

المجتمع الأمومي في رواية حكاية الخادمة لمارجريت أتوود

Matriarchal Society in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of Marxist feminism. Atwood constructs the dystopian world of Gilead, where women are denied their rights and reduced to mere means for reproduction. They are subjected to cruel punishments for any form of resistance. Atwood's portrayal of women's rights under the rule of Gilead serves shows that housework and bearing children can be used as methods to oppress and control women. Drawing parallels to real-world events and ideologies, the novel gives a relevant picture to women's battle for their rights across time.

Keywords: women's rights, Marxist feminism, The Handmaid's Tale, patriarchy, psychological stability.

المخلص

يتم التّحليل في هذا البحث رواية حكاية الخادمة لمارجريت أّتوود من خلال منظور الحركة النسّويّة الماركسيّة. تقوم أّتوود ببناء عالم جلعاد البائس، حيث تحرم النّساء من حقوقهن ويتم تحويلهن إلى مجرد وسيلة للإنجاب. إنّهن يتعرضن لعقوبات قاسية إن قمن بأي شكل من أشكال المقاومة. إنّ تصوير أّتوود لحقوق المرأة في ظل حكم جلعاد يوضح أنّه يمكن استخدام الأعمال المنزليّة وإنجاب الأطفال كوسيلة لقمع النّساء والسّيطرة عليهن. من خلال رسم أوجه تشابه مع أحداث وأيديولوجيات العالم الحقيقي، تقدم الرّواية صورة ذات صلة بمعركة المرأة من أجل حقوقها عبر الزّمن.

الكلمات الرئيسيّة: حقوق المرأة، النسّويّة الماركسيّة، حكاية الخادمة ، الأبويّة ، الاستقرار النّفسيّ.

1.1. Introduction to Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism is a branch of feminism that involves the Marxist ideology. The ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels introduce a new perspective on social struggles. Marx illustrates that capital accumulation relies heavily on the exploitation of workers. As industrial capitalism bloomed in the early 19th century, workers were devoid of significant property aside from their labor and found themselves compelled to submit for capitalists. However, upon returning home from factories and fields, they engage in unpaid domestic labor to sustain themselves with meager wages. Marx and Engels discuss the overlooked aspect of workers' reproductive roles stating that, "[t]he production of life, both of one's own in labor and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship" (Marx & Engels, 2020, p. 250).

Though reproductive labor was originally thought to be solely a biological function, but it was socially organized by communal structured forms like marriage and family.

Reproductive labor is the method by which a society upholds its customs and norms over time. Women engaged in this labor were often perceived as inherently tied to it, lacking agency to change prevailing social structures. Marxism contextualizes social reproduction as labor within the framework of capitalism. Beneath the apparent capitalist relations between the capitalist and the worker exists another concealed social dynamic: that of the household, specifically the relationship between spouses. Within the newly privatized household, gender roles confine women to the of reproductive labor under male authority. Consequently, women are responsible for reproducing the workforce, including themselves, ensuring their readiness to sell their labor to their capitalists' families each day. The intrinsic value of this reproductive labor lies in the daily and generational renewal of the workforce. However, the exchange value of women's labor within the family is nothing. They are expected to serve the household for nothing in return (Armstrong, 2020, pp. 35–52).

Karl Marx's conflict theory posits that throughout history, societies have been shaped by struggles between oppressor and oppressed economic classes. Marxists contend that all forms of historical oppression come from one source: the clash between the rich and the poor, the owner and the owned. This crucial historical reality serves as a tool for fathoming contemporary society and predicting social evolution. Marx's conflict theory is commonly recognized as the economic theory of history. It states that every society is founded upon an infrastructure which is the system of commodity production that sustains the superstructure which contains the array of social, political, and cultural phenomena (Lomire, 1989, p. 57).

Early Marxist feminism regarded patriarchy as a social structure that comes with capitalism. Juliet Mitchell (1966) proposes that women's oppression comes from a combination of both systems. She discusses four structures which are production, reproduction, sexuality, and child socialization and concludes that women's struggles

are shaped by their roles within these structures. Mitchell suggests that even though industrial labor and technological advancements put the groundwork for women's liberation, they were not sufficient. Her argument lays the notion that despite increases in productivity, women's subjugation does not end and patriarchy continues to reinforce women's oppression with capitalist exploitation. Mitchell tackles the oppression of women within the reproductive realm, focusing on fertility, sexuality, and the upbringing of children inside the house. She advocates for challenging social ideals surrounding motherhood, sexual norms, and the stereotypical roles imposed on women by capitalist societies (Mitchell, 1966, p. 11).

In order to maintain their dominance, the bourgeoisie create patriarchal control and the oppression of women. They exploit the dependency of women on men within familial structures for their economic survival. This transforms class conflict into gender conflict. Capitalist patriarchy oppresses women by shaping the reproduction relations. This system marginalizes women, pushing them to secondary roles in the labor market. Capitalists historically utilized women as a reserve labor force and continue to do so by promoting the nuclear family structure which justifies paying women lower wages based on their contributions to the household. Since the beginning of capitalist social structures, women have been confined to domestic roles, excluded from participation in society. These exploitative relationships ensure the continuity of capitalist production (Duan, 2022, p. 71).

Thus, Marxist feminism examines how women are exploited within capitalist systems and under the regime of private property ownership. According to Marxist feminists, true liberation for women can only occur through the changing of capitalist structures, as they argue that a significant portion of women's labor remains uncompensated within these systems. Moreover, Marxist feminists expand upon traditional Marxist

analysis by including unpaid domestic work and sexual relations, applying Marxist principles to these aspects of women's lives.

In [*The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*](#) (1884), Friedrich Engels discusses the earliest roots of family structures, social hierarchy, and wealth, depending on both ancient sources and contemporary studies. His analysis leads him to conclude that women initially held a higher social status and were equally valued in labor. Notably, Engels observes that originally, only women were certain to pass on the family name. In contrast, the earliest men did not share this certainty, as they were not guaranteed to know the paternity of their children or benefit from inheritance (Duan, 2022, p. 26).

Marxist feminism asserts a crucial point in the search for women's liberation and parity: gender equality that is devoid of suppression. Thus, policies protecting women's rights should transcend the division between labor and family to ensure equal treatment during pregnancy and childbirth instead of diminishing maternal roles. Contemporary feminism is connected with social structures. It deals with new challenges like the proliferation of marginalized groups of women whose labor inside the home remains unpaid and unrecognized (Duan, 2022, p. 73). The unpaid labor is a way to control women and push them to the confines of home that prevents them from being liberated from their male relatives and their control. In this sight, women in the family home become a property that belongs to the man of the house instead of belonging to herself.

Margaret Atwood especially focuses on the existence of women in the totalitarian patriarchal society of Gilead. Women are denied education, jobs, ownership of money, and the ability to read and write. Their possessions must be relinquished to their husbands or male relatives. In Gilead, women are classified according to their fertility and purity into groups ranging from the most "powerful" such as the

commanders' wives and aunts, to the powerless Marthas (house servants), handmaids, and colony workers. Some women, however, are employed as prostitutes, though this employment is not officially recognized (Ketterer, 1989, p. 209). The writer speculates on the subjugation of women to show the necessity of granting them freedom. By painting an extremely negative picture of economic control, she draws the reader towards the opposing positive image of feminism (Crick, 2015, p. 2). The estranged roles for women and the focus on reproductive oppression have led *The Handmaid's Tale* to be labeled as a feminist dystopian novel, despite Atwood's rejection of such classification for her work.

Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* consciously embodies the characteristics of Marxist feminism. It is set in a dystopian world where the fanatic totalitarian government named Gilead, rules everything with power. Gilead a fictional world, which was created by Atwood, enslaves people and directs their lives with mere oppression and violence, everyone is expected to submit to Gilead otherwise s/he will face body mutilation, torture, or a death sentence. The novel follows the protagonist Offred (previously named June) in her struggle to liberate herself from the imprisonment of Gilead.

1.2. Literature review

Atwood's work has been extensively studied from various viewpoints. However, there are specific studies that have focused on women oppression in her work. Among the notable studies is "Gender, Ontology, and the Power of the Patriarchy: A Postmodern Feminist Analysis of Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" by Aisha Matthews (2018). The study explores the social expectations placed on women, which profoundly influence their roles. Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* deal with self-

perception, authority, and individuality. Atwood's novel focuses on a post-apocalyptic America taken by environmental catastrophe and ruled by a sect of male Christian extremists. Through this dystopia, Atwood shows the essence of human existence, particularly for women. Women's lives revolve around reproduction, and strict gender roles are enforced on them. While in Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* Anyanwu, being rooted in her body, is guardian of life, while Doro is a consumer of lives. With Anyanwu as the matriarch who raises and defends her own people and Doro as the patriarch who rules and dominates his people, their conflict is between "feminine" and "masculine" viewpoints. Their relationship is comparable to that of a master and slave. When Anyanwu defends his people against Doro and refuses to comply with his demands, the master/slave relationship becomes more nuanced.

Another significant article is "Investigating feminist tendency in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of Sara Mills' Model: A feminist stylistic study". by Abbas Deygan Darweesh and Hussein Huwail Ghayadh (2016). This paper examines the connection between linguistic structures and socially constructed meanings within the novel. Through a stylistic analysis, the paper shows where language often serves to cover or obscure events. Employing Sara Mills' Model, the researcher discusses the ideology and power within the text at various linguistic levels: word, phrase, and sentence. The paper suggests that while the model may possess discernible functions, these functions contribute significantly to the novel's overall meaning and effectiveness. Consequently, it can be inferred that these linguistic elements play crucial roles in conveying the author's intentions to the reader.

David Coad has also studied the novel in his article "Hymens, lips and masks: The veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" (2001). In Margaret Atwood's novel, the enforced veiling of women is a stark symbol of their oppression as they endure suppression and disempowerment. The researcher clarifies the connection between

veils and broader politics. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the veil symbolizes the theme of colonial and gender-based oppression.

There is also Amin Malak's "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Dystopian Tradition" (1987). The Ruling power applies prohibition merely to control sexuality. It uses punishment as a tool to stifle sexual expression. Sexual freedom is under danger because of this punishment. Powerful regimes control sexuality by making it socially unacceptable. When reading Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the researcher considers Foucault's insight to understand the struggles of the protagonist, Offred, who grapples with such prohibitive laws. Atwood's novel focuses on Offred and the degradation and fear within a future society dominated by Christian fundamentalists. For Offred, the bleak alternative to compliance is exile to the Colonies, where women endure labor as punishment. In Gilead, state policy reduces sex to a transaction or a means of survival.

Finally, Fiona Tolan tackles the novel from a distinctive perspective in her "Feminist utopias and questions of liberty: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as critique of second wave feminism" (2005). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's portrayal of utopia aligns with Jean-François Lyotard's concept outlined in his 1986 essay, "Defining the Postmodern," which associates utopia with totalitarianism. Following Lyotard's and Kumar's interpretations, the idea of utopianism becomes increasingly different from the postmodern perspective. To some extent, postmodernism can be seen as emerging alongside anti-utopianism: both reject the notion of a perfect society.

1.3. Marxist Feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Offred was the name of the main character in the novel, who was taken prisoner by Gilead. Her name previously was June. Like many other handmaids, she

was an ordinary free woman who was taken by force and turned into a handmaid under the rule of the new system. The novel is narrated from the first-person point of view so that the story gradually unfolds before the reader through Offred's eyes. Throughout her narration, Offred returns to the past and links it to the present. The narration is significantly enriched with flashbacks. In her solitude, she tries to find an escape, a way out of the darkness of Gilead. She says, "there must be a resistance, a government in exile. Someone must be out there, taking care of things. I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without a shadow" (Atwood, 1986, p. 128). Offred escapes her imprisonment by envisioning the existence of utopian other places to which she might leave. This "other place" is her pre-Gilead past. Offred is a vibrant, multifaceted figure who transitions from being subservient to rebellious. Offred is a symbol used by Atwood to represent both the oppressive aspects of patriarchy and the matriarchal resistance to these oppressions. The features of a matriarchal society began when Offred became a prisoner in Gilead, where she began her journey by searching for her daughter and trying to get her out of Gilead. Despite the difficulties and the strict regime of Gilead, Offred succeeded several times in her endeavor, following her maternal instinct. Her understanding of the sanctity of family life and the close bond that unites a mother and her two daughters, and her insistence on protecting her daughters and ensuring a normal life for them, was the motivation for other women in Gilead to resist patriarchal society and achieve the required balance between matriarchal and patriarchal societies, and to reach this point, we must understand Gilead and its system.

Gilead is a political totalitarian system that is initiated and ruled by a group of religious extremists who call themselves Sons of Jacob. The reader learns later that they started Gilead after they made a highly successful coup on the government of the United States, in which they attacked the politicians and government organizations and seized the power to initiate the Gilead republic. These people

come with the call that they are about to make a perfect society which is built on religion and God's rules. This society is presented as the only way to survive in such a promiscuous industrial materialist world. A world that people have created by straying away from God.

One of the main reasons that motivated the rise of Gilead is the spread of infertility and sexual freedom. *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the near future where the rate of birth becomes in sharp decline all over the globe. The rate of birth, as Offred says, was "one in four" (Atwood, 1986, p. 135), and many times the born infant would be defected or "unbaby," as the handmaids would describe it. In the following passage, Offred talks about the pregnant handmaid Ofwarren.

What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet? There's no telling. They could tell once, with machines, but that is now outlawed. What would be the point of knowing, anyway? You can't have them taken out; whatever it is must be carried to term (Atwood, 1986, p. 135).

Gilead was established for various reasons, with the primary one being the challenge of declining birth rates. The novel later reveals the cause of infertility to be 'Pollution.' This theme of pollution is recurrent in dystopian literature, and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is directly associated with environmental degradation and infertility:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile, they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. Who knows, your very flesh may be polluted, dirty as an oily beach, sure death to shorebirds and unborn babies. Maybe a vulture would

die of eating you. Maybe you light up in the dark, like an old-fashioned watch. Deathwatch. That's a kind of beetle, it buries carrion (Atwood, 1986, p. 135).

Fertile women become a rarity in the world. Gilead, a government led solely by men, refuses to acknowledge that pollution has rendered men infertile, as it has done to many women. Consequently, it is not solely women who fail to conceive children; rather, it is the polluted environment that results in infants being born with deformities. To counter the threat of extinction, fertile women must be identified and married to men who are deemed 'pious' and 'fertile' to impregnate them. However, if these women are deemed 'impure'—as many were before the rise of Gilead—they are turned into handmaids and assigned to the government's commanders. Once a month, these handmaids are subjected to sexual intercourse with the commanders while positioned between the legs of the commanders' wives. This act, known as the Ceremony, shows the contradiction of existing within a system that ostensibly rose against sexual freedom.

The role of Marxist feminism is to illuminate issues within women's life in the light of economic control. Margaret Atwood excels at such writing. Her novel portrays events that could feasibly occur in the real world. It is worth noting that each tool of oppression depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* finds its roots in real-life examples, as explained in the 'Historical Notes' following Offred's narration. According to Harith Ismael Turki and Dulfqar M. Abdulrazzaq (2023), "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a salient dystopian fiction considered as an allusion to the reader's reality" (Turki & Abdulrazzaq, 2023, p. 15). While Atwood's portrayal of Gilead's strictly fanatic religious society draws inspiration from modern Christianity, it is important to recognize that the religion of Gilead is Christian in name only. Many of its laws are novel to the religion and have been invented solely to serve the oppressive system (Fetchko, 2014, p. 26). The system denies women the opportunity

to work and make their money or own their property. They are expected to be housewives, servants, or handmaids. Thus, by controlling their roles and confining them to the limits of the house, Gilead gains its power from subjugating women and oppressing them. According to Mulri Desai (2014):

Men became dominant in the production process and created a system of private property, the power relationship between the sexes shifted. Men now wanted to pass on their property to their own children and subjugated women, both through sex and through the division of labor within the household (Fetchko, 2014, p. 168).

Offred, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, was once a working married woman who lived with her husband and daughter. However, with the rise of Gilead, she was labeled as impure, having strayed from the path of God, and was tasked with redeeming her soul through her body. She was considered impure because she had an illicit relationship with a married man and took him from his wife, whom he divorced and married Offred. According to Gilead law, Offred used seduction to seduce a married man, and this is taboo. Transformed into a handmaid, her duty now is to conceive and bear a healthy child for a privileged, infertile couple—Commander Waterford and his wife, Serena Joy. Failure to do so would result in her being declared an "unwoman" and sent to die in the nuclear colonies.

Despite the blatant reality that "the Ceremony" is a form of rape, Gilead denies this. It justifies it with a quoted passage from the Bible. This passage is recited at the start of every Ceremony, and it is also featured as the novel's epigraph:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Genesis 30:1–3– King James Version, cited in Atwood, 1986, p. 6)

In fact, not only does Gilead refuse to acknowledge the Ceremony as rape, but Offred herself also denies it, asserting, "nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for" (Fetchko, 2014, p. 116). Because Offred actually began to believe that she was impure, due to the pressure and strictness imposed on her by Gilead, as she was always reminded by the aunt that she was guilty and impure, she began to have a delusion. In doing so, she attempts to reject the imposition placed upon her, striving to exercise any sort of power within her reach. Stripped of her identity and even her name, Offred clings to the few remaining aspects of her humanity. By refusing to acknowledge the Ceremony as rape, Offred tries to escape the fact that she is held in a prison. Acknowledging rape is to acknowledge the power of others over her. She resists that power by any shallow means she can find including denial (Fetchko, 2014, p. 32). Denial is one way a victim responds to an overwhelming reality (Shaalán, 2020, p. 113)

In Gilead, the Handmaids not only lose their names but also their identities. They are stripped of their voices, choices, freedoms, and names. Offred's name itself is symbolic, as it means 'Of Fred'—reflecting the first name of the commander she serves. Her name signifies her role as a belonging of Fred; she is essentially one of his possessions. Consequently, when a Handmaid is transferred to a new household, her name changes to reflect the name of the new commander. According to Heidi Macpherson (2010), "the lack of a confirmed original name indicates another stripping

of her identity” (Shaalan, 2020, p. 56), which means the absence of a verified birth name suggests that her identity has been further stripped away.

In Gilead, everyone lives in fear, a fear of the punishments imposed for disobeying assigned roles. Gilead employs special strategies to address disobedience, even when it is beyond an individual's control, such as pregnancy. In Gilead, infertile women are sent to the colonies to clean toxic wastes, alongside feminists, sterile women, lesbians, and those who hold beliefs divergent from Gilead's. The colonies are a dreadful place for the handmaids. Offred describes the colonies in the novel stating that, “[t]hey figure you’ve got three years maximum, at those, before your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves. They don’t bother to feed you much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it’s cheaper not to” (Atwood, 1986, pp. 305–6). In her critique of using house duties to enslave women, Angela Davis (2011) writes:

Women’s place had indeed been in the home [...] As workers, women had at least enjoyed economic equality, but as wives, they were destined to become appendages to their men, servants to their husbands. As mothers, they would be defined as passive vehicles for the replenishment of human life (Atwood, 1986, p. 32).

To force women into their expected roles, women must either comply or be severely punished. Aunt Lydia represents the pervasive fear that handmaids experience in Gilead. The Aunts are "pious" unmarried women whose role in Gilead is to train handmaids for their subsequent assignments, prepare them for pregnancy, and administer violent punishments for any transgressions. Punishments in Gilead always entail one of two outcomes: either physical harm or death. “Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential.” (114). When Janine, Offred's fellow handmaid, addresses Aunt Lydia impolitely in the red center

where handmaids are trained, several women enter the room and escort Janine out. When she returns, her eye is covered and she appears to be drugged. Offred's friend Moira informs her that Janine has had her right eye removed, as it was deemed unnecessary for her to have eyes to conceive. Additionally, when Janine is accused of endangering her child after birth, she is sentenced to be stoned to death by her fellow handmaids.

Besides physical torture, people in Gilead are psychologically tormented. In order to dominate them, Gilead abolishes people's identities and freedom, destroying their sense of safety and independence. The first and most important thing is the leaders' efforts to alienate people from each other, making everyone a potential "eye" or spy who may betray them. This is evident when Offred meets the new Ofglen and engages in a conversation with her. All women are cautious about what they say, how they say it, and to whom they say it. Even the formal greetings among people, "under his eye," indicate this sense of being constantly watched and monitored. Personal liberty is nonexistent for anyone. Offred says, "the door of the room—not my room, I refuse to say my—is not locked. In fact, it doesn't shut properly" (14). It is entirely prohibited to enter in any discussion outside the usual matters unless of course, someone of higher rank is talking with them.

Gilead manipulates women's psychological stability by spreading fear and violence among them. "[T]he way women are represented is socially influenced by the prevailing held beliefs that women are passive, submissive, dependent on men, inferior to and unequal to men" (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 77). In every city, there is a wall on which the guardians hang the bodies of the "sinners." Dead bodies continuously appear there, and they are only taken down when new ones are to be hanged:

[t]he three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; like

birds with their wings clipped, like flightless birds, wrecked angels. It's hard to take your eyes off them. (336)

The people of Gilead have to participate in punishments, as they are not viewed as punishments according to Gilead's doctrine. These are means to "redeem" the soul, with the belief that the more one suffers for their sins, the more they are redeemed and liberated from the chains of sin. Handmaids are required to administer the punishment themselves under the supervision of the aunts. When a man commits any crime that affects a handmaid, he is to be tied up and placed in front of the handmaids. They wait until the aunt signals them to form a circle around him and tear his limbs apart—an act called participation. (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 337) "You know the rules for Participation," Aunt Lydia says. "You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again" (Atwood, 1986, p.249) However, the punishment of a "sinner" is no less cruel than the participation, as she will be hanged by the other handmaids. This punishment administration gave some feminine authority to the maids to achieve justice.

Cruelty and ignorance become the two weapons by which Gilead dominates women. All women, with the exception of the aunts, are forbidden from reading and writing. If a woman is caught reading or writing, she would lose a finger, and if she does it again, she loses the whole hand. No woman is allowed to have any sort of profession other than domestic work. They are silent, voiceless, and entirely deprived of their rights as human beings. According to Silvia Federici (2012), "[h]ousework [including bearing and raising children] was transformed into a natural attribute, rather than being recognized as work, because it was destined to be unwaged. Capital had to convince us that it is a natural, unavoidable, and even fulfilling activity to make us accept working without a wage" (Ibrahim, 2020, p. 16). But despite all these restrictions, the maids in Gilead were able to communicate, transfer information, and

plan rebellion and coup, as they were able to provide the external resistance with information.

Gilead was initiated with a call for a better, purer life. However, when it seized power and became a government, all it did was spreading death, ignorance, sexism, inequality, and religious prejudice. In an essay describes *The Handmaid's Tale* as dystopia, Margret Atwood says she was partially inspired by George Orwell's *1984*. She states, "Orwell became a direct model for me much later in my life? in the real 1984, the year in which I began writing a somewhat different dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Atwood, 2004, p. 516). She modeled *The Handmaid's Tale* with an eccentric vision of the totalitarian systems, which is derived from actual totalitarian systems that appeared earlier in the west.

Every aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale* was inspired by the social and political movements of the early 1980s when Atwood wrote it. The book mirrors the United States' embrace of conservatism, as evidenced by the election of Ronald Reagan as president, as well as the increasing power of the Christian right and its powerful lobbying organizations like the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and Christian traditions. The novel reflects on the fact that even when calls for strictness and authority seem attractive at the beginning, those who advocate for them often use them to serve their own self-interests. Serena Joy is one example of this; she was involved in the initiation of Gilead and helped write its doctrine. However, soon after Gilead dominated the country, Serena was marginalized. She was stripped of her position, her voice, her career, and her autonomy. She transitioned from a social activist and former televangelist to a woman whose only domain was domestic work. The only activities she was allowed to engage in were gardening and knitting (Armstrong J. , 2018). The narrator clarified her status that she has stopped giving speeches. She can't even say what she's thinking. Though it doesn't appear to fit her,

she continues to live in her home. How enraged she must feel now that her word has been believed. (Tolan, 2007, p. 155). But despite her marginalization by Gilead, she was able to save her husband when he was lying in the hospital after the explosion, from the clutches of another commander who tried to frame her husband and seize his high position, and She forged her husband's signature on a paper she had prepared in advance stating that this leader was a traitor, because she was driven by the motherly instinct to defend her family and preserve their interests. Even at the end of the novel, she was able to get rid of her husband and smuggle her son out of Gilead when she learned that the senior leadership in Gilead had decided to hand over her son to the family of another leader, following her maternal instinct, so She has the ability to make decisions despite the control of the patriarchal society. And also we have Naomi Putnam, the wife of Commander Warren Putnam, when she accused her husband of raping one of the underage maids (Esther Keyes), who was a former wife of a commander, which caused his imprisonment and then his suicide, as she had power over her husband and also the power to choose her husband's personal handmaid. Besides the 14-years-old Gilead wife (Esther Keyes) played a crucial part in the story when she bravely took June (Offred), Janine, and the other Handmaids into hiding on her farm while they were fleeing.

When it comes to individual human rights, one can observe that people are reduced to an animalistic level in Gilead; their only value lies in what they can produce, but this does not apply to Esther Keyes, because she believes in humanity. However, this is not the case for the men in power. Those who initiated God's punishment and soul-cleansing of others are also indulging in promiscuity.

Later in the novel, after the reader learns of the commander's relationship with Offred, Fred takes Offred to a secret brothel called Jezebel's. It is named after a figure from the Bible. "Jezebel's" is where "sinful" women are secretly sent to offer

their bodies to any man who asks for it. This section of the novel exposes the true motives behind Gilead. The leading figures who initiated Gilead preach against sexual freedom, and the harshest punishments are reserved for adulterers, labeled as “gender-traitors,” who are hanged on the wall. Yet it appears that these rules do not apply to the men in power.

Atwood ends the novel in a manner similar to Orwell's *1984*, where the history of Gilead, as narrated by Offred, is to be discussed in the past tense several years in the future. Gilead becomes no more than a topic of discussion in academic disciplines, where scholars tackle its doctrine, rules, and enslavement in the name of religion. The novel speculates on social, political, and religious movements that impact women. However, like Orwell's *Animal Farm*, it remains relevant at all times. It is not structured after specific people, religions, or existing political systems; rather, it contemplates on the power of sex and economy that men exercise over women. It explores how people handle these aspects of life rather than focusing solely on the aspects themselves.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale is a powerful critique of social control over women. It explores the oppression, resistance, and the consequences of totalitarian rule over women. Marxist feminism stresses that women's lack of financial power turns them into slaves of their men which is the case in Gilead. Women are made voiceless and speechless to grant men the power and children they seek. The novel shows the depressive and damaging results of denying women their rights for work and education. It shows clearly that confining women to unpaid house work and bearing children results in the creation of totalitarian system that is based on the destroying of women's lives. Therefore, despite the apparent patriarchal society, there was a hidden matriarchal society that moved events and changed their course. This was clear when the

leader's wife forged papers using her husband signature stipulating the arrest of another leader by accusing him of treason, as the last leader was plotting for the supreme leader, and in this way her goal was to protect her family. Also, the wife of one of the commanders, who is young and her husband is very old, used to shelter runaway women on the farm and provides them with financial and moral support. At last Offred and her continuous struggle to free her daughters, as well as her plan to smuggle the children from Gilead with the help of other maids succeeded in achieving her plan. Until the last moment she encouraged the enslaved women in Gilead and comforted them, reminding them that they are human beings, mothers, sisters and daughters.

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