

Marriage as Survival: A Feminist Reading of Domestic Space and Social Reality in Margaret Atwood's *Habitation*

X. Keerthi

Department of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil - 629004

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli - 627012

Email: keerthix99@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a feminist reading of Margaret Atwood's Habitation, arguing that the poem reimagines marriage as an evolving space of negotiation rather than a stable domestic institution. Through imagery of liminality, domestic space, and survival, Atwood challenges traditional assumptions of marriage as a source of security and fulfilment, revealing its emotional and psychological complexities. Drawing on feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett, Judith Butler, and other critics, the study examines how the poem exposes the gendered expectations embedded within patriarchal marriage. The analysis further situates Atwood's vision within contemporary social realities, particularly in the Indian context, by considering emotional labour, digital representations of marital life, and marriage-related distress reflected in National Crime Records Bureau statistics. By connecting literary analysis with present-day social concerns, the paper demonstrates the enduring relevance of Habitation as a critique of domestic ideology and a powerful exploration of survival, resilience, and gendered experience.

Keywords: Marriage, Feminism, Domestic space, Emotional labour, Social reality, Margaret Atwood

The institution of marriage has long been culturally constructed as a site of stability, fulfillment, and social legitimacy, particularly for women. Within patriarchal frameworks, marriage is often presented as the ultimate destination of security and identity. However, in *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that woman has historically been positioned as, “the Other,” confined within patriarchal roles that reinforce dependence and restrict autonomy (26). This ideological construction underlies the romanticized vision of marriage as a protective and fulfilling institution. In *Habitation*, Margaret Atwood challenges this narrative by presenting marriage not as a stable structure, but as a fragile and evolving condition marked by uncertainty and survival.

Atwood's opening assertion, “Marriage is not a house or even a tent,” directly rejects the conventional metaphor of marriage as a form of shelter. Traditionally, as Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* suggests, the house symbolizes intimacy, safety, and psychological stability (4). By denying both the permanence of the “house” and the

provisional security of the “tent,” Atwood destabilizes the assumption that marriage provides protection. Instead, the poem situates the relationship in a space of exposure and vulnerability. As Betty Friedan argues in *The Feminine Mystique*, domestic life often fails to deliver the fulfillment it promises, leaving women trapped in roles that obscure dissatisfaction (15).

The poem’s recurring imagery of “edges” further emphasizes the instability of marital space. References to “the edge of the forest” and “the edge of the desert” evoke liminal zones that resist fixed definition, symbolizing transition and uncertainty. At the same time “the edge of the receding glacier” introduces the idea of gradual erosion, suggesting emotional distance and the fragility of connection. This depiction aligns with Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, that personal relationships are shaped by underlying power structures that often disadvantage women (23). Marriage, in this sense, becomes a site where these power dynamics are negotiated rather than resolved.

The representation of domestic space in the poem further challenges the idealized notion of home. The image of “the unpainted stairs / at the back where we squat / outside, eating popcorn” presents an incomplete and marginal environment. The “unpainted stairs” signify a lack of finish, while the positioning “at the back” suggests exclusion from the central, idealized space of domestic life. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, domestic spaces in literature often reflect the constraints imposed on women within patriarchal systems (89). Atwood’s imagery exposes the gap between the ideal of domestic perfection and the reality of lived experience.

The concluding line, “we are learning to make fire,” shifts the focus from spatial instability to the theme of survival. Fire symbolizes warmth, sustenance, and continuity, yet the phrase “learning to make” indicates that these qualities require effort and are not inherent to the relationship. Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* suggests that roles within relationships are not natural but are repeatedly enacted (33). Marriage thus emerges as a site of ongoing negotiation, where stability must be actively constructed.

The tone of the poem reinforces this interpretation. The lines “painfully and with wonder / at having survived even / this far” suggest that endurance, rather than fulfillment, defines the marital experience. Coral Ann Howells mentions Atwood’s work frequently explores themes of survival and adaptation, while Sherrill Grace in her work *Violent Duality: A Study of Margaret Atwood* highlights the tension between opposing forces such as stability

and instability in her writing (41). These critical perspectives underscore the poem's portrayal of marriage as a complex and often precarious condition.

The concerns articulated in *Habitation* resonate strongly with contemporary social realities, particularly in the Indian context, where marriage continues to function as both a cultural ideal and a source of psychological strain. In the age of digital representation, platforms such as Instagram construct an idealized image of marital harmony, emphasizing visual perfection while concealing emotional complexities. However, emotional labour remains disproportionately borne by women, revealing the persistence of gendered expectations within modern relationships.

The influence of digital culture further intensifies the gap between the idealized and lived realities of marriage. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook play a significant role in constructing and circulating images of marital perfection, often emphasizing curated moments of happiness while excluding conflict, labour, and emotional strain. This selective representation creates what may be understood as a performative model of marriage, where individuals feel compelled to align their relationships with socially validated standards. In this context, marriage becomes not only a private institution but also a public performance shaped by digital visibility. The pressure to maintain this illusion of perfection can intensify dissatisfaction and emotional stress, particularly when personal experiences fail to match these idealized portrayals. Atwood's depiction of marriage as a space of uncertainty and continuous effort thus stands in stark contrast to the polished narratives promoted through social media, revealing the persistence of hidden struggles beneath the surface of contemporary relational life.

Statistical evidence further underscores this disparity between perception and reality. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, marriage-related issues accounted for over 9,000 suicides in India in 2023, representing nearly five percent of total cases (NCRB). Between 2016 and 2020, more than 37,000 individuals died by suicide due to marital problems, with only a small percentage linked to divorce, indicating that individuals are more likely to endure distress within marriage than to exit it (NCRB). Furthermore, over 66 percent of suicide victims in India are married individuals, suggesting that marriage often intensifies rather than alleviates emotional and social pressures (NCRB). These findings strongly echo Atwood's depiction of marriage as a space of survival rather than security.

Figure 1: Marriage-Related Distress in India (Based on NCRB Data)

Category	Data (India)
Total suicides (2023)	1,71,418

Marriage-related suicides (2023)	~9,043
No. of total suicides	~5%
Total (2016–2020) marriage suicides	37,591
Married victims (overall suicides)	~66%

As illustrated in Figure 1, the persistence of marriage-related distress highlights the gap between the idealized perception of marriage and its lived reality. The data reinforces Atwood's argument that marriage is not a stable refuge but a condition requiring continuous negotiation and endurance. These statistics demonstrate that marriage cannot be understood solely as a private emotional bond but also as a social institution shaped by unequal expectations and gendered responsibilities.

Ultimately, Atwood's *Habitation* dismantles the romantic myth of marriage by presenting it as an evolving space of negotiation rather than guaranteed security. Through feminist perspectives and contemporary social realities, the poem exposes how domestic relationships continue to be shaped by gendered expectations, emotional labour, and unequal power structures. By connecting literary representation with present-day realities, this study demonstrates that Atwood's vision remains profoundly relevant to feminist literary criticism and contemporary debates on marriage, identity, and survival.

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