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The Prostitute in Margaret Atwood's the Handmaid's Tale and the Testaments

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Abstract: ***The purpose of this study, titled The Prostitute in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments, is to identify and analyze who among the characters in both novels possesses the characteristics of a Prostitute and Hetaeras, as classified by Simone de Beauvoir in her theory on the Other. The Prostitute, according to the concept, is the absolute Other, the object. However, she is also the exploiter. She is a prostitute for money and the men's recognition of her Otherness. According to the analysis, all of the Handmaids in the novels fit the classification, with their roles as two-legged wombs engaged in ceremonial monthly intercourse with high-ranking men. Moira, Paula, and Shunammite all exhibit characteristics of a prostitute, with Moira being the most obvious because she is a Jezebel, both a prisoner and a sex slave of Gilead's supposedly pure men and a prostitute for foreign tourists The study also looked at the significance and implications of the role of the prostitute in today's patriarchal society. The Prostitute's role teaches us that when male oppression occurs within societies, it is frequently justified by reference to culture, religion, politics, economy, and the established standards of social norms. Recognizing women as the subjects of their own lives and accepting women's rights as fundamental human rights necessitates reconsidering the institutions of family, religion, culture, tradition, and politics.***

Keywords: Other, Prostitute, Simone De Beauvoir, Margaret Atwood.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception, feminism has asked fundamental questions about the nature of one's own identity, the body, and social norms. In a patriarchal society, sexism and male dominance are the primary targets of Feminism's critique. Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex is emblematic of this view since it assumes that women should be viewed as objects, non-subjects, and the Other.

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The startling statement "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" is made by Simone de Beauvoir in this book. Philosophers and academic thinkers have been very critical of The Second Sex since it was first published. The book's feminist critique of patriarchy, which insists on the reality of sexual difference, has caused so much controversy and condemnation. This is due to the fact that when it was written, there was a dearth of feminist philosophical work focusing on women. Because the topic of sex is not exactly on the front burner of philosophical debate, it was argued that one of the century's most influential books, The Second Sex, should not be included in lists of the top philosophical works (Bergoffen et al., 2020). This reflects the changing status of women over time.

The oppression of women is an intractable part of the world's history since it arose alongside the rise of civilization. By making cultural, religious, and social norms part of everyday life, oppression becomes even more suffocating. Some cultures, including the United States, continue to practice customs that place women in positions of mental, physical, and sexual subjugation, as stated in an article published by Grover (2017) on Huffpost. For some communities, such practices represent the norm, leaving women with no choice but to comply. Margaret Atwood's novels The Handmaid's Tale (1985) and The Testaments (2019) represent this point of view by depicting a society in which the oppression of women is the law, in accordance with distorted theological ideals, and any woman who refuses to obey must suffer and, in the end, die. This type of agreed oppression of women, enforced by the government, society, or religion, is also discussed in books like A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hossieni and The Color Purple. The ultimate goal of these works is to inspire readers to take action in the fight against women's oppression and to demand the rights that the authors believe are essential to a fair and equitable society. The political, social, and ideological shift that is Feminism may be seen in these fights.

Although the writings of women like Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley, George Eliot, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Virginia Woolf are often cited as evidence of feminism predating the nineteenth-century emergence of organized women's suffrage movements in the United States and Britain, the latter two authors are often credited with advancing the cause. When Mary Wollstonecraft published A Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792, French women like Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Méricourt were already campaigning for the extension of the rights promised by the French Revolution to women (Freedman, 2001).

Women's societal inequality and injustice have been the subject of literature long after today. Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, and Betty Friedan are just some of the authors whose works fall into this category. Simone de Beauvoir released The Second Sex in 1949, in which she posed the questions, “what is woman, and how is she constructed differently from men?” To which she replied, “She is constructed differently by men.” Additionally, Friedan debunked the myth of the perfect American housewife and mother in her 1963 book, The Feminine Mystique. By reading literature as a record of male dominance, Millet's Sexual Politics (1970) was the first widely read work of feminist literary criticism. She does so through close readings of works by authors including D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet (Guerin, et al, 1992).

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A number of pioneering Filipino women writers, including Kerima Polotan Tuvera, Rosario Cruz Lucero, Ligaya Victorio-Reyes, and Jessica Zafra, broke taboos in Philippine society by writing about topics like female anatomy, erotica, divorce, separation from ex-husbands, abortion, extramarital affairs, and childless marriages. Forbidden Fruit, a collection of women's writings in both Filipino and English published in 1992, is an example (Vartti, 2001).

Women such as Paz Marquez Benitez, Paz M. Latorena, Estrella Alfon, Angela Manalang-Gloria, Genoveva Edroza-Matute, Loreto Paras-Sulit, Lilledeshan Bose, Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo, and Lina Espina-Moore were influential in the development of English-language literature in the Philippines during the period of linguistic transition from the European-Hispanic to Anglo-American.

Several feminist studies have also been produced by the faculty of the literature department at the University of Southeastern Philippines, including Teresita Sancho's "Empowerment of Female Characters in the Selected Novels of Sidney Sheldon" (2018) and Janette Butlig's "The Transcendence of the Other in the House of Mirth and The Return of the Native" (2015). Many undergraduate and graduate-level works on feminism have also made its rise known to students of literature. Students in this course have a firm grasp of the various feminism-related theories and concepts that have been proposed by various authors, in an effort to advance the cause of gender parity by examining women's experiences in the past, the present, and the foreseeable future.

Although there are many feminist studies, none of them have examined Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale or The Testaments. Hence, the researcher decided to examine the women's roles in the two novels through the lens of de Beauvoir's thesis on the Other and its classification, focusing merely on the Prostitute. Since no prior research has been conducted on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of Other, and in particular on the women's role as a Prostitute, this study will focus on this subset of females. Hence, this research will be useful for those who believe that women are equal to males in every way God created them to be, including in the legal, political, social, economic, and religious-cultural spheres.

Literature Review

The Second Sex

Simone de Beauvoir, a French author and philosopher, authored a wide variety of works, including fiction novels, philosophical tomes, political treatises, social critique articles, and autobiographical works. The Second Sex, her treatise, is a thorough study of women's subjugation and a founding tract of modern feminism, and her philosophical novels, such as She Came to Stay and The Mandarins, have made her famous. It was originally published in 1949 in the language of its author, then in 1953 it was translated into English. It lays out a moral revolution based on a feminist existentialism. She identified as an existentialist and thus subscribed to the idea that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one." The social construction of Woman as Other is the primary subject of her analysis. This is something de Beauvoir sees as crucial to the subjugation of women. She claims that even Mary Wollstonecraft looked forward to men as the ideal and that women have always been stigmatized for being deviant

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and unnatural. According to de Beauvoir, this mentality needs to be abandoned if feminism is to advance.

Additionally, as some have put it, de Beauvoir, in the book, answers the question "What is a woman?" in Book I, "Facts and Myths," with the phrase "Tota mulier in utero: she is a womb." In this context, "sex" refers to a woman's biological function, which defines her primarily as an object of procreation. After this role has been fulfilled, women are no longer necessary. This view is oppressive because it casts women in the role of the Other, as opposed to the role of the Self, which is the domain of men. He transcends and is fundamental to all else. The mutilation and lack of vitality she exudes are all too apparent. He projects himself outside to dominate the world, while women are relegated to acting from within. She sits passively, expecting him to come to her rescue as he is the one who does the work by creating, acting, and inventing (de Beauvoir, 1949).

De Beauvoir, an existentialist, goes even further to say that women are made, not born. The point of this statement is to demonstrate that women are not naturally "feminine," but rather are shaped by a myriad of environmental factors. She talks about how a female is conditioned to accept her inadequacy at every age. By preventing her from achieving her creative potential and earning her own living, patriarchal society as a whole conspires to reduce her to the status of an inanimate object. Because of this, many women accept a life of servitude at home, in the home, and in the bedroom (de Beauvoir, 1949).

De Beauvoir also believes she can dispel the idea of the "eternal feminine" by tracing its roots back to male dissatisfaction with the reality of his own birth. She argues that no man would ever want to pen a book on men because of how unusual their plight is in the world. Simply stating, "I am a woman," as a starting point, allows de Beauvoir to make all other self-definition claims that flow logically from this one. That he is a male is assumed from the start because men never need to state it explicitly. Since every man already sees himself as the better half—the positive and the neutral. He has no need to explain what it means to be a man. Alternatively, a woman is the negative, to the extent where any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity. Women, according to de Beauvoir's definition, are "The Second Sex" because they are classified in contrast to men.

The prostitute, the narcissist, and the mystic are the three types of women that de Beauvoir saw as playing the role of the Other most obviously. In this context, the prostitute functions as the object, or the absolute Other. Yet, she is also the exploiter. She works as a prostitute for money and affirmation of her uniqueness that she receives from the male customers. Similarly, the narcissist lacks the capacity to act as a subject, or to independently work toward her own ends. Instead, she focuses on her uniqueness and uses it to her advantage. The goal of the mystic is to merge with God, to become one with God. She prefers the idea of being owned over the idea of independence.

Women should labor, as a means of eradicating subjectivity, to pursue and participate in intellectual activity as an act towards Transcendence. She must be able to lead the change for

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women and must work to convert society into a socialist society, as a means of attaining economic justice and emancipation (Scholtz, 2008).

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to identify and analyze who among the characters in both novels possesses the characteristics of a Prostitute and Hetaeras, as classified by Simone de Beauvoir in her theory on the Other.

Research Design

The study employs a descriptive research strategy. Research that is descriptive in nature observes, describes, and documents components of a scenario as they occur in the wild, as outlined by Dulock (1993).

This study is descriptive in design since it aims to describe and examine the women characters in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments using the theory of Simone de Beauvoir on the Other, particularly the kinds that clearly play the role of the Prostitute.

Data Interpretation

		Prostitutes
Female Characters	**The Handmaid's Tale**	All Handmaids, Moira, Offred, Ofglen, and Janine/Ofwarren
	The Testaments	All Handmaids, Paula, and Shunammite

The Prostitutes and Hetaeras

A civilization in which being a woman means being socially submissive to a male-dominated society inevitably leads to the awful outcome of prostitution. Prostitution occurs when married men sleep with prostitutes in the expectation of having more satisfying sexual encounters outside of their marriages. As such, the presence of a prostitute allows for married women to be treated with more deference. It's indisputable that the former's predicament is analogous to the latter's.

Marriage can be seen as a form of long-term prostitution in which a wife exchanges sexual favors for a ring, a home, and a family, particularly in circumstances where a woman only marries to achieve economic stability. Given these assertions, the researcher feels compelled to analyze the circumstances of all Wives in The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments to discover if they exhibit characteristics that would designate them as Prostitutes.

Analyzing the women in The Handmaid's Tale and The Testaments, through the lens of a Hetaera, provides a unique perspective, particularly for determining which of the characters share characteristics with a Prostitute. Beauvoir notes that the hetaera, like the prostitute, must rely on men's monetary assistance and their use of their bodies for subsistence. She not only

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feeds on males, but also utilizes them to acquire "control" and "independence," making hetaeras a more aggressive presence. Despite the little agency afforded to women in this patriarchal culture, she is captivating and all-consuming. Because she lacks the confidence of a fully self-reliant woman, her economic autonomy is ensured by the money she accumulates and the name she launches like one launches a product (de Beauvoir 694).
That being said, as was previously noted, the aforementioned might be said about the female characters in The Handmaid's Tale and The Testament who play the role of Prostitutes. Moira is the most glaring example; she is a Jezebel who serves as a prostitute for foreign tourists and a prisoner and sex slave to the apparently moral men of Gilead. To a similar extent, Atwood portrays the Handmaids in both works, with their position as the two-legged wombs who engage in ceremonial monthly intercourse with high-ranking men, as prostitutes of the dictatorship. This includes Offred, Ofglen, and Janine/Ofwarren. Lastly, it has been pointed out that Paula and Shunammite, among the female characters in both works, are the closest in nature to the Prostitute archetype.

Comparatively, Moira accepts her role as a prostitute, seeing no other way to escape the oppressive control of the state, and exploits prostitution as a method of survival, albeit not monetarily. “Moira had power now, she’d been set loose, she’d set herself loose. She was now a loose woman. I think we found this frightening.” (Atwood, 135a)

In addition, Moira's claims that she is living in "Butch Paradise" and that many formerly straight Jezebels have converted to lesbianism (with the exception of Moira, who was already a lesbian before Gilead) and that these women now engage in illicit relationships with each other will serve to further link her to the role of the prostitute. Because “their relations with half of humanity are commercial because the whole society treats them as pariahs, there is great solidarity among prostitutes; they might be rivals, jealous of each other, insult each other, fight with each other, but they always stick together in the halls of the Jezebel's.” (de Beauvoir 689).

The most downtrodden class of women in Gilead, the Handmaids, are exploited, enslaved, and regarded as an object rather of a person in a male-dominated society, which is one of the key ideas that will bind various characters to the position of the Prostitute. There is no hope for a Handmaid; she must submit completely to the desires of her Commander or master and the regulations of the regime, which range from domestic servitude to sexual subjection and ultimately reduce her to the status of a domestic and legal Prostitute. For context, consider what de Beauvoir has to say about the matter:

Most prostitutes are morally adapted to their condition; that does not mean they are hereditarily or congenitally immoral, but they rightly feel integrated into a society that demands their services. (de Beauvoir 1949: 691)

Further, situated as they are in a predetermined setting governed by rigid religious customs and beliefs, Offred, Ofglen, and Ofwarren are all reduced to the status of an object. It's possible, though, that Offred and Ofwarren were more subtly set up for the Prostitute role. Since Ofwarren has been conditioned to believe that she is now loved and cherished as a result of her

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pregnancy, she has become cooperative with the teachings of the regime. She works as a prostitute because the men of Gilead treat her as though she is exotic and desirable.

The hetaera's whole life is a show: her words, her gestures, are intended not to express her thoughts but to produce an effect. She plays a comedy of love for her protector: at times she plays it for herself. She plays comedies of respectability and prestige for the public: she ends up believing herself to be a paragon of virtue and a sacred idol. Stubborn bad faith governs her inner life and permits her studied lies to seem true. (de Beauvoir 1949: 698)

It is becoming increasingly apparent that Offred is the absolute target of many of the arguments made about the prostitutes in The Second Sex. To Commander Fred and Nick, Offred is both a body and a mind; as Commander Fred's Handmaid, she is a body, his Scrabble playmate, and a friend. Nick sees her both as a lover and a responsibility. She is neither their property and neither are they her absolute masters, yet she does not reject either of them as oppressors because she recognizes that she has the most pressing need of man. It is now clear that Offred, in her role as Commander Fred's Handmaid, assumed the role of the Other and an object, primarily as a Prostitute, and fixed the Commander and Nick as the Subject, all in an effort to meet the expectations set for her by Gilead.

[…] the prostitute needs a man. He also provides her with moral support […] She often feels love for him; she takes on this job or justifies it out of love; in this milieu, man's superiority over woman is enormous: this distance favors love-religion, which explains some prostitutes' passionate abnegation. They see in their male's violence the sign of his virility and submit to him even more docilely. They experience jealousy and torment with him, but also the joys of the woman in love. (de Beauvoir 1949: 688)

The preceding material can help explain the determining criteria that apply to the female characters who are demonstrating traits of a Prostitute, including the Wives Paula and Shunammite. Both of these wives place too much emphasis on their need for their male partners, which is a big mistake. What they appear to realize is that as soon as they are no longer under the protection of their husbands' rank and power, as soon as these men cease to be their Subjects, they are no more special than any other woman in Gilead. They are more likely to be influenced by men who will exploit, dominate, or cause their pain due to their inflated sense of self-importance.

Of all the female characters we've looked at, it is especially noticeable that these two characters display more behaviors of this category of the Other, making it easier to determine their ultimate Otherness. They put themselves in this particular situation in order to become marriageable and, by extension, survive the rigorous restrictions of Gilead. We have seen that even as a young woman, Shunammite believes that a marriage to a powerful man will boost her wealth and provide her access to opportunities that only the wealthy may enjoy. But in the end, she is dragged into the spiral by violence, false promises, mystifications, and so on, becoming a slave to the same thing that she had hoped would elevate her status as a woman in Gilead (de Beauvoir 167). Commander Judd has killed all of his Wives and is planning to marry a new, younger female, and she has no way of escaping his vicious and abusive grip.

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Paula is not different to Shunammite in the way she uses her femininity for personal gain. Paula is a part of the problem because of who she is as a woman and as a person. She finds satisfaction in being an Other because it makes her life easier. Because of her meager resources, she has no choice but to resort to prostitution in order to avoid the inevitable fate that befalls all women under the current administration.

[…] it is more often thanks to her masculine "protection" that she will attain her goal; and it is men—husbands, lovers, suitors—who confirm her triumph by letting her share their fortune or their fame. (de Beauvoir 1949: 694)

What is implied here is that Paula believes she is not oppressed by men, but rather that she is the one carrying out exploitative behaviors, such as murdering her former husband in order to marry Commander Kyle. She may be more self-sufficient than the other Wives in both novels, specifically Shunammite, Tabitha, and Serena Joy, but she is simply choosing objectification because her options as a woman living in Gilead's totalitarian and patriarchal system are so reduced.

Social institutions of marriage and motherhood, for example, are criticised by de Beauvoir as exploitative of women, yet are roles which women accept. Women accept the roles that are created for them, roles which are associated with an idea of femininity and roles that are resigned to the domestic sphere. Women, who align themselves with men, gain some sense of esteem as an individual and also value in society. The more powerful and materially successful the man, the more she will gain some sense of satisfaction from her position. It is however, a vicarious existence. Her characteristics and possibilities are shaped, as are his. (Shepherd, 2015)

So it appears that there is neither a single criterion nor a clear set of criteria for establishing what makes a woman a Prostitute, as a woman need not sell her body for money in order to be labelled as such, as defined by Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex. The distinction between Jezebels, such as Moira, and these two Wives, Paula and Shunammite, is that the former does it for survival while the latter does it out of regard for men and their money and power. Paula and Shunammite train themselves to adopt the position of Other since it is how they view themselves as a social category that must become the Other in order to avail of the only accessible opportunities for them.

With that, the Prostitutes symbolize man's aggressive and uncontrollable sexuality and polygamous nature, which they viewed as normal and natural. Through patriarchal concepts of protection, veneration, and control, the sexual objectification of women is perpetuated. In all times, sex labor has been a method of enslaving and dehumanizing women. It was not designed as a way for women to make money and feel independent. The role of the Prostitute has exposed males as oppressors for centuries, especially in today's culture.

Some women must be sacrificed to save others and to prevent an even more abject of filth. (de Beauvoir 1949: 680)

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Similarly, the Prostitute's job illustrates the gender disparity stemming from unequal educational opportunities, unequal pay in the workplace, limited control over one's own body, and pervasive poverty. Yet women are the most vulnerable segment of society in any economy built, especially on violence, dominance, or inequity. Since prostitution is nothing more than a means through which men maintain their power and control over women, it is immoral and should be outlawed in the modern day in light of progress toward gender equality.

In reality, as soon as a profession opens in a world where misery and unemployment are rife, there are people to enter it […] Especially because these professions are, on average, more lucrative than many others. It is very hypocritical to be surprised by the supply masculine demand creates; this is a rudimentary and universal economic process. (de Beauvoir 1949: 681)

The normalization of sexual violence, economic disparity, and the objectification of women's bodies are all implications of the role of prostitutes in today's patriarchal society. These causes have led to the continued prevalence of sex trafficking and slavery in modern society. Even in this enlightened age, there are still many people who fail to recognize the magnitude of the problem that is prostitution. This is especially true in societies where men hold the majority of political and economic power and where women are still treated as second-class citizens and objects of contempt.

What the Prostitute's role teaches us that when male oppression occurs within societies, it is frequently justified by reference to culture, religion, politics, economy, and the established standards of social norms. Recognizing women as the subjects of their own lives and accepting women's rights as fundamental human rights necessitates reconsidering the institutions of family, religion, culture, tradition, and politics.

2. CONCLUSION

The Prostitute is one of the types of women who most obviously play the role of "Other," as described by Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 book The Second Sex. Prostitutes represent the ultimate Other, the object. But she's also the one doing the exploiting. She works as a prostitute for both financial reasons and the affirmation of being "different" that she receives from the male customers. Moira is the most glaring example; she is a Jezebel who serves as a prostitute for foreign tourists and a prisoner and sex slave to the apparently moral men of Gilead. However, in the novels, all Handmaids are viewed as regime prostitutes due to their status as the two-legged wombs who engage in monthly ceremonial intercourse with powerful men. Paula and Shunammite also display traits of a prostitute since they learn to identify with the Other in order to expand their own limited range of options in society.

In this sense, what the Prostitute's role teaches us in the contemporary society is that when male oppression occurs within societies, it is frequently justified by reference to culture, religion, politics, economy, and the established standards of social norms. Recognizing women as the subjects of their own lives and accepting women's rights as fundamental human rights necessitates reconsidering the institutions of family, religion, culture, tradition, and politics.

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Recommendation

It is undeniable that women are disproportionately affected by all forms of female oppression in every element of life, despite the fact that women in the past and today have made essential and valuable contributions toward reducing oppression of women in many races and communities. Hence, the researcher suggests that female groups or people who are fighting for gender equality study books that explore the subjection of women in order to educate themselves further on women's rights and to give them more agency in settings that devalue these rights. Equally, classroom educators and students can investigate and report on gender disparities in order to better the lives of women everywhere, but especially in places where sexism and oppression are pervasive. For the continued success of women in the workplace, in the classroom, in politics, in the community, and in the home, it is clear that more research and scholarly writing is required. Because of this, we must keep fighting to free women from oppression in general and young women in particular, because they are the most defenseless population group of women.

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