



RESEARCH PAPER

Womanimality and Gender Polarity in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Western philosophical traditions responsible for objectifying women and animals. It looks at how Margaret Atwood has engaged with these issues in *The Testaments*, which is the sequel of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The purpose of this study is to use a deconstructive approach to analyse sexual differences through animal differences. Animals and women have been standing at the periphery since the start of western civilisation. Animal and gender metaphors play a significant role in creating these differences. In Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, handmaids have a problematic relationship with this androcentric classification of women as animals. The reason behind this animal objectification is to make them realise their inferiority as women. The marked differences have utopian and dystopian characteristics; both parallel each other. Compared to these bifurcated images of life, Atwood imagines a post-utopian and dystopian reality that she names utopia. It connotes an idea of gift, love and democracy; there is no separation based on animal and sexual differences. The importance of language in the bifurcation of sexuality cannot be ignored, significantly when the name of handmaids is redefined according to the patriarchal perspective. The politics of naming is connected with the myth of creation; commanders and aunts consider naming women a patriarchal prerogative. Significantly, these sexual differences discourage multiplicity and promote singularity in the dystopian state of Gilead.

KEYWORDS Binarism, Fall, Naming, Objectification, Singularity, Utopia

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Testaments* explores the role of women in a society that is rigidly divided between the sexes. The novel challenges the idea that human beings must be either masculine or feminine and posits that genders are fluid categories. The best example of this fluid category is the character Aunt Lydia, who is an influential leader but also a kind and nurturing guardian. The article investigates how women are traditionally imagined as part of the animal kingdom—while men are imagined as transcendently rational beings—and how this affinity affects women's social and sexual lives. Throughout the novel, Atwood uses the motif of animality to explore the theme of sexual polarity. Women are constantly aware of how they are seen as inferior to men, and they must find ways to overcome the obstacles that stand in their way. This animality also justifies the sexual polarity between women and men.

By using the insights generated by Derrida for an analysis of binaristic thought, this article critiques the objectification of women and animals by the powerful philosophical traditions which subjugate women and animals and treats them as inferior to others. The article ultimately tries to find whether women can transcend their biology and create their destinies. Aunt Lydia is complicit in treating women as beastly creatures, but she is not blind to the duality of Western traditions. She describes traditions as “corrupt and blood-smeared

fingerprints of the past” (Atwood, 2019, p. 4). She suggests thinking beyond the landscape of traditions because it creates gender polarity. Here, polarity is not limited to gender differences but also human/animal differences rooted in philosophical and cultural traditions. Lydia considers this animal objectification not the fault of patriarchal ideologies but suggests that women are complicit with it. So, Atwood, through the character of Aunt Lydia, aims to unearth the genealogy of traditions that subjugate women: “I’m inclined to dig them up again—if only for your edification, my unknown reader” (Atwood, 2019, p. 5). Unlike Plato and Heidegger, two thinkers who built their philosophical systems on polarity, Atwood wants to imagine a society beyond all binaries. Atwood’s fiction tries to imagine gender beyond heteronormativity (Boynton, 2002, p. 54). This paper attempts to explicate Atwood’s radical potential in questioning traditional gender binaries and how they lead to the objectification of women. This article is also a celebration of Atwood’s worldview of universal, all-inclusive love, innocence, generosity and hospitality.

Literature Review

The Testaments helps to trace the war between men and women through human and animal differences. Agnes’ character is rooted in the traditional binary of the human-animal category, making her look non-human. Here, non-human is being used in the context of being an animal that helps to explore sex differences through animal differences. Agnes suffers from an inferiority complex because of these sexual differences. She thinks of herself as lacking behind men because women have “smaller brains” (Atwood, 2019, p. 15) and lacks intellectual maturity in conceiving big ideas.

Daisy, Agnes’ step-sister, feels that she is “a prize cat” (Atwood, 2019, p. 47) in the presence of Neil and Melanie. Moreover, her aunts also accuse her of being irrational: “It would be like trying to teach a cat to crochet” (Atwood, 2019, p. 15). On the contrary, these aunts are responsible for making them realise their closeness to animals.

Most importantly, Gilead believes in splitting society into two genders; they are inspired by a Western intellectual tradition structured on an old-age binary of human and animal. The aunts and commanders only enjoy the prerogative of reading and writing, leading to feelings of inferiority in Agnes. She starts getting jealous because of the superiority of their rational skills and says, “Did they have special brains, neither female nor male?” (Atwood, 2019, p. 156)

Atwood questions the idea of the male desire for dominance as part of gender opposition. Furthermore, Gilead is a theocratic state ruled by fanatics, but only aunts and commanders are considered legible to read Bible. This dominance shows the hypocrisy of Gilead because handmaids are considered untouchables and irrational to read Bible. Aunt Lydia wants to divide and conquer; she is told by Judd that intermixing men and women have produced horrendous results. According to Amin Malak, binary opposition is part of dystopian societies, and these “dialectical dualities” construct our sense of good and evil (2004, p. 83). Indeed, a broader target of this project is to think beyond these multitudes of differences. Derrida’s deconstructive ideas help us think beyond these sexual differences rooted in Gilead.

Carl Olson argues that language for Derrida works through “differance”, which is defined as the difference of signification, leading to the erasure or negation of meaning (2011, p. 247). He perceives language as not independent in signification and conceives it as “a living dead, a reprieved corpse, a deferred life” (2011, p. 247). Notably, Gilead exists on a model of signification which makes women mere negation of men by giving privilege to men. The use of animal metaphors for handmaids in Gilead leads to the negation of handmaids; this negation is similar to the negation of animals against humans. In Agnes’ eyes, this negates her identity by contrasting her with non-humans. It is like making her believe she is a negation to men, and she resists this notion by saying she is not a cat. She feels dishevelled because of these differences based on animal polarity, prioritising men.

By considering these differences, Agnes is concerned with her mental health, which is deteriorating, and she feels her skull will be “emptied of brain” (Atwood, 2019, p. 226). When she reaches the age of puberty, she feels terrible pain psychologically because of biological changes. Aunts instruct her to accept these painful changes; women are negation to men lacking “hard and focused” (Atwood, 2019, p.88) brains like men. This advice makes her realise that women are stranded in the fixed binary of their physiognomy, which is not different to animals. Aunt Estee makes fun of Agnes’ brain by comparing it with a mud-filled container. Agnes feels her soft muddy brain hardening like a stone because of these sexual and animal differences. She feels she is exchanging her “woman’s nature for an imperfect copy of a sharp-edged and ruthless man’s nature?” (Atwood, 2019, p. 328). The existence of Agnes and Daisy are perceived concerning men; they fail to imagine their true self that is beyond binary.

Discourse and Content Analysis I

The relationship between women and men in Gilead is based on the discriminating sexual marks that cannot move beyond the opposition of feminine and masculine. For Derrida, an ideal utopian society should unhinge those “nonidentified sexual marks” (2011, p. 298) hidden behind these sexual differences. These nonidentified sexual marks deconstruct those dualistic binaries that create hierarchies in Gilead by giving Commanders privileges over women based on these dichotomies. Hence, handmaids possess the intellectual capability to enjoy the exact privileged status as the Commanders and Aunts enjoy. They are separated from others due to sexual differences; significantly, these differences are exacerbated by language.

In terms of sexual differences, language can be either marked or remarked; a sign is not irreplaceable, but it continues to repeat (remark) itself through different signs. To borrow an expression from Timothy Morton, “re-mark is the fundamental property of ambience.... It is a special mark (or a series of them) that makes us aware that we are in the presence of (significant) marks” (2009, p. 48). In other words, this heterogeneous quality of marks splits society into two incorrigible halves. Atwood argues that a dystopian society is the reverse of a utopian society because “how can you define a “good” society as opposed to a “bad” one if you see good and bad as aspects of the same thing” (2005, p. 93). The following discussion shows that Gilead’s utopia is based on the illusion of gender equality.

Gilead manipulates its draconian actions to serve humankind to set the stage for an ideal society. According to Commander, women should be thankful to their masters because they live a life of equality, freedom and autonomy. He discusses the privileges of women in Gilead about past experiences. Here, privileges are fixed marks of difference that depends upon the past for recognition. He reminds them about the “gap between the ones who could get a man quickly and those who couldn’t” (Atwood, 1985, p. 231). Importantly, Gilead’s policy is making a difference with its other object or mark that it cannot explain. The concept of an ideal woman depends upon her matrimonial commodification, which is homogenous to the Puritan era. Hence, the utopian version of Gilead is similar to the dystopian Gilead, which censors women’s rights, liberty, democracy and individual rights. Women are denied the right to credit cards, and their male relatives are made the successor of their properties. Women are treated as sex slaves, and their relationship with men is no other than that of a commodity. Daisy, known as Baby Nicole in Gilead, describes Gilead as a terrible place where women are not allowed to drive cars and have jobs due to sexual demarcation. She argues that Gilead treats women like cows; even cows enjoy a better future than women (Atwood, 2019, p. 46). They cannot escape the binary opposition in which women and animals are exploited. Here, Daisy struggles to escape these marks and remarks of sexual difference by imagining something that she lacks but is possessed by animals.

Aunt Lydia draws a landscape of Gilead before becoming an aunt; women are humiliated as sub-humans. This politics of division is similar to the dehumanisation of

animals which Marie-Louise Mallet equates with the “philosophical tradition” (2008, p. x) that has rejected an animal. Here, we find the negation of women like animals by Eyes, the intelligence unit of Gilead. Aunt Lydia states that living in Gilead is torturing them to death and reducing them to animals. She says, “they were reducing us to animals—to penned-up animals—to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman” (Atwood, 2019, p. 143). Laetitia Clavien explains that Gilead tries to “animalise women” (2021, p. 27), making them realise their status as non-human. She compares animals and nature that are at loggerheads with humans and culture. This binary opposition works through exclusion, and “if women belong to one category, they are automatically excluded” (2021, p. 27).

The sexual and animal differences between nature and culture lead to violence. Women are victims of suffering, brutalisation, and sexual moaning in the prison of Gilead. Eyes use Taser guns to control women’s subjectivity and objectify their wildness. They try to change their physiognomy into animals; they do not want to accept them as humans. Perhaps this is why wives, daughters and handmaids have missing fingers, “some have one foot, some have one eye” (Atwood, 2019, p. 169). The horrendous life of a female in utopian and dystopian Gilead helps us to deconstruct sexual differences through animal differences. Atwood says, “neither the utopia nor the Dystopia is open-ended” (2005, p. 95). This discussion opens the fixed dichotomies of sexual differences that mark and remark society into utopian and dystopian fantasies when one is blind to the origin of difference. We must move beyond the marking and remarking differences to answer this question.

Discourse and Content Analysis II

Derrida helps to deconstruct the binary of mark and remark differences by giving the philosophy of hyperbolic ethics. A world exists beyond these differences between utopian and dystopian manifestations of women. It is not essential to program one's identity in opposition to others (men), women are not designed only to breed babies, and men are not only meant to husband a society. Atwood says: “all fictions begin with the question of What if...?” (2005, p. 97). What if we imagine a future that has no sexual and animal differences? What if we plan an androgynous society that has no signs of gender? What if the patriarchal gaze does not objectify women? What if we think beyond femininity which is a binary of masculinity? In his later work, Derrida equates femininity with phallogocentrism because phallogocentrism is “the complicity of Western metaphysics with a notion of male firstness” (Kamuf, 1991, p.445)

Atwood wants to imagine a future based on gift, forgiveness, hospitality and democratic principles. Atwood defines a gift as an entity that cannot be “weighed and measured, nor can it be bought. It can't be expected or demanded; rather it is granted, or else not” (2015, p. 60). On the other hand, the gifts that Gilead gives are given from the position of sovereignty; women are exchanged as commodities for their services. Agnes exposes these contaminated notions of gifts that are based on sexual differences. Aunt Lise manipulates the theoretical hierarchical commodification as God’s plan, “all were equal in the sight of God, but some had gifts that were different from the gifts of others” (Atwood, 2019, p. 164). This behaviour of Aunts shows that Gilead is blind to the true spirit of democracy and forgiveness.

In addition to the philosophy of purity, Derrida conceives hyperbolic ethics with an expression “worthy of its name,” giving dignity and value to the name or the particular word (Oliver, 2011, p. 296). Aunt Lydia’s evolution from *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Testaments* depicts the evolution from contaminated gift to pure gift. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia is a facilitator of the regime; she is the epitome of absolute power that makes her corrupt. In the sequel, we have a different side of Aunt Lydia, who stealthily plans strategies to demolish Gilead. She is a source of Mayday who warns them about the expected Gilead raids and shares important information and maps so Mayday can infiltrate into Gilead. She starts hating Gilead due to its voracious policies and hates “the structure we were concocting”

(Atwood, 2019, p. 178). She supports commanders because she believes in Gilead's utopian philosophy. Still, the dystopian brutalisation of nature and women makes her disillusioned about this sexual difference built on human-animal opposition. There is another possibility that she wants to achieve the atonement of her past crimes by helping Mayday to bring down Gilead.

Moreover, when Agnes wants to commit suicide because her parents force her to marry Commander Judd. Aunt Lydia saves her from that matrimonial suicide by acknowledging, "Not every girl is suitable for marriage" (Atwood, 2019, p. 231). She thinks marriage is not meant for everyone; not only she saves her from the Commander, but Lydia risks her life to plan the escape of Agnes from Gilead so that she can unite with her mother, who is known as Aunt Victoria. Aunt Lydia provides logistic help to Daisy for escape, who is worshipped as Baby Nicole in Gilead. She asks her to escape with the cache that contains all secrets of Gilead's crimes. In the Thirteenth symposium on Gilead studies, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto describes that the smuggling of microdot cache has paved the way for the collapse of a misogynist authoritarian regime (Atwood, 2019, p. 411).

The sacrifice of Aunt Lydia for girls is an example of hyperbolic ethics of pure gift and worthy of its name. According to Katha Pollitt, Atwood wants to exonerate one of her evil characters Aunt Lydia who "cooperated to survive and to bring down the patriarchy" (2019, p. 247). Derrida has explained such sacrifice as love or *jouissance* that is not allowed in societies like Gilead, where duality exists. He believes true love exists beyond sexual duality; a perfect reality is known by imagining a future beyond marked (utopian) and remarked (dystopian) anatomical differences. Like Derrida, Atwood is trying to imagine a post-utopian or dystopian future, which she names Ustopia. Ustopia is a term coined by Atwood in *Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia* that has properties of both utopia and dystopia: "perfect society and its opposite" (2011, p. 66). She wants to imagine a future beyond the borders of feminine and masculine, "a border between known and unknown" (2011, p. 67). Following this example, Aunt Lydia is an ustopian character that stands with victimisers but also heals the wounds of victims behind doors. On the practical level, dissecting the gender polarity through this ustopian phenomenon helps distinguish the unmarked differences beyond the bifurcation. These unremarked differences are unconditional hospitality that is pure, incalculable and worthy of their name. Taniyan describes Gilead as open-ended because it "neutralises or inverses the relations which it signifies" (2012, p. 252). Aunt Lydia's Ustopian struggle trespasses the bifurcation and challenges the phallogocentric philosophy of the utopian and dystopian regimes.

Political and Cultural Ramifications of the Analysis

According to Jacques Derrida, the "animal is a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other" (Derrida, 2008, p. 23). The power of naming plays a significant role in creating sexual demarcation based on animal differences. The marked and remarked differences of language proliferate marked and remarked names in Gilead. Maria Christou believes Agnes' name symbolises Agnus Dei from the *New Testament*, known as God's sacrificial lamb but consumed by the Eucharist (2015, p. 419).

Following this analogy, Agnes Jemima encapsulates the concept of sacrifice and unconsciously imagines herself as a sacrificial lamb. The second word Jemima is taken from the book of Job. Jemima is Job's eldest daughter; he is cursed by the death of his children as a test by God. Finally, God has mercy and blesses him with Jemima. Jemima means Dove, which symbolises purity and good luck for Job. Like the biblical Jemima, Agnes is told by her surrogate mother that she has brought good luck to her barren stomach like Jemima. She says that God has given Jemima to Job as "God gave you to me" (Atwood, 2019, p. 19). Agnes is born into gendered structures through sexist mythical names and finds it impossible to free herself from the masculine appellation, like animals. Agnes is intrigued about her

identity and often asks Tabitha and Martha to tell her about "a past a life of the defiled beyond my own past." She feels herself living image and "would have a story instead of a zero" (Atwood, 2019, p. 329).

The name strongly influences handmaids; the change implies re-identification because they must reject their past and assimilate into a new identity. Thomas also points out that the politics of naming is "a part of the system promoted at the Red Center, each Handmaid will eventually be forced to give up her name and adopt a patronymic consisting of the preposition "of" and the first name of the Commander to whom she is temporarily assigned" (2008, p. 92). Deborah A. Her housekeeper (Martha) tells Agnes she cannot know her birth mother's name because handmaids have rejected their old names. Agnes' mother, Offred is known by the name of her Commander's first alphabet Fred. Interestingly, Agnes is rescued by Lydia from marriage to Judd; otherwise, she would be named Ofjudd.

Aunts are not different from animals because they are dependent and cannot choose their names independently. The names in Ardua Hall are given to newly joined aunts based on their consumed products. Agnes is asked to select names from cosmetic products like Maybelline, Ivory and Victoria. In the context of consumable culture, women are consumed as animals; Alison Suen argues that animals are not only consumed in slaughterhouses but are made "absent in our language by being renamed" (2019, p. 14). Accordingly, women are consumed as edible twice: first, they are slaughtered in Thank Tank, and secondly, they are consumed by re-identification. Due to this politics of re-identification, Ofkyle is consumed voraciously like an abandoned dog. Ofkyle's real name is Crystal, but after becoming a handmaid to Commander Kyle, her name becomes Ofkyle. Agnes mocks the politics of naming by calling Ofkyle an Oftucker; the purpose of this re-identification is to consume girls like animals. Shunamite pacifies Agnes that handmaids are "all sluts anyway, they don't need real names" (Atwood, 2019, p. 81). At one moment, she recalls Ofkyle as "the nameless one" who is "buried under a little square" that has been blank (Atwood, 2019, p. 104).

It is impossible to escape from the patriarchal appellation like animals. This derogatory categorisation aims to obliterate the identity of their consumable commodity; they are even nameless in their graveyards. Agnes has a chance to read the Bloodlines Genealogical Archives; she is shocked after seeing two folders where women are placed inside the folders of men. Atwood is trying to critique the re-identification of names that makes the consumption of women like animals unobjectionable and leads to their fall in Gilead.

A Fall before Fall

The naming of women has its roots in the myth of creation. Adam first names animals and then names women, whom God sends to give relief to Adam from alienation. It is noteworthy that handmaids are named by their patriarchal Adams, and their role is to provide relief to them from infertility. According to Oliver, the naming of animals and women is similar, but women are named twice, "first he calls her "woman", and after they eat from the tree of knowledge, he calls her "Eve"" (2019, p. 302). Commander Judd puts all the responsibility for Gilead's administration in Aunt Lydia's hands and warns her she will be responsible for the fall of Gilead: "If you fail, you will fail all women. As Eve did" (Atwood, 2019, p. 176). Hence, being named like animals is a fall before fall, which Derrida calls "contretemps" (Oliver, 2019, p. 302), evocative of an embarrassment.

The marked and remarked re-identification of names creates sexual polarity by animal differences. If this is the case, the naming of Ofkyle and other handmaids separates them as an outcast like serpents. The myth of creation gives a sense of nakedness to Adam and Eve regarding their genitalia. However, men in Gilead absolve them from these differences and separate themselves from women and animals; this establishes their sovereignty over women and animals as superior beings. More precisely, Daisy herself feels

disoriented by this naming, she has grown up as Daisy, and then she is shocked that she exists in another place as baby Nicole.

Further, she has to change her name according to the instructions of Mayday to Jade. This politics of naming does not stop here. She has to re-identify herself as Aunt Dove on her passport to travel to Gilead. When Commander Judd raids Ardua Hall to marry Daisy, Aunt Lydia arranges her escape from the Gilead by re-identifying her name as Aunt Immortelle. The identity politics behind names give power to Gilead and the patriarchal Sons of Jacob, who believe themselves as God's representatives. They think they have a licence to tame and domesticate women as animals.

Handmaids as Singular

This monolithic creation myth divides Gilead through domestication; Becca tells Agnes that the God of Gilead is horrible because it rejects diversity. This monolithic image turns "God to be only one thing" (Atwood, 2019, p. 295). Likewise, women are assigned the singular identity of submission, sacrifice and obedience. Here, being heteronormative means being fixed by language limits that discourage plurality of thoughts. Derrida also questions the binary divide between "Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A" (2008, p. 29). Likewise, we cannot move beyond the limits of Men with capital M and Women with capital W. This discussion is worth taking because fall before fall is not limited to re-identification. Still, categorising men and women is problematic because it discourages plurality.

Beyond these binaristic limitations, there is a life with "heterogeneous multiplicity" (Derrida, 2008, p. 31). Handmaids, like animals, are treated as homogenous, having no existence apart from the patriarchy. Commanders are allowed extramarital affairs, but it is considered blasphemous for women to reject the sexual binary. The only goal of women is to get married and reproduce like animals. Gilead is producing a uniform society where all handmaids look identical due to their dress code and singularity of thought. One of the aunts, Aunt Lily, realises the joy of the plurality of life; she refuses to marry because she wants to work on a farm and live her life by choice. She disappears strangely, and her body is discovered in the cistern after some time. The murder of Aunt Lily shows that Gilead is a homogenous society that rejects individual plurality and controls women with an iron fist. After the Coup, Aunt Lydia and her colleague Katie are asked to declare their pregnancy status.

Katie is pregnant because she has chosen "single motherhood, as many women did in those days" (Atwood, 2019, p. 68). She is arrested for rejecting the heterosexual union and getting herself pregnant by an unknown sperm donor; there is no legality of relation that exists beyond the sexual differences. Katie's sexual plurality is similar to Derrida's silkworm, which does not need coupling to breed. Hence, Katie is an example of a "multiple sex of 'one's own'" (Oliver, 2019, p. 307) and rejects oppressive heterosexual singularity. Atwood equates gender singularity with transphobia against the LGBTQIA community and non-binary; she separates sex from gender and speaks for hermaphrodites (Parsons, 2020).

Conclusion

The community outside of heteronormativity in America has faced victimisation due to Trump's objectification. Moreover, Atwood has stated that the election of Trump has inspired her to write *The Testaments*. America is recovering from the post-Trump era of victimising policies toward the non-heteronormative community. Post-Trump era is similar to the post-Gilead era. Similarly, the way Gilead has collapsed, Trump's discriminatory policies are also ending. Joe Biden has fully supported the non-heteronormative community by reversing all the draconian laws restricting same-sex marriage.

The discussion from the perspective of biased binaries deconstructs the reasons behind the objectification of women as animals. Atwood wants to criticise *Gilead's*

anthropomorphic and androcentric exploitation through *The Testaments*. This exploitation is supported by the binary opposition that gives preference to humans and men compared to animals and women. In the contemporary world, women are still victimised like animals through objectification. We need to move to Atwood's *ustopia* to be healed.

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