

Postmodernism in Literature
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Lecture – 22a

Postmodern Fiction by Women: Reading Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Good morning everyone. I am happy to welcome you to today's session of the NPTEL course Postmodernism in Literature. Today's lecture is a continuation of the previous one titled Postmodern Fiction by Women. And today we shall be reading Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. This lecture needs to be situated in context as a continuation of the previous lecture, trying to locate the Postmodern Feminist writings, published particularly by fiction writers who are also women.

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The Handmaid's Tale (1985)

- A dystopian novel set in a near-future New England, in a totalitarian, Christian theonomy Adapted into a film - 1989
- The journey of the handmaid Offred – “Of Fred” – handmaids are forbidden to use their birth names – must echo the master whom they serve



This also needs to be situated as a corollary to the many discussions that we have been having in trying to see the connections between feminism and post modernism. To recall the previous session, we have already taken a look at one of the first the first novel by Margaret Atwood titled *The Edible Woman*.

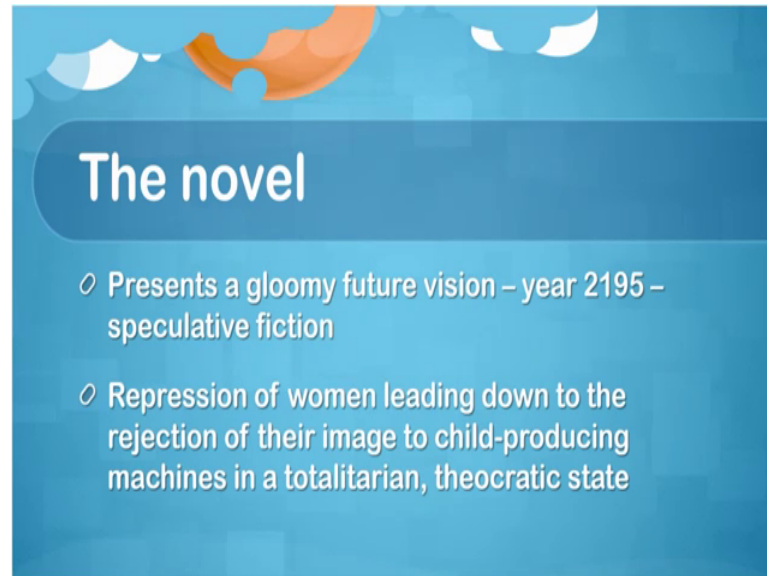
And we have seen how she makes use of the idea of gender and the idea of consumption to subvert and to reject the identities of gender and also to critique the growing consumerist tendencies within America, particularly in the 1960s.

A Handmaid's Tale; the novel that we propose to take a look at in today's session is one of her later novels published in 1985. And here we also see a more predominant postmodernist stance being foregrounded by Margaret Atwood. A Handmaid's Tale was an immediate success soon after its publication and it was also adapted into a film in 1989. And if we talk about the novel, this can be seen as a dystopian novel set in a near future; in New England, in a totalitarian Christian theocracy. And this is in stark contrast to the more or less realist elements that were introduced in her first novel; The Edible Woman.

And we find her moving away from all the binding tendencies of realism as well as feminism and taking the discussions related to feminism in post modernism to a different paradigm all together. We also find that if we examine the trajectory, if we examine the transition of Atwood's works from the edible woman till a Handmaid's Tale, there is a definite way in which her narrative progresses to reject all the grand narratives which are related to the literature as well as a feminist articulation.

A Handmaid's Tale at the dystopian novel is could be summarized as a journey of a handmaid Offred and the name "Of Fred" is a combination of Of Fred to suggest that in possession of Fred because during the time that this novel is set the handmaid's are forbidden to use their birth names and they must echo the master whom they serve. So, this is a tale of a handmaid who is serving a master named Fred. We do not get to know about her in any other way rather than by the name which she bears in this way of Offred.

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The novel presents a very gloomy future vision it is set in year 2195 and in that sense it also fits well into the category of speculative fiction. It talks about the repression of women, eventually leading down to the rejection of their image to child-producing machines and this happens in a totalitarian, theocratic state which is predominantly a Christian fundamentalist in nature.

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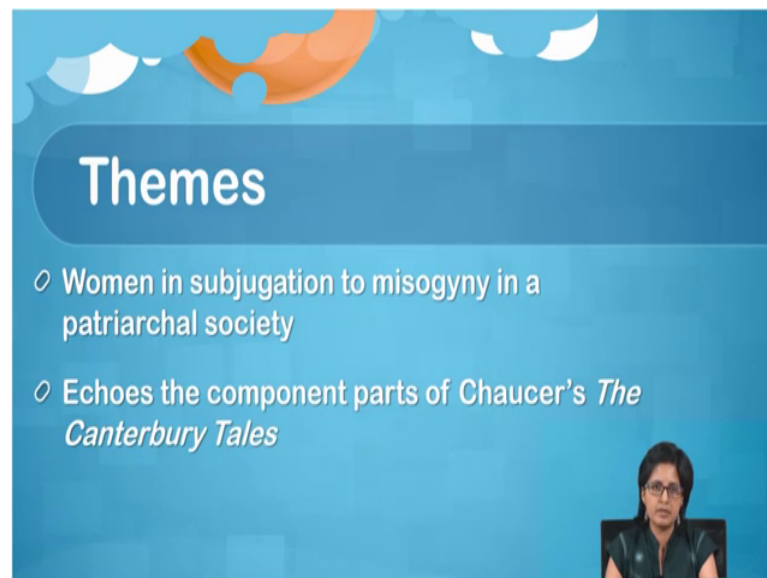


It is possible to say that a Handmaid's Tale also equals a certain other dystopian novel of well repute this just a Yevgenie Zamyatin's We published in 1921,

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* published in 1948 and Orwell's novel *1984* published in 1948. And here we begin to notice that Atwood was also subscribing to a particular tradition which has always been made popular mostly by male writers the writing of dystopian fiction.

And here she uses this available form to reject certain conventions about writing, about literature and also about the identities of gender.

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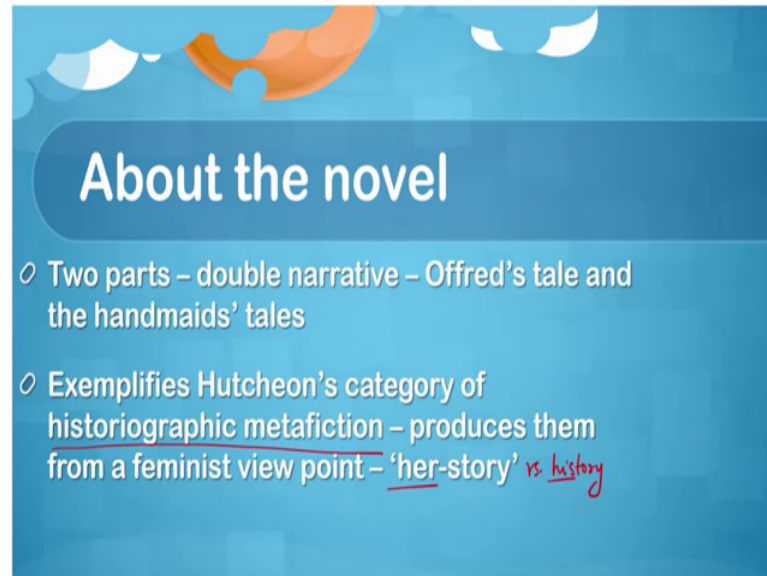


Themes

- ◊ Women in subjugation to misogyny in a patriarchal society
- ◊ Echoes the component parts of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

And some of the major themes in *Handmaid's Tale* include the identification of women in subjugation to misogyny in a patriarchal society. And we find that the narrative of the novel, the way in which of the novel is structured; it also Echoes the component parts of *Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales*. This could also be seen as the as an element of inter text in the work a *Handmaid's Tale*.

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The novel is narrated in two parts. It also functions as a double narrative. On the one hand we have Offred’s tale and also a number of Handmaid’s Tale which are woven into the novel. And this work a Handmaid’s Tale also exemplifies Linda Hutcheon’s category of historiographic metafiction. And Atwood has been able to very successfully produced historiographic metafiction from a feminist point of view.

And accordingly it is also possible to say that she also offers her story versus history; which is mostly her story. So, there is also a play on gender at many levels. She also uses the idea of gender, she problematizes a gender; to further complicate the notions of history and how history has been narrativized and handed down.

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The Context and relevance of a Handmaid's Tale needs to be further engaged with. And this could be seen as an interrogation of traditional historiography and realism and she in that sense also debunked the myth that feminism and postmodernism cannot truly sit together. That feminist writing is essentially also committed to a realist authentic portrayal and hence cannot fit into the postmodernist framework.

So, Atwood completely debunks this myth and she engages in a very powerful interrogation of traditional historiography as well as realism. We may also note that the novel expresses a Margaret Atwood's concern about the rise of reactionary politics and culture in 1980s. She is particularly referring to the Reagan administration and the crisis that followed in 1980s.

This novel in that sense because the critique that it offered, it was famous and notorious at the same time. On the one hand the novel was prescribed as a fixture on the school syllabi for a very long time but it was also critiqued for its antireligious sentiment the way in which a Christian theocratic state with became the background in which the dystopia gets set.

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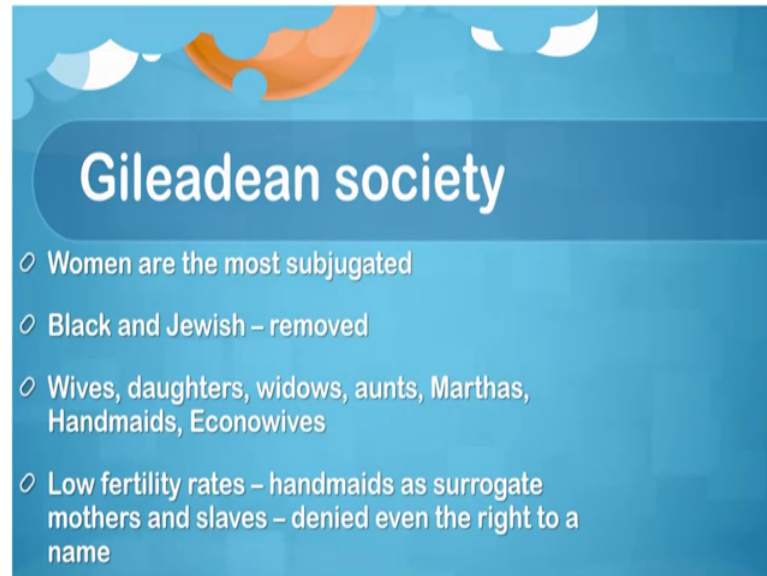


So, this is the setting of the novel. This is Set in Cambridge, particularly in Massachusetts and in the course of the novel we find that due to a certain revolution that happens in Massachusetts, post-revolution the abolish the US constitution gets abolished. And in place of the US constitution what gets enacted is the Republic of Gilead: it is a Christian theocracy. So, we find that the story of this dystopia begins with the setting up of a new Republic of Gilead.

So, the republic of Gilead is in stark opposition to everything that the progressive notion of America stands for. It offers only limited freedom, literacy is eroded and women are forbidden to read, dissidents and homosexuals are put to death publicly at a place called Wall and this was outside what was formerly Harvard University.

So, this directed reference to the transformation of a leading western city into a dystopia, is also offering a critique on the way in which the western societies, the western consumerist cultures could be leading themselves into a kind of degradation.

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So, how do we understand the Gileadean society which is being represented in novel Handmaid's Tale? Women are the most subjugated in the republic of Gilead. The black and Jewish women have already been removed because they are seen as unwanted. And this is the social stratification that is being followed as far as women are concerned at the top of the hierarchy is the category of wives, followed by daughters, widows, aunts, Marthas, Handmaids, and Econowives. And thus, this story the Handmaid's Tale is about the handmaids which are located fairly in the lower rung of the hierarchy, they are also represented in stark contrast to the way in which wives are being held in a higher status.

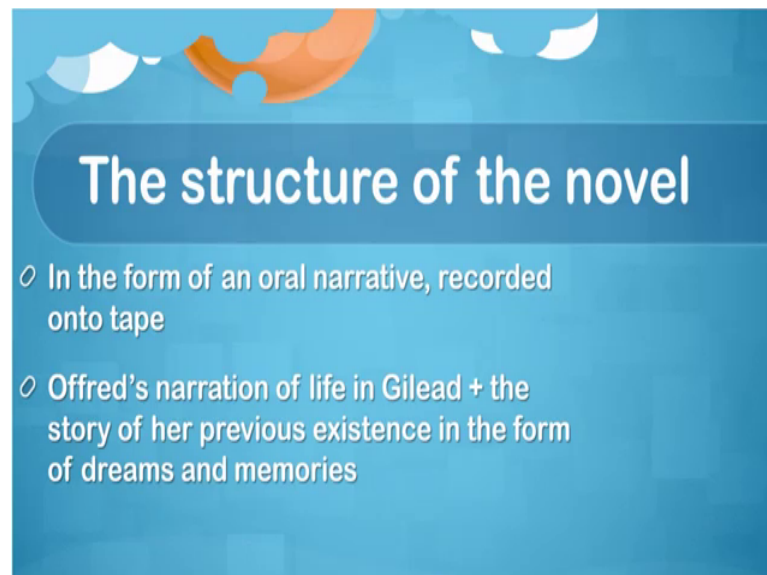
The novel tells is that in the republic of Gilead, most of the women suffer from low fertility rates. So, the handmaids are employed as surrogate mothers as well as slaves, for the women who are in the higher rungs of the society; especially the wives. But these women who are helping the wives to bear children for their families; they denied even the right to a name; which is why the protagonist is known as Of Fred because her master is a Fred.

While this novel talks about a dystopia, at some level act would also maintains that this is hardly a stretch of the imagination, because even in today's world there are certain places where women are denied all kinds of agency and all kinds of rights over their own bodies, about the rights to choose, what to wear or whom to marry.

And in addition, she also reminds us that there are many places even in the contemporary society where women can be stoned to death for crimes such as adultery. So, though this is set in a distant future, she also reminds us that this is a not too distant future that is being referred to; same as a case with Orwell's 1984 or Aldous Huxley's *The Brave New World*.

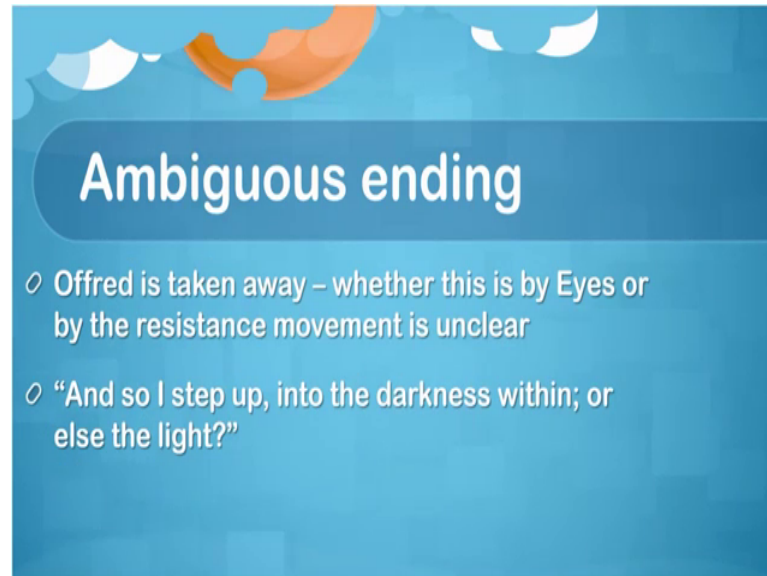
And Atwood's work also needs to be seen in that context. And here we also find that while she is using the postmodernist strategies, she is also able to bring in build in a certain political critique through the framework of feminism.

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The structure of the novel needs to be taken a look at this point of time. It is narrator in the form of an oral narrative which is recorded on to a tape. And this is primarily about Offred's narration of life in Gilead and this also includes the story of her previous existence in the forms of dreams and memories. So, the narrative shifts between these different parts of the story also exposing a very pertinent postmodernist element in this.

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The ending of the novel is very ambiguous, making the work more postmodernist than ever. Offred is taken away towards the end of the novel and she is being taken away in a van. One does not know whether this is by the ICE which is you know part of the administration or by the resistance movement this is very unclear and novel does not offer us any clear suggestions about the same. And Offred herself is not very sure of what she, what has in store for her. As and when she is boarding this van, in which she has taken away towards the ending. She says “And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light?”

So, the character herself is not sure whether she is leaving for darkness or for light and the novel does not make any effort to clarify this for the reader. So, it is up to the reader to figure out, how the novel ends and what the future is going to be.

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In terms of history and accuracy, this is a perfect novel which doubles with both of these ideas. There are occasional digressions in the novel about the problems of constructing accurate historical narrative. If you recall the discussions that we had about Toni Morrison's work *Bellwether*, you may remember that, she also engages with the question of history and accuracy. And in this novel we can also find a familiar postmodern concern about the unnarrated events about the gaps and margins which are part of the narrative.

So, that since we are introduced to not just a narrator which is being handed down to us, we are also alerted to the fact that there could be gaps, there could be margins, there could be certain outlier, certain elements which have been left out.

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This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. . . . When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or in the tongue, half-colours, too many.

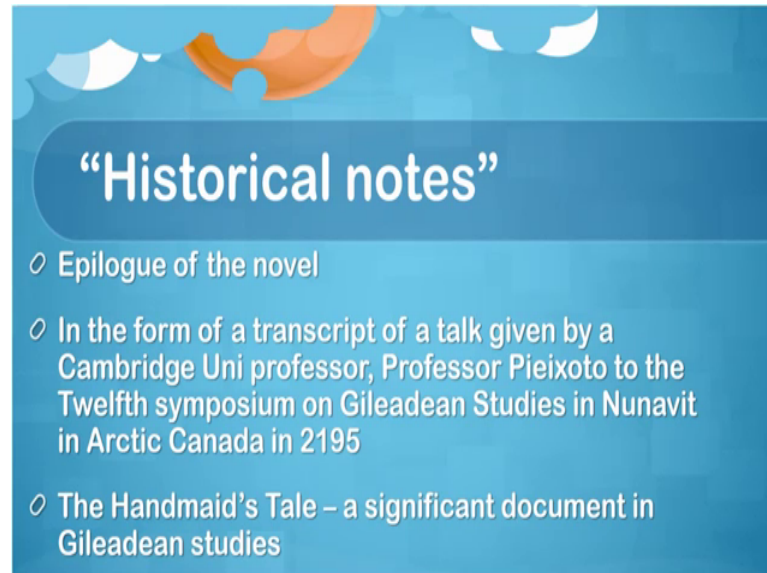
(Atwood, 1996a, 144)

So, if you take a look at an excerpt from the novel. This is an excerpt where Offred talks about, how this narration is part of a reconstruction. This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It is a reconstruction. Now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or should not have said, what I should or should not have done, how I should have played it. When I get out of here, if I am ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It is impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact. You always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances, too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or in the tongue, half colors, too many.

So, look at the way in which she is focusing her attention to the word reconstruction and also to how there are too many things to be told, there are too many that one could always leave something out. And this may also remind us of how the character in midnight's children Salem Sinai He begins telling the story of the nation and also telling the readers that there are too many stories to be told. This is a perfect postmodernist rendition of being aware that. Everything is a reconstruction, there is nothing original, nothing can be accurate and also there are too many stories to be told that there is always a possibility of having left out something.

So, whatever we have at this in form of narration, in form of history, could be fragmented and there is no way in which one could get away from that knowledge.

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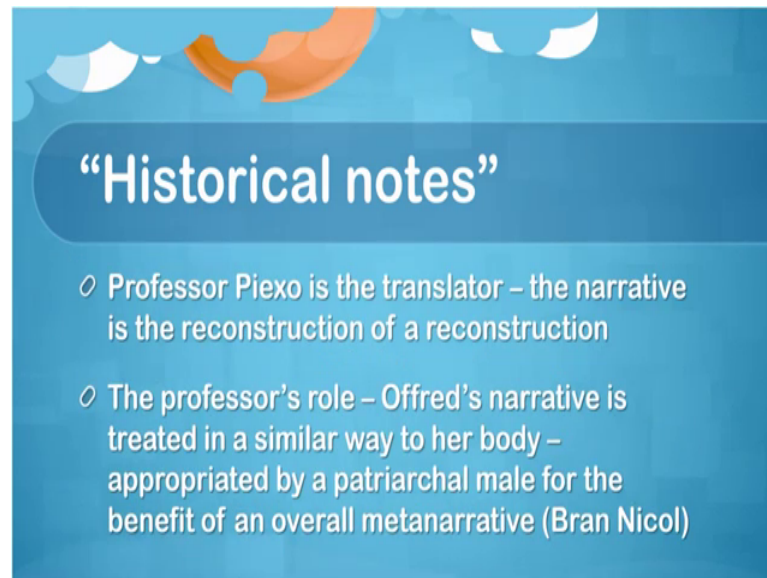


To engage with this problem of accuracy perhaps, Atwood leaves with us a section, titled “Historical notes” as an epilogue after the novel. And this is also a very deliberate postmodern strategy that she employs. The epilogue of the novel has also been much discussed for the interest that has it has generated. It is in the form of a transcript of a talk given by a Cambridge university professor, who was a named Professor Pieixoto and he is also addressing the 12th symposium on Gileadean Studies in Nunavit in Arctic in 2195.

So, very cleverly Atwood brings in a document of which also gives us assemblance of certain historical academic veracity. The Handmaid’s Tale is being introduced in this talk given by Professor Pieixoto, as a significant document which would contribute to Gileadean studies. And the republic of Gilead is also seen as a major research, a site a major historical site in that sense.

So, the epilogue also gives us a sense that it becomes important to play with the idea of veracity, the play with the idea of an academic accuracy and research related academic activities.

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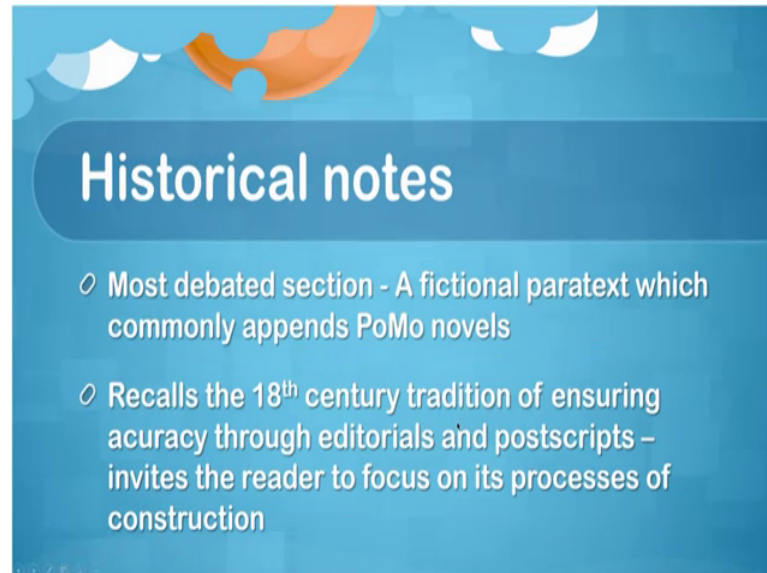
In the epilogue historical notes we get to know that Professor Pieixoto is the translator. And by him being the translator, we also get to know that this narrative gets transformed into a reconstruction of a reconstruction. I want to note this point with particular care in the excerpt that we have just now read; the character Offred is telling us about how her own recounting, her own retelling is a reconstruction.

And now we find that, when the professor translates this work, it becomes further removed from that reconstruction and it becomes a reconstruction of a reconstruction. Here we are also made to see the way in which this novel resonating a well with the idea of a copy of a copy. How the post, how the postmodern celebrates the move away from any kind of originality? How it becomes difficult to know what is original and what is a copy? How it becomes difficult to know what is the original text? And what is being reconstructed or emitted him?

And he realized the very powerful postmodern strategies employed by Margaret Atwood. And to bring in a more feminist reading to this epilogue title historical notes. The professor’s role can be seen in a very different way. Offred’s narrative, it is treated in a similar way to her body we can say. Because her body was appropriated by a patriarchal male in it throughout the story and here her reconstruction her retelling is also being appropriated by a patriarchal male for the benefit of an overall metanarrative. And this is

also the reading that Bran Nicol brings in his work, the Cambridge introduction to postmodern fiction.

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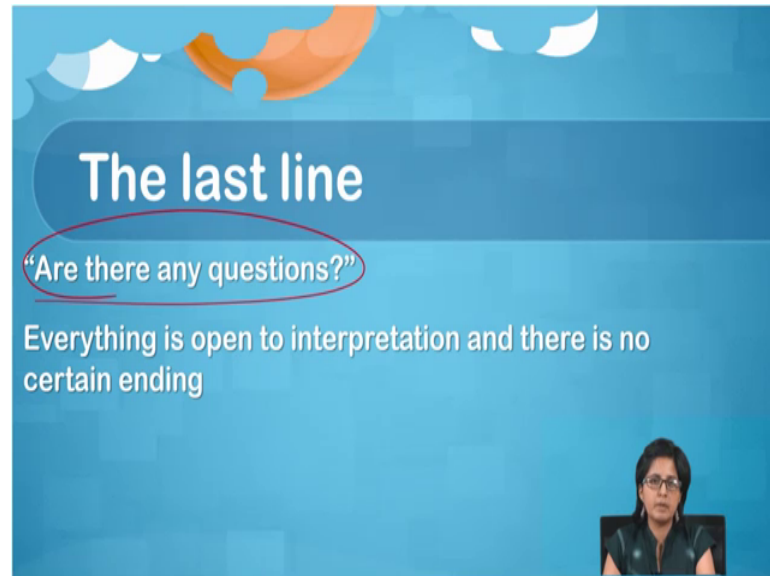
The historical notes as an epilogue it continues to be seen as a most debated section in the novel *Handmaid's Tale* and this is seen as a fictional paratext which commonly appends postmodern novels. We have also seen how the postcolonial postmodernist novel by Ishmael Reed titled *Mumbo Jumbo* also makes use of references after the novel.

And this technique of giving historical notes as an epilogue; it also recalls the 18th century tradition of ensuring accuracy through editorials and post scripts. In the 18th century when the novels were beginning to be written; when the novel was true struggling for a kind of legitimacy throughout the 18th and 19th century. We find that there was also a very pertinent effort being put into ensuring the accuracy or the veracity of the incidents being retold. We may recall the elements of this right from the beginning of the works it is *Robinson Crusoe* published in the 18th century.

And here also we find an Atwood is employing a similar strategy to subvert the realist elements. And she is inviting the reader to focus on its processes of construction. As we read through the historical notes, from the professor we also get to know that Offred eventually had managed to escape from the republic of Gilead. But whether she survived this or not is a question that the novel does not an answer and that is the ambiguous ending that we are left with. As we begin to wrap up this lecture, I want to draw your

attention to the last line of the novel which is part of the historical notes; the epilogue.
“Are there any questions” Being asked by the professor.

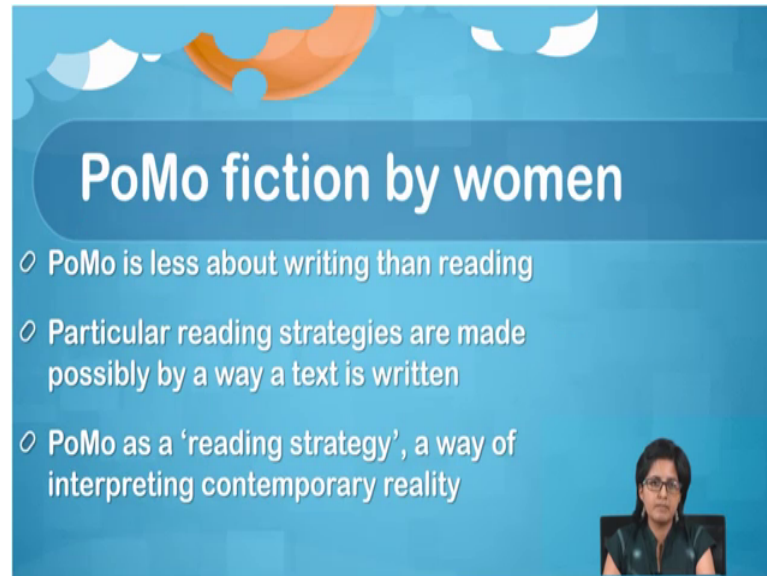
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This is a very deliberate way in which Atwood chooses to end her novel by asking the readers are there any questions? Of course, the reader is left with a number of questions and a number of ambiguities and this is a very direct invitation to the reader, to participate in this act of interpretation and also to be aware of the fact that there is no certain ending.

So, the last line with the question “Are there any questions?” Is also a very postmodern strategy that Margaret Atwood employs and with this we also get to know that the postmodern writing is not merely about writing, but it is also about employing particular reading strategies to make sense of the text which is being given to us;

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The slide features a blue background with a decorative top border containing white and orange abstract shapes. The title 'PoMo fiction by women' is centered in a white rounded rectangle. Below the title, three bullet points are listed in white text. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a woman with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark top, looking towards the camera.

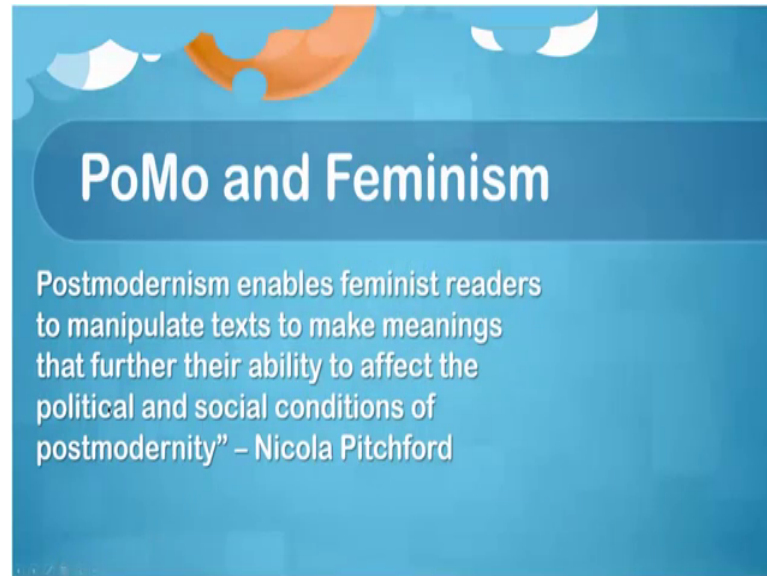
PoMo fiction by women

- PoMo is less about writing than reading
- Particular reading strategies are made possible by a way a text is written
- PoMo as a 'reading strategy', a way of interpreting contemporary reality

So, as we conclude this, how do we understand the postmodern fiction written by women? So, this the understanding of postmodernist fiction written by women, begins also with the understanding that post modernism is less about writing than reading. The ending of the novel is also a very direct pointer towards this act of the reader's participation in making sense of the text.

And this is also reminder that, particular reading strategies are made possible by away text as written. It is a way the text is being written; what enables certain kinds of reading strategies to be employed in understanding the novel. And post modernism in that sense could be seen as more as a reading strategy and as a way of interpreting contemporary reality. And a Handmaid's Tale certainly offers us many of these things and it also alerts us to the possibility that the reader, needs to participate in the making of the text, in making sense of the text and the ambiguity which is part of the text is also an open invitation for the reader to participate.

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As a concluding note, I wanted to pay attention to a quote by Nicola Pitchford, where she tries to see the connection between post modernism and feminism. Post modernism enables feminist readers to manipulate text to make meanings that further their ability to affect the political and social conditions of post modernity. So, this Nicola Pitchford is further reminding us that postmodernist feminist writing is not just about the text but it is also about enabling feminist readers to see particular kinds of social and political conditions. On that note, we wind up today's session.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.