

**A MARXIST READING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE  
HANDMAID'S TALE**

**Harith Ismael TURKI**

[harith.turki@karabuk.edu.tr](mailto:harith.turki@karabuk.edu.tr)

**Dulfqar M. ABDULRAZZAQ**

[dulfqar@gmail.com](mailto:dulfqar@gmail.com)

**Department of English language and Literature,  
Karabuk University**

**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31973/aj.v1i146.3726>**

**ABSTRACT:**

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a salient dystopian fiction considered as an allusion to the reader's reality, where it highlights a futuristic totalitarian regime in which people are dehumanized and live in horror and indignity. However, the purpose of this paper is to explore the class conflict between the various women's social classes under the Gileadean regime and its resulting persecution. Moreover, this study adopts Marxist Feminism as a theoretical framework to read the text and explore the implications of social class conflicts and clashes among women in the household. Consequently, the current paper reached the following findings: First, the Gileadean regime deliberately creates differences among the women in the household in order to exploit them and creates a state of conflict among themselves. Second, the regime fabricated a false consciousness among each class, especially the Handmaids, to deceive them and make them think they are superior in society in order to keep them under control so as to be used as sacred vessels or fertile reproduction machines for the infertile women of high class. Finally, Gilead was able to make women turn on each other as the upper class of women played the role of patriarchy in persecuting the inferior classes of women.

**Keywords:** *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood, patriarchy, Marxist Feminism, persecution

**1. Introduction**

Fiction has always played a major role as a dominant literary genre in different time periods, in conveying the social reality that human experiences in which the novel is written. Therefore, a novel could reflect the author's personal experiences or reality. It might also deal with public issues that are related to the abhorrent social and class issues that classify people according to their social and economic

classes. Some authors depict issues related to women's rights, like the economic and gender issues in a society where the income of men is higher than women as an example, or patriarchal unjust authority that imposes sexual discrimination that makes women powerless and acquiescent. Therefore, fiction could be considered among the most important literary genres that embody the reality of humans in their various issues. For this reason, postmodern writers adopt novels as a means to express the serious issues that emerged after World War II, which justifies the focus of postmodern authors on using the novel as their official genre more than other literary genres (Brantly, 2017, p. 13).

Furthermore, the issues of class clashing and discrimination based on economic and social aspects have always been of interest to many researchers, particularly those of gender and social class segregation examined from a feminist perspective. One of the issues that researchers are interested in is the way women are treated in the patriarchal society and the influence of the economic side on raising discrimination, persecution, and submission against women. Margaret Atwood is considered one of the most prominent postmodernist authors who focus on feminist issues, her style is ironic against the norms of society and questions the lost identity, as she is sometimes considered a postcolonial writer for that reason. However, often the heroine of her novels is an artist, writer, or urban woman in general, struggling against the oppressive patriarchal power in society, where Feminism is defined from her point of view as a "human equality and freedom of choice" (Tandon, 2008, p. 141).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts the issues of gender and social class, which have caused continuous conflict among people at various levels. However, the events of the novel take place in a dystopian community, where "silence, oppression, constraint and surveillance operations, rebellion and assertions for individual freedom can be seen in being able to leaf through an old magazine and play a game of Scrabble" (Wisker, 2010, p. 27). The community in the dystopian condition is divided into several social classes, led by a totalitarian government in which women's rights have been obliterated, and men gained greater rights and wider authority, under which women's community has been divided into several groups such as the handmaids, Econowives, Aunts and Marthas. Such division created a major conflict among them, more than the conflict between females and males, or even getting the chance to think about getting their rights, as they were powerless and in a continuous struggle with each other.

## 1.2 Research Method

This paper relies on Marxism as a general theoretical framework to study Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Marxist feminism theory is specifically used as a tool to examine the female character in the novel. However, Marxism highlights the suffering of the working class in capitalist societies (Chikwado, 2017, p. 115), where they try to suggest or find some solutions for them and empower them in their communities. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels believe that all aspects of life, whether cultural, social, educational, or religious, are controlled by the economy. Moreover, Both Marx and Engels classify communities into various groups divided according to their economic level and their ownership of material goods. However, Marxism is a social theory coined by the German philosopher Karl Marx. This theory appeared as a reaction against the long history that classified society according to social classes which created a continuous struggle among them (Barbalet, 2015). Moreover, Marxism suggests not only identifying problems but finding solutions that enable the crushed classes to change their life. Karl Marx believes that the social and economic process in society results in informing all the ideological systems. In other words, the economic and social system is determined by the hegemony imposed on it, and therefore the shape of society is culturally determined, including educational, political and legal institutions.

Frederick Engels developed a more precise and defined concept to examine women's issues only under patriarchal authority from an economic perspective. He formulates the Marxist feminist theory (Donovan, 2000, p. 79), which is concerned with the economic emancipation of women from patriarchal power, and highlights the issue of unpaid women workers, whether inside the home or outside it, at different periods. Apart from this, Marxist Feminism as a theory tries to find effective solutions to the problems facing women, in order to let women live their lives without being marginalized or persecuted and break the stereotype that sees women as second sex or lower than men in everything (Mojab, 2015). However, Marx and Engels believe that men's consciousness is not the main source that determines their way of life, but what determines their consciousness is their social entity and their daily way of dealing with each other within the society.

Thus, Marxism generally tries to make people criticize what they think and believe in at all levels, whether cultural, economic, or even religious. Therefore Marxist Feminism influences people in what they believe and rethinking the notions about women or the second sex imposed on them by societal stereotypes (Aronson, 2003).

Engels, in his theory, believes that women's financial stability is the only way to make women get rid of marginalization and persecution, as he highlights mainly the problems of women working under the capitalist system, both in society and in domestic life. However, Engels and other Marxist philosophers elucidate that gaining stability and financial independence for women in society or the domestic environment leads to the achievement of the basic goal of women, which is gender equality.

## **2. Results and Discussion**

The social class conflict between women in *The Handmaid's Tale* takes a considerable part of it, where the novel presents four groups of women struggling with each other, as a certain group of women is dominant and oppresses another group, while the other group is subject or submitted to them, which creates a state of influence and impact among them (Vogel, 2013). However, this conflict will be read from the point of view of Marxist Feminism, as long as the author intensively highlights women and their relationship with each other.

### **2.1 The authority and domination of women's classes on each other in the Gileadean world.**

*The Handmaid's Tale* offers several social classes of women conflicting with each other, where the lower ones are the Handmaids, the Marthas, then the higher ones are the Wives, and the Aunts. However, the Handmaids and the Marthas are the lowest class on the social ladder in the Gileadean world, but the Handmaids are considered lower than the Marthas, where they comply with orders from everyone, including Marthas. For instance, one of the Handmaids' duties is to buy groceries for the household, but at first, the Handmaids must "take the tokens from Rita's [one of the Marthas] outstretched hand" (Atwood, 2006, p. 18), which is considered as taking permission from the Marthas, where they direct and order the Handmaids to what to do with the grocers, as they have to "Tell them fresh, for the eggs, she says. Not like last time. And a chicken, tell them, not a hen. Tell them who it's for and then they won't mess around" (Atwood, 2006, p. 18).

Furthermore, the reader can observe that there is an authority imposed and practiced on Offred by Rita to let her do anything. Even in the simplest things, Offred must ask Rita for permission to do it. For instance, Offred must obtain permission to use a match in the kitchen. Offred describes Rita's reaction every time she asks for permission: "Surprising how much like a small, begging child she makes me feel, simply by her scowl, her stolidity; how importunate and whiny" (Atwood, 2006, p. 236). This assures the inferiority of the Handmaids and how the Marthas look at the Handmaids as a low

grade, even though both are at the end of the social class ladder (Zarrinjooee & Kalantarian, 2017, p. 70). In addition, the Handmaids are inferior to the Aunts and the Wives as well. This is evident in the first meeting between Offred and the Commander's Wife, when Serena Joy prevents Offred from entering the house. Offred states that "she just stood there in the doorway, blocking the entrance. She wanted me to feel that I could not come into the house unless she said so" (Atwood, 2006, p. 20). This confirms that there is an authority imposed by Serena on Offred, who does not allow her to enter her house until she asks to be authorized to do so. Besides that, all the events indicate the inferiority that the Handmaids experienced at all levels with all other groups.

Furthermore, as for Marthas, they have a margin of freedom compared to Handmaids. They are a bit higher than Handmaids, where Marthas are free to meet each other and talk about many things. Therefore, they know everything that occurs in the household, in contrast to Handmaids who meet each other only on specific occasions and live the rest of the time in continuous isolation. Offred explains that "we would gossip. The Marthas know things, they talk among themselves, passing the unofficial news from house to house. Like me, they listen to doors, no doubt, and see things even with their eyes averted" (Atwood, 2006, p. 17). Moreover, Marthas have a great deal of freedom to talk to the Wives, unlike the Handmaids, who are not allowed to do so. For instance, when Serena instructs Offred on occasion, she scolds her for replying with yes ma'am, by stating that:

Don't call me ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha ... I didn't ask what I was supposed to call her, because I could see that she hoped I would never have the occasion to call her anything at all". (Atwood, 2006, p. 23)

Such expression is not allowed for Offred to use, the matter that shows the freedom granted to Marthas to talk to the Wives. This reveals the considerable differences between Marthas and the Handmaids in the household.

What is equally important is that in the ceremonies of the Prayvaganza, which is held to celebrate the marriage of the Wives' daughters, Marthas are free to attend the ceremony or not "especially if they're on duty or have young children" (Atwood, 2006, pp. 234–244), unlike the Handmaids who are required to attend it. Besides, Marthas holds a place dedicated to them alongside other groups of women, unlike the place of the Handmaids, which is surrounded by a rope that Offred describes as "this rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the others from contamination by us" (Atwood, 2006, p. 244).

Another point worth mentioning is that the Wives' social class is higher than the Handmaids and the Marthas, as they enjoy the highest level of privileges in the household. For instance, the Wives enjoy a high level of luxurious life, such as obtaining jewelry and special types of cigarettes that are only obtainable on the black market, in addition to having gardens where they relaxing spend their free time as "it's something for them to order and maintain and care for" (Atwood, 2006, p. 19). Moreover, the Wives have a considerable authority in the household, which makes them control and overpower the rest of the women of different social classes, as the rest of the women in the house are subjected to all orders of the Wives, because of the great power that the Wives hold (Roozbeh, 2018, p. 17). However, the Wives have the ability to fabricate false evidence, if they desired, against any of the women and send them immediately to the colonies, in this regard, Offred described the authority and arrogance of the Wives as follows:

she'd have me out of the house in a minute, or worse if she could think up any excuse at all. If she were to find out ... the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the Wives alone. (Atwood, 2006, p. 86)

Despite the fact that the Wives in the house have authority and strength in making orders in the household, as is distinct from other women groups with the privileges that they hold, but there are some privileges and exceptions that are not allowed to them to gain. Therefore, the Aunts hold every privilege that the wives have in addition to many exceptions granted to them that go against the household's rules. However, these special treatments in the Gileadean world made them at the top of the women's social ladder, because they have nearly absolute power over the rest of the women's groups (Zhao, 2020, p. 250). For instance, in the world of Gilead, there is a forbiddance on reading and writing for all women, but there is only an exception to the Aunts of this prohibition, as when the Commander meets the women to read the Bible on any occasion, all women only listen to him because they could not read, wherein the Gileadean world "only the Commanders and the Aunts are allowed to read and write" (Nelson, 2011, p. 119). Consequently, the reader can observe that there is a kind of superiority of the Aunts over the Wives, Marthas, and Handmaids in many aspects, including their ability to overcome the rules and allow them to learn to read and write.

Besides that, the reader can observe the authority of the Aunts through public execution or what is known in the Gileadean world as the Salvaging ceremony. However, when Salvaging begins, the Aunts lead the ceremony while the rest of the women remain as only a

spectator. Offred describes to the reader how Aunt Lydia leads the public execution ceremony as follows:

The official procession is approaching the stage, mounting the steps at the right: three women, one Aunt in front ... Behind them are the other Aunts. The whisperings among us hush. The three arrange themselves, turn towards us, the Aunt flanked by the two black-robed Salvagers. (Atwood, 2006, p. 309)

That shows the difference in the social class between the superior class where the Aunts belong and other inferior women classes. Therefore, the Aunts represent the authority in the world of Gilead, where this celebration is sponsored and implemented by the government and led by the Aunts, thus representing the authority of the Gileadean government, which gives them the superiority and authority over the rest of the women classes.

## **2.2 Patriarchal and social class treatment against women.**

Any regime that gets authority by force, seeking to impose its ideas and strengthen its power over the people by any means. However, the Gileadean regime has sought to instill its ideas on all the citizens, especially in women, where women themselves were used as a tool to control each other, as the upper class of women, the Aunts were used to indoctrinate and influence the rest of the classes of women (Bloom, 2009, p. 79). In this regard, Offred demonstrates the goal of the Gileadean government in using the Aunts as a means to make the rest of the women subjected to the government, which can be indicated through the following:

The best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves ... no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. In the case of Gilead, there were many women willing to serve as Aunts ... for the benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting. (Atwood, 2006, pp. 345–346)

Consequently, this shows the extent of the class conflict that women experience among themselves, which leads some women from a high rank to persecute other women who are less than them from a class perspective like the Handmaids. However, the Aunts took the role of indoctrinating the inferior class of women and directing them to what the Gileadean regime desired, so the role of the “Aunts is to indoctrinate the handmaids with reactionary ethics” (Firchow & Real, 2005, p. 298). Thus, they impose the rules on the Handmaids to make them submissive to the government. The Aunts do that in pursuit of gaining benefits and authority by the Republic of Gilead, even if they persecute other women. For instance, Handmaids stay in their private rooms when they are not needed, unlike the Marthas who are relative

freedom to go out of their rooms. However, when the Handmaids feel as if they live in prison, and to curb this feeling, the Aunts follow the method of indoctrination to control what they think and feel, where the Aunts convince the Handmaids that their rooms “are not a prison but a privilege” (Atwood, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, the Aunts instil the idea that their rooms are not a prison, but a place where the Handmaids spend their time after completing their important work, and as a result, the Handmaids themselves are important characters as much as the work they have done, which creates a feeling that they live freely and equal as the other women, as Offred states that after the Aunts’ indoctrination them “I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight” (Atwood, 2006, p. 14).

As a consequence, Offred, as well as the other Handmaids got rid of the feeling that their rooms were just a prison due to the Aunt Lydia’s indoctrination when she stated that “I called it mine” (Atwood, 2006, p. 60), referring to her room after she was refusing to admit that. However, the role of the Aunts is highly substantial in restructuring the thinking of the Handmaids and guiding them to what the Gileadean regime wants, where Aunt Lydia indoctrinates the Handmaids with the notion of freedom from the Gileadean point of view, as they must be grateful for the freedom provided by the regime. Another important aspect is that the Gileadean regime has deprived them the real freedom, and given them the illusion instilled in their minds by the Aunts. Since the notion of freedom, according to Gilead, refers to the protection that the regime provided to them, and any attempts to reject or question this protection or mere objection by the Handmaids are met with execution, which is known as salvaging led by women themselves or the Aunts (Ritzenhoff & Goldie, 2019, p. 18). Therefore, the class struggle among women is enormous and much more significant than an abstract conflict between women’s classes, where there is no winner in this struggle and the only loser is the women as a whole in the Republic of Gilead, regardless of their social class.

The Gileadean regime deliberately creates a class conflict among women in various ways, one of which is by presenting a false illusion of superiority and power to a certain class of women over the other classes. Consequently, each group believes that they are superior and have authority over other classes of women, because of the indoctrination of the Aunts that controlled their minds. The regime of Gilead specifies a special color for the women’s robes so that each class is distinguished from the others with official robes with a specific color to the class to which they belong, which somehow represents the identity of women in the Gileadean society. For instance, the Handmaids wear red robes, the Marthas wear green

robes, and the Wives wear blue robes, while the Aunts wear brown robes which symbolize power and authority.

The Handmaids in the Gileadean regime are considered vessels of fertility and breeding apparatus, where they are identified to wear a red robe, which makes them feel that they are superior or distinct from other groups of women, because of the false illusion that fueled their minds through the Aunts' indoctrination. Offred as a narrator shows the reader a comparison between her life in the past and the present, where she demonstrates how all men were flirting and whistling at women in the streets unrestrictedly to any woman before being specified and distinguished in a certain color according to their social class (Wynne-Davies, 2010, p. 37).

However, when Offred become a Handmaid, the red robe made all men avoid flirting with her or any other Handmaid, where all people obviate any possible inconvenience to the Handmaid with their red robes. Furthermore, Offred describes her present life by stating that when "we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles" (Atwood, 2006, p. 33). Moreover, these rules or false illusions by the Gileadean regime imposed on their people have made the Handmaids feel as if they are special members of the household, or more like the holy vessel that prohibits all men from harassing them. Moreover, some of the Handmaids may feel that this special treatment they are superior to the other women from a social class point of view, but others feel that the red robe makes them isolated and despised, and everyone must avoid them the moment they see the red color.

Consequently, the reader can observe the extent of the class conflict created by the Gileadean government within the women's social fabric, where it has made each class believe that they are higher than the other, and thus persecutes each other, making women of the upper classes persecute those of who are inferior to them. Besides that, they are considered a reflection of the ruling patriarchal regime of Gilead, therefore the "typical Marxist feminism attribute women's oppressed condition to the patriarchal, male-dominated capitalistic social order" (Thomas, 2001, p. 243).

Another point worth mentioning is that the robe's color has a different effect on the other classes of women. For instance, the Marthas wear a green robe but "nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" (Atwood, 2006, p. 16). Moreover, the effect of the Gileadean regime appears in creating chaos and persecution within the different women's classes, where the Marthas may think that they are less important than the Handmaids who wear red robes, which may reflect their importance in the Gileadean society, and therefore Handmaids would encounter persecution from the Marthas for such

reasons. In addition, the Wives wear blue robes, which symbolize power and considerable authority over the other classes of women, but the Aunts wear brown robes, which symbolize wisdom and almost absolute authority over all women in the Gileadean regime.

### **Conclusion**

Marxism as literary theory mainly examines social class conflict, persecution, divisions of class, and the unjust consequences of these aspects on the inferior classes. In addition, it highlights and questions the role of the authority of the ruling regime in stoking these abhorrent social divisions. However, Marxist Feminism is almost similar to Marxism but it focuses specifically on women only, their living conditions, their social class, and social status under capitalism. Moreover, it tries to highlight the persecution and exploitation to which women are subjected, as well as the role of the authority in exposing or liberating them from the resulting persecution of social class struggle.

In addition, Margaret Atwood highlighted the class struggle among women themselves, where the Gileadean regime uses several ways to make each group live in an illusion by thinking that they are superior to the others. For instance, using the indoctrination by the Aunts to control the Handmaids and create false consciousness in their minds of their important role of them in society. However, the Gileadean regime, like other totalitarian regimes, aims to control and exploit all the people, as the reader can plainly observe how the Handmaids were exploited and used as a fertile reproduction machine or a sacred vessel for the Commanders' infertile wives. Furthermore, the regime does not directly interfere in the process of persecution, exploitation, and slavery of women. Still, the task is left to the women themselves from the upper classes to handle that by creating an intense struggle among inferior classes of women, where the Marthas and the Wives persecuted the Handmaids. At the same time the Aunts indoctrinate a false consciousness in the Handmaids about their important role in the household.

Consequently, Atwood demonstrates how the Gileadean regime makes women practice the patriarchy on the lower classes of women, as the superior class of them accepted being subjected by their government in order to get as many privileges as possible, which made them turn on each other.

## References

- Aronson, P. (2003). Feminists or “Postfeminists”? Young Women’s Attitudes toward Feminism and Gender Relations. *Gender and Society*, 17(6), 903–922.
- Atwood, M. (2006). *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Barbalet, J. M. (2015). *Marx’s Construction of Social Theory (RLE Marxism)*. Routledge.
- Bloom, H. (2009). *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Infobase Publishing.
- Brantly, S. (2017). *The Historical Novel, Transnationalism, and the Postmodern Era: Presenting the Past*. Taylor & Francis.
- Chikwado, E. P. (2017). A Critical Analysis of Karl Marx’s Conception of Society and Individual. *Journal of Law and Allied Discipline*, 4(3), 114–119.
- Donovan, J. (2000). *Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions, Third Edition*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Firchow, P. E., & Real, H. J. (2005). *The Perennial Satirist: Essays in Honour of Bernfried Nugel*. LIT Verlag Munster.
- Mojab, S. (2015). *Marxism and Feminism*. Zed Books Ltd.
- Nelson, D. E. (2011). *Women’s Issues in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*. Greenhaven Publishing LLC.
- Ritzenhoff, K. A., & Goldie, J. (2019). *The Handmaid’s Tale: Teaching Dystopia, Feminism, and Resistance Across Disciplines and Borders*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Roozbeh, R. (2018). The Handmaid’s Tale Through the Lens of Marxism. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 17(1), 16–20.
- Tandon, N. (2008). *Feminine Psyche A Post Modern Critique*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist.
- Thomas, R. M. (2001). *Recent Theories of Human Development*. SAGE.
- Vogel, L. (2013). *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. Brill Publishers.
- Wisker, G. (2010). *Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Wynne-Davies, M. (2010). *Margaret Atwood*. Oxford University Press.
- Zarrinjooee, B., & Kalantarian, S. (2017). Women’s Oppressed and Disfigured Life in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 8(1), 66–71.
- Zhao, M. (2020). Power Analysis in The Handmaid’s Tale. *IRA International Journal of Education and Multidisciplinary Studies*, 16(4), 248–252.

ذو الفقار م. عبد الرزاق

قسم اللغة الانكليزية وادابها، جامعة كرابوك

### الخلاصة

رواية مارغريت أتوود حكاية الخادمة هي رواية دتسوبية بارزة حيث تُعتبر إشارة إلى واقع القارئ في الوقت المعاصر، تسلط الرواية الضوء على نظام مستقبلي شمولي يتم فيه تجريد الناس من إنسانيتهم ويعيشون في حالة رعب وإهانة مستمرة. ومع ذلك، فإن الغرض من هذه المقالة هو استكشاف الصراع الطبقي بين مختلف الطبقات الاجتماعية للنساء في ظل نظام جلعاد الحاكم والاضطهاد الناتج عنه. علاوة على ذلك، تتبنى هذه الدراسة النسوية الماركسية كإطار نظري لقراءة النص واستكشاف الآثار المترتبة على الصراعات الطبقيّة والصدمات بين النساء في الأسرة. وبالتالي، توصلت الورقة الحالية إلى النتائج التالية: أولاً، يخلق نظام جلعاد عن عمد اختلافات بين النساء في المنزل من أجل استغلالهن وخلق حالة من الصراع فيما بينهم. ثانياً، اختلق النظام وعياً زائفاً بين كل طبقة، وخاصة الخادمت، لخداعهم وجعلهم يعتقدون أنهم متفوقون في المجتمع من أجل إبقائهم تحت السيطرة لاستخدامهم كأواني مقدسة أو آلات للتكاثر من أجل النساء المصابات بالعقم من الطبقة العليا. أخيراً، تمكن جلعاد من جعل النساء ينقلبن على بعضهن البعض حيث لعبت الطبقة العليا من النساء دور الأبوي بدل الرجال في اضطهاد الطبقات الدنيا من النساء.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** حكاية الخادمة، أتوود، النظام الأبوية، النسوية الماركسية، الاضطهاد