

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Dystopian Novel

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ABSTRACT--*The dystopian world is a nightmare for anyone who lives through it or encounters experiences related to such a society. There is no individual freedom, right to privacy, freedom of speech or even thought. People become pawns in the hands of an autocratic system which rules the lives of the people. Any voice raised against such a society is silenced by brutal violence or death. The system rules not only through political power, but ideologies as well. They condition the people through educational institutions and Churches in the attempt to make the tyranny seem natural. Women suffer the worst. They have no right over their bodies or their children. Indeed, the people are kept so terrified and vulnerable that they never rebel against the injustices committed against them by the government in power. Such a horrific and hopeless society is presented by Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The tale narrates the tale of Offred, who is forced to leave her family and work as, in every sense, as a sex slave. She, like the other handmaids, are treated as mere baby producing machines and have no right over their privacy. Through the character of Offred, Atwood reveals the dangers of exploiting one's own rights, thinking they are for granted and warns her readers of a world of dystopia. My paper, in this respect, aims to explore the themes used by Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* to elevate it to the level of dystopia. It also analyzes the various episodes and instances of dystopia presented in the novel.*

Keywords --*dystopia, freedom, handmaids, sex, rights.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dystopia and utopia are two main genres of speculative fiction which primarily focus on the society and the political jurisdiction over a territory. The term dystopia have its roots in Ancient Greek words 'dys' and 'topia', meaning 'bad' and 'place' respectively. It is thus used to describe a society which is completely dehumanizing, evil and degraded to an unimaginable extent. Dystopian fiction, as defined by Wikipedia, is "the creation of an utterly horrible or degraded futuristic society that is generally headed to an irreversible oblivion, or dystopia. Dystopia is defined as an alternate society characterized by a focus on negatives, usually frightening, such as mass poverty, public mistrust and suspicion, police state, squalor, suffering, and/or oppression, that society has most often brought upon itself. Dystopias usually extrapolate elements of contemporary society and are read by many as political warnings. Many purported utopias reveal a dystopian character by suppressing justice, freedom and happiness." First example of a dystopian fiction would be George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is another such example which has been a landmark text in this genre in literature. Published in 1985, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is unquestionably one of the best examples of a dystopian novel in the history of English Literature. In fact, as stated by Lois Feuer - "Atwood's work goes beyond Orwell's, in matters of style

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that becomes matter of substance as well as in the female debate over “essentialism” that Atwood brings to the dystopian tradition.” (Feuer 83)

Set in the setting of The Republic of Gilead, the novel portrays a society which is completely totalitarian and autocratic. Individual identity, freedom, human rights and even the right to move freely out of one’s room is under constant surveillance in the Republic of Gilead. Atwood creates the feeling of fear by putting an almost military like force in control, with almost no loopholes for the people to escape. The Republic is a place which uses ideology to subdue its people. In the guise of creating a utopian, or ‘perfect’ and ideal society, the theocratic regime creates order by suppressing freedom, justice and happiness of its people. The aim of my paper is thus to analyze the primary themes and issues that promote it as a dystopian novel. Moreover, I shall also analyze how Atwood, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, extends the dystopian genre by taking it further and showing how the state uses propaganda to further the ideology of the society.

II. ANALYSIS

A dystopian novels offer to its readers an imagined futuristic setting in which the society is controlled by an autocratic, totalitarian and theocratic regime with no individual freedom or liberty for its citizens. There is gloom and a sense of hopelessness in the environment with heavy surveillance all around. In the guise of an ordered and utopian society, there is heavy oppression and autocracy of the government in power. It creates a sense of fear and apprehension in the minds of its readers. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is one such novel which contains all these features of a dystopian novel. As stated by Slawomir Kuznicki in his Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Fiction: Fire is Being Eaten Atwood is conscious of the themes and style she uses: “her peculiar astringent blending of these two elements [i.e. form and contents] links her separate works, which display such technical and intellectual versatility that they often seem unrelated.... Definitely, one of Atwood’s most powerful means of expressing worldly interests—because it seems that, after all, substance always comes before form in her prose—is the genre of dystopian or speculative fiction, as both terms are adequate. (Kuznicki 14-15)

Not only is the individuality of the citizens curbed in the Republic of Gilead, but their identities are also erased. No longer are they someone who are characterized by their name, their bloodlines or their relations with one another. Rather, they are reduced to being defined by the role they play for the regime. The soldiers are called Angels, the police became the Guardians, the high officials as Commanders. Women were either Marthas, Econowives, Wives or Handmaids. There were the Unwomen who were infertile and sent to the colonies. As stated by Fredrik Petterson in his dissertation “Discourse and Oppression in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” -Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a thought provoking novel about the domination and governing of women by men. It presents a dystopia where freedom for women is restricted because of the new Christian government’s extreme policies. This new society, The Republic of Gilead, is described by a woman called Offred. She is a so-called Handmaid, a kind of breeding tool for the republic. The ideology and ideas of this Christian government are presented to us through Offred’s first-person narrative. Flashbacks also provide a picture of the society “before” Gilead. (Petterson 3)

Like all autocratic regimes, The Republic of Gliead too was not free from hypocrisy. Gilead made rules stating that sex was something only to be done for reproductive purpose and men were not to indulge in it other than for

such productive reasons. However, Jezebel and the prostitutes there were a clear example of how the regime bent its own rules. The Commanders were never punished for indulging in such fantasies. However, if any normal citizen was to even show a slight action of defiance, the penalty could be death. Even a wink or an improper gesture could lead to one's execution.

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the background of a society which is completely authoritarian and autocratic. The government of Gilead is a totalitarian regime which has taken full control over the state after killing off the President and the Congress. The people no longer have the rights they once had and have to obey every command of the regime without any opposition if they want to live. Not only their public, but their private life as well is governed and dictated by the Republic of Gilead. The regime follows the ideals of the Old Testament and would prosecute anyone who goes or even dares to go against the smooth functioning of the regime in power. It justified its actions by preaching the ideology that it was creating a utopia where the ravages of environmental degradation and radiation would no longer exist. However, it is only an illusion to remain in complete power over its citizens. The Guardian stated -

Like any theocracy, this one would select a few passages from the Bible to justify its actions, and it would lean heavily towards the Old Testament, not towards the New. Since ruling classes always make sure they get the best and rarest of desirable goods and services, and as it is one of the axioms of the novel that fertility in the industrialised west has come under threat, the rare and desirable would include fertile women – always on the human wish list, one way or another – and reproductive control. Who shall have babies, who shall claim and raise those babies, who shall be blamed if anything goes wrong with those babies? (N.pag)

The violators are hanged or punished with the penalty of death in public, so as to in still fear in the residents of the town, warning them of the consequences of treason. It is through Offred, the main character in the novel, that the readers are made aware of the theocracy that runs in the so called 'Republic' of Gilead. Offred, whose name was once June, is a handmaid. Handmaids are fertile women who can still bear children in the environment where the fertility rate has decreased drastically. Like all other handmaids, June does not have any choice in her existence. She does not have the freedom to live with her husband, Luke, and her little daughter. Rather, she has to act as a child bearing machine for the Commanders. She is reduced to a mere tool where her only purpose of existence is to produce babies. The handmaids are treated like sex slaves who are to be passed from one Commander to the other for procreation, and are sent to the colonies once they are found infertile. They have no private life whatsoever. In fact, every individual in the town are under surveillance and constant supervision by secret agents called the Eyes. They report anyone or anything that happens to be against the regime. No one is sure who the Eye could be and hence, cannot lay their trust on anyone. In the totalitarian regime of Gilead, individual freedom and liberty are terms that are foreign and completely non-existent.

Offred, or June, narrates her memories of her past with Luke and their daughter. She recounts how once she used to live happily as a family with her own job and freedom in America. However, like a nightmare which comes without warning, her job was taken from her. She could neither work, and neither did she have any access to her credit cards. This was all done by the regime which believed women shouldn't work. As the laws were becoming more threatening, she and Luke planned to escape with their daughter. However, they were caught and separated. They were arrested by the state without any valid reason or any offense to the law. Neither did they get their right to appoint any lawyers. The Republic of Gilead and justice became synonymous in the state. Whatever the regime

decided became the law. There were only two options. Either follow the rules, or suffer execution. Unlike a free country where there was freedom of speech and reforms, Gilead didn't allow such acts. Rather it punished anyone if they were found to preach any ideology other than those of the regime. The incident in chapter XVIII, A Guardian was accused of raping a Handmaid. However, Ofglen tells Offred that the actual reason was because he was a member of Mayday, the underground resistance against the regime. Ofglen herself commits suicide when she learns that she has been caught. Moira, Offred's friend, too was a victim of the regime and made to choose between being a prostitute or sent to die in the colonies. None of those options were dignified or just for someone who just wanted to escape the life of a Handmaid and live on her own terms.

Although it was named "Republic" of Gilead, ironically it was anything but so. It was a state of utter theocracy and totalitarian rule. *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important text in this genre as it is not only about the curbing of individual freedom and liberty by a totalitarian regime. Rather, it also focuses on how the government in power uses ideology to justify their ways of governing, further making it seem banal. As put in a popular blog in markedbyteachers.com -

Individuality is crushed in George Orwell's "1984", but forms the source of politics and character in *The Handmaid's Tale*. *The Handmaid's Tale* extends the dystopian genre. This is what makes *The Handmaid's Tale* a good example of a dystopian novel. Gilead is a state which uses propaganda to further the ideology of the society. Atwood creates the feeling of fear by putting an almost military like force in control. (N.pag)

The society of Gilead was suffocating for all its citizens, but was more nightmarish for the females. The women were not allowed to read, not given government jobs and neither were they to wear clothes of their own choice. Their purpose in life from their birth to death was directed by the state. They were taken away when they were born, married off early right after they attain puberty so that they can bear children sooner. The women who are fertile are taken away from their families and made to sleep with various high officials to bear their babies and increase the birth rate of Gilead. The freedom of speech, which is one of the most important fundamental rights, is taken away by the theocratic regime. To prevent any revolution in the minds of the women, they are not allowed to read any magazines or documentaries. Neither are they allowed to associate freely with each other so as to thwart the prospect of any protest. They are made completely obedient by the fear of being punished or killed off.

The life for the Handmaids is the worse. They are given high privileges as compared to the other women. However, it doesn't remove the fact that despite their rank being higher than the Marthas or the Econowives, they are nothing but usable sex slaves. They have their usefulness as long as they are fertile. The moment they are found infertile, their life is doomed to the colonies where they will eventually die, lonely and uncared for. Even if it is the male that is sterile, it is the Handmaid that would be blamed for being infertile. Even if they get a chance to get pregnant by some other means to save themselves from being shipped off, they are too afraid to take the plunge. In chapter XI of the novel, the Doctor offers to impregnate her because he knows there is nothing wrong with her. It is the Commander who is sterile according to him. However, despite knowing that the Commander's inability would be blamed on her, and she would be shipped off, she manages to resist the tempting offer. The doctor assures her that they are alone and the door is locked. However, she is unable to break free from the fear instilled in her mind by the regime:

The penalty is death. But they have to catch you in the act, with two witnesses. What are the odds, is the room bugged, who's waiting just outside the door? (67)

Not only men, but women too contribute to the suppression of women. The Marthas, Econowives and other women who envy the Handmaids leave no chance to blame them if they get assaulted or raped. It is the woman who is blamed for getting into trouble. This patriarchal setup of the society is a part of the ideology of the regime in power. Women are always treated as second to men and as tools for procreation. The Republic of Gilead justified the supremacy of men over women by referring to the ideas of the Old Testament.

“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection.” Here he looks us over. “All” h repeats.

“But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

“For Adam was first formed, then Eve.”

“And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was the transgression.

“Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.” (229)

The concept of love is something that becomes foreign in Gilead. There is no trust amidst anyone to have a suitable partner. All marriages and relationships are established for the benefit of capitalism. Young women are married off after puberty so as to be able to give birth sooner. The husbands and wives are to indulge in intimacy only for reproductive purposes. Offred once knew what love was when she was with Luke. However, the regime had turned her into someone who couldn't recognize between love or simply necessity. She began to like the commander because he brought her magazines, lotions and spent time with her. However, at times it seemed as if she liked him because she had a power over him. Her liking for him disappears when she realizes he is the same with all his Handmaids. She feels something for Nick towards the end of the novel. However, the constant fear and weariness of the regime makes her question over and over again if he is genuine. At times, she doubts if he is an Eye of the regime and was testing her. In such a dystopian society, all such emotions of love, longing and other human feelings are squashed. At its expense, the Regime rules and benefits.

In the Republic of Gilead, the right to choose a partner, the right to raise their own children, the right to speak the language one wanted, the right to live in one's own property without any surveillance – all such basic human rights are next to non-existent in such a dystopian world. It is a world where the people in power try to play God over its citizens. In the guise of utopia, they normalize their norms and ideologies, so much so that any new born would think it is how societies are meant to function. The rigid control over the lives of the people, especially the women, was suffocating. They could not even trust their shadows in such a state ruled by sheer surveillance and autocracy.

The Handmaid's Tale, although depicted as a dystopian speculative fiction, it is based on contexts that exist in the real world. Many of the incidents narrated by Offred in the novel are actually present in some countries, where freedom is curbed and women are treated as sub-humans. North Korea is a country which is an apt example of a theocratic regime that completely controls the life of its citizens. The people who manage to escape recount their sufferings and horrors in documentaries, much like Offred's recordings. Autocratic regimes like the Republic of Gilead aren't only part of fictions but an actual reality in many of the Taliban countries. For the citizens of such territories, even the basic human rights are almost non-existent, with no means to rise in protest. The slaves in America before the Civil War faced such a fate. These societies could only be termed as real life dystopian societies, much like Gilead.

The regime which holds power makes and bends laws as per their wish. While they make the life miserable for its subjects, it twists some laws for their own conveniences. But the regime is all powerful in the state and hence, the people refuse to protest knowing it was hopeless. It was complete dystopia for the people in the illusion of a disciplined and progressive world. The ones in power rule by means of instilling fear and terror in the people in various countries like Pakistan, Iraq, Iran and such others. Women are not allowed to move out of homes without a male of the family. Many of the housewives have to withstand abuse and harassment from the people in power. These corrupt people escape punishment because they control the law in their state. Such theocratic regimes indeed exist in the world that exists to preach their ideologies by any means. Thus, the dystopian world that is portrayed by Margaret Atwood in her novel is not just a speculation, but a horrific reality in some parts of the real world. It makes the readers beware of such a theocratic state and reminds them how fortunate they are to have their basic human rights intact. It warns them never to take their rights for granted, and neither to provide complete power to any regime so much so that they become cruel dictators.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be seen that the novel successfully portrays a society which can be termed complete dystopian. Atwood's use of language, various flashbacks which contrast the past with the present, her portrayals of the different characters and the constant surveillance manages to make the readers feel Goosebumps on their skin. Even the thought of having such a theocratic regime in one's life would make a person wish they were never born. The suffocation is deepened by the fact that it had become banal and acceptable as a normal in Gilead. Apart from the few members of the resistance, all of the other people have been brainwashed to believe the ideals preached by the state. Even the females blame other females whenever they get assaulted, raped or murdered. This patriarchal mindset is also something that has been infused by the regime in power. Although, the novel is termed as a feminist novel, the various themes, the scenarios and the construction of the society efficiently elevate it to a level of a dystopian novel that even went beyond Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

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