



## **TRAUMA: A PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW ON MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Trauma plays pivotal roles directly or indirectly in everyone's life and is shown in different pragmatic contexts. It is a kind of psychological injury caused by deep emotional wounds or terrible events. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the domination and governance of men on women in the name of religion and infertility. Similarly, this paper intends to discover the consequences of individual trauma through Moira, one of the major characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel portrays the life of a handmaid, who is forced to lend her femininity to the unknown. The traits of trauma are subtly treated by the writer in her novel and picturized the individual psychological misgivings caused by certain undesired events. Moira was free and unconventional and strong enough to question the social inequalities and unfair attitudes whose life took turn to live in a male-oriented society. The purpose of the paper is to unravel the depth of trauma in the life of Moira who was plunged deep into the roots of an innate patriarchal society.*

**Keywords:** Psychological Trauma, Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Moira

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## INTRODUCTION

The interdisciplinary studies between psychology and literature give opportunities to analyse the untouched epistemological shreds of evidence. Psychology helps to understand the psyche of an individual whereas literature represents reality in an artistic form. The combining of these two disciplines gives a better understanding of the human psyche and its influence on literature. Margaret Atwood is a seasoned author who has often designed her work taking inspiration from the leading theoretical approaches in fiction. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is one such example in which she created the plot based on underlying hues of trauma, a leading psychoanalytic school of thought that garnered critical attention during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The present paper intends to analyse the psychological trauma endured by Moira, one of the major characters of the novel and further it is discussed on leading psychological trauma theories and how they can be extended in studying the respective characters.

Trauma studies emerged during the 1990s are concerned with the impact of psychological trauma in literature and also threw light on the importance of contemporary individual identities. Trauma studies are largely based on psychoanalytical criticism associated with various contours of literary criticism genres as; socio-cultural, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theories. Trauma studies interrogate the role of trauma in shaping an individual/collective memory and identity. The effects of trauma are extended to literature and society by keenly studying its psychological, sociological, and cultural significance.

Society and literature play prominent roles in representing traumatic experiences in different ways. In literature, the trauma is concentrated on the influence of print and media texts in representing trauma in a way that shapes the psyche, unconscious, identity, and remembering of an individual. Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* talks about the psychological analysis of memory and trauma which make the foundation for studies in this field. The study of shock and hysteria became the budding ground for all future studies related to the effects of trauma.

Margaret Atwood a popular Canadian writer who intellectually used trauma in her writings. Her *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a near-future Massachusetts, California, in a strongly patriarchal, quasi-Christian, totalitarian state, known as the 'Republic of Gilead', the perfect society that has overthrown the United States government on the grounds of extreme environmental pollutions, infertility, radiation, and loss of values.

Moira belongs to the group known as handmaids, who are forcibly assigned to produce children for the commanders – the ruling class of men. The original name of handmaids is forgotten and a new name is assigned with respect to the commander who has the right to

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breed her. In the Republic of Gilead, women do not exercise the fundamental human rights or freedom. They are the secondary citizens of the country and are divided into different categories associated with their statuses such as Commander's wives, daughters, handmaids, Martha's, and aunts. They are assigned different colours of clothes based to categorize into specific groups assigned for the service of the powerful. They are given strict codes of conduct and restricted to exercise any kind of freedom other than what was permitted. They were closely monitored by guardians and those who waver from the rules are either killed by hanging on 'The Wall' or sent out of the province to the colony where they die of radiation.

The narrator represents Moira as: "quirky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful." Moira symbolizes female resourcefulness and freedom in the novel as opposed to the majority of characters portrayed in the novel who succumb to the oppressive power. She is different with her life choices, resistance against violence inflicted on her, and impregnable attitude towards an inequitable society. The narrator's memory of Moira portrays her as: "sitting on the edge of my bed, legs crossed, ankle on knee, in her purple overalls, one dangly earring, the gold fingernail she wore to be eccentric, a cigarette between her stubby yellow-ended fingers. Let's go for a beer." (7), she asks the narrator. Moira does not accept the Republic of Gilead and life as a handmaid reticently, but plans and executes escape attempts and finally succeeds to get out of the 'Red Centre,' a place she called the "loony bin" where handmaids are trained. Moira couldn't get out of Gilead as she was caught before doing so.

Moira is represented in the novel as a feminist lesbian who is unconventional, rebellious, and free as a bird in the pre-Gilead. Atwood's dystopian fiction analyses the themes of sexual slavery and feminism as an integral aspect in understanding the Republic of Gilead. The trauma faced by women living in a totalitarian regime acceding to the callous behaviour of the state is effectively narrated by Atwood. The society of Gilead dissociates any kind of identification for women and is unsympathetic towards the strong persona of Moira. It becomes the impetus for the psychological trauma and how it becomes the catalyst for the transformation of her identity in the society of Gilead where no identity of a woman is respected. After one of the escape attempts from the Red Centre, Moira was caught by "two of the aunts came out of the building, with the guard. They Went around to the back. They Hauled Moira out, dragged her in through the gate and up the front steps, holding her under the armpits, one on each side. She was having trouble walking. I stopped eating," the narrator remembers. Moira "could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent...Her feet did not look like feet at all. They Looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless, except for the colour. They Looked like lungs."

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A complicated woman like Moira might have passed through a turmoil of emotions and her final submission to Gilead's regime proves that she is accustomed to the unkind, inconsiderate, or unreasonable approach of the state. Freud and Breuer in *Studies of Hysteria*, reveal that the remembrance of traumatic events is more traumatic than the event itself. They also extend their findings in understanding the latency period required to reveal the severity of traumatic events to bring out the meaning and effect of the deferred action. The traumatic event of the past can be associated with the contemporary events that instil the process of remembrance. The remembrance of the traumatic events can also cause dissociation or splitting of consciousness. It is observed that such kind of trauma can lead to the splitting of consciousness where an individual's psyche conveniently dissociates themselves from the event causing an abnormal consciousness or neurosis. Freud continues his research on the effect of neurosis in the psyche in his book '*Beyond the pleasure Principle*' and coined the term traumatic neurosis, which is a detailed conclusion on the ego's way of coping with the trauma.

One of the first studies in trauma hugely relied on Freudian approach to extreme occurrences which interpret that suffering is unrepresentable as it challenges the limits of language, fragments psyche, and ruptures meaning, as represented by Michelle Balaev in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. This can be seen in Moira's inability to reveal the mental trauma and her attempt to cover up the trauma with a straight face, often trying to support Offred and help her stay calm amidst the chaos. Moira rather appears to be strong and rebellious in front of others where she "makes [Offred] feel safer." (Atwood, 60) It is seen that none of the characters in the novel identifies the terror as a traumatic incident nor narrates it as something that induces trauma in them. This unrepresentable nature as Freud called it, is something that fragments their psyche and shatters their courage and will to survive.

When a victim is unable to identify the experience of trauma or the social, pathological, or cultural aspects that induced trauma, the inaccurate representation of effect is multiplied as an exact cause is not established. It is perceivable in Moira's multiple survival attempts from different torturing places that she is not initially hit by the real truth of what was happening to her. Moira's belief in the possibility to escape Gilead shows her persistent spirit and strength to survive the incidents. She is seen plotting the escape attempts multiple times as she says, "I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats. I feel panic". The trauma is identified only towards the end of the novel as we get to see a different Moira who started accepting her fate and recognize the degree of torture she underwent.



The nature of representing Trauma is further investigated as the approach in understanding a traumatic experience as trauma is not known in the initial stage and that trauma comes back to the survivor later. Studies in psychology show that amnesia, dissociation, or repression can be apprehended as the natural response to trauma even though it can't always be the exclusive result of trauma. The nature and intensity of trauma are not identified by the victim when the event of trauma occurs.

During one of the washrooms meets between Moira and Offred, we can see how Moira expresses her interest in escaping the Red Centre. She clearly says her inability to function, relentless anxiety, and hatred towards herself as:

*Are you there? I whisper.*

*Large as life and twice as ugly, Moira whispers back.*

*What have you heard? I ask her.*

*Nothing much. I've got to get out of here, I'm going bats.*

*I feel panic. No, no, Moira, I say, don't try it. Not on your own. (Atwood, 96)*

This kind of feeling shown in Moira is a clear indication of the trauma that is built inside her. The dialogue throws light on Moira's inability to contain herself in a restricted environment and the way she accepts panic and mental suffocation, which shows the effect of trauma on her.

Cathy Caruth's take on psychological trauma denotes the psychoanalytic aspect of the repressive, repetitive, and dissociative nature of trauma. The theory explores the formation of dissociation in the psyche of the victim when an extremely traumatic event happens. The event affects the victim to produce a dissociative consciousness, where the truth from the past is buried. As Caruth claims, trauma is interlinked with the lives of one or more associated persons, and trauma does not confine itself to one person. The trauma theory moves on to establish that trauma cannot be confined to one's own experience as one's trauma is interlinked with the trauma of a different person, directly or indirectly. The relationship between Offred, the narrator, and Moira is indeed an apt reflection of this finding, as the collective trauma of a totalitarian society befell on both of them. The trauma of Offred was comparatively different to Moira as their pasts and characters are different. Offred sees herself as someone who could adapt to the circumstances as she accepts that "We were revisionists; what we revised was ourselves" (Atwood) denoting that, unlike Moira, she can live according to the present regime. At one point, Offred confesses her allegiance towards the regime as well, which is something that could never be seen in Moira. Even though the foundational trauma remained similar for both of them, the multitudinous trauma endured and





experienced is distinguishable. An underlying similarity in the institution that renders violence that is extended to every woman in the society cannot go unnoticed as well.

Offred remembers Moira as “[she] is like an elevator with open sides” (Atwood) associating a dangerous side to her character. The movement of the elevator denotes her freedom of movement. The Republic of Gilead is a feminist’s worst dream and having to live in it and experience every pain and horrendous attitude can only instigate terror in Moira.

In the pre-Gilead times, Moira was an unconventional and strong feminist who took every instance to expose what was not discussed, she realized the necessity to act to bring a positive change instead of staying passive. “Now, said Moira. You don’t need to paint your face, it’s only me. What’s your paper on? I just did one on date rape” (Atwood, 43). The idea of investigating a rather modern and rarely discussed topic such as date rape is indeed the conviction Moira has in the underwhelming attitudes of the society and how she embarks on the mission to transform the societal misgivings. Her unconventional and bold character is further represented by the ‘underwhore party’ she hosts to sell lingerie to college girls. Moira is a person who is uninterrupted by the cultural morality of the society and the sudden shift to an anti-feminist regime can only deliver a shock to her. Moira’s logical nature can be identified in her ability to predict the future and its imminent rumbling into something bad, as she warns Offred to be wary of it.

Moira who is well-read, with concrete perceptions and logical thought processes can only resist the terror rather than accepting it. But the fate that befell on the rebellious character makes us realize that after the period of initial latency the psychological trauma affects the individual which makes them succumb to the power.

*“Moira,” I say. “You don’t mean that.” She is frightening me now, because what I hear in her voice is indifference, a lack of volition. Have they really done it to her then, taken away something—what? —that used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not? (Atwood, 257)*

Towards the end of the novel, Moira is seen as a defeated prostitute, who lost the will to live and wants to live her life in a way that is prescribed. She is unable to identify the purpose, the event that encouraged her vigor, the people responsible for the terror, or even her pain. This is a universal trait observed in victims of trauma that can adversely affect establishing pluralistic forms of trauma studies.



Stephanie Barbé Hammer discusses in *The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Powering The Handmaid's Tale*, observes that all the rebellious women had to face failure.

Significantly, the rebellious females of Offred's world are all defeated: Ofglen commits suicide to protect the May Day under-42 ground; Moira's escape attempt is thwarted and she is imprisoned in the city's brothel; Offred's mother is glimpsed in a film-documentary about the dreaded toxic-waste colonies. To survive, Offred seems to suggest, one must surrender. (Hammer, 6)

The trauma's morbid influence on the consciousness cannot be denied. This kind of inadequacy in identifying trauma will result in limiting the knowledge of the traumatic event, experience, victimization, or the perpetrators for the victim.

The construction of trauma in literature can be extended to further study only if various hues and the plurality of trauma is identified, established, and studied, giving scope for involvement not only in the harm caused by the trauma but also the representations, descriptions, and post-traumatic consequences. Trauma origin has innumerable social, political, pathological, and cultural factors associated with it. The pluralistic approach to trauma will give a holistic approach in understanding the direct and indirect perpetrators or events that cause trauma. The margin on the allocation of responsibility for violence and the identification of the victim is diminished in this theory as there is only a fine line between the victim and the perpetrators. The degree of trauma experienced cannot be unified in many instances as it is functionally attributed to the individual psyche. The psyche of Moira as compared to Offred and the wavering graph of understanding trauma is an example of how each individual is affected by similar incidents. The trauma experienced by Moira is dissimilar to the trauma of any other character in the novel which makes her life trajectory a testimony to survival, as trauma and survival are two sides of the same coin.

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