



Dystopian Exploration in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This article explores *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood as a dystopian novel that delves into a nightmarish future society known as Gilead. In this bleak world, women's rights have been stripped away, and fertile women, known as Handmaids, are forced into reproductive servitude. The story follows Offred, a Handmaid, as she navigates a treacherous landscape of oppression, surveillance, and resistance. Atwood's masterful narrative highlights the dangers of religious extremism, totalitarianism, and the erosion of women's autonomy. This article provides a concise overview of the novel's themes and plot while emphasizing its relevance in addressing contemporary issues related to gender, power, and societal control. The exploration of *The Handmaid's Tale* sheds light on the enduring impact of literature in provoking critical discussions on the human condition and the potential consequences of oppressive ideologies.

Keywords:

Dystopian, Oppression, Surveillance, Resistance, Religious extremism, Totalitarianism

Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel, was penned by Canadian author Margaret Atwood and released in 1985. In this novel, she explores a future where a theocratic dictatorship has stripped women of their rights and reduced them to a subjugated role as "handmaids" for reproductive purposes. Set in the Republic of Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a disturbing look at the potential consequences of extreme religious and political ideologies. The protagonist, Offred, provides a realistic portrayal of the challenges faced by individuals living under such oppressive regimes. Some of her most famous works include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin*, and *Oryx and Crake*. Margaret Atwood is celebrated for her thought-provoking and often dystopian storytelling, which explores themes of feminism, social commentary, and speculative fiction. In 2017, Amazon Prime released the television series adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which garnered significant attention and acclaim among viewers.

Glimpse of the novel

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel set in the near-future United States, now known as the Republic of Gilead. The story is narrated by Offred, a woman living in this oppressive society where a theocratic and authoritarian regime has seized control.

In Gilead, fertility rates have drastically declined due to pollution and sexually transmitted diseases. As a result, women who can still bear children, like Offred, are reduced handmaids. They are forcibly assigned to wealthy and powerful men, known as Commanders, for procreation. Offred, whose real name is never revealed, is subjected to a strict and dehumanizing existence. She is not allowed to read, write, or have any form of personal autonomy. Her life revolves around the monthly ritual of attempting to conceive a child with her Commander, all under the watchful eye of the government's enforcers, the Eyes. Throughout the novel, Offred reflects on her past life, her family, and the gradual erosion of her rights. She also forms clandestine relationships with other women, like her fellow handmaid Ofglen, and remembers when she had a daughter and a husband. Her story is a poignant exploration of the loss of identity and freedom. As Offred navigates this dystopian world, she becomes involved in a dangerous underground movement aiming to overthrow the oppressive regime. Her journey is filled with risks and uncertainties as she tries to regain control over her life and find a way to escape to a better future.

Double Oppression

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the dystopian society of Gilead portrays a chilling reality where men oppress women and are complicit in subjugating their fellow women. Suganya. et al. discussed in an article "Communal Expectancy and the Authentic Self of Men and Transgenders - *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw and *Birthday* by Meredith Russo", that "Certain facets and ideas are inscribed in our minds without our consciousness. Such notions are very strenuous to be changed or erased even if they are inexact"(Suganya. et al. 879) The Aunts epitomize this internal oppression, and women are assigned the role of indoctrinating and policing other women into their prescribed roles as handmaids, wives, or Marthas. The Aunts act as enforcers of the patriarchal regime, actively suppressing women's rights and individuality. Their methods range from strict re-education to punitive measures, reinforcing the system that disempowers women.

Furthermore, Serena Joy, once a prominent advocate for traditional values, represents another poignant example of women oppressing women. As a former speaker and author, Serena's past actions contributed to the rise of the oppressive Gilead regime. However, she later becomes a symbol of her subjugation when she realizes the limitations of her role as the Commander's wife and her inability to bear children. Her bitterness and frustration are often directed at Offred, the novel's protagonist, whom she views as both a potential threat and a reminder of her lost agency.

Offred describes the internalized oppression of the Handmaids as they begin to accept that they are only useful for their reproductive abilities. Describing the handmaids, Offred offers, "we are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices..." (Atwood, 136).

Offred's words highlight that the Handmaids are exclusively tasked with reproductive duties, a statement that not only devalues them but also estranges them from their own physical selves. Margaret Atwood skillfully portrays how women, in their quest for power and security, can become active agents in perpetuating a dystopian society where women's rights and autonomy are ruthlessly stifled. In the article, "Gender Performance on the Reinvigoration Via Food", Suganya et al. states, "The stereotypical notion of women and the kitchen always hold a diminished perspective over the space of a productive economy" (Suganya et al. 887)

Surveillance and Resistance

In this society, surveillance is omnipresent, with the government monitoring every aspect of people's lives, particularly women who are reduced to the roles of Handmaids, Marthas, or Wives. Surveillance is achieved through various means, including the Eyes, the secret police, and the Aunts, who indoctrinate and control the Handmaids. The regime also uses technology and propaganda to maintain control and keep the population in check. Resistance to this surveillance takes various forms throughout the novel.

The protagonist, Offred, engages in secret acts of rebellion, such as forming relationships with other characters in defiance of the regime's rules. She also has internal thoughts memories that the government cannot

control, providing her with autonomy. The resistance movement, known as Mayday, operates underground to oppose the regime and rescue individuals from its oppressive grasp. Throughout the novel, characters like Moira and Nick are involved in resistance activities, highlighting the ongoing struggle against the surveillance state.

Totalitarianism

Offred reflects on how the Handmaids come to internalize their oppression, ultimately realizing that their only recognized utility is based on their ability to reproduce. Her words highlight that the Handmaids are exclusively tasked with reproductive duties, a statement that not only devalues them but also estranges them from their own physical selves. In the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime takes control of the United States due to declining birth rates. Men hold all the power in this society, while women face oppression and have no voice in decision-making. Many women's primary role is reproduction, and the story is narrated through the perspective of Offred, a handmaid assigned to bear children for the upper class.

Gilead categorizes women into five main groups: wives, handmaids, aunts, marthas, and econowives. Wives are elite women married to powerful men, symbolized by their blue attire. Handmaids, dressed in red, are fertile women subjected to various forms of oppression. Women in Gilead are denied basic rights such as voting, reading, or writing to prevent them from becoming independent or rebellious. Aunts, identifiable by their brown clothing, train handmaids and maintain order through force if necessary. Marthas, wearing green, are older, infertile women who serve the upper class by handling domestic chores like cleaning and cooking. Econowives, on the other hand, are married to men of lower status, and their responsibilities encompass everything from childbearing to household chores and providing emotional support to their spouses. They wear attire in various colors like blue, red, brown, and green because their duties are all-encompassing. Despite the differences in their roles, all women in Gilead ultimately bear the same burden.

In Gilead, societal ranking determines the opportunities available to men and women. Women are expected to be more passive, with their primary responsibilities being tending to the home, raising children, and attending to their husbands. Their sole purpose is reproduction, and they are expected to be subservient to the state and their husbands, resulting in the loss of their identity, dignity, and individuality. Gilead perpetuates traditional gender roles reminiscent of our past societies, with many women in Gilead conforming to these established norms.

Conclusion

In a dystopian society, the oppression of women is central to the regime's control. Through the lens of Offred's harrowing journey, readers are confronted with the stark realities of a theocratic dictatorship that strips women of their rights, autonomy, and even their names.

The novel masterfully explores the complex dynamics of women oppressing women, highlighting how individuals can become complicit in perpetuating a system that diminishes their agency. The characters of the Aunts and Serena Joy serve as poignant examples of women who contribute to their subjugation, a chilling reminder of the power of indoctrination and fear.

Physical and psychological surveillance casts a long shadow over Gilead, emphasizing the theme of control. However, resistance also emerges as a prevailing force, embodied by Offred and others who dare to defy the oppressive regime, even in the face of grave risks. Ultimately, this dystopian masterpiece encourages us to examine our society, question the power structures in place, and appreciate the fundamental importance of individual rights and freedoms. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful literary work that continues to resonate, urging us to remain vigilant against the encroachment of oppression in all its forms.

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