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**A VOICE BEHIND THE RED CLOAK AND WHITE WINGED BONNET: A HANDMAID'S QUEST  
OF EQUALITY AND IDENTITY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

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Since 2006, the World Economic Forum (WEF) is involved in the publishing of an annual Global Gender Gap Report. The report prepared by WEF analyses and quantifies the magnitude of gender disparity and keeps track of their progress over time. The annual report released in November 2016, covers 144 countries and marks the 11<sup>th</sup> instalment. The WEF notes that 'more than a decade of data has revealed that the progress is still too slow for realizing the full potential of one half of the humanity within our lifetimes'. The report has always seen a very minimal progress over time with the median gender gap of 16.5%. One major fact to be noted in the survey is that there is no nation in the world that has 100% as gender parity score. The score of 100% denotes the true gender equality.

"If I were a man and cared to know the world I lived in, I almost would think it would make me shade uneasy- the weight of that long silence of one-half of the world"

-Elizabeth Robins in a speech to WWSL, 1907

There is no nation in the world with 100% gender parity score, why? Scaffolding the crisis of gender equality and identity brings to light the various complications at different levels and one among them is the problem of equality and identity even with the same gender group. This could be marked as one primary problem and becomes the crack in the unity that must exist within and among the same gender group. This problem of identity and inequality among one gender group is effectively portrayed by the Canadian literary figure Margaret Atwood in her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, inventor and environmental activist, Margaret Atwood has published books of poetry, novels, ten books of nonfiction, collections of short fictions and children's books. Atwood's writing spectrum includes themes highlighting religion, myth, power of language, gender equality and identity, climate change and power politics. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel published in 1985. Originally set in the near future of New England which is renamed as Republic of Gilead, the society of Gilead is a Totalitarian state like theocracy which has overthrown the United States Government. The novel is the tale of the handmaids in Gilead spoken through one representative voice, Offred. The handmaids are one group of people who are fertile and are employed to meet the population crisis in the era of declining birth rates owing to increasing infertility. These women are forcibly assigned to produce progeny for the ruling class and are known as handmaids based on the biblical story of Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah.

The social structure of Gilead has different class of women and their lives vary according to the rules of the theocracy. The woman population itself is physically segregated by the colour of the clothing – blue, red, green, striped and white. The colour of the clothing denotes the existence of hierarchy even among woman in the society. The commander's wives who come in the highest position among the women are dressed in blue, handmaids in red, marthas in green, striped for econowives and young unmarried girls are dressed in white. This is the very primary example of inequality and identity crisis among the same gender in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Social Identity theory introduced by social psychologists Henry Tajfel and John Turner talks about the intergroup behaviour of the people in a society. The central hypothesis of social identity theory is that the group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group thus enhancing their self image. Social categorization is one major explanation for the prejudice attitudes. The group to which one belongs is the in-group and the other group is the out-group. This theory applied to *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood opens a new perspective of the social structure in Republic of Gilead.

The narrator of the story, Offred is a handmaid which becomes the in-group while the other different colours become the out-group. Offred, dressed in red with white winged bonnets offers insight into the life and mind of the handmaids in the Republic of Gilead. In Gilead, the identity of handmaid is subsumed not only by the male gender that controls them but also is looked down as the most sinful creatures by other colour categories of woman. "We put our hands over our hearts to show these women that we feel with them in their loss. Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the others turns aside, spits on the side-walk. The Econowives do not like us" (54).

We come to know names of men like Fred Waterford, Nick and Luke but the major inequality is in the names of the women. The wife of the commander is addressed by her name as Serena Joy, while the two marthas in the household are also addressed by their real names as Rita and Cora and there are also Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth but the handmaids are forbidden to use their real names. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name which nobody uses now because it's forbidden"(94).

Instead the handmaids take the name of their owners in possessive form like Offred (Of-Fred), Ofglen(Of-Glen) and Ofwarren(Of-Warren). Handmaids are also identified by the number that is tattooed on their ankles just like the prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps who had tattoos on their arms.

The flashbacks that Offred has often about her perfect life before the Republic of Gilead shows the yearning of Offred for real love and her need for real love goes in hand with her needs to be recognised. "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (108).

Amidst all the restrictions and bias that is offered to the handmaids, Offred tries to assert her individuality and unique identity in various small ways. For instance at the very beginning she refuses to say the room that is allotted to her in the commander's house as *my* room by later she does say it as *mine* and asserts her right over it. "There has to be some space finally that I claim as mine"(60).

The handmaids are also banned from making a conversation with another handmaid and are not allowed to read, write or indulge in any sort of activities while the other woman group has no such restrictions. The power of language is shown through the character of Offred. The restriction to read and write thus makes Offred during the game of scrabble played in secret with the commander taste words as a sensuous experience. When she writes out, *Nolite te bastardes carborundum*, she becomes very conscious of the power of writing because it is an activity usually forbidden to her. "The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects" (196).

The colour red also plays a major significance in the identity of Handmaids. The red colour can be identified with life because of the association with blood. The handmaids are all about bringing new life and denote fertility. But the red colour also has a negative symbolism and is associated as a scandalous colour frequented with woman working as prostitutes while the historical evidence show identification of woman who committed adultery with red colour as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet letter*. While at the same time the commander's wife who wear blue colour denotes the purity and serenity that may also lead to a direct comparison with Virgin Mary. Thus it is very evident that the handmaids are considered scandalous, provocative and are constantly compared to concubines and prostitutes and looked down by woman of other colour categories. The handmaids do nothing but bring life to earth and it is all only by force and not by volunteering.

Influenced by the movie *The Red Shoes*, Atwood shows in her novel how the suppression had led the woman not to have any careers. The condition is even worse for the handmaids because they are not even allowed to have any hobbies like other woman groups. This reference to the movie can also give clue that

handmaids are dressed in red to denote they are oppressed and Offred comments several times on her 'red shoes'. Her first mention of the 'red shoes' can have a direct connection to the movie *The Red Shoes*. "I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing" (18).

The voice of Offred from behind her red cloak and white winged bonnets is the remainder of how the disparity existed among even the same gender because although the handmaids did a deed of bringing life to earth amidst the declining of the birth rate which started teasing the idea of extinction to the people of Gilead, the handmaids are the most oppressed and their oppression started from their own gender, the woman of other colour categories. Offred marks the struggle for identity and equality of a woman among all the women. The other woman categories do not help the handmaids in getting back their rights and freedom. "We were the people who were not in papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of the print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (66).

*The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood thus also marks the disparity and the crack in unity that exists among the same gender. Substituting this disparity within the same gender to the contemporary society helps at identifying the primary problem that should be rectified before talking about gender equality and gender identity. Unity is the only answer and this unity among woman can be achieved when one understands that woman can uplift and empower another woman. But there is always disparity even among woman at various scenarios like work place, household, public and even in the health sector. Thus the major goal of gender equality and identity can be achieved by unity among the gender groups and by accepting people with their differences, embracing similarities and celebrating uniqueness. This could help achieve 100% gender parity score.

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