

Modern Feminism and Repercussions on Contemporary Literature: *The Handmaid's Tale* an Example

Asst. Lect. Yousif Ali Yousif Salman¹

yousuf.en.hum@uodiyala.edu.iq

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6184-2699>

Department of English, College of Human Sciences, University of Diyala, Diyala, Iraq

Asst. Lect. Alyamama Qais Yousif Ismaeel²

alyamamah.en.hum@uodiyala.edu.iq

Department of English, College of Human Sciences, University of Diyala, Diyala, Iraq

Asst. Lect. Ruaa Ali Mohsen Hasan³

ruaa.mouhsin@atu.edu.iq

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8434-1651>

Al-Furat Al-Awsat Technical University, The University Administration, Iraq, Najaf.

Abstract

The feminist movement has had a significant impact on the human level. It has affected women's definition of the world and of themselves. They have appeared in the world through this movement and are working to build women's personalities morally and humanly to be compatible with the life process. This research aims to define the feminist movement in its various forms and opinions. Another aspect is looking for the possibility of analyzing this movement and its waves in detail, as the waves of Feminism take different forms for each of them. The research process takes within its limits *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and the reflection of Feminism on this story. Therefore, this is the intended impact of this movement socially, literally, culturally, and politically, as well as the extent of its reflection. This reality depends on the nature of the writers who adopted it. In addition to studying the nature of each wave, its literary and cultural dimensions, and the extent of its social impact.

Keywords: Feminism, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood, waves of Feminism

1. Background of Feminism:

A movement with a long history. Three basic positions of the women's movement during the years 1400-1789:

- 1- A conscious position in opposition to male slander and mistreatment of women: and dialectical opposition to misogyny.
- 2- The belief that sexes may be culturally constituted, not just biologically; The belief that women were a social group formed to fit male ideas of an inferior gender.
- 3- A point of view that transcends the then-accepted value systems by exposing and opposing unfairness and narrowness, The desire for a genuinely general concept of humanity. (Kelly, 1982)

The term "Feminism" came into English usage around the 1890s, but women's conscious struggle to resist discrimination and sexist oppression goes back much

further. Introducing Feminism surveys the significant developments that have affected women's lives from the seventeenth century to the present day.

Feminism's goal is to change this degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a "nonsignificant Other" but that, instead, each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Women, feminists declare, must define themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to fostering such change, feminists hope to create a society in which the female voice is valued equally with the male.

1. **There are also Some Definitions of Feminism**

It may be known as a movement that seeks to reorganize the world based on equality of the sexes (male/female) in all human relations: it is a movement that rejects all distinction between individuals based on sex, abolishes all sexual privileges and burdens, and strives to establish recognition of the common humanity of women and men. As the foundation of law and custom." (Billington-Greig, 1911)

"Feminism is the political theory and practice of the liberation of all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, women with physical difficulties, lesbians and older women, as well as sexually straight and economically affluent white women. Anything less is not considered Feminism, but merely Feminine self-aggrandizement." (Smith, 1979)

"It is a theory that calls for women to have social, economic and political rights and opportunities equal to men. Feminism is also a model of social status – an ideal, or desired, level of perfection that has not yet been achieved in the world." (Rebecca. L. 1983)

She is a good witch. "Do you remember the story of Cinderella? She's sitting at home, kind of upset, and she wants to go to the ball. She's got nothing to wear when the good witch comes running by and fixes everything. One of the great things about the good witch is that she turns all the old things around Cinderella into things." "New and useful: rags, pumpkins, rats, etc. It turns out that this little girl's witch is called Feminism. In addition to bringing boundless joy to the little girl's heart, Feminism has transformed all the old things around her." (Maitland, S. 1983)

It is a homoeopathic remedy that goes beyond the symptoms to the deeper causes of our problems: the imbalance between feminine and masculine energies, which manifests itself in the disorders of a patriarchal society. (Raymond, J. & Wilson, J. 1983).

2. **Discussion of Historical Development of Feminism:**

Although many people believe present-day feminists and their accompa- literary theories and practices found their beginnings in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, the roots of feminist criticism lie in the early decades of the twentieth century during what has been dubbed the Progressive Era. During this time, women gained the right to vote and became prominent activists in the social issues of the day, such as health care, education, politics, and literature. But equality with men in these are- has remained outside their grasp.

In 1919, the British scholar, teacher, and early feminist Virginia Woolf laid the foundation for feminist criticism in her work *A Room of One's Own*, in which she declared that men have treated women and continue to treat them as inferiors. It is the male, she asserted, who defines what it means to be female and who controls the

political, economic, social, and literary structures. Agreeing with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the foremost nineteenth-century literary critics, that great minds possess male and female characteristics, she believed that a female Shakespeare could achieve literary prominence in the twentieth century if women scholars, teachers, and critics would only pave the way. However, the Great depression of the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s focused humankind's attention on other matters and delayed the development of such feminist ideas.

With the 1949 publication of the French writer Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, however, feminist interests began to surface again. Her- added as the foundational work of twentieth-century Feminism, Beauvoir's text declares that both French and Western societies are patriarchal. That is, they are controlled by males. Like Woolf before her, Beauvoir believed that the male in these societies defines what it means to be human, includ- ing, therefore, what it means to be female. Since the female is not male, Beauvoir asserted, she becomes the Other, an object whose existence is de- defined and interpreted by the male, the dominant being in society. Always subordinate to the male, the female finds herself a secondary or nonexistent player in the major social institutions of her culture, such as the church, government, and educational systems. According to Beauvoir, a woman must break the bonds of patriarchal society and define herself if she wishes to become a significant human being in her own right and to defy male classification as the Other.

Since no critical theory of writing dominates feminist criticism, it is understandable that three distinct geographical strains of Feminism have developed: American, British, and French. For the most part, Ameri- can Feminism emphasizes the actual text with all its textual qualities, such as theme, voice, and tone, while at the same time being suspicious of any one theory that would attempt to explain the differences between male and female writings. It has found its home in American universities, in English and women's studies departments.

British Feminism, on the other hand, declares itself to be more political than American Feminism, advocating social change. Often viewed as Marxist, British Feminism is more ideological and therefore seemingly more concerned with social and cultural change than its American coun- part. Finding its home outside the university in the publishing world, journalism, and politics, British Feminism attempts to analyze the relation- ship between gender and class and to show how the dominant power structures controlled by men influence all of society and oppress women.

Unlike American or British Feminism, French Feminism concentrates on language, analyzing how meaning is produced through various lin- guistic symbols. Such an analysis usually leads these critics into other areas of study, such as metaphysics, psychology, and art. Most recently, these theorists have speculated that a writing style peculiar to women exists. *L'écriture féminine* or "women's writing," they maintain, is funda- mentally different from male writing and obtains meaning through the writing process.

No matter what they emphasize in theory, all feminist critics assert that they are on a journey of self-discovery that will lead them to a better understanding of themselves. And once they understand and then define themselves as women, they believe they can change their world. (E. Bressler, 1994, p:104)

What are the Objectives of the Feminist Movement at the Base Level:

1. The advocacy of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes.
2. The theory of the sexes' political, economic, and social equality.

3. The belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities.
4. The doctrine advocates equal social, political, and all other rights of women to those of men.

4- Methodology of Feminist Movement:

Feminist methodology is the approach to research that has been developed in response to concerns by feminist scholars about the limits of traditional methodology to capture the experiences of women and others marginalized in academic research. Feminist methodology includes various methods, approaches, and research strategies. Beginning in the early 1970s, feminist scholars critiqued positivist scientific methods that reduced lived experiences to a series of disconnected variables that did not do justice to the complexities of social life. Feminists were among the first scholars to highlight the marginalization of women of colour in academic research and offer strategies to counter this trend within academia. Feminist scholars also stress the importance of intersectional analysis, which highlights the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality in examining women's lives. Some of the earliest writings on feminist methodology emphasized the connection between "Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research", the subtitle of a 1983 edited collection by Stanley and Wise. Over the years, feminist methodology has developed a comprehensive vision of research practice that can be used to study a wide range of topics, analyze both men's and women's lives, and explore local and transnational or global processes.

5- Feminism Waves:

First-wave Feminism was a period of activity during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the U.K. and U.S., it focused on promoting equal contract, marriage, parenting, and property rights for women. New legislation included the Custody of Infants Act 1839 in the U.K., which introduced the tender years doctrine for child custody and gave women the right of custody of their children for the first time. Other legislation, such as the Married Women's Property Act 1870 in the U.K. and extended in the 1882 Act, became models for similar legislation in other British territories.

By the mid-20th century, women still lacked significant rights. In Switzerland, women gained the right to vote in federal elections in 1971, but in the canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden, women obtained the right to vote on local issues only in 1991, when the canton was forced to do so by the Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland. In Liechtenstein, the women's suffrage referendum of 1984 gave women the right to vote. Three prior referendums held in 1968, 1971 and 1973 had failed to secure women's right to vote.

Feminists continued to campaign for the reform of family laws, which gave husbands control over their wives. Although by the 20th century, coverture had been abolished in the U.K. and U.S., in many continental European countries, married women still had very few rights. For instance, in France, married women did not receive the right to work without their husband's permission until 1965. Feminists have also worked to abolish the "marital exemption" in rape laws, which precluded the prosecution of husbands for the rape of their wives. Earlier efforts by first-wave feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre, Victoria Woodhull and Elizabeth Clarke Wolstenholme Elmy to criminalize marital rape in the late 19th century had failed; this was only achieved a century later in most Western countries but is still not performed in many other parts of the world.

The Clarence Thomas Anita Hill debacle of 1991 stirred the pot of feminist emotion. With rapt and often lascivious interest, the American public watched the televised Senate nomination hearings during which conservative African American nominee Clarence Thomas responded to accusations of sexual harassment. His accuser was a former colleague, African American Anita Hill, who alleged that on repeated occasions, Thomas made sexually charged comments and pursued her for dates, which she rebuffed. The sordid story was told and retold with crowd-pleasing detail and fired debates in countless kitchens, shop floors, break rooms, and classrooms. For many feminists, some donning "I Anita" t-shirts, the hearings revealed entrenched public ignorance and persistent myths about sexual harassment. But when Thomas characterized the hearings as "a high-tech lynching for uppity any way deign to think for themselves," many feminists, myself included, felt conflicted. Was sexual harassment thrust into the national spotlight at the expense of a black man's ascendance to a high-profile government post? If so, was it impossible to confront sexism without participating in racism? Ultimately, Hill's allegations were insufficient to block Thomas's confirmation, an outcome that left many feminists enraged. Among those angered was Rebecca Walker, daughter of legendary writer and activist Alice Walker. In a 1992 Ms. magazine article, Walker crafted a feminist response to the notorious hearings as an impassioned call to action. Urging young feminists to resist pronouncements that they inhabit a postfeminist era and to take up the mantle of feminist activism, she wrote: "Let Thomas' confirmation hearings serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power." She famously concluded her essay with the words: "I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the third-wave." This is one story of the origin of the term "third-wave feminism" (Bobel, 2010, p:14)

Fourth-wave Feminism refers to a resurgence of interest in Feminism that began around 2012 and is associated with the use of social media. According to feminist scholar Prudence Chamberlain, the focus of the fourth wave is justice for women and opposition to sexual harassment and violence against women. Its essence, she writes, is "incredulity that certain attitudes can still exist".

Issues that fourth-wave feminists focus on include street and workplace harassment, campus sexual assault and rape culture. Scandals involving the harassment, abuse, and murder of women and girls have galvanized the movement. These have included the 2012 Delhi gang rape, the 2012 Jimmy Savile allegations, the Bill Cosby allegations, the 2014 Isla Vista killings, the 2016 trial of Jian Ghomeshi, the 2017 Harvey Weinstein allegations and subsequent Weinstein effect, and the 2017 Westminster sexual scandals.

Examples of fourth-wave feminist campaigns include the Everyday Sexism Project, No More Page 3, Stop Bild Sexism, Mattress Performance, 10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman, Yes All Women, Free the Nipple, One Billion Rising, the 2017 Women's March, the 2018 Women's March, and the (MeToo) movement. In December 2017, Time magazine chose several prominent female activists involved in the (MeToo) movement, dubbed "The Silence Breakers", as Person of the Year. In *The Handmaid's Tale* for Margaret Atwood, Offred lives in a dystopian world where a theocracy has replaced the United States government, and women have lost their rights. Offred has been forced to become a Handmaid but dreams of escape. In the end, it's unclear if she is rescued or arrested.

6- Margaret Atwood and Personal Information:

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer, poet, literary critic, feminist and social activist. She was born on 18 November 1939 and is one of the most influential writers of novels and short stories in modern times. She received the Arthur C. Clark Prize in Literature and numerous official awards in Canada and Ontario. She is a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Society. She was one of the first candidates to win the Bruker Prize five times and won the prize once. Although her fame was the result of her writings as a Canadian novelist, her poetry has been widely accepted and she has many successful collections of poetry, which have reached 15 groups of poetry so far.

The Handmaid's Tale:

Set shortly just before the year 2000, *The Handmaid's Tale* is science fiction but also an indictment of the present since Atwood's future is the reader's. It is an atypical Atwood novel, her only novel not rooted in Canada and the only one to be so blatantly propagandistic. In it, she fulfils the promise of her narrator-protagonist in Lady Oracle (1976): "I won't write any more Costume Gothics. But maybe I'll try some science fiction." Atwood prefers the term "speculative fiction" because of the blending of future and present and maintains that all the events in the novel have a "corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact." Since the book is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Atwood also indicts the American culture, which contains the "corresponding reality."

The novel begins with a quotation from the book of Genesis about a barren Rachel encouraging her husband Jacob to have children by her maid, Bilhah. In the aftermath of nuclear war, a new North American republic called Gilead (another biblical reference to fertility) attempts to correct a declining birthrate caused by atomic radiation and pollutants by relegating fertile women to the role of Bilhah-like Handmaids, the breeders of society. (All Gilead women are assigned to one of eight roles, each distinguished by its own uniform.) In such a patriarchal society where religion, state, and military are combined, women's identities are controlled by men. Offred, the narrator, has lost her real name; she is "of Fred," about the commander whom she services in a perverse, impersonal sexual coupling with his wife, Serena Joy, at the head of the bed. At the novel's beginning, Offred recounts her training under the aunts—also a perverse parody of the training that nuns and sisters undergo; Offred's uniform, though red, resembles a nun's habit.

Despite her indoctrination, Offred chafes under the repressive regime, and when her commander gives her access to his library, a male preserve reading is dangerous for women—she becomes even more rebellious. She meets Moira, an old friend, at a brothel where the males circumvent their own repressive sexual roles and discovers that there is a revolutionary organization named Mayday, which suggests fertility and anarchy. Her rebellion is fueled by her illegal affair with Nick, the chauffeur, who restores her identity (she tells him her real name), liberates her sexually, and ultimately aids in her escape via the Underground Femaleroad, reflecting, through its parody of the slave underground railroad, the slavish position of women in Gilead.

Offred survives to tell her tale, not in traditional epistolary form but in tapes edited by scholars in the year 2195. Atwood's account of the recordings, similar to conventional accounts about finding ancient manuscripts, is appended as "Historical Notes on The Handmaid's Tale" to the novel's text. Still, in suggesting that two centuries have not altered female/male relationships, the notes continue the novel's indictment of current culture. In keeping with utopian tradition, Atwood's site for the scholarly proceedings is the University of Denay, Nunavit (or the University of Deny, none of it).

Atwood's wry denial of the validity of the proceedings calls into question the male editing of female discourse; Professors Pieixoto and Wade have arranged "the blocks of speech in the order in which they appeared to go." Since Offred frequently alludes to the problem of articulating her feelings and experiences, the professors' presumptuous efforts are open to question.

While the proceedings are chaired by a woman, Professor Maryann Crescent Moon (perhaps a criticism of academic tokenism), the keynote speaker is a man, Professor Pieixoto, whose comments hardly represent an improvement over current male chauvinism. In his opening remarks, he alludes to "enjoying" Crescent Moon, "the Arctic Chair." His further comments about the title of the book (the "tale" "tail" being a deliberate pun by his male colleague) and his joke about the "Underground Frail-road" reveal the same chauvinistic condescension that characterizes current academic discourse. His unwillingness to pass moral judgments on the Gileadean society because such decisions would be "culture-specific" reflects not scientific objectivity, which he has already violated by his editing, but his moral bankruptcy.

The Handmaid's Tale does survive, however, despite the male editing as a "report" on the present future; similarly, in *Bodily Harm*, the radicalized protagonist becomes a "subversive" who vows to "report" on the repressive society. The novel, like *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), serves as an anatomy, an indictment, and a warning about current society. Among Atwood's targets are religious fanaticism, nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist practices. Like other utopian novels, however, *The Handmaid's Tale* is weakened by its political agenda, which creates one-dimensional characters and somewhat implausible events; the propaganda also gives the novel its power, relevance, and appeal. Because of its popularity, it was adapted into a film in 1990.

"I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand and that if Moira thought she could create Utopia by shutting herself up in a women-only enclave, she was sadly mistaken. Men were not just going to go away, I said. You couldn't just ignore them". (Atwood, 1985. p. 18)

A "women-only enclave" is not "Utopia" nor Gilead. Although women have a different quality of life in Gilead that could be said to include occasional improvements, they are definitely not in Utopia. (p. 21)

"Yes," I say. What I feel is not a straightforward thing. Indeed, I am not dismayed by these women, not shocked by them. I recognize them as truants. The official creed denies them, denies their very existence, yet here they are. That is at least something". (p. 33)

Here are women doing something they should not exist. Are they any more or less womanly or feminine than the Handmaids? It seems they're better off in some ways and worse off in others. They're reduced to their sexuality just as Handmaids are reduced to their fertility.

"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 skimp, 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". (p. 45)

Here, the narrator describes the roles of women in this society. All but the Econowives are "divided into functions," as shown by their dresses. The women are colour-coded: blue Wives, red Handmaids, green Marthas. Their individuality is completely stripped away. (p. 87)

Results

Feminism has a clear dimension and a well-known and clear approach built on foundations upon which some disagreed and others agreed, but through research the facts can be investigated with great impartiality. We see today the influence of feminist literature in the twenty-first century that is not similar to past centuries such as the twentieth century (the era of Woolf, bell hooks, and others). And other eras as well, so this progress in the movement (advancement in the age of the movement) was offset by a delay and decline on the level:

- Expansion globally..
- Influencing the public.
- Cultural progress.
- Presence on the ground.
- Support and support for goals.

Conclusion

We find that it is very clear the impact of feminism on the reality of life for women in the first place and for men as well. Likewise, the waves that were mentioned in this research, as is their nature, we find that their birth was great, even in the middle of the wave, and their actions and influences were very great, even on the cultural, literary, and social level. Therefore, we find The extent of the impact of *The Handmaid's Tale* on society, researchers, and readers, and the extent of the impact of this work (one of many works) has a clear and significant impact, but we find this progress that has occurred in the current reality weak, as if feminism today is dying as a literary, cultural, and social movement. As we see, this movement has dispersed. Most of its goals were lost and it began to return to before the beginnings, that is, the period of attempts and emergence. This means that the size of the impact of this movement has declined greatly and very significantly.

References:

1. Cameron, D. (1992). *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. London: University of Strathclyde.
2. Atwood, M. (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Canada: O.W. Toad.
3. Bobel, C. (2010). *New Blood*. London: Chris Bobel.
4. Bressler, E. (1994). *Literary Criticism*. United States of America: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
5. Kelly, J. (1982). Early feminist theory and the "quenelle des femmes", 1400-1789. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 8(1), 4-28.
6. Billington-Greig, T. (1911). *Feminism and Politics*. Contemporary Review.
7. Smith, B. (1979). Notes for Yet Another Paper on Black Feminism, or Will the Real Enemy Please Stand Up?. *Conditions: Five*, 11(2), 123-127.
8. Hooks, b. (2014). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and Feminism*. Boston, South End Press.
9. MacNamara, M. (1982). What is Feminism? Another view..." *Wicca: 'Wise Woman' Irish Feminist Magazine*, 12, 6-7.
10. Deborah Aslan, J. (1982). Review of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. *Off our backs*, April 6, 11.

11. Bunch, C. (1983). 'Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education'. N.Y., The Crossing Press.
12. Rebecca. L. (1983). "Truth-Telling Through Feminist Fiction." London. Womanews Press.
13. Maitland, S. (1983). "A Feminist Writer's Progress." In On Gender and Writing. Ed. Michelene Wandor. London: Pandora Press.
14. Raymond, J. & Wilson, J. (1983). "Feminism Healing the Patriarchal Disease." In Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth. Ed. Lconie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland. London: The Women's Press.