OPPRESSION AGAINST WOMEN IN MARGARET ELEANOR ATWOOD’S THE *HANDMAID’S TALE* (1985) NOVEL: A FEMINIST CRITICISM

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ABSTRACT:

The major problem of this study is how oppression against women is
reflected in The Handmaid’s Tale novel by Margaret Eleanor Atwood’s. The
objective of this study is to analyze the novel based on structural elements and to
analyze the novel based on feminist criticism.

In analyzing The Handmaid’s Tale novel, the writer uses qualitative
method and feminist criticism. The object of the study is Margaret Eleanor The
Handmaid’s Tale novel published in 1985. The data sources consist of primary
data and secondary data sources. The primary data source is The Handmaid’s Tale
novel itself and the secondary data sources are the other sources related to the
analysis such as books of literary theory, the author’s biography, and the other
relevant information to analysis of this research. The method of the data collection
is library research. The technique of data analysis is descriptive analysis.

The results of the analysis shows the following conclusion: first, based on
the structural analysis it can be concluded that in oppression in The Handmaid’s
Tale novel Margaret Eleanor Atwood’s convey analysis that oppression is the
condition that happens in all people especially of women. Second, based on the
feminist criticism in The Handmaid’s Tale novel, that there is a correlation
between and social realities of America society in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Feminism, Handmaids Tale, Oppression
A. Introduction

Oppression is the condition that happens when people are pushed down by societies or the people of weak and people who are not able to resist when they are oppressed by others. In the real life people do not escape from the oppression. People who feel oppression are weak people, for example; oppression experienced by college students that are conducted by the senior etc (Deutsch, 2006: 76).

Gender difference is not a problem as long as it does not cause inequalities of gender. But, in fact that gender differences cause many inequalities moreover women, because women is known as a weak person who has low power in society (Smith, 2008: 15).

One of the problems which is often faced by every human being especially, women is how to stand up their right and not allow their male dominated society to define what it means to be women. Women them selves must show their capability, to prove who they are and what role they will play in society. Therefore, according Elliot in Mandel (1995: 5), that every person has equal opportunities and civil right and they should be allowed to exercise freedom of choice without interfere of public opinion on or law.

Oppression against women in The Handmaid’s Tale is a novel that was written by Margaret Eleanor Atwood. Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa Canada. In 1961, when she was nineteen years old she published Ganda Persephone. Ganda Persephone is the collection of poem about Persephone characters mitologis. She also received many awards and she wrote more than twenty book, poetry, nonfiction, fiction, children book, and short stories. Her novels namely Cat Eye (1989), The Robber Bride (1984), Alias Grace (1996), The Edible Woman (1974), The Handmaid’s Tale (1983) and The Blind Assassin (2000). Margaret Atwood also had the collection of short stories namely: Good Bones and Simple Murders (1994) and a volume of poetry, morning in the Burned House (1995) (Atwood’s, 1986: 110).
The story of oppression against women’s in *The Handmaid's Tale* is about Offred who is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids are assigned to bear children for elite couples that have trouble conceiving. In the old world, before Gilead, Offred affair with Luke, a married man. He divorced his wife and married Offred, and then they had a child together. Offred’s mother was a single mother and feminist activist. The architects of Gilead began their rise to power in an age of readily available pornography, prostitution, and violence against women when pollution and chemical that effect to declining rate fertility. They repres by women’s rights, forbidding women to hold property or jobs. Offred and Luke took their daughter and attempted to flee across the border into Canada, but they were caught and separated from one another.

Offred marriage was voided (because Luke had been divorced), and she was sent to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center. This place called the Red Center by society. At the center, women were indoctrinated into Gilead’s ideology in preparation for becoming Handmaids. Aunt Lydia supervised the women and giving speeches extolling Gilead’s beliefs that women should be subservient to men and only care with bearing children. Daily activity Offred restricted by commander. She went shopping with Ofglen, another Handmaid, and they visited the Wall outside that used to be Harvard University, where the bodies of rebels hang. She had to visit the doctor in order to be checked for disease and she had to endure the “Ceremony,” in which the Commander read regulation household from the Bible, and then she went to the bedroom, where his Wife and Offred waited for him, and then Comander doing sex with Offred. The first break from her routine occured when she was visiting the doctor and offering to have sex with her in order to get her pregnant, it is suggesting that her Commander was probably infertile. After a Ceremony, the Commander Sent his gardener and driver. Nick requested Offred to meet him in is office room in the
next night. She began visiting him regularly. They played Scrabble and he let her look at old magazines like Vogue.

The reality Offred didn’t get pregnant, Serena suggested that Offred often should have sex with Nick secretly. Serena promises to bring a picture of her daughter if she sleep with Nick, and offred knows that Sarena always knows where ever her daughter stay. In the same night Offred sleep with Nick, and the Commander secretly took her out to a club called Jezebel’s, where the Commander mingles with prostitutes. Offred saw Moira working there. The two women met in a bathroom, and Offred learnt that Moira was captured just before she crossed the border. She chose life in a club over being sent to the Colonies, where most political prisoners and dangerous people were sent.

After coming back from Jezebel, Serena arrived and told Offred to go to Nick’s room. Offred and Nick had sex, and then they began to sleep together frequently. Offred is caught up in the affair and ignored Ofglen’s requests that she gathers information from the Commander for Mayday. One day, all the Handmaids took part in a group execution of a supposed rapist, supervised by Aunt Lydia. Ofglen strike the first blow. Later, she told Offred that the so-called rapist was a member of Mayday and she helps Offred out of his misery.

Shortly thereafter, Offred went out shopping, and a new Ofglen met her. This new woman was not part of Mayday, and new woman told Offred that the old Ofglen hanged herself when she saw the secret police coming for her. At home, Serena had found out about Offred’s trip to Jezebel’s, and she sent her to her room, promising punishment. Offred waited there, and she saw a black van from the Eyes approach. Then Nick came and told her that the Eyes were really Mayday members who had come to save her.

The main problem of the study is how is oppression against women’s reflected in The Handmaid’s Tale’ by Margaret Eleanor Atwood. Based on the problem, the writer formulates the objective of the study to analyze and to describe The
Handmaid’s Tale novel based on the structural elements and to analyze The Handmaid’s Tale novel based on the feminist criticism.

B. Research Method

In analyzing oppression against women in Margaret Eleanor Atwood’s the handmaid’s tale as the object of the study. The novel is the primary source is the novel Margaret Eleanor Atwood The Handmaid’s Tale. The secondary source are from the article, journal, internet, book, and reference which are relevant with the study. The technique of data collection is library research, the steps are: a) reading the Margaret Eleanor Atwood The Handmaid’s Tale novel, b) browsing to the internet to get several information and articles related to the object of the study c) identifying the problem and finding the data, d) making the important notes of important data, e) both primary and secondary data, f) collecting some supporting data from other references related to the topic and arranging the data into several parts according to its classification. The technique used in analyzing the data is descriptive analysis, to analyze using feminist approach. Then, the data reports will contain dialogues and narrations.

C. Findings

Based on the feminist criticism of The Handmaid’s Tale novel, there is relation between the novel with America society where the novel appeared. The novel reflects the reality of America society in the twentieth century. Those realities in society are as follows.

1. Women’s Position

In the society woman are seen as the second class people, they have no right in deciding their own life. Patriarchy system, a system that places men as the ones who rule women in every aspect of their life becomes the basic cause of woman oppression.

In the The Handmaids Tale novel, the handmaid includes the major character Offred, always treated like a servant where they become inferior and
subordinated. On below quotation shows that all of the handmaids must not stay in big and luxurious place. They are all gathers in one place, and on the quotation shows that they stay together in gymnasium. Only the rich people and especially men with a high position can stay with all of glamorous.

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shout through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from the pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green –streaked air (THT, 1986: 1).

On the above quotation shows the place where the handmaids slept together with no partition that separates them. The gymnasium is the place that used to play many kinds of sports, especially basketball.

The next patriarchal system showed on the history of the gymnasium, where Offred explore her imagination related with her story of sex. Starts with the gymnasium that only gives her loneliness, and it reminds her on her yearning for something that was always happen to her, she always plays sex everywhere. The sad thing is that, Offred always plays sex with men that are not her husband and her loves. The men is, the people who uses her as a servant.

There was an old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh (THT, 1986: 1).

The above quotation shows the situation of Offred’s imagination related with her sex experiences, where she can plays sex everywhere, in the parking lot, in television room with the sound turned down. As a servant for men who have everything especially money and high position, Offred needs to obey them, if she does not, she will accept the consequences from them.
In patriarchal system, the position of men is superior because they control everything especially on sex. Men use their power to oppress the women because women are weak in a lot of thing. On sex, men usually use many kinds of words and language to convey such as *gets laid*, makes out etc. Women, regards that words as a usual meaning, but for men, that is difference.

The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quite. As long as I don’t move. As long as I lie still. The difference between lie and lay. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I’d like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I’d like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don’t really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it (THT, 1986: 13-14).

2. Women’s Right

Right is something owned by every human being, women have right to define as autonomous beings. There are two aspects of feminist existential theory that must be discussed. The first concerns the internalization of others that colonized group experience and the second, the phenomenological reconstruction of other’s.

In America, people have the same rights on choosing their own religion. Men and women have the equal right to choose what kind of religion they want to hug. It can be seen on below quotation related with the freedom of selecting the right in religion.

What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace with love, with self denial, semen and babies.
Oh god, king of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man.
Oh god, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled (THT, 1986: 74).
Some of them would get carried away with this. The ecstasy of abasement.
Some of them would moan and cry (THT, 1986: 74).

The other rights that can get by women in America is that, their right to get love and to be loved. It is almost the same with other country, where women and men have their own freedom to get love and to be loved. It can be seen on below quotation.
Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they’re protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. Now, tell me, you’re an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook?

Love I said.

Love? Said the commander. What kind of love?

Falling in love, I said. The commander looked at me with his candid boy’s eyes. Oh yes, he said. I’ve read the magazines that’s what they were pushing, wasn’t it? But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, falling in love? Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better (THT, 1986: 84).

On the above quotation shows, that Offred admits that she really wants to get love. She overlook for love, because as a women she wants spent her life together with her family. Offred tells honestly to Commander that she wants love not only sex and money. Sex and money only can gives her happiness on the outside, not on the inside. But, Commander does not believe in love, she just want every women to serves him without many kinds of sues.

Beside Offred wants to get love, she is also wants to be loved. It can be seen on below quotation.

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the children. We would have children. Although we knew it hasn’t too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays, Such freedom now seems almost weightless (THT, 1986: 9).

3. Women’s Role

Woman is traditionally defined by their roles as daughters, wives, and mother. Women with disabilities are assumed unable to full care taking and partnership roles”. It means that women are always associated with domestic roles. Actually, as wives and mothers, women can be included in double role, in domestic and public role. Besides doing her housework, she also can find meaningful work in the public sphere.
Below quotation shows that Offred as a woman really wants to become a mother with children. She wants to have children from her husband Luke.

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Offred always imagine that she still can get her happiness in love that she wants to live with her ex husband Luke. As a wife Offred always serves her husband everyday, from making coffee every morning, prepare the clothe for her husband everyday he wants to go to work, until she knows every inches of her husband style and every situation where she always stand together with Luke. As a wife, that is the most happiness situation in the world, where she can spent her time together with Luke. But now, the situation has been change, where Luke now belong to some one and she can not loves him anymore. She just dancing with her beautiful memory with Luke.

Beside as a wife, Offred also has the the role as a mother. Previous, Offred lives together with Luke and her child where she does not know where her kid goes.

I almost gasp: he’s said a forbidden word. Sterile. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law.

“lots of women do it,” he goes on. “You want a baby don’t you?”

“Yes,” I say. It’s true, and I don’t ask why, because I know. Give me children, or else I die. There’s more than one meaning to it (THT, 1986: 18).

Until one day, she faces a certain situation where, she almost involves on sex with a doctor. The doctor wants to get laid with Offred, and Offred tells him that he can palying sex with him with one condition, he must gives her a children. Offred really misses her child and being a mother. Becouse on that time, Offred really opprese with many kind of handmaid situatino,
where she must serves a man that she did not love and she must obey every rules of him.

On the above quotation shows that, Offred dares to do that action supposes she gets her freedom from a man with a high status, a doctor. But, again and again, she is fails, the doctor does not interest with that condition. He just stop and stop of doing something on her.

D. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the analysis the writer has done, it can be drawn some conclusions as follow, First, based on the structural analysis it is apparent that in this novel, the author wants to deliver a moral message that Women should struggle for freedom to free themselves from oppression. The author creates caracters namely the weakness of women on that time and the oppression women. Women are only as weapon to raise the power of man in politic, beside that, she also wants to show that men’s power can be defeated without women’s support. The author shows in Amerika the people have right to talk or get the freedom and free from the oppression and other guaranteed rights for residents and They want to get free from any kind of slavery and torture to be the setting of the story and build the plot and also the theme in the story.

Second, based on the feminist criticism, The Handmaid’s Tale novel contains many facts that are revealed by Margaret Atwood reflected women’s position, women’s role, and women’s right. It is based on the reality in The Handmaids Tale novel that tells about the oppression of women, where they are controled by man and the people with a high status. In the society woman are seen as the second class people, they have no right in deciding their own life. The women can’t decide their own decision without any permits from their owner or their kipper. Women can’t go everywhere freely, and if they break the rules, they will get the punishment from the skipper. The author wants to say, the people have the same rights on choosing their own religion especially for the women in America. There are also the freedom to choose the religion that there are many kinds of people with different religion, not only Christian and Catholic, but also Jewish. The author shows in women’s role that the women wants to have children
from her husband, as a mother and as a wife, The author does not describe that in woman’s participation because there aren’t found the women participation in novel. The story tells about the struggle of women for freedom to free themselves from oppression.
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