“If I have an egg, what more can I want?”: The Metaphorical Representations of Eggs in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale

Ng Lay Sion*

Graduate School of Language and Culture, Osaka University, Japan

ARTICLE INFORMATION
Received: 18 Dec. 2018
Received in revised: 6 Jan. 2018
Accepted: 7 Jan. 2019
Available online: 12 Jan. 2019

KEYWORDS
Eggs-as-a-dehumanizing-tool
Eggs-as-feminine-resistance
Feminism
Handmaids
Counter-narrative
Gilead patriarchal administration

ABSTRACT
This article attempts to explore the metaphorical representations of eggs in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, suggesting that eggs represent not only an oppressive tool to control the Handmaids but also a symbol of resistance against the patriarchal norms imposed by the Gilead administration. Its first section uncovers the ideology of patriarchy, gender cannibalism, and dehumanization that are embedded within the representation of eggs in the novel. The second part foregrounds the notion of eggs-as-feminine-resistance through making visible the metaphorical connection between eggs, the lunar moon, women’s wombs, cave, and love in The Handmaid’s Tale (THT). These representative elements, as the author argues, function as a powerful counter-narrative as opposed to Gilead’s patriarchal and totalitarian consciousness.

1. Introduction

Representing a novel of survival, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale describes a dystopian futuristic world in which the Republic of Gilead is suffering from a decrease in the childbirth rate due to various social and environmental problems. For instance, the widespread availability of birth control (abortion) in the immediate pre-Gilead period; also, the widespread environmental degradation originated from an uncontrollable use of chemical substances, to name a few. Under these dystopian circumstances, the Gilead regime aims to
preserve human life through “return[ing] things to Nature’s norm,” which includes the imposition of a compulsory surrogacy service and group marriages, the controlling of social media and technologies, the manipulation of food distribution, to name a few (THT 220). Drawing on the control of foods in the novel, I attempt to explore the metaphorical representations of eggs in the Republic of Gilead, suggesting that foods (in this paper I mainly focus on eggs) serves not only as an oppressive tool to control the Handmaids but also a metaphor of resistance against the patriarchal norms imposed by the Gilead administration. Divided into two parts, the first section uncovers the ideology of patriarchy, gender cannibalism and dehumanization that are embedded within the representation of eggs in the novel. In doing this, I come to the assumption that Gilead’s operating system is constructed upon the ideology of self-eating or self-sacrifice, leading to the realization that the ultimate goal of Gilead’s ruler is to transform the Handmaids into self-cannibalistic creatures. The second part foregrounds the notion of eggs-as-feminine-resistance through making visible the metaphorical connection between eggs, the lunar moon, women’s wombs, cave, and love in the novel. Embedded in the representation of eggs, these elements function as a powerful counter-narrative as opposed to Gilead’s patriarchal and totalitarian consciousness.

2. The Metaphorical Representation of Eggs in The Handmaid’s Tale

2.1 Oppression

After being deprived of identity, family, and property, the Gilead administration classifies women based on their social roles: the Wives of the Commanders; the surrogate mother trainers, the Aunts; the fertile women named Handmaids; the housekeepers, the Marthas; and the toxic dump cleaners, the Unwomen. These roles play an essential part as they are bound to the food distribution system in the whole regime. For instance, the unfertilized Wives are free to take any food, which includes unhealthy substances such as cigarettes and alcohol while the Handmaids can only have “healthy foods” that are rich in “vitamins and minerals” (THT 65). This regulation, as Offred recalls, is in contrast to what she used to have in pre-Gilead time: freedom. As she claims, “I could lift the telephone and food would appear on a tray, food I had chosen. Food that was bad for me, no doubt, and drink too” (51). Being deprived of the freedom to choose unhealthy foods, the Handmaids are forced to consume healthy foods that symbolize the “representation of wombs and fertility,” which emphasizes that their only socio-cultural value is reproduction (Stein 200).
Under this food distribution system that is twinned together with the ideology of objectification, even Offred, a woman with an independent mind, is tempted to surrender herself. As in Chapter Nineteen, while Offred has an egg for breakfast, she begins to think that the life of laying eggs or “incubate” (THT 111) is the only life that she could and should pursue: “The minimalist life. Pleasure is an egg … If I have an egg, what more can I want?” (111); “Give me children, or else I die” (61). Here, Offred’s mindset is deeply related to the Aunt Lydia’s claiming of “America was dying of too much choice” (25). This leads to the assumption that the Aunts’ education and Gilead’s food distribution have twinned together in combinations to make the Handmaids believe that they deserve to be nonhuman egg-laying creatures. As Offred calls herself “a queen ant with eggs” (135). In this respect, eggs are used by Gilead as a tool to dehumanize the Handmaids.

By looking further into Gilead’s operating system, one realizes that the tricky part of this system lies in its “auto-cannibalistic consumption,” in which the oppressed individual is turned into both the eater and eaten (Christou 415). In the novel, this instance is also reflected in the episode of Offred’s eating breakfast, in which she thinks of the eggcup as “a woman's torso in a skirt” under which one of the eggs is “being kept warm” (THT 110). Interestingly, this image is parallel to the tradition of Birth Day ceremony in Gilead, whereby the Wife will sit on top of the Handmaid while she is in labor. Referring on this parallelity, the eggs Offred eats are no doubt associated with human ovaries, which are what Handmaids are thought to be in Gilead: they are regarded as “two-legs wombs” with “viable ovaries” (136). In this respect, Offred’s eating of the egg-ovary symbolizes a form of self-cannibalistic act. In other words, the Handmaids are symbolically “edible” and “self-eating” (Christou 416). In Chapter Thirty-One, Offred further stresses that this act of self-eating has slowly become an unbreakable habit for her:

The geometrical days, which go around and around, smoothly and oiled. Sweat already on my upper lip, I wait, for the arrival of the inevitable egg, which will be lukewarm, like the room and will have a green film on the yolk and will taste faintly of sulphur. (THT 200)

Offred’s emphasis on her eating of the egg yolk that tastes like “sulphur” comes to reinforce her self-eating act, as sulfur is used to manufacture products such as fertilizers. What is worth emphasizing here is that this act becomes more and more enjoyable to Offred,
that she is more likely to be convinced that the Gilead administration is designed for her own
good. Offred's shifting of mindset is a result of Gilead’s auto-cannibalistic system.

Besides the effects of dehumanizing and self-cannibalizing, the Gilead administration
further imposes a scientific discourse on “eggs and sperms” that comes from the cultural
stereotypes of male and female roles in the pre-Gilead society. This scientific fairy tale
becomes the core concept of Gilead’s operating system, resulting in the division of women
into different categories according to their reproductive abilities. In “The Egg and The Sperm:
How Science Has Constructed A Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,”
Emily Martin foregrounds the impact of Western cultural stereotypical norms on the scientific
construction of the “egg and sperm” discourse by noting that,

In the case of women, the monthly cycle is described as being designed to produce eggs
and prepare a suitable place for them to be fertilized and grown—all to the end of making
babies. But the enthusiasm ends here. By extolling the female cycle as a productive
enterprise, menstruation must necessarily be viewed as a failure. Medical texts describe
menstruation as the "debris" of the uterine lining, the result of necrosis, or death of tissue.
The descriptions imply that a system has gone awry, making products of no use, not to
specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap. An illustration in a widely used medical text
shows menstruation as a chaotic disintegration of form, complementing the many texts
that describe it as “ceasing,” “dying,” “losing,” “denuding,” “expelling.” (486)

On the contrary, the maturation of sperm is written in a completely different tone
compared to women's reproductive physiology. As Martin claims that,

Male reproductive physiology is evaluated quite differently. One of the texts sees
menstruation as failed production employs a sort of breathless prose when it describes
the maturation of sperm: “The mechanisms which guide the remarkable cellular
transformation from spermatid to mature sperm remain uncertain. ... Perhaps the most
amazing characteristic of spermatogenesis is its sheer magnitude: the normal human male
may manufacture several hundred million sperms per day. (486)

It is this culturally biased scientific egg-and-sperm notion that serves as the core
concept of the Gilead administration. As Offred in her story sees the coming of her
menstruation as a failure: “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it
means failure” (THT 73). This failure denies her existence as a “true” woman not only to
others but also herself: “I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (73). This denial toward her own presence then converts her body from a “single, solid, one with me” to “the central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am,” dehumanizing her and making her a breeding machine of Gilead (73-74). On top of this, Offred is fearful toward the reality that she will be sent to the Colonies if she does not soon produce a child within the given time. However, the old Commander is excluded from this anxiety even though his physical condition might be the main cause of Offred’s non-pregnancy. This double standard notion imposed by the Gilead administration is no doubt derived from the biased scientific description of men and women’s reproductive systems in the early twenty-century:

Textbook descriptions stress that all of the ovarian follicles containing ova are already present at birth. Far from being produced, as sperm are, they merely sit on the shelf, slowly degenerating and aging like overstocked inventory...the male, who continuously produces fresh germ cells, and the female, who has stockpiled germ cells by birth and is faced with their degeneration. (Martin 487)

It is not hard to think that descriptions such as degeneration, wasted, and failure legitimizes the Handmaids as “two-legged wombs” and rationalizes the denial of their basic rights (THT 136). In the novel, Offred’s Commander justifies this notion by claiming, “You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs” (211). Following this, Karen Stein claims, “women become for him [men] the eggs which are broken and consumed to create a better life for the patriarchal ruling class” (67). Calling women “broken eggs” is thus rooted in the culturally oriented scientific discourse that regards women’s ovulation as degeneration, a waste, and a failure.

The description “you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs” is further linked to the situation of Jews during the Holocaust by Offred. In Chapter Twenty-Four, Offred recalls her childhood terror in which Jews are killed in “ovens” by the Nazis (THT 145). As a child, Offred was confused and thought that “these deaths had taken place in kitchens” because “ovens mean cooking, and cooking comes before eating” (145). Offred further claims, “I thought these people had been eaten” (145). However, as an adult, she still thinks that “in a way...they had been [eaten]” (145). As Maria Christou suggests, this image of burning human fleshes resemble the image of baking bread in the ovens in Gilead, “an association which sets up an analogy between the Gilead regime and Nazi Germany” (418).
Christou’s claim leads to the assumption that the Handmaids are dehumanized and cannibalized in Gilead’s patriarchal community, that they are “eggs which ‘are broken and consumed’ just as the Jewish people were consumed at the Holocaust” (qtd. in Christou 418). This metaphor makes visible a parallel structure between the situation of the Handmaids in Gilead and the Jewish people under Nazism, which further leads to the idea that both women and Jewish people function as the scapegoats of each administration. While the Nazi regime insists that the Jews’ inferior blood and racial features are to blame for causing economic and political inequality, the Handmaids who are marked as “Unwomen” by the Gilead administration are to blame for causing the depopulation of the regime due to their inability to reproduce healthy babies. This racial and patriarchal setting is the structure of scapegoating violence that characterizes both the Nazi and Gilead administration.

In “Can the Treatment of Animals Be Compared to the Holocaust?”, David Sztybel foregrounds the parallel oppression between the Jewish Holocaust and the treatment of animals by focusing on how Jews were treated in the Holocaust and how animals are treated in the present day (100). Solid evidence that Sztybel offers to support his argument includes: Boria Sax’s claiming of the holocaust originally denoted “a Hebrew sacrifice in which the entire animal was given to Yahweh [God] to be consumed with fire” (qtd. in Sztybel 98); Peter Singe’s “clear discussion of how the Nazi experiments are like experiments done on animals” in his work (qtd. in Sztybel102). These analyses prove that the Jewish holocaust and the treatment of animals are bound to the concept of oppression. In the novel, the Handmaids are often figuratively regarded as animals such as pigs (“I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (THT 69), egg-laying hens (as mentioned above) and so forth. Indeed, Offred’s description of her life as a “pig” resembles the oppression of animals in intensive farming. As for intensive farming, Jim Mason observation is worth noting that every few miles, the road is shrouded in a breath-stopping, rancid smell from some nearby animal factory. It is a sickly, deathly smell … like the smell of a concentration camp. Which, of course, the factory farm quite literally is, because it concentrates a large number of animals indoors and feeds them a steady diet of grain concentrates … In addition, it is a factory in which energy and nutrients from the sun and soil are concentrated by animals and turned into meat, milk, and eggs.(qtd. in Sztybel 105).

Mason’s description leads one to imagine at Gilead itself as a factory farm, and that the Handmaids are animals indoors who are fed with a steady diet before turning them into meat, milk, and eggs. This argument leads to the assumption that the deconstruction of
Gilead’s auto-cannibalistic and patriarchal system would bring both the oppression toward women and Jews and the nonhuman animals to an end.

### 2.2 Resistance

While food represents a tool to oppress women’s fundamental rights and desires, converting them into egg-laying creatures or breeding machines, food also symbolizes some sort of power concerning feminine resistance and human nature. As Emma Parker’s states that, “[t]he food which is intended to control becomes a means of subverting that control” (119). The most significant example that shows foods as a form of resistance (reconstruction of identity) is Offred’s applying organic butter to her skin in order to overcome the experience of disembodiment that she is forced to encounter in Gilead:

Can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I too am disembodied. I can listen to my own heartbeat against the bedsprings, I can stroke myself, under the dry white sheets, in the dark, but I too I am dry and white, hard, granular…I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor. (*THT* 104)

It is through applying the organic butter to her skin that Offred feels as though she has regained her body, leading her to believe that one day she will be able to escape this place and “will be touched again, in love or desire” (*THT* 97). From this respect, the act of buttering, which Offred calls the “ceremonies of our own, private ones,” symbolizes the reconstruction of identity in the sense that it reconnects her mind to her body and further leads her toward hope. As Kiyomi Sesame notes, “[u]sing butter as a lotion or cream is the Handmaid’s resistance, not only to the Commanders’ Wives, who deny them their femininity but also to the Gilead regime as a whole, which has reduced them to ‘containers’” (95). Hence, this private act of buttering serves as a form of resistance to the Gilead’s disembodiment policy.

Another profound instance of resistance can be found in eggs. While eggs are fragile and breakable on the one hand, eggs also imply the power of renewal on the other. In the novel, eggs are emphasized by Offred as a source of vital energy: “the egg is glowing now, as if it had an energy of its own. To look at the egg gives me intense pleasure” (*THT* 110). Thus, her act of sliding the top off the egg and eating the contents symbolizes a movement of
revitalization or the recharge of feminine energy. Moreover, Offred links the representation of eggs to the moon, a round, mysterious body that holds power for healing, emotional strength, physical and spiritual wellness: the first egg is white. I move the egg cup a little, so it’s now in the watery sunlight that comes through the window and falls, brightening, waning, and brightening again, on the tray. The shell of the egg is smooth but also grained; small pebbles of calcium are defined by the sunlight, like craters on the moon. It’s a barren landscape, yet perfect; it’s the sort of desert the saints went into, so their minds would not be distracted by profusion. I think that this is what God must look like: an egg. The life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside (THT 110).

The shifting of metaphors from eggs to moon, then desert, and then God, indicates Offred’s spiritual discovery of a whole universe inside the glowing egg. As Glenn Deer claims, “the egg is compared to the moon; the moon becomes a desert, place of spiritual trial and of revelation” (qtd. in Sasame 94). This symbolic creation serves as a form of mental resistance toward Gilead’s phallogocentric oppression. In this regard, Hilde Staels explains that:

The egg is an image for the barren surface of Gilead and for the condition of the protagonist's outer body, which is “defined by sunlight” or by the logocentrism of the rulers. Yet the egg glows red from the inside. Underground, a red, hot pulsing process of life is hidden. Red is the color of organic, free-flowing blood that reveals the existence of life energy: “the life of the moon may not be on the surface, but inside,” Offred says. (462)

From this respect, Offred’s emphasis on the productive (inner) life of the egg and its bright red yolk is juxtaposed with her cold red dress and the unproductive (outer) life of Gilead. While the red sun defines her outer body, the deep red blood moon defines her inner body. Furthermore, following this lunar calendar, a woman’s womb is a multi-dimensional universe, in which from period to period it transforms from a cosmic wilderness to a tremendous warm wetland, before turning into an awe-inspiring desert, whereby the spiritual purification takes place. These spiritual transformations have been emphasized in the analysis of Lilith, a figure in Jewish mythology, by Jungian psychoanalysts:
Along in the menstrual hut, a woman can reflect on her wounds, lick her own blood, and become healed and nourished. There is a cold lunar logic to the periodic feminine need for flight to the wilderness, the swamp, and the desert. At the dark of the Moon, woman can connect with the elemental feminine stuff within her, and a natural process of healing can occur. (Quadrant 100)

While the inner transformations of women represent something malevolent and dangerous, at the same time they can also be benevolent, tenderhearted and meditative. In the novel, the malevolent aspect of the womb is reflected in Offred’s description that “[e]very month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, and omen” but suddenly it “passes out of sight” and leaves her nothing but “despair” and “emptiness”; paradoxically, the benevolent aspect can also be found in Offred’s referring to her womb as “huge as the sky at night and dark and curved like […] black-red. […] Pinpoints of light swell, sparkle, burst and shrivel within it, countless as starts” (THT 74). Regarding this, in “Science Fiction in the Feminine,” Coral Ann Howells regards Offred’s womb as a continent of “cosmic wilderness,” a symbolism parallel to French feminist Hélène Cixous’s “dark continent”—a feminine space that “is neither dark nor unexplorable” (138, 137). Cixous’s idea leads Howells to view Offred’s exploration of her dark continent as an “intense meditation [that] offers a kind of imaginative transcendence” (138). This transcendental transformation occurring inside Offred’s cosmic womb proves that “the egg [womb] is not merely a large, yolk-filled sphere into which the sperm burrows to endow new life.” Rather, eggs are as active as sperms; they are mutual active partners (qtd. in Martin 494). Finally, these multi-dimensional representations of Offred’s eggs serve as a counter-narrative to Gilead’s phallogocentric norms. As Howells notes, “[i]t is within this territory of imagination and metaphor that Offred claims the space to write about her body, her memories, and her womanly desires, and so manages to elude the confines of Gilead” (136).

In “Science Fiction in the Feminine,” Howells further emphasizes the collective power that lies within Offred’s narrative, suggesting that “Offred’s voice doubles and multiplies to become the voices of ‘women’ rather than the voice of a single narrator” (133). Indeed, this aspect is reflected in the episode of Ofwarren’s Birth Day, whereby the Handmaids who help Ofwarren to give birth feel as though they were “transported” into the body of Ofwarren, experiencing the pain of giving birth to a child (THT 127). As Offred claims, “[m]y breasts
are painful, they’re leaking a little. Fake milk, it happens this way with some of us” (127). The transcendental moment in which all the Handmaids felt as though they had become “one” is when the child is coming out from Offwarren’s womb.

It’s coming, it’s coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other’s hands, we are no longer single. (THT 125)

This collective consciousness represents the voices of all Handmaids rather than just Offred's. Furthermore, what leads to this transcendental moment is the sharing of the “[s]mell of matrix,” which includes the smell 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” (THT 123). In the late Latin medical literature, the word “matrix” is closely related to “mother, breeder, and womb” as well as “original place” (qtd. in Aristakhova 12). From this respect, the sharing of matrix or womb between the Handmaids foregrounds their creative feminine power as opposed to the patriarchal administration of Gilead.

Another aspect that illustrates this transcendental “matrix” is the love affair between Offred and Nick. As Offred expresses, “[b]eing here with him is safety, it’s a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside” (THT 269). Here, the word “cave” can be referred to as a womb as well, as a cave symbolizes “the realm of death (the dark space) as with that of rebirth (the maternal womb)” (Bocker 54). Not only a safe cave/womb, but this mystical space also represents the state of cosmic wilderness, parallel to the metaphorical description of Offred’s womb. As Howells notes that “She and Nick have crossed over into wilderness territory of passion and instinct as the imagery suggests, finding there a place of security where like primitive cave-dwellers they cling together in their shared private space (144).”

This shared, primitive, wild cave or womb that is created by Offred and Nick thus serves as a transcendental space as opposed to the isolated, controlling, totalitarian space of Gilead. Moreover, within this wild womb-like space there is also love, an element strongly dismissed by the Gilead administration. However, it is this element that transcends time and space and further brings happiness, security, and trust into Offred’s life in Gilead. As Offred confesses, “[t]he fact is that I no longer want to leave, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (THT 271). Love thus serves as an essential element for them to create their own version of cosmic wilderness, urging Offred to consider
being with Nick in Gilead instead of escaping the regime. Furthermore, I see love as the main reason why Offred would step into an unknown black van after hearing Nick’s assertion of “[t]rust me” (294). Finally, drawing on the Historical Note at the end of the novel, the reader knows that Offred’s story has reached the hand of Darcy Pieixoto. This comes to mean that Nick did not betray Offred after all, even though “neither of [them] says the word love” to each other throughout the story (270). Here, one understands that the word “love” is unnecessary since Offred and Nick have already found their own version of cosmic wilderness.

3. Conclusion

In Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, eggs are used by the Gilead administration to control the mentality and bodies of women. By eating eggs—which symbolize fertility and women’s wombs—prepared by the regime, the Handmaids are assimilated into Gilead’s auto-cannibalistic ideology and gradually transformed into nonhuman breeding machines or two-legs wombs. Under this auto-cannibalistic system, the protagonist Offred begins to see her menstruation as a failure, further losing her self-identity and becomes disembodied. Like the privileged Commander’s assertion that “you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs,” the sacrifice of the Handmaids (women in general) is necessary for creating a better life for the rulers or oppressors. Rooted in the culturally oriented scientific discourse in the pre-Gilead time, the recognition of the Handmaids as “broken eggs” is derived from the patriarchal declaration of women’s ovulation as denegation, passive, and failure. This biased assumption is parallel to the Nazi’s racialized declaration that Jewish people are inferior, untrustworthy and parasitic. Similar to the incident of Nazi’s racial Holocaust or the cannibalistic act in George Orwell’s Animal Farm, the Republic Gilead is nothing but a patriarchal animal farm that animalizes and cannibalizes them.

While eggs are breakable and consumable, they also imply the power of renewal and the revitalization of feminine energy. In the novel, Offred’s spiritual discovery of a whole universe inside the glowing egg serves as a form of resistance against Gilead’s phallogocentric oppression. More specifically, the representation of eggs is linked to the diverse transformations of the lunar moon as well as the multi-dimensional universe of women’s wombs, which includes the stage of cosmic wilderness, the tremendous warm
wetland, and the awe-inspiring desert. These transformative changes that occur within the Handmaid Offred foreground the fact that eggs/wombs are not merely passive containers but active continents of viral energy and life. More interestingly, when all the handmaids join together for Ofwarren’s Birth Day, they share the smell of “matrix” in the labor room and transform this maternal matrix into a collective feminine consciousness as opposed to Gilead’s patriarchal consciousness. Another instance that contradicts Gilead’s oppressive system is the love relationship between Offred and Nick, which is deeply embedded within the representation of womb/cave. Like the cosmic wilderness expressed through Offred’s womb, the intimate sexual interactions between Nick and Offred come to highlight a shared primitive wilderness that serves as a transcendental space as opposed to the isolated, controlling, totalitarian space of Gilead. At last, Offred’s trust toward Nick shows the reader that it is love that ultimately transforms fear into courage, wilderness, and hope.

References:


How to cite this manuscript: Ng Lay Sion, “If I have an egg, what more can I want?”: The Metaphorical Representations of Eggs in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies, 2019, 2(1), 79-92.