very freedom from women by disallowing them jobs, freezing their accounts and declaring their primary duty to be procreation, as they would be "saved by childbearing" (Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* 233). Advocating the precept of state over individual women are reduced to handmaids, wombs on two legs, ambulatory, chalices, and are relegated duties as Marthas, Econowives and Aunts. There is a conscious un-naming of the female to advance the status quo. They are supposed to be merely functional in their relegated roles as breeders and not individuals in their own right. Those like Moira, who are resistant, are branded as unwoman. They are either transported to colonies where they act as nuclear waste cleaners or are employed at the Jezebel for the pleasure of the commanders.

Gilead offers a curious contrast; highly modernized and technologically advanced in its computerized mechanisms, yet hailing back to the early puritans in its biblical patriarchal codes. The idea of male infertility is unthinkable in Gilead, "There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (61). Depicting the possible horrors of a totalitarian state like America, it also pictures the distortion of the collectivist ideal in its socialist setup. The dystopia of Gilead is all the more annihilatory for its expansive sociopolitical sweep.

Offred, the narrator of the story, is caught in a repressive and regressive society. Legal, economic and political apparatuses are geared to reshape the truth for political purposes of governance through suppression. Appallingly, women themselves aid the patricentric codes, contributing to the states control over women and their bodies. The wives and aunts wield power over other women, one treating them like furniture and the other as animals worthy of cattle prods. The engraving on Offred's ankle is seen by her as 'cattle brand' and also a braille to be read by the commander who is willfully blind to the animalistic existence which this regime has reduced her to. The regime justifies its sexist policies with the socio-biological theories of natural polygamy and legitimizes it by instituting a biblical precedent. The place itself is named after the biblical Gilead where Jacob went to the Handmaid Billah, as his own wife Rachel was infertile. The commanders make similar usage of the Handmaids. Perverting biblical mythologies for their own political ends, the rulers of Gilead do not allow the bible to fall into the hands of the servants. The Handmaids and Marthas can merely listen to the Bible as translated or reinterpreted by the commanders. The biblio-mythological substructure of this society includes or rather is fashioned by its political propaganda. In a society where even God is seen as a 'national resource', religious oppression becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of the rulers.

A collective mode of existence is a utopian vision. It projects a community founded on a sort of relational identity associated with the feminine impulse. The impulse towards discovery of an identity, which would allow for connection as well as autonomy, is linked to utopian desire. This impulse displaces the narrative modes of realism with those of fantasy, dream and desire. Alongside familial social ties, an 'inner space' beyond socio-political one becomes essential and offers an alternative to egotism. Atwood offers in her novel a vision of a complete breakdown between individuals, as well as a total annihilation of any hope for this 'inner space'. The novel begins with the horrors of a state that is presumably egalitarian. Overtly left winged in its amalgamation of family and individual identity into a communal existence, as well as totalitarian in its over-arching authority. Groups as well as individuals are alienated from each other. The alienation experienced by Offred, from herself as well as others, is complete and terrifying. She has no control over her life and none whatsoever over her death. The shatterproof panes, the absence of ceiling hooks, all build up to an image of this unsaid decapitation and horror. The community evoked in the novel offers only alienation with no connection with others and no autonomy whatsoever. The Handmaids are allowed to go out in pairs, but no exchange of speech is allowed or is safe. The words exchanged are 'Blessed be the fruit' 'May the lord open'. People are suspect and cannot converse even if they wish to. In this community to be alive itself is dangerous and the words are treacherous, "In this house we all envy each other something" (59).

What reoccurs time and again in Offred's narrative is the displacement of realistic modes by fantasy, dream or desire, the only means of construction open to Offred to subvert a ghoulish reality. The only 'inner space', allowed to and acknowledged of her, in this dystopia is the womb which defines and determines her existence. No 'outer space' any longer remains. Her constructions are a safety valve for her to escape from the restrictive reality around her, "My room then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time" (60). Her outcry is a bid for some kind of autonomy. Offred is aware that her position as a woman in the society of Gilead is extremely marginalized and expresses her discomfort in a series of sporadic experiments at fantasy and construction. Before the ceremony with the commander, she says "I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose as one composes speech" (76). She is aware however that this is not a self-realization or a statement of autonomy, but merely a coercion she practices on herself as a sanity measure, "what I must present is a made thing, not something born" (76). Moira and her escapade are also another such fantasy of liberation and freedom. "We hugged her to us, she was with us in secret, a piggle; she was lava beneath the crust of daily life" (143). But all her attempts at such fantasies are mere illusions or reconstructions, as she herself is aware. Moira escapes merely to end up in Jezebel. Whatever one says is a "another remove" (144), one tends to leave something out. All she can hold on to in this parodic universe is 'forgiveness'. Like Moira does as she imagines, in leaving Aunt Elizabeth alive; "Forgiveness too is power" (144), probably the only power they can exert. Recounting the first encounter with the Commander in his office she says of him, "He was so sad. That is a construction too" (150). All her constructions, even in her own perception, are undercut. Against the harsh reality of the state of Gilead, they are shown up for the fantasies they are. Fantasy and desire for a better, more human existence are strangled at their very conception. All Offred can do now is play

meaningful word games with the commander. Interestingly, the only meaningful word she is allowed to read is 'faith' embroidered on her pillow and the Latin phrase engraved in her cupboard. Both provide her with some sense of connection, even though it is only with the previous occupants of the jail like room. All she can do is to revise and improve herself and even that she acknowledges is an illusion of change. Trying to make up a world of her own realities in her mind, she faces the futility of such a mode of existence as being mere fabrication. It is Offred's bid not to live with her face squashed against the wall, a search for some perspective even though it may be an illusion of depth. As Offred realizes, it is a gesture to ward off a complete annihilation. "People will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is; No plot" (227). She perceives Nick also as a semaphore, a kind of signaling apparatus, indicating some meaning. But in all her constructions set up against the dystopic dominant order, her feminine subjectivity merely results in a parody. It becomes a fantastic narrative counterpointed by dystopian realism. The only verbal construct viable to this reality, is May Day, that is 'help me', other than that "Context is all" (154). Context is the reality which ridicules all efforts to reconstruct history, be it Offred's efforts or those of the professors of Delany.

Atwood's she is more of a humanist and her novel presents a critique of the radical feminist ideal of utopia. Offred tells Moira that she could not create untopia "by shutting herself in a women only enclave" (172). Men cannot be ignored. Thinking about her mother's activist feminism she remarks "Mother, wherever you may be, can you hear me? You wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists" (127).

In utopia, as the commander tells Offred, "Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some" (211). The Republic of Gilead starts by declaring its perfectibility and utopian state: "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (24). But what it is in reality is perversion of every kind of human nature and society with its very ordinariness pervading and corrupting all aspects of human existence. Atwood tries to negotiate the 'space between', to establish interdependence of self and world. In the final analysis *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary tale conveying Atwood's view that once you try to implement utopia you end up with an inferno.

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