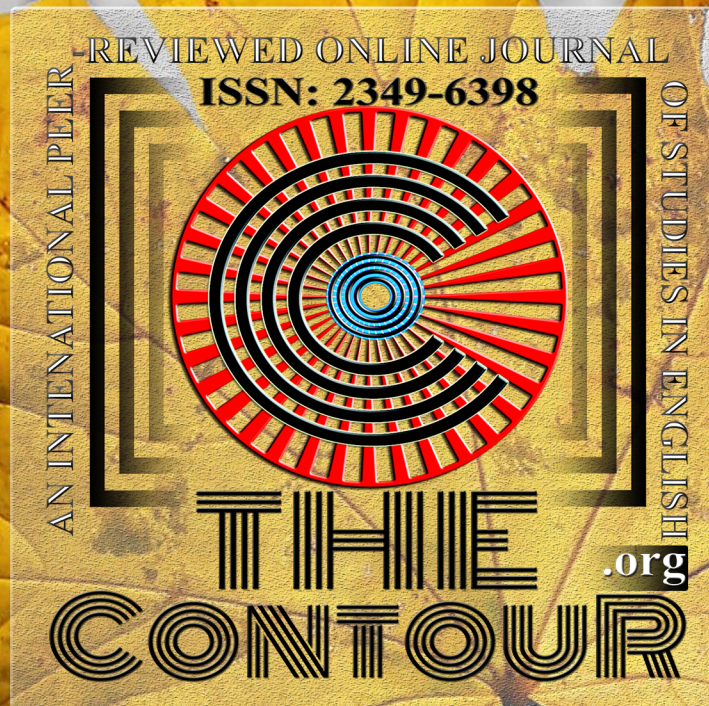


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The Republic of Gilead: The Dystopia of Cultural Feminism and Environmental Devastation

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Abstract

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*This paper wishes to take a closer look at this social setting of the futuristic dystopia, called the Republic of Gilead in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and thus try and analyze how the subjugation of nature and natural forces are directly equated with the subjugation of women in Gilead. The paper closely analyses Atwood's contrasting portrayal of the radiation devastated nature outside the walls of the Republic of Gilead and the lush, beautiful and green gardens located within the walls of Gilead and thereby tries to equate this with the placement of the Marthas and the Handmaids within the walls of the Gilead and the Unwomen outside it, in the colonies. By studying these contrasting delineations by Atwood the paper affirms Ortnier's argument regarding the universal subjugation of women and nature; and as such the Republic of Gilead manifests a blatant culmination of all domineering tendencies of man vis-à-vis nature and women.*

Keywords: dystopia, Gilead, women.

Professor Sherry B. Ortner in her influential essay, "Is Women to Men as Nature Is to Culture?" had argued rightly that the domination of women to the doctrines of patriarchy is closely likened to the subjugation of nature and natural forces to the progress of culture; to the extent that the heavy brick wall of fortification that seeks to shut out the forces of nature from the city also acts as a boundary which prescribes the roles that the women are to play within a civilized society.

The Republic of Gilead, the locus of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* although set up by the "Sons of Jacob" is much different from the Biblical Gilead, as it not only shuts out the radiation devastated nature by a high wall but also seeks to dominate over all the women by reducing them to the meagre roles of a Martha (assigned to look after the household) or a Handmaid (assigned the task of giving birth to babies, without having any right to call them their own). Thus within this nightmarish world of Gilead, the infertility of nature is attempted to be balanced by the fertility of the women within. Any failure on the part of the women to confirm to



either of these two roles results in their branding as “Unwomen”, followed by a deportation to the radiation devastated colonies or to the secret brothel called Jezebel’s. The men on the contrary are assigned only two functions within the Republic of Gilead that is either to fight the rebels or impregnate women.

The very first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis delineates the creation of both Adam and Eve, but where Adam is individually sculpted from dust and brought to life by Lord God himself, Eve is born out of a rib of Adam; allowing Adam to not only identify Eve as the “bone of my bones/ and the flesh of my flesh” but also claim to call her “woman”, as she was “born out of man”. (*Genesis 2:23*) Similarly the denial of citizenship to both women and slaves in Ancient Rome but granting the same to the men or the refusal to grant voting rights to women for a long time in UK are only a few examples of the “universality of female subordination”, that Professor Ortner argues is a fact “that exists within every type of social and economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity” (Ortner 67).

Professor Ortner lists that, either one or all three types of the following “data” is found to be prevalent in some form or the other within the precipices of all culture; and this is evidence enough to assert the universality of female subordination to male/patriarchal doctrines. Firstly, according to Professor Ortner, there is the presence of “elements of cultural ideology and informants” that explicitly devalue women’s contribution to the society and thereby, conferring greater importance to the functions performed by men (Ortner 69). For example, within the Victorian society women were encouraged to stay behind at home for the purpose of performing daily household chores and for childrearing leaving all cares of the outside world on the broad shoulders of men. Although the women were hailed and appraised for their sacrifice by attributing them the title of the “Angel of the House”, their hard labour and contributions found no such formal recognition in the world of men. Instead the services performed by the Victorian women was rather seen to be only their natural disposition and not something even remotely extraordinary as the functions performed by the men, such as the founding of colonies in unknown lands or fighting with rebellious tribal forces on the lands of the foreign nations so that the flag of the Union Jack may fly high. Secondly, Professor Ortner states that nearly in all cultures there is the presence of “symbolic devices” that attribute “defilement” and therefore the eventual “devaluation of women” (Ortner 69). Continuing the example of the Victorian era, the concepts of the “New Woman” or the “Fallen Angel” are all such “symbolic devices” used by the then patriarchs of the Victorian society to connote or identify



such women who refuse to adhere to the role of the “Angle of the Hose”. Thus the “New Woman” is found to be portrayed riding a bicycle or smoking a cigarette in the cartoons of the newspapers of the time; while the disrespectful and piteous treatment meted out to a “Fallen Angel” or a “Fallen Woman” is ideally portrayed in Tomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Thirdly, within the structuring of every social milieu, Professor Ortner claims to have found the existence of some “arrangement” that seeks to “exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside” (Ortner 69). To exemplify, the doctrine prevalent in the Hindu tradition of debarring of women from entering into the inner sanctum of temples, touching of any holy relic or worshipping of gods during their period of menstruation is among one such “arrangements” to exclude women from coming into contact with figures of power and authority.

Apparently the only position of power and authority that a woman may dream to acquire is through motherhood, wherein for her ability to give/create life out of her own body, the woman who was earlier either despised or subjugated by the patriarchal society is now raised to a position of a goddess by the same patriarchy. This is particularly in keeping with God’s blessings to Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply.

Nevertheless, Professor Ortner particularly refers to De Beauvoir’s advocacy that, “the female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species” to argue vituperatively that the significant position attributed to mothers in almost every society is nothing more than another ploy to render the females subservient to males, as before. She summarises De Beauvoir to state that “many major areas and processes of the woman’s body serve no apparent function for the health and stability of the individual; on the contrary, as they perform their specific organic functions, they are often sources of discomfort, pain, and danger”, (Ortner 74) and further illustrates this by directly citing from De Beauvoir:

Many of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements; in respect to the organism as a whole, they make for disequilibrium rather than for regulation – the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements (Ortner 74).



Similarly, Professor Ortner also points out, after De Beauvoir, that menstruation — which is not only uncomfortable and often painful, but also “frequently has negative emotional correlates and in any case involves bothersome tasks of cleansing and waste disposal” serve no other purpose but that of preparing the female body for motherhood; and further continues to argue that while pregnancy dangerously depletes the woman’s body of vitamins and minerals by channelizing it “into nourishing the foetus”, childbirth itself is a very dangerous and painful procedure that the women undergoes (Ortner 74). Professor Ortner is thus right to formulate, that, much of the “woman’s body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at sometimes great cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species” (Ortner 75).

Closely related to this patriarchal repression of women is the desire of culture to triumph over nature and natural forces and bend nature to its own whims. To expatiate vividly, all of the great civilizations of the world could only come into existence and sustain itself once they had been able to control the forces of nature, such as floods and droughts, rampages by wild animals, storms, etc; and thus ensure for themselves a steady, sustainable source of food and water and a certain security of life. One of the most common techniques that enabled these early civilizations to keep out the effects of nature and natural forces was to build high walls or fortifications around the cities. Thus, civilization thrived within the walls of the city while outside it was nature, wild and uncontrollable. But with the advancement of time, man got the better of nature, as he promptly took to reach into the deepest recesses of the earth and the sea and to exploit the natural resources for his own wellbeing.

Professor Ortner is thus right to point out that, every “culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products)” where, “the distinctiveness of culture rests precisely on the fact that it can under most circumstances transcend natural conditions and turn them to its purposes”. Hence, “culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to “socialize” and “culturalize” – nature” (Ortner 73).

Analysed in this light the subjugation and subduing of females by the patriarchal society attains a completely different dimension. Within a civilized society, the females are blessed with the power



to create life out of their own body, and are also tasked with the purpose of nurturing the babies from their infancy till adulthood. In this respect the woman becomes much likened to nature; for doesn't nature also has the ability to give birth to life and is tasked with the responsibility of nurturing it with all necessary environmental requirements? On the contrary, as professor Ortner points out, the males "lacking natural creative functions, must assert his creativity externally, through the medium of technology and symbols"; but the objects thus created by man are relatively lasting, eternal, transcendental objects; while the products of woman's creation, that is man is mortal, and has a limited span of existence. Furthermore, since hunting and fighting wars is always associated with masculinity irrespectively in all cultures, it can be further inferred that males alone has the power to kill while the females can only bring forth life (Ortner 75). Such facets of conceptualization of the male-female and nature-culture binary that has been deeply ingrained in every civilization makes the subjugation and subduing of females to males a truly "universal and pan-cultural fact" (Ortner 67).

The Separating Wall of the Republic:

All readers of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, would be quick to realise that, the reasons, justifications and the manners by which the females are claimed to be rightfully subjected to patriarchy and that of nature and natural resources to the progress of culture by Professor Ortner, as expatiated above, bear an uncanny similarity with the Republic of Gilead — the locus of the plot and action of the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Biblical land of Gilead mentioned in the book of Genesis was said to exist on the east of the River Jordan, and was supposedly a land of peace and fulfilment, for the Lord God had in person instructed Jacob to flee with all his possessions to Gilead — the land of Jacob's father Isaac and also that of Canaan — in order to save himself from the biased treatment meted out to him by Laban and his tribe. The Republic of Gilead as Atwood tells us in *The Handmaid's Tale* had been set up by the "Sons of Jacob". However, these Sons of Jacob are no good Samaritans but are rather Christian fundamentalists who set up the Republic of Gilead after staging an attack and killing off the President and nearly all of the members of the Congress. Furthermore, unlike the Biblical Gilead, the Republic of Gilead is no land of peace and fulfilment, but is a hierarchical regime of Old Testament-inspired social and religious fanaticism that seeks to repress the liberties of women to the extent where they are reduced to nothing more than mere tools of procreation.



To expatiate vividly, as Offred, the protagonist of the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* informs the readers that within the Republic of Gilead, the women are asked to fulfil either of any of the following roles — the Wife or Daughters of a Commanders of the Faithful, an Econowife, a Martha or a Handmaid. Each of these roles prescribed to the women is mutually exclusive and are never overlap; and each one of these women (whether a Wife or a Handmaid) has to wear a specific dress of a single colour to represent their hierarchical position within the society of the Republic of Gilead.

The Wives and Daughters of the Commanders of the Faithful occupy the highest standing among all other women in the society of Gilead. The Wives wear the blue dress, closely resembling the delineation of the Virgin Mary in historic Christian art, which is ironical, since the Wives of the Commanders being sterile and unable to give birth to babies their “virginity” stands susceptible to much problematic interpretation. Unlike the Wives of the Commanders of the Faithful, their Daughters are required to wear an all-white garment by the theocratic rulers of the Republic of Gilead to symbolize their innocence and sexual purity. The Daughters upon reaching maturity are given in marriage to able men, through the ceremony of “Pravaganza” (formed after the conjoining of two words Prayer and Extravaganza) who had helped defend the Republic of Gilead against the rebel forces who were always at hand trying to disrupt the social setting prevalent there.

Immediately following the rank of the Wives and Daughters of the Commanders of the Faithful are the Marthas and the Handmaids. Dressed in green overalls, the Marthas are tasked with the job of tending to all household duties (baking, cooking, cleaning the household, etc.) in the houses of the Commanders of the Faithful. In utter dissimilitude to the Marthas are the Handmaids. Dressed in bright red, somewhat like the Whore of Babylon, the Handmaids exist only for one purpose — to satisfy the sexual desires (on the nights of the Ceremony) of the Commanders of the Faithful, and thus become their surrogate mothers of their babies, without any more claim on these babies than one has on over someone else's property. In other words, the Handmaids, not just resemble the Whore of Babylon in their attire, but also in the very purpose they serve to exist. The least and the last category of women are the Econowives, who are as Offred elucidates, are women who have married low-ranking men, not belonging to the elite category of the Commanders of the Faith and are therefore required to fulfil all the functions of household duties, companionship and child bearing. The Econowives could thus be identified by their multicoloured dress having shades of blue, green and red.



Distinctly differentiable, the men in the Republic of Gilead are tasked with either of the three jobs: defending the Republic of Gilead either through fighting as Angels in the war against the rebels or by serving in the system of surveillance or the local police within the boundary of the Republic (the ones in charge of surveillance are called The Eyes of God or simply “the Eyes”, while the local police in the Republic of Gilead are called the Guardians of the Faith) or look after the effective administration of the Republic of Gilead by serving in the ranks of the elite Commanders of the Faith.

Offred, as stated above is the protagonist and also the central voice in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, and it is through her narrative that all about the Republic of Gilead and its nightmarish repression of women comes to light. Offred serves as a handmaid in the house of one of the Commanders of the Faith, but as Atwood etches, the life and work of a Handmaid is wrought with repression and torture in all possible aspects. At the very beginning of the novel one is struck by the fact that although the Wife of the Commander has a name, namely Serena Joy as well as the two Marthas, who are called Rita and Cora; strangely the Handmaid is simply named Offred; which when interpreted lends itself to a variety of interpretations, where Offred could mean offered for sacrifice, belonging as a property to the Commander of the Faith, whose name is most likely Fred, thus Of-Fred; or Offred could simply mean a pseudonym that is interchangeable depending on the name of the Commander she is sent to serve next. Likewise, Offred's narrative presents the reader with such an astounding list of prohibitions that a Handmaid is forced to abide by, that one is to shudder at the very thought of living such a cursed life. For starters, Offred as a Handmaid is denied any right to read or write, reserving the freedom of literacy only to the Commander alone; so much so that even the Bible — the very words of the book that are to serve the Handmaids as a rule book of conduct — is kept under lock and key inside a secured box; just as the library of the Commander, containing hundreds of books (even those banned under the laws of the Republic of Gilead) is off limits for any and every member of the household, save for that of the Commander. Similarly, Offred is required to utter only such preset words of greetings as “May the Lord open”, “Blessed be the fruit” and “praise be” when interacting with other members of the society and also even with other Handmaids. The list goes on to include Offred's right to move about freely on the streets of the Republic of Gilead (she is to be escorted by another Handmaid and walk in pairs whenever she steps outside the house of her Commander, carrying at all times her passes in their zipper pockets); using any kind of cosmetics that may glorify or assault the



female form; and even wearing any other clothes except for her red “habit”. Startlingly enough, following a previous case of commitment of suicide, the Commander of the House has even removed any objects from her room — to the extent that even her baths are supervised by either of the two Marthas — that may allow Offred to take away her life. The only freedoms that are made available to the Handmaids are the ones which in the words of Offred are “freedom from” sexual oppression, unlike “in the days of anarchy” when the “freedom to” choose what one wants to do existed. In other words, before the Republic of Gilead was founded, the women were although subjected to various kinds of torture by the males, making their lives quite unsafe; but with the establishment of the Republic of Gilead the lives of the women were made safer and valuable, but their freedom to choose the life they wanted to lead was taken away from them.

Nevertheless, the actual reason behind the denial of the most basic freedoms and liberties to the Handmaids was that they were thought unimportant in respect to the purpose of their existence. In other words, the sole duty of the Handmaids was to serve as surrogate mothers for the babies of the Commanders and their otherwise infertile Wives; and in respect to this duty such freedoms were regarded to be impediments. The Aunts (the governing functionaries who also acted as teachers) of the Red Centre — the state sanctioned institutes set up to assist ordinary females into forgetting their past life of luxuries and freedoms and indoctrinate them into the ways of the life of a Handmaid, and thereby turn themselves into passive tools of procreation — themselves are heard to say, “for our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential.” (Atwood, 108); which is the purpose of giving birth to babies. Even Offred herself attests to this passive performance of giving birth and being valued only for her womb, in one of her musings, as:

[Earlier] my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me... Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red with its translucent wrapping (Atwood, 88).

The “pear” shaped object or the womb of Offred, has attained such a kind of autonomy of its own within the precincts of the Republic of Gilead, that it overshadows and governs the very life of its bearer.



All and any women who fail to participate in this state sponsored compulsive act of procreation are branded as “unwomen” — an umbrella term that is used within the Republic of Gilead to designate all such women who are sterile, unmarried, certain widows, feminists, lesbians, nuns and politically dissident women. These “unwomen” according to Offred are either exiled to the colonies, where owing to prolonged exposure to harmfully radiation infested, and hostile environment they die within a span of three years; or they are forced to become prostitutes in the secretly run state sponsored brothels, called Jezebel’s, for the sole purpose of entertaining the Commanders and their guests. The common point linking the fate of both these types of “unwomen” is that they exist outside the walled boundary of the Republic of Gilead.

However, the most gruesome of the punishments is reserved for those females who despite appearing to have apparently confirmed to the stereotypical roles as prescribed by the laws of the Republic of Gilead, commit some act of rebelliousness (which for the Handmaids would tantamount to a murder of the babies born, undergoing an abortion or the most heinous of all, that is getting impregnated by some other male other than the Commander to whom the Handmaid owes all loyalty of service; while those for the Wives would be committing some act of adultery). Such females are publicly hanged on the noose in the ceremony called “Salvaging”, and thereafter their lifeless bodies are left hanging on the Wall as a lesson and a further warning to all other females to not cross the laws of the Republic.

Much like the fate of the Handmaids, nature also seems to have taken a subservient position epitomizing passive beauty and reproduction. A single description of the private garden maintained by Serena Joy, the Wife of the Commander, as seen through the eyes of Offred would suffice to evince the ostentatious role that nature has taken to serve in the Republic of Gilead. The description goes:

Then we had irises, rising beautiful and cool on their stalks, like blown glass, like pastel water momentarily frozen in a splash, light blue, light mauve, and the darker ones, velvet and purple, black cat’s ears in the sun, indigo shadow and the bleeding hearts, so female in shape, it was a surprise they’d not long since been rooted out. There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s... A Tennyson garden, heavy with scent, languid; the return of the word *swoon* (Atwood 175).



As Offred herself notices this garden maintained by Serena Joy in her house has a certain pictorial, almost poetic appearance that appears to be almost unreal when compared to the harsh environmental conditions that exists outside the boundaries of the Republic of Gilead; which Offred delineates as:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shore birds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would die of eating you.... Women took medicines, pills, men sprayed trees, cows ate grass, all that souped-up piss flowed into the rivers. Not to mention the exploding atomic power plants, along the San Andreas Fault... and the mutant strain of syphilis no mould could touch (Atwood pp 128-9)

This utter discrepancy that exists in the environmental condition inside and outside of the boundary of the Republic of Gilead only further adds conviction to Professor Ortner's argument of that what man could subjugate and subdue gets included within civilization, while every "other" is promptly excluded.

Furthermore, Offred also observes Serena Joy to mutilate the seedpods of the flowers by the cruel use of shears just when the season of spring has set in her private garden; and thereby depriving the flowers a chance to propagate and reproduce. Observed closely, this mutilation of the reproductive parts of the flowers is not just a metaphorical subjugation of nature to culture, but it also subtly underscores Serena Joy's own secret desire to exact revenge upon the fertile Offred by ripping off her fertile womb from her body.

Similarly, Roberta Rubenstein rightly points out that description of the atmosphere of "birthing" by Offred in terms of animal imagery, such as, "the smell is of our own flesh, an organic smell, sweat and a tinge of iron, from the blood on the sheet, and another smell, more animal, that's coming... a smell of dens, of inhabited caves" (Atwood, 141); or that of the Aunts at the Red Centre prodding the novice Handmaids using cattle prods and tattooing them clearly helps to associate women with lower animals of nature, (Rubenstein, 106) that must be subjugated to the control to the faculties of the higher animals, that is of man and his civilization.



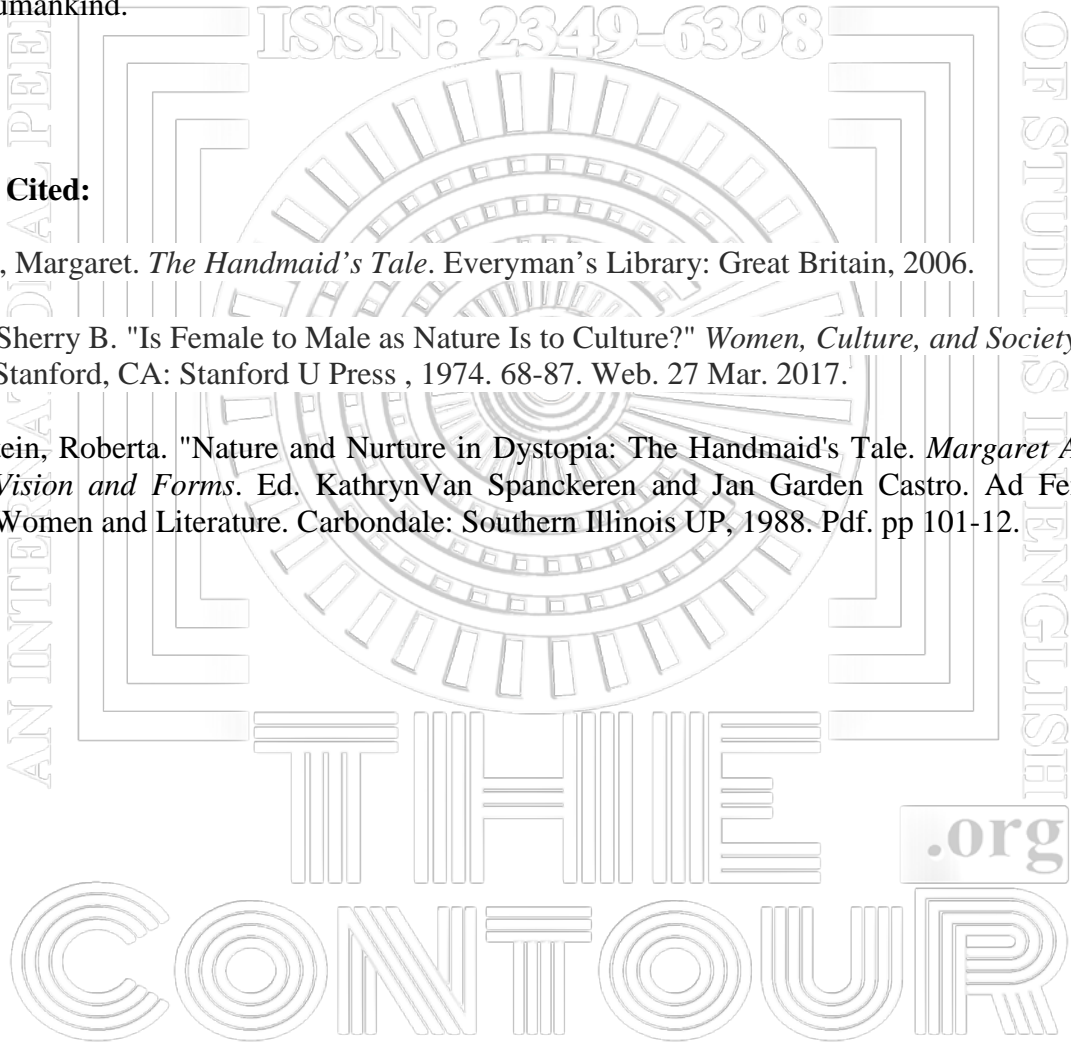
Thus, to sum up after the enlightened interpretation of Rubenstein, the utterly polluted and denuded environmental atmosphere coupled with the existence of the unwomen, outside the known boundaries of the Republic of Gilead is endeavoured to be balanced by the fertile wombs of the Handmaids and the disciplined maintenance of the adjoining gardens of the Commander's house; both of which exist within the boundaries of the Republic of Gilead. (Rubenstein 103). Thus, it can be stated that delineation of the futuristic dystopia by Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* should act as a tale of caution for the modern society, which if unheeded may spell the doom of the entire humankind.

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