



EXPLORATION OF PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVASTATION AS AN ICON OF FEMINIST TRAUMA AS PROJECTED IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*: A NOTE IN COMPARISON

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Abstract

This research article ardently probes with the fact that showers light on the two newfangled skilled and proficient writers Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison erudite feminist writers who often deals with the distress, hardships and challenges in the life of the women in their novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Beloved*. It keenly dives deep into the mysterious heart and psyche of the dystopian female protagonists Offred and Sethe in order to explore the physical and emotional devastation in their sufferings. This article neatly examines the facets of dystopian land and society and its effect on the female protagonist, which weakens them both physically and mentally, there by ending up with a quintessential point of view, that Morrison and Atwood though born, grown up and brought up in the different angle of nation, their conceptualization and thoughts regarding feminism juxtapose them.

Key Words: *Feminism, Physical, Mental Psyche, Dystopia, Devastation, Conceptualization, Mysterious.*

Women are scrutinized to be a fertile power of the world. She is a creature, created by God in order to show his innovative power not only giving physical fabulous beauty to her but also giving courageous mental power which makes the world turn upside down. When a man is educated, only he is educated: when a woman is educated; the entire society, world and nation gets educated. Women are like a double-edged sword, contemplated as a creative factor as well as a destroyable factor. Women are the immunity power of the world, where she has the capacity of vanishing the pessimistic forces surrounding her as well as the her societal atmosphere the fertile power of women makes the world a land of fertility by reproducing young ones in addition to regenerating vibrant air of optimism, around her social cosmos nationwide. Men are somatically strong but women are conceptually and intellectually strong, making her role as a light house in guiding the ship of the society in the time of darkness. Women have perfect mental strategies who are responsible for war as well as peace in the nation and world. Male civilization hegemonies women by suppressing her mental and emotional power in position to avoid the vigorous progress of women than men. This is what the reason? Women are oppressed by men from ancient time onwards to lock the fertile power of women in the well of infinity.

This paper lays focus on the upheavals of female pains and problem where their physical and emotional compassions are faded and annihilated by the male as well as the atmosphere, nation and also women explored through the novels of Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood. Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison are the bounteous cerebral feminist writers. Their novels *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Beloved* discusses the entity survival of women, who were meant as slaves, mere properties, mere than of animal excrete used as sex toys and also a birth giving machines, and it brings home the point that it was sin for the women to travel in their own way to lead an independent life.

Canada's one of the most erudite and determined literary figures, Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a popular versatile novelist, poet, critic and cultural activist. Synchronously, Toni Morrison is the literary giant of the Afro-American literature. Atwood concentrates on White feminism whereas Toni Morrison centralizes on Black feminism. Both of these writers belong to two different angles of nation, community, race, on the other hand, they sail in the same boat with the common target i.e. women's grieving, agonizing and torments. Most of Margaret Atwood's novels tussle with the politics of gender, where she attacks the pernicious gender discrimination which is of incommodious, peremptory social and aesthetic construction of identity and gender. Atwood's adroit intellectualness evidenced in the words of Robert Fulford rightly says in "**The Image of Atwood**";



Representing Atwood is like representing the Dynasty of writers. I am always racing to keep with her. There are some important things that have to said. This woman is larger than Life. This woman is a genius. She is magnificent in what she creates and expanded and exquisite way she lives her life.”(20).

The female protagonist of Atwood and Morrison clutches in the teeth of wind where washed and squeezed in the hands of male dominated dystopian society. They often travel from victimization to self-actualization. The novels **The Handmaid’s Tale and Beloved** renders the physical and psychological relation between men and women. It is considered through the novels that Atwood and Morrison are pessimistic viewers and they were hailed as a visionary interpreter of contemporary feminist thought as it is evidenced from the quotations of Atwood and Morrison. The following quote about Morrison, by Carolyn Denard, which appears in “**Black Women In America: A Historical Encyclopedia**”, writes;

“In Morrison’s works she strips away the idols of whiteness and of Blackness that have prevented Blacks in the United States from knowing themselves and gives them their own true, mythical, remembered words to live by. She takes on the whole culture and seeks to restore the mythos and ethos that will clarify the meaning of the journey of African-Americans in the United States. She is healer and prophet; she is nurturer and guide; and she achieves these task with such grace, such love, and such confidence, courage and skill. Morrison holds an indelible position of prominence in African-American history of great writers all through the world.”(21).

The Handmaid’s Tale and Beloved are primarily concerned with feminine issues and their struggles, obstacles that hinder their good flourship life and also deal with freedom and slavery. Above all, these two novels have the features of dystopian fiction where it not only explodes the atmosphere but also the physical and mental mind of the women particularly the female protagonists of two novels endure hardships, anguish physically and emotionally in their lives.

Margaret Atwood’s **The Handmaid’s Tale** unveils the ramification of a reversal of women’s rights. In the novel, the bogey dreaded phobic world of Gilead, the freedom and language of women are forbidden for them. In the nightmare world of totalitarian world, a group of religious extremists has taken the power and the sexual revolution on its head. Women in Gilead are forbidden to vote, read and write. Atwood also paints a picture of world undone by nuclear pollution and infertility mirroring 1980s fears about descending birth rates, and the dangers of under power and environmental degradation. The female protagonist of the novel is a “handmaid”, who cannot obliterate the past from her memory and her mind is often interspersed with flashbacks to her life after she was plucked out consciously from her husband and her daughter in order that one of few women whose reproductive systems have survived the chemical pollution and nuclear radiation from power plants. Woman’s bodies are used as political instruments and they are defined solely by their gender roles as “Wives are the partners of the commanders who are sterile; Handmaid’s are the woman who are able to give birth that is fertile ladies; Marthas and Aunts are the woman who are the strict guardians and the servant maids for the Handmaids and the Wives. The end of novel is in



the dilemma and makes the readers to think whether the protagonist Offred ends her life in darkness or survived her life in lightness in the red city Gilead.

Toni Morrison **Beloved** reconntires the destructive legacy of slavery as it documents the life of black woman Sethe, from her Pre-civil war days as a slave in Kentucky to her Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. However, Sethe abides there as a untrammled woman. She is held as a prisoner by the thornful memories of the trauma of her life as a slave. This novel is based on the true story of a black woman, Margaret Garner, who in 1856 fled out from a Kentucky with her husband Robert and their children. They sought refuge in Ohio and soon got trapped and caught by the law officers. Before their recapture, Margaret Garner killed her younger daughter to prevent her return to slavery. In this novel, Sethe also an ardently solicitous mother, who escapes with her children from an abusive owner School Teacher. They are caught and in an action, incredible utmost love and scarifies, she kills her younger daughter to keep her away from slavery. These events are revealed in flashbacks, as the novel opens in 1873 with Sethe and her teenage daughter Denver in Ohio, where their house haunted by the angry ghost of the younger child whom Sethe killed. Therefore, the novel finalizes by the disappearance of the Ghost and the life of fruitfulness shown before Sethe, Denver and Paul D. Thus, Toni Morrison Offers a harrowing look at slavery and its mournful everlasting effect.

The detailed analysis and study of the novel **The Handmaid's Tale and Beloved** unearths the analogous ideologies right from the epigraph of the novels. The epigraphs in these two novels are from the Bible which is eluded to encounter the centralized icon of the novels. These epigraphs by Atwood and Morrison give an unambiguous view of understanding the title of the novels. The word "Handmaid" and "Beloved" are allusions from the Bible used by Atwood and Morrison denotes something vital reference to the readers. The first epigraph from Margaret Atwood holds:

And when Racheal saw that she bare Jacob
no children. Racheal envied her sister; and
saidgive me children or else I die; And Jacobs
was kindled against Racheal and he said, Am I
God's stead, who hath withheld from the fruit
of womb? And Rachel said, behold my maid
Billah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon
knees; that I may also have children by her. (Genesis 1:3)

As the result of above epigraphs by Atwood, unveils that the term "Handmaid" is taken from the Bible; particularly the story of Billah and Racheal discussed where Billah is the handmaid to give birth in behalf of Racheal because she is infertile. Similarly, it also represent to the reference of virgin Mary's designation of herself as a Handmaid of Lord(Luke 1:38) which is story of Mary's complete abnegate sacrifice of herself in accepting the pregnancy from God, which thoroughly twisted by the totalitarian government of Gilead justifies the enforced surrogacy through dominant theocratic rule. Thus the epigraphs by Atwood unmask the centralized ideology of the novel about the handmaids and it is said that woman are involuntarily subjugated under the male dominated society of Gilead considered to be the torment factor by justifying it as a theocratic rules.

Similarly, the first epigraph of Morrison in her **Beloved** holds;
"Sixty Million and More"

It further explains, The sixty million to whom Morrison dedicates **Beloved** refers to the estimated number that is 'Sixty Million' black people died during the Atlantic slave trade than Jews from the Holocaust which brings forth the centralized theme that the novel **Beloved** by Morrison revolves around the sufferings of slaves. The second epigraph holds;

I will call them my people,
Which were not my people



and her beloved which was
not beloved.(Romans 9:25).

It means that the above epigraph from Morrison is the allusion from the Bible in New Testament represents a message that God would accept the African people as his people who are new to the Christian community. God's love and forgiveness come even though the new Christians do not deserve to be beloved. Accordingly, Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood buttoned up their prime paramount motifs of their novels through their epigraphs alluded with reference from the Bible. This proclaims the intimacy of faith of God manifested in the heart of Morrison and Atwood.

The Handmaid's Tale and Beloved are adjudged to be **dystopian novels**. The characteristic features of dystopian society are, 1) the propaganda framed is used to hegemonize the citizens of the society, 2) the sources of information, independent thought and freedom are restricted, 3) citizens are perceived to be under constant surveillance, 4) citizens fears of the outside world, 5) citizens live in the dehumanized state, 6) the natural world is banished and destructed. The female protagonist of these novels Offred and Sethe are often feels trapped and striving hard to escape. They both were totally grinded by the terrible torment that prevails in the dystopian society. Both the protagonist of these novels Offred and Sethe are slaves. Offred in the novel **The Handmaid's Tale** reveals to the readers of her experience as a reproductive slave in the society of totalitarian world called Gilead formed by the theocratic rules where she is confined to stringent, nonsensical rules designed to make, what they considered a better life for freedom. Sethe in **Beloved**, though she is a free slave, her mind totally pre-occupied with the haunted slavery experiences undergone in her life.

Both Sethe and Offred are dystopian heroines, who suffered physically and emotionally under the control of the haunted rules and regulations. They are not allowed to be an independent that is being independent and thinking in a individualistic way are meant for doing sins and considered to be the sinners. Offred and Sethe as a slave restricted to vote, read and write is totally forbidden to them. Offred in the city of Gilead is perceived to be under constant surveillance by secret spy officers called Eyes. Sethe in the midst of slavery is constantly monitored by her white owner School Teacher. Offred and Sethe lead their tormented life with their flashbacks and they are completely haunted with fear of the outside world. Offred was terrifically mortified by Serena Joy, the commander's wife and the things going on around her tortured her emotionally. Sethe was cruelly treated by the white owner School Teacher, who whipped her brutally. Naturally, all the consequences and circumstances states that Offred and Sethe are a typically a dystopian heroines, who are physically and emotionally devastated in the dehumanized world.

The city Gilead in the novel **The Handmaid's Tale** is the authoritarian theocratic regime formed in response to the crisis of decreased birthrates, with religious trappings and also with rigid political hierarchy where the prevalence of sexual assault and pornography in the Gileadian world is justified. Sexual assault and sexual violence is apparent in the world of Gilead, where it compels Handmaid's to have sexual intercourse with their commanders whose wives are sterile. Offred is one of the victimized protagonists in this land.

Alike the city of Gilead, is a place called Sweet Home plantation in the novel **Beloved**, where Sethe and her family kept as slaves which serves as a central point of her flashbacks memories. When the person School Teacher arrives in behalf of the previous owner Mr. Garner He misuses his power and as a cruel beast, he brutally wounded and allowed his nephews assault Sethe sexually. Only the name of the plantation is sweet, originally there doesn't exist sweetness of life, the panic cries the slaves during the torment and assassination spreaded all around the atmosphere of the Sweet Home. As a result, the dwelling place of Offred and Sethe is the land of agonizing, anguish grieving, where it weakens and destroys the lives of the heroines.



Atwood and Morrison pay attention to the flashback technique which is crucial for identity construction for Offred and Sethe. By remembering the past, both Offred and Sethe traumatize their physical and emotional identities. Offred and Sethe are besieged by painful memories which enable them to construct their personal identity. In the novel **Beloved**, a ghost symbolizes the persistence of past which return to haunt Sethe. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred frequently thinks about the past with her husband and daughter and the painful way, how she was captured to Gilead's Red Center as a Handmaid. The memories of Offred's past made her to think emotionally about her hopeful future. Painful memories and trauma are buried in the heart of Offred and Sethe. The harsh sting of slavery and domination deeply stung into the heart and psyche of Offred and Sethe which makes them physically and emotionally weak and sterile.

To conclude, the novels Atwood's **The Handmaid's Tale** and Morrison's **Beloved** deal with the problems faced by the women in terms of regarding the aspects of holocaust victims, victims of slavery and victims of patriarchy, Thus, these aspects and the flashback technique bridge between both the novels capturing the scene of past, present and future.

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