

A Critique on the Women Objectification in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

*The present research is carried out to explore the commodification of women in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* with objectification perspective. This research is design to determine the factors and figure out ways, which allows women to be treated as a commodity in the Gilead society where women are exploited under the control of men. The present study highlights incidents of commodification of women. Women are used as a tool for reproduction and servitude and the reinforcement of the process of commodification or objectification in the selected novel. This study investigated the commodification of women. This paper, is essentially qualitative in nature, takes into consideration David Greenham's *Close Reading* (2019) and uses the lens of Roberts' and Fredrickson's *Objectification Theory* (1977).*

Keywords: *Commodification, Reproduction, Servitude, Objectification, Women Objectification*

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1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is one of the most talented authors in Canadian contemporary literature. She has taken an active position in the feminist movement and Canadian politics. The majority of her works deal with political and social themes. She takes into account the relationship between basic human rights and men and women. Having said that, this paper asserts that the main issue of women's objectification is the author's major concern and thus this is the focus of this study. She writes about women who, in a patriarchal culture, are constantly trying to figure out who they are. She questions women's subordinate standing in society. In her works, she depicts the agony endured by her female characters who are constrained by their gender roles. It is therefore argue that the primary focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* analysis is the objectification of women. Women in Gilead society are forced to do various tasks and duties for the state, and they are denied personal autonomy.

This study probes into the text's objectification of women at different points and in varied contexts. This study focuses on how the numerous events and happenings in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* serve to emphasize the objectification of women in the work. Present study attempts to investigate and locate evidence of various degrees of objectification of women at the hands of a Commander and his spouse, Serena Joy. This study offers a more in-depth analysis of

the book to pinpoint the instances in which women, particularly Offred, the main character, are treated like commodities by Commander and his wife. This work presents proof that in a patriarchal society, women are viewed as means of production. The genuine picture of feminine status that is, a woman as a commodity in a society dominated by men has been carefully examined by the researchers in a number of text extracts.

Many women in the United States were infertile in the mid-1980s as a result of pollution and nuclear accidents. The government was taken over by the Gilead Republic. Women under the new administration fall into a number of groups. Women are classified according to their age and level of fertility, and they have distinct roles in society. Older women, Jews, and non-Whites are moved to radioactive areas called colonies. To work as handmaids in the Commander's home, white, fertile women are dispatched. The Handmaids' sole responsibility is to conceive for the childless couples from upper-class backgrounds. Handmaids are subject to strict social restrictions in Gilead.

The Handmaid's Tale, shows objectification of women in the patriarchal society of Gilead. In this patriarchal society women are treated as an object and being mere a means for reproduction and man's use. In Atwood's portrayal of a patriarchal society, the state marginalizes and victimizes women. This study demonstrates how women are objectified in a society where men predominate and how this patriarchal culture disregards women's fundamental freedoms.

Research has been carried out on this novel from different perspectives such as gender roles, women oppression, loss of individuality and self-alienation, role of women, women of Gilead as colonized subjects in Margaret's Atwood's novel. However, limited or no significant research has been carried out on the objectification of women's bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This research identifies the ways in which women's bodies are objectified and the factors behind women objectification.

The main objectives of this research paper is to identify the ways in which women's bodies are objectified in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Furthermore, it also analyses the factors behind objectification of women's body in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. This research paper focuses on the following research questions: What are the ways in which women's bodies are objectified in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*? And what are the factors behind objectification of women's bodies in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*? This paper probes into the fact that in what ways and what are the factors behind objectification of women's bodies. It contributes to the ongoing debate about equity and equality, gender discrimination and objectification of women bodies between East and West, both in reality and literature. By analyzing women objectification, the research adds depth to the existing criticism. Moreover, it raises awareness and giving voice to women who may not realize they are being objectified.

2. Research Methodology

Research has been carried out on *The Handmaid's Tale* from the perspectives of gender roles, women oppression, loss of individuality and self-alienation and role of women. However, limited or no research has been conducted on *The Handmaid's Tale* from the perspective of objectification. The researchers focus on the narratives and discourses those are relevant to the topic involving objectification of woman.

In order to do so, essentially it is qualitative in nature. This study uses the parameters of close reading by David Greenham and Theory of objectification by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is used as a lens to probe into the research questions set for this paper. This theory states that many women are objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others. The researchers used this theory because it informs us how women are mistreated and subjugated in the novel.

The primary data for this research comes from Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and for secondary data the researchers rely on various articles, journals, internet resources and other relevant studies.

3. Literature Review

Women now enjoy considerable advantages in a number of spheres of life, including as work, education, and political representation. In fields that have historically been controlled by men, women have accomplished tremendous triumphs. While it is true that women are contributing members of society in all spheres, they are nevertheless subject to institutional oppression and are viewed as the weaker sex. Their experiences with gender-based violence, such as sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and body policing, are disproportionate.

Treating or viewing a person as an object that may be exploited, further manipulated, and assessed primarily based on their outward appearance is known as objectification. Such a person is sexualized and seen as enjoyable and useful. (R. M. Calogero, 2012)

Here, a person is treated according to their physical attributes and their private areas of the body. An objectified person is not treated as a human being by us; instead, we regard them as completely devoid of their autonomy, integrity, respect, and opinion. (Rachel M. Calogero & Tylka, 2014). According to Kant, seeing oneself as a "end-in-itself" is the process of objectification. Alternatively put, believing that we are sexually fulfilling and appealing to other people. (Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014; Papadaki, 2007)

The practice of diminishing a person's worth in society by comparing them to other people is known as objectification. Objectification is a form of dehumanization that is most frequently studied at the level of a society. It ignores the physical attributes, emotions, thoughts, and uniqueness of women. Instead than appreciating a person for who they truly are, it turns them into an object for the amusement or utility of others. This can occur in a variety of settings, including the media, advertisements, and daily interactions. Instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, denial of autonomy, inertness, violability, fungibility, and ownership are examples of subtypes of objectification. (Martha C Nussbaum, 1995). Later, Langton (2011) added three more subtypes—reduction to the body, reduction to appearance, and silencing—to Nussbaum's objectification theories. The term "objectification," however, is also regarded by (Nussbaum, 1995) as being difficult to define because of its "multiple" and "slippery" characteristics. Although it can be difficult to define objectification precisely because it can also refer to how we treat one another in daily interactions, many media scholars agree that there is a link between objectification and media. (Szymanski et al., 2011).

Women become less human when they are objectified. The patriarchy's most astute move was to portray objectification as uplifting. They attribute women's representation as kind, lovely, and submissive beings. But the impressions they provide are meant to devalue women. (Sultana, 2011). Cases of women being objectified are more common in nations with strong patriarchal cultures. The patriarchal culture still exists in the world today. The patriarchal system affects the majority of the world's population. Politics, the economy, society, and ideology are all under its power. When it comes to the objectification of women, Langton claims that men's views and aspirations force women to become obedient and objectified. Men want women to be like this, and if they have authority, they coerce women into doing this (Langton 2000). Their classification as a minority group causes it to occur in a variety of ways. The objectification of women is a reality that has permeated society and can be seen in everything from print and digital media to everyday activities. Some even contend that because it is ingrained in contemporary culture, most people are unaware of its detrimental consequences on the maturation of young men and women. Her ideal

"human body with feminine beauty" status dates back to the Cleopatra Era, when she was the object of this objectification. Because of their physical attributes, women were viewed as submissive and attractive, while men were associated with dominance (Balraj, 2015).

Regarding the place of women in the media and advertising, the media and advertising sector is not an exception. The premise that media and advertisements are strong and significant components of every society has been the subject of much research and writing by various academics, social scientists, and researchers.

Sumaira Muhammad (2020) in her work claimed that advertisements portray women as a sex object rather than domestic attendants. The goal of using attractive female bodies is to increase sales and purchases of products. Stereotypes can be strengthened and a viewer's concept can be influenced by TV advertisements. They create and perpetuate the idea that women ought to be slender, attractive, sophisticated, sensible, and well-groomed. These attributes are also required of the ladies who work in the advertisements since they set the bar for beauty. The stereotype that women are frivolous, seductive sex objects may be fostered by advertisements that frequently feature women in this manner. Men may acquire a wish for their spouse to resemble these models, while women may become unhappy and self-conscious about their bodies as a result of seeing these kinds of advertisements. These sexist advertisements are criticized for creating distorted body views in women by enforcing unattainable ideals of feminine thinness and beauty.

Music videos are becoming more and more popular and profitable because of their greater appeal, entertainment value, and emotional resonance. However, this music's substance is also linked to misogynistic beliefs about women and their exploitation. Currently, the idea of women as nothing more than sexual objects is perpetuated via objectification, which is becoming increasingly common, intense, and accepted in music videos. (Apuke and Jigem, 2019)

Politics also objectify women. Claire Gothreau(2020) examines in her paper and noted that the topic of sexism against women in politics has received a lot of attention. Women in politics are not an exception; in a manner that males have not, they have been the target of objectifying discourse and representations ever since they entered the field. One tactic used to devalue and discredit women in politics is objectification. But psychological research tells us that these strategies can be especially harmful not just to female politicians but also to female voters. The representation of women in literature spans a wide range in both contemporary and historical works. Women are frequently depicted as powerful, independent people, yet they are also frequently shown as weak, helpless people who yield to their surroundings. This is a recurring theme in a lot of literary works. The presence or absence of a man is the factor that starts women's misery. Men are only one factor contributing to women's misery; there are other factors as well. The themes of women's subordination are evident in several works, including Hurston's "*Sweat*," Gilman's "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," and Chopin's "*The Story of an Hour*," short stories. In this novel, women are portrayed as sexual objects that men use for their own needs and pleasure rather than as independent human beings. A woman is bound by her body; it is the one thing that makes her unique. In this book, the males of the upper class frequently mistreat and treat the fertile women as objects to be bear children. To men, they are status symbols reserved for the wealthiest. They have become practically edible, transformed into a thing that a man can enjoy. The work of fiction demonstrates mistreatment of women. Women are deprived of their independence; they are only permitted to leave the house for shopping.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter discusses issue of women objectification in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The issue of women objectification can be seen through different ways and factor such

as instrumentality, ownership, religious extremism, surveillance and control, language and economy and denial of agency.

1. Instrumentality

In the novel, there is negative portrayal of female characters by the hands of men. Women have therefore always been viewed as machines or as helpful tools rather than as fellow human beings. They are only valuable as maids, sexual slaves, reproduction machines, and commodities. Consequently, the researchers name this type of objectification as instrumentality. Men treat women in this way, treating them as if they were objects to be objectified. This instrumentality is evident from:

"I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will." (chap.13, pg.72)

The researchers assert the ways in which woman is used as a tool for pleasure or transportation. The statement about viewing the body as a tool highlights the ways in which women's bodies are treated as commodities and personal autonomy are being undermined. The feelings of love are evident in the text; however inside the harsh society, her body is reduced to a tool, devoid of agency and limited to fulfilling the demands of the totalitarian government. This quotation emphasizes how women's bodies are devalued and their individuality is lost.

2. Ownership

The second factor in the objectification of women is ownership. The condition or actuality of possessing exclusive rights and authority over any kind of asset be it an item, a piece of real estate or land, intellectual property, or, in this instance, human beings is known as ownership. Multiple rights collectively referred to as title that may be divided and possessed by many persons are involved in ownership. Men own, sell, and purchase women (Nussbaum: 1995). Therefore, it can be argued that men treat women as though they are objects, and they are free to do as they like. Offred's admission that she is Commander Fred's property demonstrates how the patriarchal system deprives women of their agency and treats them like inanimate things. *"I am his, the Commander's. I am his... possession"* (chap.5, pg.25)

It draws attention to women's identities and liberties that are confined to the will of men. Offred's usage of the word "possession" serves to further accentuate the notion that she is treated more like a commodity than a person with inherent rights.

"Offred's internal monologue reflects the psychological impact of being owned and controlled by men in Gilead." _Tonight is one of those nights when nothing I do can divert him; he's made up his mind already. Tonight I am a two-legged womb, a thing_ "(chap.23, pg.128)

It effectively conveys Offred's feelings of objectification and helplessness. She loses all control over her own body and destiny and is reduced to the status of a simple reproductive vessel. These exchanges demonstrate how ownership is ingrained in Gilead, a place where women are routinely abused and denied fundamental human rights. The novel highlights the necessity of agency and autonomy in the face of structural oppression, exposing the degrading effects of patriarchal domination.

3. Religious Extremism

Another important factor of women's objectification is religious extremism. A totalitarian government in charge of Gilead uses religious theology to defend its control over the bodies of women. The leaders of the community impose rigid moral standards that define women's roles and conduct, based on their reading of the Bible. Women are objectified by this religious fundamentalism because it subjects them to a strict patriarchal hierarchy.

“Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. And so on and so forth.” (chap.15, pg. 85)

Offred and the other handmaids are compelled to recite this prayer. The republic propagandizes its beliefs through religion. They are conditioned to believe that having children is their whole purpose, therefore they pray for the ability to do so. The prayer makes reference to biblical passages, including the directive to "be fruitful, and multiply," as well as the Old Testament tales of Rachel and Leah. The Handmaids are forced to recite the prayer, which is not a voluntary expression of faith. The objectification and subjection of women in Gilead is justified by religious fundamentalism, which depicts women as reproductive organs and denies them power over their own bodies and lives.

4. Surveillance and Control

One of the most important factor is surveillance and control in the objectification of women. In Gilead, women are constantly watched upon and monitored both physically and ideologically. This is the strong evidence of objectification of women in the novel. The state controls their behaviors, thoughts, and even movements, which serves to further solidify their status as objects of observation and manipulation for the privileged. Aunt Lydia's directives to the Handmaids clearly demonstrate the ongoing monitoring and manipulation of women's bodies.

"There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from."(chap.5, pg.28)

It can be argue that how the surveillance and control mechanisms in Gilead are framed as a form of freedom, while in reality, they strip women of their identity, agency and autonomy. Women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are both controlled and stripped of their identity by the oppressive regime of Gilead.

“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.” (chap.14, pg.80)

Offred discloses that the dictatorship has dictated that she go by "Offred," rather than her actual name, since it is illegal. Offred's forced identity shift strips her of her individuality and personal history, illuminating the ways in which the state manipulates women by forcing them to adopt new identities. Offred also discusses the importance of her given name, stating that it has personal value and symbolizes her uniqueness. But in Gilead, women are robbed of their individual identities and subjugated to their designated roles. Offred's admission of her real name as a secret treasure represents how the regime has suppressed her uniqueness.

5. Language and Economy

Language is a major factor in the objectification of women within the context of the women. The term "Unwomen" is used in *The Handmaid's Tale* to refer to infertile women who are unable to conceive and are of no service to Gilead. They regard them as the least respectable ladies. Throughout the book, it is stressed how unimportant women are and how they should not be talked about or seen. These women either reside in dead colonies.

“They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks [...], but they don't want us to hear what the Unwomen are saying.” (chp.20,pg.111_112)

One could claim that the intentional attempt to quiet the Unwomen who are viewed as social outcasts was made. The repressive regime seeks to keep the Unwomen silent and to prevent them from telling their stories of resiliency and resistance by highlighting their physical agony. It emphasizes how women are dehumanized and the power relationships in the book.

“There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they’re called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can.”(chap.5, pg.27)

The researchers argue that "Econowives," which portrays these women as being more valued for their financial contributions than for their uniqueness or agency, is not realistic. It emphasizes their economic value to society that they are expected to perform a variety of tasks, including those of spouses, mothers, and domestic helpers. Maternity care, childrearing, and financial assistance for their spouses are the responsibilities of econowives. In addition to objectifying them as instruments for upholding the patriarchal system, their work is utilized by the regime for its own purposes. Rather than being valued for who they are as people, they are valued for how productive they are and how well they fit in with society. The fact that econowives coexist with other female social classes like handmaids and wives normalizes the objectification of women in Gilead. The assumption that women are defined by their duties within the patriarchal hierarchy is reinforced by the stratification of women based on their social roles, which furthers their marginalization and objectification.

6. Denial of agency

One of the most important aspects of objectifying people is the denial of agency, especially when repressive systems and power dynamics are involved. Denying someone their agency entails taking away their freedom to choose, take charge of their own life, and behave in accordance with their own free will. Denial of agency contributes to objectification by turning people into inanimate objects or tools devoid of humanity, autonomy, or dignity. *“Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some”* (chap.32, pg. 195)

There is a claim that the aforementioned evidence captures the brutal realities of living in Gilead's repressive society. The Commander draws attention to the fundamental injustice and inequality that are ingrained in the system by recognizing that social changes frequently occur at the expense of particular people or groups. In the story, the Gilead government marginalizes and oppresses people, especially women, while enforcing rigid gender norms and other harsh laws that serve the interests of the ruling elite. The majority of society is negatively impacted by this system, even though some people may enjoy brief benefits or advantages. One of the main experiences of women in Gilead is the denial of agency.

Their rights, autonomy, and even fundamental humanity are taken away from them, and they are reduced to inanimate objects whose only function is to carry out the orders and wishes of the ruling class. The Commander's recognition of this fact highlights the way in which the government treats women as throwaway objects instead of free-thinking, sentient beings with intrinsic worth and dignity. In addition, the Commander's admission highlights the systematic cruelty and injustice that the regime upholds in the name of holding onto power. He alludes to the pain and oppression experienced by individuals on the margins in Gilead, especially women, whose agency and humanity are routinely ignored, by acknowledging that social advancements frequently come at the expense of others. All things considered, the Commander's speech acts as a sharp reminder of the objectification and dehumanization that are features of Gilead's cruel government. It draws

attention to the basic injustice of depriving people of their agency and individuality and emphasizes the hard reality that women must live in this dystopian society.

5. Conclusion

This research has provided valuable insights into the objectification of women in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. This study has shed light on the numerous ways that patriarchal societies commodify, dominate, and demean women. Our comprehension of the intricate dynamics of gender oppression and objectification depicted in the novel has been enhanced by this research's examination of instrumentality, ownership, religious extremism, surveillance and control, language and economy and denial of agency. A picture of a world that is painted by Margaret Atwood reveals that women have no freedom, choices or voices. Therefore, they are both physically and mentally subservient. Furthermore, men are their masters and women are their slaves. Women are assigned to serve in various capacities, such as handmaids (who facilitate childbirth) and Martha's (maids). It is concluded that a patriarchal world presented by Margaret Atwood, where women are viewed as formless objects that are shaped by society to suit the whims of males. Her goal is to demonstrate how women in patriarchal countries are nothing more than objects of sexual desire and reproduction for men. The patriarchal rules stripped them of everything, including their identities, and made them the property of males. Women are also kept silent because it is against the law for them to express their opinions and rights. Women's movements are similarly restricted. They need guards when they go to the church, the office, and other locations. Their only options are the hospital, the market, and their own home. They are restricted from doing anything they want to do unless the men grant them access. Through this novel, Atwood hopes the reader will gain an understanding of how women have been treated in society over time.

Contributing to the existing criticism on the subject at hand, this research sheds light on how women are objectified in the novel and the real life too. Giving voice to the voiceless characters as in a way a first step of giving similar voice to real life characters. Women objectification in this analysis refers to how patriarchal system represented by men in government objectify women and subordinate them as they are less person in society. Women objectification can be seen through certain factors such as instrumentality, ownership, language and economy, religious extremism, surveillance and control and denial of agency.

The aforementioned analysis demonstrates that women's lives are significantly shaped by the patriarchal system. Patriarchal rules are how men rule over women. In women's careers, regulation takes place. But women are limited to four occupations. They are playing the roles of Martha, Wife, Handmaid, or Aunt. The woman's fertility is taken into account based on the classification of those jobs. The commander's household will use the handmaids who are fertile to assist in childbirth. In addition to the belief held by society that women are inferior, males also act in ways that hide their religious beliefs. They pervert religion and prevent people from discovering the truth. They cover up their faith with religion in order to exert complete control over a woman's life. They use the name of God as an excuse for their immoral behaviour. It can be concluded from the evidences from the text that women are powerless to choose who they want to be and are forced to accept the roles that are given to them by the patriarchal system. Examining and opposing the objectification of women in literature and culture is crucial going forward. Issues like this current project in a way similar to addresses the patriarchal issues in real life. Questioning patriarchy in the text is in a way questioning patriarchy in a real life. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a potent warning against unbridled misogyny and emphasizes the need to struggle for gender equality and women rights.

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