

Dehumanization through Mirroring Animal Gaze in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

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Abstract

This article tends to capture the dehumanization of handmaids in *The Testaments*. Women are objectified through the mirroring animal gaze, they are dehumanized, and led to believe that they are less human as compared to men. Handmaids start believing themselves as animals because they are looked at as animals in the eyes of commanders, and their identity is negated in comparison to commanders. This analysis of gaze has shown that eyes enjoy unique importance in Atwood's fiction. The patriarchal gaze depends upon the eyes to mortify the subjectivity of women. Therefore, Eyes like Big Brother facilitate Gilead in crushing the resistance of Mayday. Moreover, it is supported by the work of Jacques Lacan who helps to understand the victimization of women through the gaze. The mirroring animal gaze shapes the identity of Daisy and Agnes; they perceive themselves as an animal due to the voyeuristic gaze of the commander. The patriarchal gaze is the first weapon against women in Gilead to develop feelings of dismemberment and alienation. This article also explores the patriarchal gaze that lures the desire of its victims. The feminist resistance is based on a lack that is imitating a patriarchal narrative.

Keywords: Gaze, Lack, Dehumanization, Eyes, Dismemberment, Desire

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Introduction

In this article, *The Testaments* is contemplated from the lens of a violent gaze towards women that creates sexual polarity in the newly established theocratic state of Gilead. This gaze represents the identification of an individual to a predestined image which Lacan names “imago” (“Mirror Stage as Formative” 76) which plays a significant role in the mirror stage. Imago word has different connotations; apart from the mental image it also means “the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect, especially one with wings” (“imago”). Aunt Lydia who is the facilitator of the regime and leader of Ardua Hall chronicles the events in *The Ardua Hall Holograph and* convinces readers that she has no other option except to take sides with Gilead. As a reader, we have seen that Aunt Lydia is the symbol of power and terror in *The Handmaid's Tale* but secretly plans a strategy against Gilead in *The Testaments*, she herself feels powerless as an image. She conceives Gilead as a mirror in which women imagine themselves as animals. Serban argues that in Gilead, women are denied to have a mirror, that's why women use gaze as a replacement for a mirror because it gives them a sense of completion. (“Eye Representations in Margaret Atwood's” 117). Handmaids are reduced to animals when they look into the eyes of commanders and Aunts. Aunt Lydia believes, “The inventor of the mirror did few of us any favours: we must have been happier before we knew what we looked like” (Testaments 6). Hence, everyone is born with a pre-existing “imago” that is based on sexual discrimination and dehumanization.

Mirroring Gaze of Animal

“Long ago, we are told, images were worshiped as gods, and were thought to have the powers of gods; so were certain words-the holy names.” (ON WRITERS AND WRITING 53)

Agnes Jemima who is chronicled as Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A has born in a “symbolic matrix” (Lacan 76) in which she has already become a part of a primordial structure that reshapes her ego. Agnes is told by her mother Tabitha that her name implies an animal that is named a “lamb”. Using the name of a sacrificial animal makes a prophetic prediction that she will be made available to be sacrificed as a wife to a ruthless Commander Judd. “*Little lamb, who made thee? / Dost thou know who made thee?*” (Testaments 19). In other words, Agnes is treated as a lamb that has to be sacrificed for matrimonial purposes; she is reminded again and again that she has no importance other than being a pet to Tabitha that will be sacrificed when the time comes. She is taught that the basic purpose of women is to make sacrifices for men. “Men must make

sacrifices in war, and women must make sacrifices in other ways. That is how things are divided” (Testaments 80). Now, this image of being a sacrificial lamb becomes an integral part of her cogito. Hence, sacrificing and accepting this dehumanization is accepted without resistance.

Jack Peat argues that naming a person is culturally and socially conditioned because “name is our very first social tagging” (“Dorian Gray effect”). Similarly, Agnes’ name is based on cultural stereotypes that make her believe that she is inhuman as wild animals. Here, Agnes’ identity is also shaped by an animal “imago”, and she is confused regarding her authenticity of herself and considers her primordial image as the only existing reality. Moreover, Agnes perceives her form as a beast through the image of her body that lacks autonomy, and it generates feelings of dismemberment and alienation. Indeed, Lacan perceives the bestial visual image as “orthopedic” (78) in its form that creates feelings of dismemberment. Jaleel Akhtar defines dismemberment from the racial perspective, and finds it as a “form of amputation, or phantom limb sensation, splitting, torture or the disruption of concrete and graphic traumatic memories” (Dismemberment 1).

According to Lacan, Gaze works similarly to the mirror and plays a developing role of an ideal I in a subject. Women have the dread of being watched by men which makes them a visual image. The development of Agnes’ consciousness takes place due to the projected animal gaze of the patriarchal regime, she compares the eyes of men with the eyes of a tiger: “The urges of men were terrible things and those urges needed to be curbed” (Testaments 9). She compares the eyes of men with tigers because they are ferocious and murderous. She is always conscious of a gaze that makes her aware of her animal sexuality. Hence, the patriarchal gaze defines the subjectivity of Agnes, she feels alienated and raped when she is looked at as an animal. But the important point is that Agnes perceives her image as a gestalt, a form that is more “constitutive than constituted” (Ecrits76). Furthermore, Agnes develops uncanny feelings when she is ridiculed by gaze while standing naked among aunts: “The air wasn’t cold, but I could feel the goose bumps rising on my skin, from being looked at and considered” (Testaments 159). In the same way, Agnes’ biological mother Offred has also experienced the sexiest gaze by Commander, he watches her “without speaking but also without taking his eyes off me” (Handmaid’s 194). Girls like Offred and Agnes feel ashamed of being watched because it makes them realize their vulnerability and nakedness. Jacques Derrida has felt a similar realization of vulnerability and uncanniness for being watched by a cat. Here, both the cat and commander are two different subjects but their gaze is violent and has a tendency to mortify the subjectivity of their victim.

Freud mentions that the uncanny has its roots in the German word “unheimlich” which means strange and unhomely (Freud 124). Here, Atwood suggests that the uncanny experiences through the mirroring animal gaze are horrifying because once they are familiar. She responds on Twitter against a viral video of a Texas lawyer who accidentally appears as a cat in a zoom meeting of court and says “I on the other hand am a cat. I just can’t get this human filter off” (@MargaretAtwood). As this is a fact, prehistoric human beings were once animals and evolved with an evolutionary cycle. Yuval Noah Harari defines humans as “an animal belonging to the genus Homo” (Sapiens 5). Ironically, animals are excluded as others when they are compared with humans because they are declared wild and irrational. Atwood tries to ponder the similar exclusion of women when they are declared as other than men. Freud defines the uncanny experience in *The Uncanny* as “something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (148). One aspect of the animal gaze is intuitive in its sense because it unmasks our existing connection to our familiar hidden cogito. The problem arises when only women are subjected to gaze rather than men; it creates sexual polarity in a theocratic state like Gilead. It is the internalization of this gaze that makes Agnes restless regarding her marriage; instead of healing her wounds, Tabitha makes her believe that she has no personal choice because she is a caged animal, “What is it, my pet?” (Testaments 22). Agnes feels an uncanny alienation when she is told that she does not belong to her mother biologically but she is a chosen one. Agnes imagines herself as not motherless but also fatherless, her father has tolerated her because she is “Tabitha’s project, her plaything, her pet” (Testaments 85).

This shows that mirroring the animal gaze is so cruel towards its victims that it can make them feel orphaned and homeless in their families. Toni Morrison in *A Mercy* has also exposed the patriarchal and racial prejudice that is exercised through the mirroring animal gaze towards slaves in late-seventeenth-century America. Lina, a Native American, reveals to Floren her objectification by the Presbyterians. She tells that the “Presbyterians stare” and treat her as a commodity that is on display for sale. Not only Lydia but Floren is also subjected to objectifying gaze because of her black identity. Like Daughter Jane, she is also a victim of a gaze by the villagers. She is intrigued by the eyes that examine her “tail, an extra teat, a man’s whip” and the “forelegs of a dog” (80). Moreover, according to Lacan, the gaze can objectify the subject into an image or picture. Lacan perceives that gaze is always outside “It is through the gaze that I enter into the light, and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects” (What is a Picture? 106). The readers can observe that not only Aunt Lydia

and Agnes are objectified as a defiled image but the third narrator Daisy who is chronicled in Transcript of Witness Testimony 369B also feels dismembered for being photographed into an image. Daisy is a victim of unstable identities; she is unable to find her true reality like her step-sister. Often, she is associated with animals like a puppy, a pack of wolves, a monkey and a prize cat in the company of Neil and Melanie. Moreover, her friend Ada compares her to a “fly on the wall” (Testaments 123) and asks her to stay “quiet as mice” (Testaments 189). She feels afraid of being caught by Gilead where women are treated as domestic cats. Daisy’s objectification through animal metaphors by her relatives shows that women are not the only victim to gaze in Gilead but anti-Gilead voices are also responsible for this dehumanization.

Like Daisy, Aunt Lydia and other women have to mould themselves according to the gaze of the Sons of Jacob, their subjectivity is determined by the gaze that is outside. They are totally blindfolded and are cuffed like wild animals in a zoo. Aunt Lydia argues “At four o’clock we were treated to a spectacle” (117). Hence, the Lacanian expression “I am *photo-graphed*” (106) expresses the dilemma of being naked in front of a patriarchal or projected animal gaze. Fredric Jameson writes “The visual is essentially pornographic” (Signatures of the Visible 1), the pornographic connotes acts of violence. This definition of the visual image is evocative of the threatening gaze that becomes unbearable when it is kept unchecked. Moreover, like her sister, Agnes has also been victimized by the voyeuristic gaze of the commander. Judd has a fascination towards the nubile paintings of women, the paintings at his home are an amalgamation of humans and animals because “Dragonfly wings “are added to these nubile fairies to make them look more “amoral” and they are “averse to clothing” (Testaments 315). This is the same commander who is against liberal women exhibiting their nakedness but personally, he likes amoral and libidinous women. It gives him pleasure to subjugate his wives by viewing them as not “fully human” (Testaments 316). Judd is a patriarch who has sadistic fantasies towards the child brides; he makes Agnes realize her nakedness during his visit during engagement week. She imagines herself as a nubile fairy who is going to be raped by Judd on the wedding night due to her voyeuristic gaze. Hence, mirroring the animal gaze is more voracious and cruel, resulting in the victimization of handmaids.

The Significance of Eyes

Mirroring Animal Gaze does not work alone it depends upon eyes to project its predatory autonomy on its victims. The eyes are the most sensitive part of the human body, but they have a tendency to kill a person by projecting their gaze on others. Atwood has a great fascination towards eyes that’s why she has excessively used eyes in her works. One of her

novels is named *Cat's Eye* (1988) which enlists an artist Elaine Risley who retrieves her childhood memories through the marble of a cat's eye. She thinks that the cat's eye has secret powers that will protect her. The blue cat's eye is an alter-ego of Elaine, and she imagines her nostalgia through its gaze "I can see the way it sees" (163). Apart from Atwood, Toni Morrison has also written her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in which an eleven-year-old black girl imagines eyes with blue colour that are important for attaining a suitable reputation in society. Here, eyes are depicted to possess the power to mortify the subjectivity of their victim. It seems Atwood has created Eyes by considering the dystopian characteristics as she is herself inspired by different iconic dystopian novels like *Brave New World* and *1984*. There exists a similarity between iconic dystopian figures like Big Brother and Eyes. Therefore, the formation of eyes relives the characterization of Big Brother in *1984*. The often repeated maxim "Under His Eyes" resonates with an often repeated maxim "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (3). Moreover, Eyes like Big Brother are evocative of secret police that proliferate their dystopian regime through surveillance. It seems that Atwood is trying to expose intelligence agencies' dictatorial policies in snubbing the freedom of their citizens. Şerban argues that "seeing/gazing" is important to control the bodies of women in Gilead (117). Lydia perceives herself and other aunts as sinners that are always under the look of the Divine Eye. Eyes are responsible like a Godly figure that is looking at its disciples from dawn to dusk. They are omnipotent, they are not invisible like God but they are everywhere as a threat to dissenters.

Under His Eye our beams of truth shine out,
We all sin;
We shall observe you at your goings-out,
Your comings -in. (Testaments 34)

In *New Testaments*, God describes the eye as the "lamp of the body" and declares if an eye is sound it will enlighten the whole body (Matthew 6:22- 23). Here, Atwood seems to play with the Biblical eyes that have turned into ferocious evil eyes in Gilead. The Eyes are very cruel, and blunt, and lack delicacy or finesse. According to the aunt, they treat her and other women prisoners as if they want to "humiliate us, break down our resistance" (Testaments 117) before killing them. Lacan has used the word "fascinum" for the evil eye that has the ability to kill anyone (118). In terms of this definition, the eyes are patriarchal organs that can kill anyone through their wild voyeuristic gaze. At this juncture, Agnes also becomes a victim of dentist Dr Grove's eyes who takes voyeuristic satisfaction from his

daughter's friend Agnes' body contours. She is raped by a pedophilic fatherly figure and "saw his eyes up close, magnified by his glasses—blue and bloodshot, with elephant-knee eyelids" (Testaments 95). After this voyeuristic fascinum, Agnes feels as being frozen and mortified. She wants to protest but she feels guilty because people will not accept her accusations because of his higher rank. This victim blaming depicts the dilemma of women in Gilead because they have no right to privacy, and the evil eye has turned them into sexual commodities. Even Lacan is conscious of the malicious powers of the predatory eye, and says that Bible has no good eyes "but there are evil eyes all over the place" (119).

Desiring Gaze

Following the animal gaze, this study also aims to discuss the complexities of feminine voices that are unable to expose the patriarchal mindset among themselves. The role of Aunts is very pivotal because they are the ones who aren't only responsible for the establishment of Gilead but they also inculcated the desire for gaze among handmaids. They are next to or even more powerful than Eyes because they are the ones who are practically enforcing Gilead policies. Lydia, likewise, aunts "control the women's side of their enterprise with an iron fist" (Testaments 62), and imagines herself a harem eunuch. Commander believes that the easiest ways to control "women for reproductive and other purposes were through women themselves" (Handmaid's 320). According to Janet J. Montelaro, only certain feminine beliefs that embody and foster misogynist desires are encouraged by Gilead ("Maternity and the Ideology" 238). In the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is a transcript of the twelfth symposium on Gilead titled "HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE HANDMAID'S TALE". Professor Pieixoto, an expert on Gilead, believes that Gilead is "doubtedly patriarchal in form, occasionally matriarchal in content" (Handmaids 320). Considering these examples, both patriarchy and matriarchy are part of the masculine consciousness. Furthermore, Aunt Lydia tries to create a balance of power against Commander Judd by designing a separate territory for Aunts in the shape of Ardua Hall. In this context, Aunt Lydia has succumbed to the gaze of Commanders. This turns Aunt Lydia into a picture, she does not see except only what is desired by Gilead. Lacan interprets this desire for power as a lack that is generated through the gaze of others. Aunt Lydia argues that "One person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others" (Testaments 148). Indeed, Aunt Lydia becomes victim to *dompte-regard* which means "a taming of the gaze" (Lacan 109) which leads one to *Trompe-l'œil* (111). Importantly, aunts and handmaids are carried away by the lure of gaze and believe that they can achieve equality by imitating their masters. Instead of resisting the

patriarchal commanders, the desire for power leads them to matriarchal violence in Gilead. Apart from Aunts, handmaids also want to emulate ferocious persecution through participation ceremonies. Participation is a combination of participation and execution where convicted men are executed ferociously as in *Salvaging in Gilead*. *Salvaging* gives them a sense of power, which they are denied as handmaids. *Salvaging* is a mimicry of massacres carried against women by Gilead. In this process of looking, handmaids think that real freedom will come after fulfilling the lack that is created by the gaze of commanders. Importantly, it seems Atwood wants to critique those feminine voices who resist patriarchy through feminine movements but lack authentic resistance. In a nutshell, the patriarchal gaze has turned them into a picture, and they desire to have the same privileges that are enjoyed by patriarchy. These anti-patriarchal narratives need to move beyond the patriarchal gaze because unconsciously they are imitating patriarchy. They are complimenting patriarchy; in other words, they think they will get empowered if they will have equal opportunities like men. Moreover, these narratives need icons because they “undoubtedly have the effect of holding us under their gaze” (Lacan, 113). One of the most powerful and evocative victims of iconization is Daisy, known as Baby Nicole in Gilead. Baby Nicole’s character is fictitious that is exploited equally by Gilead and Mayday narratives. Mayday and Gilead have “made too much of an icon out of Baby Nicole” (Testaments 198) to achieve their goals. The body of Daisy becomes a symbol of icon warfare between Mayday and Gilead. The posters of Baby Nicole are part of the televisions, posters and different tools of visualization. Commander Judd wants to telecast his marriage with Nicole on television and says “Baby Nicole must be produced immediately and put on full display” (Testaments 348). One of the reasons that Gilead and Mayday exploit her image is to project different desires among women through the gaze of Baby Nicole. Furthermore, her image is exploited to create propaganda, and instil a desire among women to accept their victimization silently. Atwood herself acknowledges the manipulative power of images that they are worshipped and “have the powers of gods; so were certain words—the holy names.” (ON WRITERS AND WRITING 53). Gilead does not shy to manipulate religious icons, Aunt Vidala exploits the popular image of a concubine during her religious lectures, and coaxes handmaids to sacrifice their lives like a concubine. She turns the murder of the concubine into an act of repentance, “she sacrificed herself to keep traveller from being killed” (Testaments 79-80). She makes the killing of the concubine as glamorous as a religious sacrifice because she wants handmaids should also sacrifice their lives for commanders. These icons are manipulated to depict the desire of commanders which

confuses the handmaids regarding the authenticity of these icons. Through their aunts, Gilead convinces them to accept their marginalization as an important sacrifice to Gilead. Hence, gaze not only dehumanizes but inserts the desire for this dehumanization among its victims. The reason behind this desire is the hidden jealousy towards commanders who enjoy all the benefits and privileges. This jealousy leads to the desire for power because Aunts feel jealous due to a lack of completeness. This desire for power is an illusion, which Lacan interprets as an *Invidia* that is resulted through the spectacle which he terms as *videre* (115). This shows that gaze cannot only dehumanize its victims through the mirroring animal gaze but also redirect their desires. The handmaids through participation desire to equate commanders but their efforts to become complete result into alienation and dismemberment. In this context, feminist narratives are also revolving around a lack that is generated by the patriarchal gaze. They only desire to have a sense of completeness rather than enjoying the privileges that are enjoyed by men. Hence, this study attempts to deconstruct the hidden lack behind this anti-patriarchal narrative. These narratives are unconsciously controlled by patriarchal structures, and the feminist struggle ends in disillusionment.

Conclusion

So far, the narrative of *The Testaments* has been explored through the lens of gaze, especially the role of eyes explored behind the feelings of alienation and dismemberment. The mirroring animal gaze objectifies its victims in a picture. Like Handmaids, Agnes has a lack due to objectification; they now subconsciously desire to look like animals. Like her step-sister Agnes, Daisy is also objected to as an animal by Gilead's oppressors, she starts imagining herself to be a pet. This lack can also be interpreted as a repressed desire that comes into existence due to the gaze of others. Moreover, this study also shows that there are certain factions of feminine voices that are complicit with Gilead in acts of violence against women. They are blind to the real idea of freedom; they are imitating their patriarchal masters in the name of freedom. Hence, it can be said that gaze not only dehumanizes but also influence our ability to desire independently.

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