

Major Project
On
A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for Award of Degree of
B.A English (Hons)



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DECLARATION

Date: 6th July 2017

I, Vrinda Maheshwari student of B.A English (H) of Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, hereby declare that I have completed the Major Project on 'A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* ' in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of B.A English (H)

I declare that it is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for award of any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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Date: 6th July 2017

CERTIFICATE

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A Study of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

The aim of this research paper is to understand the rudiments of the book, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The book has been written by the world famous Canadian author, Margaret Atwood. The paper will try to and analyses the major themes of the novel, and shall also make an attempt to understand the reason why and how Margaret Atwood came about writing this novel. The novel is a deeply feministic novel and is set in a dystopian world. The book is set in the future, in an era which has been taken over by Christian fundamentalists. The main of the book is that the government is in complete control of the bodies and even the minds of the women.

The paper will also try to understand the underlying nature of a dystopian society and why literature written in this genre has become tremendously significant in today's political situation. Also, the research paper will end on the note of comparing the book with the TV series with the same name, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The book follows the narrative pattern of first person. The narrator of this novel is a woman who is named 'Offred.'

It was in the year 1939 that Margaret Atwood was born in Ontario, Canada. Atwood is a prolific writer as well as a literary critic and is also famously an environmental activist. And it was in 1961 that she published her first book of poetry while she was studying at the University of Toronto where she was studying a degree program in English honours. She also had the opportunity to study at Radcliffe College and then, even at Harvard University. Eerily, Harvard University is taken as a set to create a grotesque site in her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. She published her first book

The Edible Woman in 1969 which shot her to fame in the literary sphere. Being born a woman in a male dominated world, it wasn't easy for Atwood to climb the ladder of success. But, she proved her genius as a writer to the world with this book and has since become a familiar face in the world of literature.

The Handmaid's Tale, written during the mid-1980s, and published in 1986, was the product of her creative faculties and literary genius. The book falls in the middle of the traditional twentieth century writing of an anti-utopian society. Atwood says that the novel was written during the time when she was living in West Berlin. It was the time when the world was being torn apart by the then on-going Cold War and there was still a shadow of the atrocious government of Nazi Germany. She utilized these events from the world's and incorporated these ideas in her novel that she finally set in America.

Books akin to this were the famous *1984* by George Orwell or *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, all of which were about a post dystopian society where the laws of 'normalcy' had long been forgotten and a restrictive and controlling society has been put into order. The book made Margaret Atwood the proud recipient of several accolades and awards. Atwood won many awards like the Los Angeles Times Best Fiction Award and 1987 Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction novel. She was also nominated for the prestigious the Booker Prize.

The Handmaid's Tale is a classic example of the genre of dystopian writing that George Orwell's *1984* made famous. Dystopia, in simple terms, is a society that has been built by a totalitarian government with complete control in their hands. It is the opposite of Utopia which is an ideal society. *Utopia* was the title of Sir Thomas More's novel and was also a term that had been coined by him. The novel was published in 1516 and served

as a blueprint for an ideal society that even the famous Greek philosopher Plato had talked about in his *Republic*.

A totalitarian government was something that held complete control of the society which it had conquered. The basic human rights were all redefined to fit the political, cultural and social aspect of the government. Totalitarianism can be defined as a form of governing system where a single ruling power holds and controls all aspects of society. "No opposition is allowed, and power is maintained by internal terror and secret police" (Dictionary of American Government and Politics, by Jay M. Shafritz, Harper Collins, 1993, p. 482).

"According to Montesquieu each form of government has a principle. The principle of a government is not its particular structure, but what "sets it in motion." For Montesquieu the principle of despotism is fear. What Montesquieu means by this is that despotism is sustained through using fear to combat people's ambitions, goals, and attachments. The ideal subject for a despot, is not a reflective human being or an ambitious glory seeking warrior for that matter, but someone who will simply do what they are told because they fear punishment at the hands of despot himself, or someone he has entrusted with power. While despotism is distinct from totalitarianism, as totalitarianism is a modern phenomenon while despotism is not, the two are both exemplified by a situation in which the social fabric and the medium of rule are dominated by fear." (jmeqvist)

There is a slight difference between totalitarianism and despotism "the difference between despotism and totalitarianism is at least partially constituted by the fact that technological advances have allowed fear to become an even more dominant part of the social fabric." (jmeqvist)

The book is presented to the reader with a strong feminist undertone. The contents of the book reflect the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States and the election of

Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain. A growing wave of “religious rights” had led the feminists to fear that the women would lose all that they had been fighting for in the previous decades. It is the obstructed story about United States when a coup had abolished democracy and the establishment of a patriarchal dictatorship in its place. The *Handmaid’s Tale* is Atwood’s attempt to understand this ludicrous reversal of the women’s right that was taken place in the 1980s. The society of Gilead, a world that Atwood crafted in her novel was a place where women were “protected” under God and His traditional beliefs. The society “returns to traditional values” and rebuilds the gender roles, and the dominance of man over women. By her wonderful use of irony, Atwood created a world where women themselves had started to believe that this was how life was supposed to be and it was the intention of God that made everything happen.

But Atwood was clear when she said that she had a small disliking to the term feminist. She believed that women of the 1970s used this term to call women who used make up or lipsticks or dressed in pretty clothes as “a traitor to your sex”. A recent interaction with Times, Margaret Atwood made a bold statement when asked about ‘feminism’. She said: “When you say ‘feminist’ do you mean: Should women have the same rights as other human beings? Then, yes. But what else do we mean by that term? Do we mean women are angelically more perfect than men? Well, no. Women are human beings.”

Feminism in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is hidden under layers of metaphors and clever use of language. She presents a distorted view of a feminist society where there is a combination of controversial views and the feminist view. Moira, Offred’s best friend, is presented as the mouthpiece she has vocal views and strong voice. She is also a lesbian. There are many conversations that Offred reminisces about with her. The most

important one was Moira's belief that living solely with women would solve many of the problems women were currently facing. In many ways, the new social order in Gilead is supposed to provide for a society of women. Most women have very little contact with men.

The book begins in the middle of the situation that had happened in the past memories of the narrator, 'Offred'. Set in a city of the United States, the narrator is talking about what seems to paint the picture of a high school gym. But, instead of cheerleaders in "mini-skirts" or basketball players, the narrator and her fellow captives sleep in the gym where rows of cots have been placed. The memories of the past create an inexplicable prison which is later on elucidated that it was like a sort of school where 'Offred' and the others were training to be a "handmaid".

A handmaid, according to the novel, was the state appointed slave to the powerful men in command of the society. They were slaves that were nothing but a "vessel" to carry a baby, a "womb walking on two legs" and nothing more. The republic of Gilead was a dystopian society created out of a need to harbor more children but everything had to be traditionalist and according to the will of God. It was in the initial stages of development, and before the horrors of the present, Offred had a name other than being addressed to as an item to her present commander. She also had a husband and a child. The book refers to the absence of real names as:

"...patronymic, composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question" and, like the other names in the text, they are "equally useless for the purposes of identification and authentication." (Historical Notes.29, 30)

Before she became a handmaid in the dictatorship of Gilead, Offred had a life.

She was a mother to a beautiful daughter and a wife to Luke. She used to work in a phone company. She used to laugh without thinking about it, read without being conscious, and wear short clothes without a second thought. For her, that life had become a distant dream. Gilead was the truth now. Everything that she was had been snatched away from her and she was now a shadow of the past. A ghost that breathed just to survive.

The society of Gilead came into existence when right wing religious extremists assassinated the President of America and set up a monotheocratic dictatorship. They manipulated the Bible and advocated the principles. Women were pushed back in the houses and under the hard scrutiny of the male “protectors”. They right to have property, ownership, money or even read or write had been taken away from them. They had been reduced to nothing but child bearing devices. It was believed that pollution and nuclear development had led to the barren dryness of the women and it was the duty of the fertile women to give their wombs for the “greater good”.

In an interview with *New York Times*, Margaret Atwood said that her book is like “... it's a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime.” (*The New Yorker*, 1986)

In another interview with *Time*, Atwood had been candid about her manuscript that had in a way redefined the feminist movement of America. Atwood said that the very first aspect of a repressive regime was the control of women and babies being born to them. She was candid about her views on rape and pregnancy and had even expressed her views openly.

“I don’t take it lightly when a politician says something like a pregnancy can’t result from a rape because a woman’s body knows it and rejects it. There’s an undercurrent of this [type of thinking]. And then it rises to the surface sometimes. But *The Handmaid’s Tale* is always relevant, just in different ways in different political contexts. Not that much has changed.”

In the same interview, when it came to feminism, Atwood said that “When we use that word, *feminism*, I always want to know: What do you mean by it? What are we talking about? If the person can describe what they mean by the word, then we can talk about whether I am one of those or not.” (Atwood)

Atwood believed that if a novel is only a feminist book, one would believe that “...all the women are over here on the low side, and all the men are over here on the high side. But it’s more like the way human societies actually arrange themselves, which means some powerful people at the top.” (Atwood)

2) Literary classic *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The main pretext of the novel that Atwood held was that the rate of childbirth had fallen so terribly in the USA that the religious extremists had taken upon themselves to bring it back. The handmaid’s were forced into this ‘profession’ against their will, presumably recruited on the basis because they had had children before.

In one of the three epigraphs of the novel, Atwood selected a verse from the Bible which stated that,

“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)

The epigraph is an indication of what Atwood has in store for her readers. Jacob urges Rachel to let him have babies through the maid and which she can claim as her own. Sex, outside the marriage is allowed as long as the goal is to make more children. In the book, the Handmaids would have to have sex, erotic and not romantic, not even sensual. It was only an act of copulation and a means to plan the seed of life in the handmaid. Handmaids were stuck in a bizarre ménage à trois with their Commanders and the Commanders' barren wives. In a way, this was foreshadowed in one of the flashbacks that Offred had. She was in fact in an illicit relationship with Luke before he divorced his wife to be with her. Now, Offred served as a child bearing wagon to a commander and his wife. The sexual act, although which was 'legal' in literal sense was still an offense to the sanctity of marriage.

The narrator tells the story in flashbacks and, in the present tense and sometimes it becomes difficult to follow what is the truth and what is simply a factor of her wilful imagination. The writing style is not easy to keep up with. The tone of the narrator seems to be blunt and she seems to account things as they are happening around her, yet a feeling of obscurity surrounds her words. She isn't always vocal about what is really happening as if she is afraid someone might overhear her. The problem in narration can be detected due to the slippage in what characters say and what they think. When the writing style is looked upon from a technical view, there can be seen a stark absence of quotation marks to differentiate between speech and thoughts. This creates a confusing flow of words which the reader takes some time to get used to.

It becomes a little difficult to assess when the narrator is talking to herself and when someone else. In the following excerpt, the narrator is reflecting back on a memory in which she is arguing with her husband, Luke trying to make him realize how she is feeling having lost her job at the call company. But these were the thoughts that were going on inside of her mind and had not been said out loud to Luke.

“You don't know what it's like, I said. I feel as if somebody cut off my feet. I wasn't crying. Also, I couldn't put my arms around him.” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

As is true to the genius of Atwood, the novel didn't quite end where the reader has assumed it would. Atwood left it dangling to the reader as to whether Offred had the opportunity to be free, or had had the Eyes got her. When the news of Ofglen's suicide reached Offred, she was relieved but her happiness of being safe was short lived when Serena Joy accused her of stealing her husband when she found out that he had taken her out to a club. In one of Serena Joy's coat. The moment of truth lingered as Offred waited in her room for her punishment. The siren of the black car had her pulse racing yet when the time came for her to be whisked off, Nick told her to trust him. It could be believed that he was a part of the same rebellious group that Ofglen had been heard speaking about. Yet Atwood left it all up to the reader. And this was the point where the narration of Ofglen ended. Then came the chapter of *Historical Notes* which made the reader realize that the novel was in fact a historical account of the society of Gilead from the point of view of maybe one of the survivors. It is the year 2195 and the Gileadean Studies' Twelfth Symposium meets at the University of Denay, Nunavit. The meeting is being headed by The Chair who is called Professor MaryAnn Crescent Moon. She indicates in her welcome address that the creation of the Gileadean theocratic society had

caused a major remapping of the world. This meeting was a hint that the horrible society of the Gilead had been vanquished and that women again had a part in the society.

The account of Offred that had been the novel was in fact a series of tapes that was found in a war bunk. The tapes had been obscured under the music of Elvis Presley, Boy George, Mantovani, Twisted Sister, and Lithuanian folksingers which proved an ironic stance. The sex images of all these singers was a humorous implication of the condition of women at Gilead. “Elvis, an idolized superstar and sex symbol; Boy George, a British rock singer who cultivates a bisexual image; Mantovani, a name synonymous with hypnotically bland elevator music; Twisted Sister, a heavy metal rock group whose name echoes Gilead's perversion of womanhood; and Lithuania, a former free state subsumed by the Soviet Union in 1940.” (Anonymous)

The addition of the historical notes can be taken as an appendix to the novel. This ending provided a framework that gave a witty perspective of a society that is technically set in the future. There is an abrupt shift in the tone of the novel from a serious somber narration to Atwood's dry humorous one. By writing the notes, Atwood provided a detached view of the world of Gilead and the professors attempt to analyses and understand the character of Offred. They try to figure out who her commander could have been and where in fact had she been based. The absence of journals, diaries or any other written material was a characteristic trademark of Gilead. The recordings were a proof that even when there was a possibility that Offred had reached a safe zone, there was still a strict ban on writing and women reading.

The manuscript has a wide range of characters, some of which have been defined in the earlier part of the paper. Other than those, there are around four major characters in

the book. Offred the Handmaid, Serena Joy the Wife, Nick the Driver and of course, the Commander. The rest are all the others which propel the story forward. The intervened life of these characters is the main of the novel. Offred is the womb that shall provide the barren house of Serena Joy with a child. The seed of the Commander has to be sown into her. But, when the jealousy of the Wife grows to such an extent, she decided to make Offred sleep with Nick so that the process of rearing a child becomes faster and Offred and any other handmaid is never to return to her house.

The relationship of Offred with Nick is a twisted and confusing one. On one hand, she doesn't want to be unfaithful to Luke yet in her heart, she knows that the marriage that they had is over and in the absence of physical or mental closure, Nick comes like rain in an empty desert and Offred is pulled to him like a moth is drawn towards a naked flame. Therein starts a gamble of love which Offred knows can even lead to her and Nick's death.

In a scene, the reader finds that the Commander wishes to see Offred alone in his study, something that is explicitly banned by the government. He had sent Nick to find her and in a moment alone in the darkness, the two had shared a kiss that had been sinful. When summoned, the handmaid thinks that the Commander might wish to indulge in copulation or something worse. She knows she cannot refuse since it wasn't an invite but an order. But, when she arrives at the study, she finds, to her own amusement, that the Commander wants to spend time with her playing scrabble.

This game of scrabble was ironically symbolic of the repression of free speech for women. They had been banned to write or read and playing a game where she has to make words, read the letters makes Offred take it as a special treat. Slowly, she starts

asking for small favors, tiny acts of rebellions like creams or magazines from the Commander.

She describes the wooden letter of the game "like candies, made up of peppermint, cool like that" molding them into exotic words: Larynx, valance, zygote, quince" (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

Margaret Atwood made use of a lot of metaphors and similes, and other literary devices to create a flow in her novel. Some of them were seasoned with dry humour and were sarcastically funny but got the point across in the biting, blunt tone. The humour of the novel is dry and unnerving. The situation that Offred and the other females are facing at Gilead is anything but funny. The narrator used bleak hard words to describe her situation and her condition under a dictatorship regime of religious activists.

Simile: "We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries; gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor key and mournful as pigeons in the eaves troughs." (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

Parody: "Blessed be the fruit," she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

Literary Allusion: 1) I would not be able to stand it, I know that; Moira was right about me. I'll say anything they like, I'll incriminate anyone. It's true, the first scream, whimper even, and I'll turn to jelly, I'll confess to any crime, I'll end up hanging from a hook on the Wall. (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

It is an allusion to the scene in George Orwell's *1984* with the capitulation of Winston's to Big Brother in.

- 3) But the frown isn't personal: it's the red dress she disapproves of, and what it stands for. (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

The scene draws a parallel to the shunning of Hester Prynne, wearer of the red A in the *The Handmaid's Tale* creates a rather bold society where the sexuality of women has ceased to exist. In fact, sexual objectification of women has become punishable by death. Porn, erotic magazines and anything else have been banned in the republic world. The women are the weaker sex and have to be protected at all means. In one of her flashbacks, Offred remembered a scene in the park. Her mother, a feminist, and her other friends were seen burning pornographic magazines in the park. When offered when to the young Offred, she was shocked to see the nude women pose provocatively on the cover. She was both amazed and ashamed at the image.

Symbolism plays a major role in the literary manuscript. Take for example, the garb that the people in Gilead wore. Clothes are something that is believed represents the selves and is a depiction of who one is. In the novel, this is taken away from the people who are presumed to dress in attire that is suggestive of their position in the society.

Another example that can be taken directly from the book reads:

“I read about that in Introduction to Psychology; that, and the chapter on caged rats who'd give themselves electric shocks for something to do.” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

Atwood compared the life of the Handmaids to that of experimental labs. It was a cruel juxtaposition of an image which had reduced a human to the position of an animal. And, an animal used for cruel experiments, none the less.

The symbolism of colour is also quite apparent in the novel. The Handmaids are seen to be dressed in red and have their entire bodies covered. They also wear a white bonnet which is similar to a horse's eye patch. The commanders are always seen in black suits, the symbol of control and power while their wives wear blue. The colour red plays a major role in the book. The red cape like attire of the handmaid is an indication of their fertility since red is also the colour of menstrual blood. Ironically, red is also the symbol of power, yet power is a forgotten concept for the child bearers. The blue colour of the wives is the colour of the Virgin Mary. The blue is also a representation of stability, peace, as well as depression. Another irony that Atwood presents to the red clothing is that colour of blood was also a marker of sexual sin, traditionally. It echoed the concept of a scarlet letter that was worn by the adulterous Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of Puritan ideology. The wives of the poorer section of the republic seen in stripes. They are called as the Econowives and do not have the 'luxury' to get a handmaid. The 'marthas' who are something similar to house help wear the colour green. They are barren women. In the world of Gilead, it is only the women who are barren. The word 'sterile' is an offensive word since it is not the fault of the man that his wife cannot produce children.

“There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimp, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can.” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

The use of colour and clothing was used quite intelligently by Atwood. She was able to divide the women according to their social standings by using this code. The dresses, something akin to uniforms have stripped the women of their individuality and their identity as their own single person. In a conversation that Serena Joy, Offred's employee, was having with her husband, the Handmaid overheard the Wife saying "we don't have different clothes [...] you merely have different women" (*The Handmaid's Tale*). This could imply that even the commander's wife, who had power in the house, still knew that in the end she was a woman and she was under the control of the patriarchal society. The women knew their position in the society and knew better than to challenge the maniacs. Yet, to see her husband have sexual intercourse, even for the sake of a child was something that must have been a mental challenge to the old wife. "It's not the husbands you have to watch out for, said Aunt Lydia, it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them." (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

The rules of the society and the needs had become such that she had no other choice. The need of the hour was children and men were ready to go to any length to get what they wanted. The mental agony of a wife, or a woman meant nothing to them. The only need of the society, of humans was children. And, then the rules of the society were twisted and manipulated in all ways to attain such lengths.

Central to *The Handmaid's Tale* is the failed attempt to produce stasis in the form of a one-dimensional, ultra-conservative society. Like the figures marching across Serena Joy's knitting or the Handmaids walking two by two to the meat market, Gilead's citizenry is the product of a fiasco: a mock factory system methodically installed to

enforce traditional values — that is, the fundamentalist concept of godliness.

“My nakedness is strange to me already. [...] Did I really wear bathing suits, at the beach? I did, without thought, among men, without caring that my legs, my arms, my thighs and back were on display, could be seen. Shameful, immodest. I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

Identity in the novel is something that Atwood plays around with. The identity of the handmaids has been broken down to ownership. To whomsoever have they been appointed, they are known as theirs. The protagonist is seen in the house of her commander as Offred and her companion is known as Offglen. Their name changes as and when ownership did.

“I am Ofglen,” the woman says. Word perfect. And of course she is, the new one, and Ofglen, wherever she is, is no longer Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names. It wouldn't be easy to find her, now.” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

The new Ofglen was the example of this. There will be another Ofglen, Offred or an Ofwaren, the identity of women had been liquidated to such an extent that they were to only be seen as the vessels. No romantic or physical attribution were to be given, their thinking was controlled and when their ways and means to escape. Not such run, but escape the shackles of life were taken away from them. They did not have a choice but survive in the life that had been chosen for them.

“My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter.” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

The novel's protagonist never reveals her name. Throughout the course of the book, she is only known by this name which she knows isn't her own. A name is the very first identity that is given to a human and is something that defines them. By stripping the women of Gilead by their identity, in a way they have taken away a part of them. They are left as hollow shells, a shadow of what they used to be. But, when she reveals her real name to Nick, with someone she felt a connection that both mental and physical, she felt that she was able to get in touch with her old self which had become a distant memory. Someone that she used to be, once upon a time. Individuality has ceased to exist.

“I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known. I act like a dunce. I should know better. I make of him an idol, a cardboard cutout.” (*The Handmaid's Tale*)

The theocracy that is prevalent in Gilead has blurred the lines between the government and religion. The state is heralded by a government that is run by religious fanatics. They incorporate the religious terms and biblical references in the official lexicon of the state. The domestic helpers who help around the house are known as “Martha”, a term taken out of the New Testament, the local police are known as “Guardians of the Faith”, the Commanders are officially “Commanders of the Faithful” and soldiers as “Angels.” Even the names of the local shops have been taken from the bibles like Loaves and Fishes, Milk and Honey and All Flesh. The cars or vans that are used in the society are renamed as Whirlwind, Chariot and Behemoth. The people in control wanted the world to

become traditional again. They believed that if they would be true to god then God would help them attain children again. It provides an ever-present reminder that the founders of Gilead insist they act on the authority of the Bible itself. They work on the slogan “God is a National Resource.”

The novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dark commentary on the patriarchal nature of the Genesis. Starting from the Epigraph, Atwood has planted the stories and allusions to the Bible in the entirety of her novel and the connections are hard to miss. The ranks of the people, shops, automobiles etc. have all been drawn from this book. The use of a handmaid to bring a child to the barren house of commanders to a direct allusion to the story of Rachel, Leah and Jacob. Even the greetings that the people of Gilead offer to one another are superstitious and religious. “May be Lord Open”// “Blessed be the fruit” and many more. The society is acutely patriarchal in nature and misogyny and the oppression of women as the weaker sex is taken quietly. It was all ‘God’s will.’ Atwood was able to provide a feminist criticism to the holy book, something that the world of today seriously needs. She was able to weave many things together and raise issues in her novels at a time when the voice of women was easily ignored in the din of masculine notion. The government in control of Gilead wished to use the deep rooted patriarchal teaching of the Bible to establish absolute power in the name of God and religion.

There are various themes that the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates in it. The theme of a totalitarian society, the complete political control of women’s body, sexuality, religion-politics and many more are woven together to create this spine chilling tale of horrors. The way Atwood works upon these themes making them come together in an

impeccable flow, an eerie world is created. A world where even thoughts that come to the mind of an individual have to be in complete control of the government.

The women are completely under the regime of the theocracy. They are deprived of even the basic necessity of reading or writing. They are nothing but a womb, a carrier. In a scene, Offred is seen taking a bath while she starts reflecting on life. She has accepted herself in this mediocre job as a subhuman, a woman that merely exists to procreate and nothing else. The most gruesome way in which Gilead controls the women is by stripping them off of their basic identity. The oppression is seen to begin slowly when Offred was still leading a normal life and then it crashed upon the females all at once. The sudden freezing of the accounts of the women and them being kicked out of their jobs without even a single explanation was a beginning of harsh regimen of oppression.

Language in the Gilead is manipulated by the government to maintain complete control. While the men are defined by their ranks, the women are merely identified in their major role in the society. By stopping the women from reading, they are able to control their thoughts. By identifying them in certain roles, they are able to maintain a disciplinary dictatorship. The distortion of language by a totalitarian society is a major factor that supplements a dystopian novel. It tries to explore the connection that is formed when the major language in command is perverted in order to propel the repression of a society. The one word that the Offred was allowed to read was 'Faith'. It was imprinted on a pillow cover. It reiterated the theme of religion in the novel.

Religion has been used in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the dominating force. Gilead is purely built on the traditional life of a religionist fundamentalist and the book is loosely and completely based on the Bible and its various teaching. The way the handmaids are used to bear children refers to Rachel and Jacob, the quote mentioned in the epigraph of the novel. The names of the places and the people in the society have also been taken out of the Book. Atwood cleverly hid her setting of the novel under covers but dropped major hints. By describing the University of Harvard, but not naming it explicitly, one was able to decipher that the novel is in fact based in the city of Cambridge, United States. An interesting note should be made that Cambridge was the first place where religious intolerance was marked. The puritan religion of Christianity was also hinted at when Offred and Ofglen visited an old church. Cambridge was able to provide the novel with a link between the hard rule of Gilead and the Puritans. Both of whom had a harsh voiced against sex, politics and religion.

The society of Gilead oppresses the natural sexual nature of a human and controls the society in this way also. The ban on the objectification of women by banning pornographic shows or magazines, and punishing the ones that do, Gilead was able to create a fear of sex. Women were, under no circumstances, were to be sexualized. Their sole intent was procreation. If a women, a Wife, was thought to be barren, a Handmaid was allotted to them. Handmaids were to be protected at all, even if their protection means their oppression. They were made to believe that it was for their own good and it was bigger, much bigger than them. The government sanctioned rape on the handmaids was not to be seen as rape, or a sexual act. The Ceremony that was performed was for the greater good of society. Such was the way women were being treated on the basis of their

gender. They were vessels that were put on earth to only procreate and nothing else. They weren't supposed to read, write, smile, laugh, think or even live. Their sole intent on earth was to bring forth children.

Recently, this year, 2017 saw the release of a TV series based on this novel. The TV series was an Atwood certified show that was created by HULU. The role of Offred is played by Elizabeth Moss, praise for whom will always be less. The TV show also stars Joseph Fiennes and Alexis Bledel. The pilot of the show telecasted in April 2017, almost three months after the election of the infamous Donald Trump as the president of the United States of America. The feministic and dystonic nature of the TV series made it easy to affiliate with it since Trump had always been pretty vocal about his views on women and other controversial issues. The TV series is brazen in its adaptation and has been tweaked to make it relatable to today's audience. Yet, the horrors that Atwood wrote, which had already been pretty graphic on paper are now almost unimaginably vivid. Even Atwood confessed that the scene where a woman is blamed for her own rape was too much to bear for her.

“I found this scene horribly upsetting. It was way too much like way too much history.”
(Margaret Atwood)

The novel, almost thirty years in print, was hailed as science fiction, a reality which could never be attained. But in today's world, the possibility of the dystopian society has become much too real, and the reliability of the TV show is scary.

“It's just that now there are actual things happening with women's reproductive rights in

our own country that make me feel like this book is bleeding over into reality.” (Elizabeth Moss)

America's terrible lack of authorized maternity leave, or the regular encounters of access with birth control abortion creates an uncanny resemblance to the novel that was written decades ago. In part, this is what makes *The Handmaid's Tale* so relevant to each successive generation. The forces are lead to the “alt-right”, the forces that were in the book were already controlling women's dominion over their bodies, much before the election took place.

The TV series also tries to incorporate the coloured people in the normal workings of the society. In the book, it was implied that the Children of Ham had been sent it. While no distinction to colour or caste was made, it could be presumed that Atwood had meant to talk about the Blacks. In the TV series, black people are given more streamlining roles. For example, Offred’s friend Moira was played by the famous *Orange is the New Black* actress, Samira Wiley and the character of Luke was played by O.T. Fabbenle. The TV series had also become more modernized in order to increase the relativity to today’s age. There are phones and fast food joints and other things.

Another thing, a major aspect of the novel that was contorted by Hulu was that Offred reveals her name. Unlike the novel, where the reader is left to guess what name she could would have, owing to the flashbacks of her personality. By revealing the name, a powerful duende is created and the audience is pulled towards the life in the world of Gilead. Offred, known by the name of June in the TV series. The revelation of the name immediately refines the robotic inhuman life of Offred and colour her in more

human hues. *The Handmaid's Tale* uses the power of a name in a very clever way. By controlling the real name of the women, the handmaids and the Marthas or econowives, the society was able to assert control and maintain a dictatorship over the women of the society.

In today's day and age, *The Handmaid's Tale* isn't just good television for entertainment purposes. TV and other series are now being used to raise sensitive issues. Another TV series that does something like this is *Dear White People* which talks about racism that even today the Blacks and people of other race face. Television is now moving into dark arenas and controversial issues. The way the world is convoluting upon itself, people are turning to TV series or books to relate and make sense of a world that is slowly closing in on itself, creating a coffin like atmosphere. The precedency of Trump had jumped the sales of books like Orwell's *1984* or Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

There is a scene of Offred where she is seen walking silence, reflecting on the supposed temporary suspension of the Constitution in response to a 'terrorist' attack: "Now I'm awake to the world. I was asleep before. That's how we let it happen. Nothing changes instantaneously. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it." (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*)

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- The book is presented to the reader with a strong feminist undertone. The contents of the book can be seen to reflect the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States and the election of Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain. A growing wave of “religious rights” had lead the feminists to fear that the women would lose all that they had been fighting for in the previous decades. It is the obstructed story about United States when a coup had abolished democracy and the establishment of a patriarchal dictatorship in its place. The Handmaid’s Tale is Atwood’s attempt to understand this ludicrous reversal of the women’s right that was taken place in the 1980s. The society of Gilead, a world that Atwood crafted in her novel was a place where women were “protected” under God and His traditional beliefs. The society “returns to traditional values” and rebuilds the gender roles, and the dominance of man over women. By her wonderful use of irony, Atwood created a world where women themselves had started to believe that this was how life was supposed to be and it was the intention of God that made everything happen. But Atwood was clear when she said that she had a small disliking to the term feminist.