iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 **Issue:** IV **Month of publication:** April 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.69900

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 13 Issue IV Apr 2025- Available at www.ijraset.com

The Testaments: The Religion and the Female

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Abstract: ***Margaret Atwood's novel The Testaments is a great novel to discuss women's issues. This novel does not merely talk about a dystopian society which collapses women but also represents women as a whole. Atwood had perfectly captured the sufferings caused for women by male society and by religion. This paper discusses the immoral activities done against women through various examples from within the text and outside. It has a detailed analysis of The Testaments. The analysis extends to the treatment of women and religion in the novel.***
Keywords: The Testaments, Margaret Atwood, Religion, Female, Oppression, Escapism

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood clearly picturises how the male society in the religion suppresses women in the society and how their rights are denied in *The Testaments.* Many researches have been filling the web sources and nothing will grab a strong argument that women are not being suppressed in the name of religion. History clearly has recorded that women are not even allowed inside Hindu temples, synagogues of churches and inside the masques. Each religion has their own unique way of oppressing women in support of the male world. Therefore, we could clearly see how religion has become stumbling blocks to the lives of women. Atwood condemns this kind of male society who makes use of women for their own shameful benefits. Almost in all societies of the world, women are treated like animals and their rights and freedom are denied by the male community.

II. THE RELIGION AND THE FEMALE

The Testaments, Margaret Atwood's masterpiece, has a greater sense in it. The novelist's creation of the three significant narrators of their testimonies plays a major role in toppling the Gilead's patriarchal government. After the dominant coup of Gilead came to existence, Aunt Lyida lost her power which she had before as a court judge. She was merely considered like a lifeless doll. Though her power was lost, she could become one of the four powerful Aunts of Gilead who served as supporting pillars in oppressing the women for men's sake. The other two narrators Agnes and Daisy clearly knew what was happening for women and Gilead. The novel has various interpretations and themes. Power is one of the major themes we could see throughout the novel *The Testaments*. Power differs from person to person and gender to gender. It is transparent that no women consume power in the society except the Aunts. The upper class women could dominate only the women like Handmaids and Marthas. Through this one could find that even those upper class women could dominate only the women and not the men. Likewise, the Aunts could only dominate the women in the society and they wholly were under oppression by the dominant patriarchal society. The four Aunts are the supporting hands of the people of power in male gender. As Agnes knew that Aunts are powerful and they too have authority over women's society. She anticipates that the knowing of the secrets of everyone in Gilead is the secret of power of the Aunts. We see Commander Judd, the head of the Eyes group of the government, has great respect for Aunt Lydia and shares secrets about Gilead. This knowing of the secret and the power are one of the major reasons that helped Aunt Lydia to write the accounts of the evils of the society
which finally puts down Gilead's theocratic rule. As we already knew, the male society assumes power in almost all places. The higher authorities in the government like ruling class men like Commander Judd and Kyle assume more power. Then, the guards of the government and the men at houses play power over the women. The regime has practiced women in certain areas in order to prove themselves as women in the society. These women have to learn certain things like embroidery which constitute the remaining life of the married women. The women are sent to premarital counseling school where they learn all these things like embroidery and what kind of dresses they should wearand behave. We see even Agnes doing embroidery when she was stopped to continue her school as she was forced for marriage at her age of thirteen itself. With Agnes her schoolmates and friends like Shunammite and Becka are also put in the training school.There they learnt embroidery. We could see Agnes making a skull in her embroidery designing jn the cloth. It was to show her resistance and anger towards her step mother Paula. Atwood relates it with Queen Mary's embroidery writing before she was executed. It was written "Such excellent embroiderers, women are". In other parts of the novel we could see the conversation between Agnes and Becka.

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Agnes says it is very tough to read and write as a woman, which the regime felt was a serious danger to the government. Becka tells Agnes that writing is like the same as we do embroidery. A great work of embroidery will collapse the government.

Escapism is one of the major factors which constitute the plot of the novel. It is mostly found in the women's society ranging from the upper to the lower class. Each type of woman had the idea of escapism. The physical type of escapism is mostly found in the Gilead's women society. Two of the three narrators Agnes and Daisy show their anger and anxiety against the men's dominant rule. Agnes hates the restrictions provided by her father. She was irritated by her father Commander Kyle's privacy even within the family members. No one should go to his study room without his permission. When Agnes attains puberty, she goes to a dentist called Dr. Grove where she was sexually assaulted. Atwood has explicitly described the sexual actions which the dentist attempts. This expression says that the pleasure obtained by sex is not a major issue for the women who are struggling for their basic freedom. This oppression makes the women escape from Gilead to Canada. It is clear when Aunt Lydia knows about the highest rate which Gilead attained in women's migration to other countries. Through the narration we also find that women who tried to escape to Canada are mercilessly killed.

The Handmaids' attempt of escorting their babies to Canada is also noteworthy. The escapism which was attempted to smuggle a baby named Baby Nicole was widely spoken by the women characters of the novel. We finally come to know that Daisy was Baby Nicole. For all the women who thirst for freedom, Baby Nicole was their motivation. Thus, escapism plays a major role in the construction of the story. The uncertainty which the characters face throughout the novel is widely seen. We see Aunt Lydia addressing her future reader about the danger which she will be facing because of secretly writing her testimony. She says that her life is on the path of death. She might be killed horrifically if she would be found writing the work. Aunt Lyida was uncertain about what will happen to her in the future. She also was worrying whether her motive of toppling Gilead would come true or not. As the novel continues we find that Daisy's parents Neil and Melanie also were taking a great role in toppling Gilead. They were not allowing Daisy to be alone in the home and they even restricted Daisy to participate in assemblies that go against Gilead. Through this we could understand that they were also uncertain about what would happen to them. Almost all women of the society feel the same.

In the work of oppressing women, we could see some of women themselves helping the male society. The foremost group is the Aunts' group. It consists of four women who take part in guiding the women. They are the one who suggest life partners for women, they check whether a girl is ready for marriage, and provide costumes for different age groups of women. When Agnes was only thirteen, it was Aunt Gabbana who checked her whether he was physically perfect for marriage. The Aunts serve as mediators between the women and the ruling class men. When Aunt Lydia was arrested and was taken to a stadium where a lot of women who were trying to escape to Canada were executed. Aunt Lydia found some of the women who served as few among the executioners. Throughout the novel, it is vibrant how men use women as mere sexual objects. The Handmaid system which the Gilead society has is a great example for this expression. The Handmaids had to bear children for the upper class men. The Handmaids are treated as child bearing machines. At the same time, they do not have any rights to claim in society. We see in Agnes's house when Paula was married to Commander Kyle, a Handmaid was assigned to bear children for him.

When it was the time for delivery and when she was critical, a doctor arrives and performs a surgery where the baby survives and the Handmaid dies. The injustice done for the Handmaid was shown through the anger expressed through Agnes. When Agnes goes to Dr. Grove sexually molests her and she anticipates Paula would also know what happens in the hospital. It is evident that the incident may be known to other men of the society and they stay calm through Agnes and Paula. Therefore, the whole men's society destroys women with no respect. As Aunt Lydia was close to Commander Judd, she knows every secret of the government and also about him. Commander Judd tells her that her wife is sick. Lydia says that she will arrange an appointment for her wife in the Ardua Hall. Commander Judd rejects her offer and Aunt Lydia knows that he is voluntarily denying her wife to be treated. Aunt Lyida knows that his wife would die soon making the Commander search for another young girl. Commander Judd is a person who has killed many of his wives in order to marry other young women. This incident in the narration clearly tells us how women are considered in society. They were killed inhumanly mercilessly. They are like dolls in the hands of men and they play with them when they like and will throw them away when they do not like and choose for other dolls. Women are merely dolls which have no life and pain in them in this critical society. The kinds of suppression which the women undergo is different. Women could not wear dresses as they wished. It was also determined by the theocratic regime of Gilead. From the new born baby to old women everyone will be wearing different dresses with different colours. As mentioned earlier, married women, unmarried women and widows would be wearing the attire which would be suggested by men.

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When we look at the religious context, various Biblical concepts and stories are twisted according to men's own interpretation to suppress women. Women are not allowed to read books, especially the Bible.It was restricted. When one of the Aunts was narrating the Concubine story to the students, every girl who was hearing was terrified. Becka decided not to marry at any time in her life. When the concubine was asked by the village men, the owner of the concubine cuts her into twelve pieces and sends them to twelve tribes of Israel each. This story was actually a twisted story where God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah for their disobedience. The men of Gilead, never reduced to twist the Bible when it is needed. The revulsion against the suppression was seen through various women characters in the novel. Margaret Atwood had clearly dramatised even the events taking place. Though Aunt Lydia pretends to express her revulsion, it is clearly seen in other two narrators Agnes and Daisy. Agnes' friend Becka was really irritated about the regime. In the premarital counseling school, Becka in anger, cuts his hip where she loses much blood. The anger, irritation and vengeance she had against the ruling men was tremendously portrayed by Atwood through Agnes's encounter with Becka. Freedom is a great question mark in Gilead. In this suppressed society of women, only women had to fight for freedom. Though two characters like Daisy's father Neil and an old man Elijah taking part in the act deal with toppling Gilead it is explicitly shown that the three narrators and other women are seriously focusing on their plot. From the beginning to the end, the resistance shown through women is passive. It had not directly hit men's society. The women secretly were trying to escape to Gilead but never directly fought against the cruel regime. However, the plot for toppling the regime was silently being done. Finally, in the course of the novel, the three narrators meet personally. Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima and Daisy join hands in taking the records made by Lydia to Canada. These three people's thoughts and struggles coincide and they strongly move forward. With the help of a few other women who had hatred against the rule, Lydia made Agnes and Daisy escape to Canada with the documents. The documents of Gilead's secrets reach Canadian media and the bad regime of Gilead falls frantically.

III. CONCLUSION

The systems and way of oppression may differ from place to place and country to country, but they never ceased to use religion and its concepts in order to take away the rights of women. For centuries, these were ttwh situations of the women in various societies. Atwood's *The Testaments* clearly telecasts the cruelty of the world which is against the women community. She has perfectly portrayed the sufferings which the women undergo through the actions taking place in a dystopian society. As the Devadasi system was there to destroy poor women in India, the 'Sons of Jacob' use Biblical principles to justify the cruel sufferings which they offer the women in Gilead. Both the West and the East target only the women and girls from poor backgrounds. Wherever, the poor become men's prey. Though

Atwood's *The Testaments* is a dystopian story, the plot and the actions taking place are not new or fancy to the world. It is what the world countries practice even till date.

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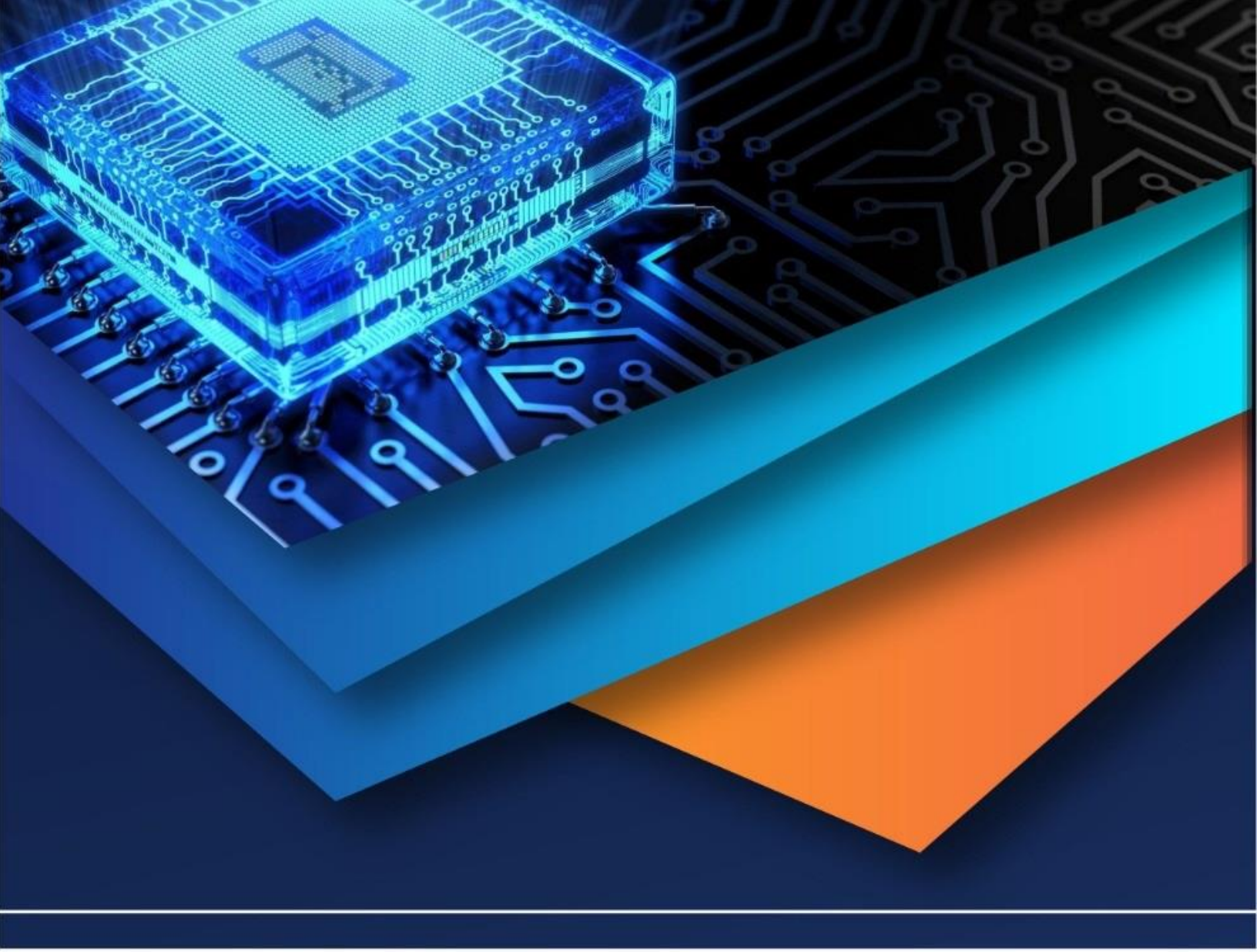

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