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Submitted by:  
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### **Patriarchal Dystopia and The Problematic Feminism in Margaret Atwood's '*The Handmaid's Tale*'**

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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to:

*My family whom I love immeasurably*

My parents who are made from every bit of heaven

MAAMAR Bechar and HOUHOU Nadia

For their endless love and inspiration.

*My Brothers..*

*My Weakness, My Strength*

Amine, Islam, Djihad and Wajih for being the source of my happiness.

*My little Sister Hidaya*

For being my sweet torturer.

*To everyone who have supported me.*

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### Abstract

The feminist movement in the postmodern era, have suffered a backlash from the conservative rise in the United States. During the 1980s, the Moral Majority gained power with the election of former conservative President Ronald Reagan. This group advocated the return to traditional values and the embrace of Christian family order, through the domestication of women and control their reproductive rights. Accordingly, women's freedoms were put in jeopardy with the constraints of their rights, which they have campaigned for so long to obtain. Such crisis evoked several feminist reactions both on the political and literary scene. The prominent Canadian writer Margaret Atwood took matter in her hands to raise warnings about the consequences of such policies. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a speculative fiction novel, arguably Atwood's most known work, in which she targets the issues concerning the constraints of women's rights and freedoms, using religion as a font of tyranny. The novel paints a grim image of a dystopian totalitarian patriarchal society created on the basis of religion and complete diminish for women's rights. Due to the resurface of the issues that are threatening the status and liberties of women under the current administration of President Donald Trump; whose misogynistic and anti-feminist discourse and attitudes are considered feminist nightmare, the novel is more relevant now than ever. Consequently, we embark on this study as an attempt to further explore the main themes discussed on this speculative narrative which are: the patriarchal order, its elements and features along with the depiction of female compliance in the upheaval of this dystopia. In addition, this descriptive study aims to decipher the ambiguity of the novel and writer's tendencies towards the feminist ethos.

**Key Words:** *Feminism, speculative fiction, women rights, dystopia, patriarchy.*





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## General Introduction

### Background of the Study

Literature combines asking the most difficult of questions, and equally, relentlessly strived to answer them. When it comes to speculative fiction, a genre that opts to create alternative scenarios as an attempt to face the ‘what if?’, there are more questions than there are answers. As literary genres evolved, the adaptation of postmodern tradition was required and speculative fiction has delivered. This broad genre, dominated the sphere of postmodern literature. Distinctively shaped by modern and contemporary events, utopian and dystopian writings popularized the experimental thought of speculative fiction and its sharp focus on the human experience. By the late 1970s, feminist speculative fiction arose, and not a decade later, the prominent Canadian author Margaret Atwood adopted the term -speculative fiction- to best describe her dystopian narratives, notably her exceptional novel ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’.

Dystopian fiction such as “The Handmaid’s Tale” should not be considered purely realistic and accurate predictions, rather, it seeks to only voice concern. It is not considered a ‘hypothetical future’ for its story is inspired by an account of true events. It speaks of “Gilead”, a mono-theocratic state, that was created upon an uprising of a fundamental Christian group called “The Sons of Jacob”. This regime overthrew the government of united states, bombarding the Congress and killing the President. Gilead is a near-future dystopia, a perfect example of a dehumanizing society. The most distinguished feature of Gilead is its women. There are different types of women in Gilead: The Wives, the Econowives, the Marthas, the Aunts and the Handmaids. Gilead is an infertile state with few fertile women. The Handmaids’ women sole purpose is to bear children of the elite by being forced into reproductive slavery. Although, the narrative is of great influence, it had been painstaking by a matter of controversy since it was

first published in 1985. It raised several debates, and unanswered questions. Granted that it offers an unsubtle critique to political regimes and the entirety within, the more appealing feature that “The Handmaid’s Tale” portrays is the exercise of this power among a modern society. It depicts an absolute patriarchal order in which women are subjugated and stripped from their basic human rights. However, fingerprints of the uphill of this patriarchy can be traced to the women of Gilead.

The Handmaid’s Tale was often described as a ‘*feminist dystopia*’, although, the author had denied it, referring to her novel’s focus as an issue of *women and women*. Moreover, the narrative is perceived as being apathetic towards the perpetuation of patriarchy by men and interested in exerting such control by women.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

A debate on whether ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ ought to be considered a feminist or anti-feminist narrative is upholding. For its portrayal of a ‘*usual kind of dictatorship*’ that suppresses both men and women alike. Therefore, one cannot help but wonder if the dystopia erupted and executed is by the system of patriarchy or a disguised matriarchy. Accordingly, we embark on this enquiry to trace the depiction of both dystopian systems, with detailed examination. Ultimately, a critique to the problematic feminism presented in the novel will be issued/initiated to better understand the writer’s motifs and purpose.

### **Research Questions**

The Handmaid’s Tale is a platform to various issues, this research attempts to address some of them through asking these particular questions:

- Is the dystopia in ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ created by patriarchy, matriarchy, or both?

- Is 'The Handmaid's Tale' a feminist narrative?

### **Aims of Research**

This enquiry targets multiple aims, some of which is exploring the representation of patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and providing an abundant association to the male and female role in such hierarchy. Along with investigating the feminist ethos within the narrative, from inspecting the chain of matriarchy, exceeding to the unravel of the problematic feminism in the novel and resolving its ambiguous stands.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study will examine the features of the postmodern tradition in Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction; *The Handmaid's Tale*. Furthermore, the core of this descriptive study is the portrayal of patriarchy and problematic feminism in the narrative, as well as exploring the dystopian dimensions within, and ultimately, determining whether the novel is a feminist or an anti-feminist work of literature.

### **Structure of the Study**

The study will be segmented in three chapters, two introductory chapters and a practical one. Initially, a general introduction that provides an entry and an overview of our research focus and problem. The first chapter will be devoted to an overall literature review provided with accounts of the key concepts of the study. Along with it, we are getting acquainted with the author and the novel at hand. The second chapter will introduce a summary of the narrative and further details of the events and dimensions that created this literary production as well as its relevance to the current scene. The last chapter, will be assigned to the practical part which is concerned with the extensive examination of the novel and answering the research questions.

## **Methodology**

The paradigm of this study is mainly descriptive on the basis on the Feminist approach. Since 'The Handmaid's Tale' is initially study of power; men over women, the Feminist approach is most convenient to this research concerning the depiction of hierarchy in the narrative. Naturally, this approach is essential to this study in providing criticism to the manifestation of patriarchy and the definition of gender roles.

**Chapter One:**  
**Literature Review and Theoretical**  
**Framework**

## **1-1 Introduction**

In this introductory chapter we attempt to present an overview of the main concepts regarding the current study, along with broad definitions to the key literary theories related to the analysis of the novel. The postmodern canon produced a plethora of literary productions inspired by its conditions. Primarily, we attempt to offer a conclusive description to the postmodern sphere and the feminist literature in which the novel is produced within. Moreover, women's position has suffered retreat under a radical political change, which was the main inspiration behind Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. A speculative narrative which is our focus in this study.

## **1.2 Tracing the Postmodern Canon:**

Postmodernism refers to the dominant mode post war; as Brian McHale and Fredric Jameson located the start of postmodernity in the 1960's, that appeared with new convention on the literary horizon. The term, although was introduced by the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard; one the key figures of the postmodern movement in his work 'The Postmodern Condition' (1979), it was in fact coined earlier in the century by the British historian Arnold Toynbee.

Postmodernism; as an international phenomenon, has arisen from the radical changes the world has witnessed post second world war. It is considered a plethora of ideas and actions contained within one movement. Hence, the notion of postmodernism, is hardly encapsulated in an amalgam of thoughts and attitudes to match the present issues put forward in what is referred to as the 'postmodern era'.

Additionally, Postmodernism is not easily explained in one phrase or one idea, but is rather a mixture of ideas put forward by a number of scholars.

Despite the significant effort made by scholars, philosophers and theorists in the aim of outlining an accurate definition to the term, the task was deemed hopeless. *'The concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted or even understood today'* (Jameson 1, 1998), the American literary critic Fredric Jameson confirms in his article which is entitled *'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism'*, endorsing the same stance as the rest of postmodern theorists that a substantial understanding to the term and what it represents seems almost impossible. Lyotard's notion of the 'Postmodern Condition' offers a more comprehensive viewpoint on postmodernism by referring to it as a global phenomenon that is *'the condition of knowledge on the most highly developed societies'* (Lyotard 71, 1993), asserting that the postmodern experience has become an international one, particularly for first world nations.

Tracing the core of postmodernism may seem a hopeless task as has been previously established, Stuart Sims a critic and editor of *'The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism'*, concludes that the postmodern in its protean nature is more of a mood or an attitude and it is far from being defined or simplified to being a mere concept or period of time. Even the term itself is in fact postmodern, the evolving arbitrariness prevented its deconstruction and altering as it has been constantly growing. According to Linda Hutcheon, Canadian critic as one of the significant theorists on postmodernism, in her publication *'A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (1988)'*, is a *'contradictory enterprise: its art forms...use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention...[in]their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past'*. Hence, postmodernism can be regarded as a particular style of thought that rejected most cultural structures of life in the West. (Hutcheon 180, 1988)



### 1-3 The Postmodern Narrative:

When the postmodern narrative is observed, no common standard is prevalent, yet a selection of similar literary conventions can be traced within the writings. Such as paradox, fragmentation, unreliable narrators, dark humor, paranoia, impossible plots, and several others that embody the mode of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon as a specialist in postmodernist culture and in critical theory in her books: *'The Politics of Postmodernism and the Poetics of Postmodernism'*, coined the term *'historiographic metafiction'*. As a reference to those works which *'self-consciously distort history'*, arguing that it is the most fitting feature in the postmodern literary productions. She further outlines other major postmodern aesthetic features with special focus on parody and irony, arguing the positive angle of the use of these strategies on the postmodern narratives.

The postmodern literature can be best defined as the utter rejection of the movement before it, modernism. Whilst modernist writer's quest for meaning and salvation, the postmodernist ones parodied and mocked their quest. Modernist authors, namely, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, James Joyce, Thomas Mann and others saw the world on the edge of destruction, facing a hopeless ending, their postmodern counterparts, however like Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, Margaret Atwood, Samuel Beckett, Kurt Vonnegut, believed that the world had already fell off the edge and had undergone every possible disaster imagined and is beyond redemption. Naturally, these writers were inspired by the extreme events and radical changes their world had experienced since WWII, which affected them with profound paranoia and skepticism.

Also described as the literature of exhaustion, the postmodern literary production assumed to have reached the 'state of exhaustion', a state to which no originality or creativity can be retributed to it that everything had already been said or written, which sets the parameters to the postmodern narrative to be simultaneously critiqued for being vague and ambiguous as well as difficult and complicated.

Postmodern fiction culminated by the publication of Joseph Heller's 'Catch 22' (1961), Kurt Vonnegut's 'Slaughterhouse-Five' (1969), John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse' (1969) and Thomas Pynchon's 'Gravity's Rainbow' (1973). The latter is considered to be THE postmodern novel and described as being *unreadable, turgid, overwritten, and obscene*; the perfect characterization of the postmodern literature and according to Pynchon that is how it [postmodern literature] must remain '*strange and wonderful*.' (Pöhlmann)

#### **1-4 Women's Position in Postmodern Era:**

Social gender roles have always been subject to constant change, for each generation rejected the one before it. As early societies attributed conventional domesticating roles for women with the sole commitment to household duties that isolated them from the social practices workforce and estranged them to the economic and political scene, the postmodern conditions dictated a more radical change. Postmodernists called for a rejection of the metanarratives, or the all-encompassing theories, which claimed supremacy, including patriarchy. With the deconstruction of metanarratives came the deconstruction of the traditional gender roles, which granted women more independence and empowered them to break free from the label '*feminine subjectivity*'.

By the dawn of the era, major feminist writings laid the groundwork for the feminist movement, namely Simon De Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' (1953); a book that examined the notion of perceiving women as *'The other'* and opposed the world system that promotes the male-centered ideology, influencing, Betty Friedan with her bestselling book 'The Feminine Mystique' 1963 which women related to the discontent and unhappiness detailed in it. The aftermath of these publications manifested in major turn of events. The early 1960s witnessed a youth movement and the emergence of National Organization for Women (1966). The Women's Liberation Movement aimed to pass Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution; followed by a flourishing, if not excessive, sexual revolution in the 1970s which resulted in backlash from the conservatives in Ronald Regan's government that rejected the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 thus, slowing down the movement.

Nevertheless, Women's Liberation Movement aimed towards achieving equality between the sexes on all surfaces, questioning the validity of the dominant patriarchal system which oppressed the position of women and limit their opportunities. The feminist and prominent figure, Carol Hanisch in her 1969 essay *'The Personal is Political'* popularized the phrase throughout the 1970s inviting the public opinion to the discontent of women and the need of connecting the private experience with the political one, thus becoming a characterization and a political argument to the Second Wave Feminism.

As the decade closed, the movement demonstrated new conceptions and in different ways including membership in political and social groups. Some radical demands from liberationists were faced with quite an opposition for their neglect to the fact that women were not united which led to the emergence for what's called anti-feminism.

### 1-4-1 Postmodern Feminism:

In keeping up with the postmodern conditions, various reasons significantly contributed to the shift of the status of women, those reasons have the same historical and social relevance that led to the rise of postmodernism. For instance, *Globalization which highly values individuality, freedom of choice, less control and hierarchy, more autonomy, and diminishing inequality*, (qtd In Ahmed et al 110, 2008). All these concepts are equally embraced by the postmodern as well as the feminist agenda. Moreover, Jane Parpart writes in *'Who is the Other?'*, a *Postmodern Feminist Critique of Women and Development Theory and Practice*; "*one of the most appealing aspects of postmodernism to many feminists has been its focus on difference*". The notion that women have been created and defined as 'other' by men has long been argued and explored by feminists, most notably Simone de Beauvoir (1952). She further argues, however, that Feminists have responded to postmodern ideas in a number of ways. Liberal feminists were the strongest opposition "*who have been preoccupied with policy formulation and the improvement of women's status within the structures of western thought and society*" (Parpart 442, 1993). Feminists have revealed that they have focused on the marginalization of women in the contemporary world.

Linda Hutcheon, along with many feminists, consider also that postmodernism actually is a threat to feminism: *'Postmodernism has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of resistance that would correspond to the feminist ones.'* (Hutcheon.168). Arguing that their political implications are likely to be diminished due to the postmodern agenda. Some feminist theorists claim that feminism has handled always 'postmodern' issues. In her book, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West*, Jane Flax along with other feminists; Linda Nicholson, Nancy Fraser, Joan Scott, Moya Lloyd, Dana Haraway, Chris

Weedon, affirm that the postmodern thought can in fact enrich feminism with the creation of ‘postmodern feminist perspective’ (qtd. In Parpart 443). Thus, the emergence of Postmodern Feminist.

#### **1-4-2 Feminist Writings:**

Male writings have always been dominant in literature; however, the postmodern sphere witnessed a renaissance in women writings. The narratives are female constructed with focus on female experience and agency. The French Feminist and Critic Hélène Cixous coined the term ‘Écriture Féminine’ in her best known work ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, to describe female writings: *“I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement”* (Cixous 2039, 1976). Cixous invited women to create and redefine their own identity and culture through writing. She further addresses, the issue of objectifying the female body and calls for taking control of it and to use it as an empowering element and a way to communicate. Margaret Atwood as prominent postmodern writer, embraces Cixous’s principles. However, she is ambivalent on being labeled a feminist writer, instead concerned herself with ‘human dignity’, characterizing her *"feminism"* as *"human equality and freedom of choice"* (Waltzing Again 81, 2006).

Most of Atwood’s fiction is concerned with female issues which she considers human rights issues. Through her writings she targets representation of women, their bodies and social status as well as women’s relationship between men and each other. She categorizes her novels as:

*“the first trio [The Edible Woman, Surfacing, and Lady Oracle] has to do with women and men, last trio [The Handmaid's Tale, Cat's Eye, and Robber Bride] with women and women, and then [one] in between [Life Before Man] ha[s] to do with both.” (Waltzing Again 219)*

Hence, Atwood dedicates her work into exploring the power relations and sexual politics between men and women. Her novels demonstrate a complexity of themes that range from loss of identity, rejection of gender roles and social myths of femininity and many others. However, the essential feature in the postmodern feminist writings; Atwood's in particular, is the female agency given that her novels always have a female protagonist.

For instance, in her first novel, *'The Edible Woman'* (1969), the protagonist Marian MacAlpin, struggles with a traditional society, between her parents' expectations and her fiancé's plans. She is afraid to be consumed by marriage and her husband, so she bakes a woman-shaped cake; hence the title, and offers it to her fiancé Natalie Palumbo believes Marian *“hopes to fend off her metaphorical consumption by Peter, and resolve her own ambivalence to marriage”* (qtd. In Callway 2, 2008). *The Edible Woman*, mirrors the loss of identity and social fears that many young women face in a defined gender roles society.

The same issues resurface in her novel *'The Handmaid's Tale'* but on a graver scale. Moving forward to her fifth novel, *'Bodily Harm'* (1981), Atwood criticizes the social constructs on femininity. The protagonist Rennie suffers from cancer and cannot accept her own body's betrayal which ultimately affects her relationship with men. Accordingly, the focus of this narrative is to draw attention of the sexual politics, thusly *“Rennie is forced to see how the personal and political cannot be separated”* (Howells 80, 2005). Atwood's novels show her feminist sympathies throughout her novels, especially *'The Handmaid's Tale'* in which she continues exploring the politics of power and gender.

## 1-5 Speculative Fiction:

### 1-5-1 Definition:

Speculative fiction is inconsistent in definition, a debate is ongoing to give a precise definition to this broad genre that encompasses fiction in all its forms and it is doubtful that it will be resolved soon. The term was coined by Robert A. Heinlein, an American science fiction author, in 1941 and popularized through the publication of his essay *'On the Writing of Speculative Fiction'* 1947. According to Heinlein, speculative fiction *"captures the highest aspiration of science fiction and includes its top-quality works"* (qtd. In Oziewicz 4, 2017). Consequently, the genre highlights the human attitudes towards the development of science and technology. Marek Oziewicz writes in the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature *"speculative fiction represents a global reaction of human creative imagination struggling to envision a possible future at the time of a major transition from local to global humanity"* (Oziewicz 2, 2017). He further proposes that speculative fiction is a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real.

Speculative Fiction, depicts alternative or possible conditions with elements of fantasy, of a world that resembles our own yet slightly exaggerated one. The genre has developed as a prominent, popular one in the postmodern scene. Such field of rapid development peaked in the postmodern era with the publication of multiple novels, aligning itself with contemporary, experimental literary techniques in form and content. championed by the queen of this genre; *a prominent woman within a male-dominated genre*, Margaret Atwood who embraced it at her specialty and sat on its throne after publishing *'The Handmaid's Tale'* (1985). P.L. Thomas in his book *The Enduring Power of SF, Speculative and Dystopian Fiction* says:

*The case that SF by its nature is critical in its patterns of creating other worlds, of raising satirical and serious questions about the Big Questions surrounding being human, of placing the individual human in a social context, of viewing the role of science through a skeptical microscope, and of narrating the essential political nature of being human (Thomas 185, 2013).*

Ergo, the primary objective of this genre is to understand the social status and examine the human consciousness of their reality and the possible future in relation to their social, cultural, religious, political, technological contexts. Claiming a relationship with the Speculative Fiction and the postmodern scene. Speculative Fiction gives a conscious confrontation to society with a prophetic vision on the possible outcomes of its reality.

### **1-5-2 Speculative Fiction Vs Science Fiction:**

The distinction between the two genres has been proven to be quite the challenge. Some theorize that Speculative fiction is a plural category that encompasses science fiction and other say it is a subgenre of science fiction. Paul Kincaid, argued that there is no such thing as a pure genre and “[e]verything is capable of being read in different ways (qtd In Thomas 38, 2010). Michael Svec and Mike Winiski in “Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Challenging Genres”: SF and Speculative Novels: Confronting the Science and the Fiction: suggest that “*Classifying rocks and minerals or plants and animals is probably easier than classifying literature*” (qtd. In Thomas 37). They explain how the genres are intertwined as some theorists suggest that speculative fiction as a category not synonymous with, but opposite to science fiction. Additionally, Marek Oziewicz proposes three approaches to define the genre: “*a subgenre of science fiction that deals with human rather than technological problems, a genre distinct*



*from and opposite to science fiction in its exclusive focus on possible futures, and a super category for all genres ..”( Oziewicz 4).* Science fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong tendency to myth.

Margaret Atwood saw SF as descending from H.G. Well’s “*War of the Worlds*” with speculative fiction tracing its origins to Jules Verne. In simpler words Atwood explains that the difference between the two genres “science fiction” that it “*has monsters and spaceships*” and “speculative fiction” that “*could really happen*” (qtd In Mancuso pars 7.2016).

Margaret Atwood examined SF; as a fan, writer, and scholar, and explored her lifelong relationship to the genres in her book ‘*In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*’ (2011). Atwood notes the book “*is an exploration of my own lifelong relationship with a literary form, or forms, or subforms, both as reader and as writer*” (Atwood 1). In this narrative, Atwood shows her appreciations of such influential writers as Marge Piercy, Rider Haggard, Kazuo Ishiguro, Aldous Huxley, and Jonathan Swift, and particularly Ursula K. LeGuin whom she argued with about the nature of Science Fiction. Le Guin believes Atwood’s works are SF because they blend an imaginative look at worlds that might be as well as satirizing the world that has been and is”. In a review of Atwood’s, *The Year of The Flood* 2009, La Guin criticized Atwood’s “*arbitrarily restrictive definition*” (qtd in Mancuso pars.9). Atwood in her recent, brilliant essay collection, ‘*Moving Targets: Writing with Intent*’ says that everything that happens in her novels is possible and may even have already happened, so they can't be science fiction. Atwood proceeds in ‘*In Other Worlds*’: “*When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefined, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance* (Atwood 7, 2011).

### 1-5-3 Dystopian, Utopian Writings:

The word Dystopia is derived from two Greek words, *dusand topos*, meaning a diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavorable place. The word functions as the opposite of 'utopia', 'anti-utopia' the bad place versus what we imagine to be a good place, the secular version of paradise. (Claeys 4, 2017). Claeys argues in his book 'Rethinking *political dystopia*': "*Most of what we associate with 'dystopia' is thus a modern phenomenon, wedded to secular pessimism*", "*like utopia, a key aspect of dystopia's specificity is its portrayal of social and political relations. Many, though not all, dystopias imagine regimes characterized by extreme suffering, fear, and oppression*".

(Claeys 3)

Dystopian and Utopian literature reads into our nightmares and dreams, as William Gibson says, "*our resonating stories are a window into our collective fears and hopes*". (qtd. In William Gibson: *what we talk about, when we talk about dystopia*, Doctorow pars 2. 2017). It tells the stories that embrace imagined alternative realities be them utopian or dystopian ones, which solely aim to either hope or warn. On the one hand, Utopian fiction sets the plot in a magical setting that offers a picture perfect, better world, an exaggerated optimism from our reality that offers an escape from reality Friedrich Nietzsche "*We avenge ourselves against life with a phantasmagoria of another, a better life*". (qtd In Carstairs et al. P2 2017). Therefore, Utopian literature functions as an escapist mode, towards a better life, better reality, transcending the ills and corruption of the real world.

Dystopian literature on the other hand, depicts an exaggerated pessimism. The word Dystopia in its sense evokes disturbing images and ominous thoughts. It evokes apocalypse, ruin and disorder. William Gibson's 'Neuromancer' (1984). The adjective dystopian implies fearful

futures where chaos and ruin prevail. (Claeys 5). Gregory Claeys, in *Rethinking Dystopia*, declares that dystopia is defined as “The antithesis of Utopia. A hellish state brought about by attempts to construct unrealizable ideal systems”. He further explains that the definition holds three main types within: the political dystopia; the environmental dystopia; and finally, the technological dystopia. Claeys elaborates that the first type [ the political dystopia] which is the one type affiliated to *the failure of utopian aspirations, and which has received the greatest historical attention.* and the type Claeys’ chief focus on his book and the type associated to our element of analysis. William Gibson notes that “*while the 20th century was rife with speculation about the 21st; here in the early decades of 21C we almost never talk about 2200 and beyond*”. (qtd In Doctrow pars.2). Gibson conveys that the future is too grim to imagine.

Ultimately, Dystopian and Utopian Speculative Fiction can be equally optimistic and pessimistic. Utopian shows a world we can never achieve; dystopia shows a world we may achieve. Consequently, Speculative Fiction gives a conscious confrontation to society with a prophetic vision on the possible outcomes of its reality.

## **1-6 Margaret Atwood:**

### **1-6-1 Biography:**

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, a Canadian hallmark. Born 1939 in Ottawa to a well-educated family from Nova Scotia, raised by a biologist father and nutritionist mother, spent parts of her life in the forests of northern Ontario and Quebec. Canada's most eminent novelist and poet, showed passion to writing at a young age and became a poet as early as the age of 16 in high school before attending Victoria College in Toronto 1957. By the age of 21 she started attending Radcliffe College, where she gained her MA and began her doctoral studies at Harvard University. By 1964–65 Atwood moved to Vancouver to work as a lecturer in British Columbia.

In 1967 Atwood married James Polk, an American postgraduate student at Harvard and they moved to Montreal for a year. After 7 years of marriage, Atwood and Polk got divorced in 1973; she later on moves with her partner Graeme Gibson to a farm in Ontario where she received her first honorary doctoral degree from Trent University, Ontario. Over the course of her career, Atwood went on to teach at a variety of colleges and universities in both Canada and the United States. She has written poetry, novels, criticism and short stories; she campaigns for human rights and for the environment; she has simply written so much. Among an array of other works.

### **1-6-2 Literary Career:**

Margaret Atwood is a literary hallmark in the postmodern scene. She is considered to be one of the most prominent and influential writers today. The author of 14 fictional novels and over 40 books including, poetry, comic books, children's stories, translated to more than 30 languages, Atwood is perceived as one of the world's leading authors, for some the best of all. Margaret Atwood's first published works was the pamphlet of poetry *Double Persephone* (1961), followed by her first novel *The Edible Woman*, in 1969, the novel that entitled her to feminist ethos, however she defends it as a proto-feminist for it predates the women's movement. Atwood is perhaps best known for her novels, namely, *Surfacing* (1973), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1980) which was shortlisted to win for the Governor General's Award, *Bodily Harm* (1981) *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1989), *Alias Grace* (1996) *The Blind Assassin* (2000), which won Booker Prize; and others. Her literary merits are as great as her literary productions. Her reviews and critical articles have appeared in various eminent magazines and she has also edited many books, including *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English* (1983) and, with Robert Weaver, *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English* (1986).

She has been a full-time writer since 1972, first teaching English, then holding a variety of academic posts and writer residencies. Margaret Atwood is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and awarded 16 honorary degrees. Including, Arthur C Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction (1987), Franz Kafka International Literary Prize (2017), The Royal Canadian Geographical Society Gold Medal Award for Outstanding Service to Literature and Geography (2015), PEN Center USA Lifetime Achievement Award 2017.

Margaret Atwood is literary canon to be reckoned, there is a major international academic ‘Atwoodian’ society that are contributors and critics to Atwood’s oeuvre who are engaged in multiple projects illustrating the variety of topics and themes in Atwood’s continuous productions. Coral Ann Howells, one of the most ‘Atwoodian’ scholars, known for her emphasis on revisiting Atwood’s works through multiple publications: *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, *Private and Fictional Words*, *Margaret Atwood*, *Margaret Atwood: The Shape-Shifter* but to name a few. She is also a member of the Margaret Atwood Society Newsletter, which publishes annual updates of scholarly works on Atwood which average over fifty per year (Howells 2, 2006). Famous as she may be for her novels, Margaret Atwood is more than just a writer, but the literary celebrity, media star, and public performer, Atwood the cultural critic, social historian, environmentalist, and human rights spokeswoman, and Atwood the political satirist and cartoonist (Howells I).

Atwood is a popular writer; her novels are bestsellers all over the world. They are also taught in schools and colleges all over the world on a wide range of courses: English literature, Canadian and postcolonial literature, American literature (in the United States, where Atwood is a “North American” or sometimes an “American” writer), as well as women’s studies, gender studies, and science fiction courses. (Howells I)

Across the years, Atwood made certain themes as a label to her craft, she experiments in narrative and form, exploring the relationship of men and women. She also excels in open ended storytelling with powerful female protagonists, for instance, *surfacing* (1973), which deals with a woman's investigation into her father's disappearance; *Lady Oracle* (1977); *Life Before Man* (1980); *Bodily Harm* (1982), the story of Rennie Wilford, a young journalist describing a woman's struggle to break free from her role.

Margaret is a progressive writer, her literary career has been steadily ongoing with endless productions, presently she's working on a time-capsule like project in collaboration with The Future Library, a project she calls '*a sleeping beauty project*', which is a book that will be published one hundred years from now.

### **1-6-3 Canadian Literature**

Although Atwood is a writer who defies categorization, she identifies as “above all else, Canadian. Hence, it is important to recognize the context of her first reading. Evidently, Atwood happened to be the writer who put the Canadian Literature on the map. According to Atwood, there had been a crisis of literature in Canadian, with complete absence of literary scene, particularly while she was growing up. She mentions in an interview in Penn State Chanel ‘Conversation’ that during the 1950s and 1960s, she had ‘no role model’ and Canada had around ‘five English novels published’ but Canada was not a home for writers in the fifties ([wpsu](#) 00:20:21-00:20:28).

*“When I first started in Canada, it wasn't just that women weren't viewed as serious writers. Writing itself was not viewed as a serious pursuit. One of the things we did to overcome it was we started publishing companies, some of which are still going, and I was the founder of one of*

*those,*” says Atwood, referring to the Canadian publisher House of Anansi. (Field, Forbes 2018). Atwood explores this issue in one of her most important works *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* 1972, in which she approached the crisis of national identity of the Canadian literature. For many Canadians, *Survival* was, combined with the critical work *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), a book that gave their literature a life of its own.

Addressed to the average Canadian reader, *Survival* is “*something that would make Canadian literature, as Canadian literature – not just literature that happened to be written in Canada accessible to people other than scholars and specialists, and that would do it with simplicity and practicality*” (qtd In Howells 19). The tone of the book suggests a guided tour through the pages of Atwood’s own reading: like “*the field markings in bird-books: they will help you distinguish this species from all others, Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared and confused*” (qtd In Howells 19). The book is “*an attempt to say, quite simply, that Canadian literature is not the same as American or British literature.*”

Despite Atwood’s critique to the status of Canada at such time, she was fascinated by her grounded country’s history and landscape which was present, and celebrated, in most of her novels and a major theme in her writings. Through her literature, Atwood grew to be popular spokesperson for Canada around the world.

For more than forty years, Margaret Atwood has been a published author, well known for the intricacies of her poetry, the power of her fiction, and the illumination of her literary criticism. As her reputation has grown steadily in international circles, she has produced more than forty books that have been translated into more than forty languages. But she has rooted most of her writing in her own country of Canada. She is, above all else, Canadian.

#### **1-6-4 The Handmaid's Tale: *A modern Classic***

The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood's deservedly best-known work, that credited her a massive wave of acclaim and popularity since 1985, it won her Governor-General's Award for Fiction (1986), Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best Science Fiction, Toronto Arts Award, Los Angeles Times Fiction Award and was shortlisted for Booker Prize Award.

The Handmaid's Tale is a futuristic dystopia that depicts late-twentieth century America that had fallen under the rule of a religious totalitarian group and formed a theocracy called Gilead. The Christian republic is formed upon principles inspired from the Bible.

As the title suggests, The Handmaid's Tale narrates the story of the handmaid Offred, her journey as subjugated woman within the patriarchal Gileadean system. The novel is structured with different kinds of storytelling, as the narrator slips back and forth to flashbacks from her past that punctuates her story and interferes with the nightmarish present reality she woke up to. This post-apocalyptic narrative explores a variety of themes: dystopian totalitarianism, religion, loss of identity, freedom, sexual politics and gender relations but above all, The Handmaid's Tale is a study of power.

The Handmaid's Tale is a political thriller, and as such a platform of a powerful regime is pivotal to the plot. Inspired by puritanical heritage Atwood masterfully appropriates history to a near future world, which complicates the reception of the reader in distinguishing whether we are approaching the future or reliving the past.

One of the most intriguing features about The Handmaid's Tale is that we are not acquainted or introduced to Gilead and its principles nor it is explained how it came into existence, rather we



learn that gradually as the story unfolds. This feature makes the grim journey of discovering Gilead more captivating than it already is.

Gilead is a monotheistic republic ruled by a Christian fundamentalist group called ‘Sons of Jacob’, it takes place on what once was the U.S.A. After a violent military coup d’état through a public massacre in which the American President and members of the congress were assassinated. Followed by suspension of constitution, freezing bank accounts and discharging women from their jobs, eliminating all the rights and liberties the citizens once had.

Gilead’s raison d’être is utopian although it carries on through dystopian methods. The notion behind the creation of Gilead is the pursuit of moral way of life through religion and ensure the endangered the survival of the humankind. With idealism running through its veins guarded by true believers. The origin of Gilead is not entirely clear for we only clustered information about it through the narration of the protagonist.

The novel is hauntingly more relevant today than it was when it was first published for the brilliant worldbuilding and storytelling of the oppressive patriarchal religious dystopia it depicted. Despite its immediate success the novel did suffer from a challenging backlash, and much critical attention. In the current political scene, *The Handmaid’s Tale* has become a symbol to the women’s rights movement. The next Chapter offers a detailed account of the novel, the author’s inspiration and the context of its upcoming.

### **1-6-5 The Testaments: The Handmaid’s Tale Sequel**

*“And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light”*

The postmodern ending of *The Handmaid’s Tale* was one of the most appealing features of the novel, the unknown fate of our protagonist has been a mystery for 34 years. Until now.

Margaret Atwood decided to put an end to the wait and give her readers answers on Gilead and Offred's fate. She writes *The Testaments* as a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*; it is set 15 years after the ending of the first book with explosive testaments of three female narrators.

**Conclusion:**

The postmodern canon is difficult to explain for it stands as a personal attitude towards the current condition. The postmodern narrative is as complicated as the era is. Moreover, women's status has changed and the era witnessed a rise in the Second Wave Feminism, thus a significant elevation and presence to the feminist writings. Margaret Atwood is a prolific writer that put the Canadian literature on the map, and stood out as a leading woman writer in the postmodern era, especially in the genre of speculative fiction. Finally, her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is an important text to study for its themes and the issues it discusses.

## **Chapter Two:**

# **The Handmaid's Tale: A Modern Classic**

**2-1 Introduction:**

The Handmaid's Tale have been a landmark in the Atwoodian literature and in feminist literature in general. The novel has endured criticism as much as it received praise. One of the most important elements that helped in its lasting success is, its relevance both back when it was published in the 1985 and nowadays.

**2-2 Book Report:**

*"Some books haunt the reader. Others haunt the writer. The Handmaid's Tale has done both."*

(Margaret Atwood)

The Handmaid's Tale is a story to remember. Once it is read, it is never forgotten. Margaret Atwood made sure of that, as she created a fiction that is powerfully realistic and disturbing to say the least. The premise of the story is utterly an Atwoodian dystopia, futuristic, grim and prophetically alarming.

The Handmaid's Tale is a nightmarish novel that is set in late-twentieth century United States, immediately located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At that point, the existence of the human race is endangered, due to nuclear pollution and chemical warfare that led to a dangerous decline of birth rates and a rise in birth defects. Under such circumstances, women were the only thing to blame of their low fertility by a religious group that took it upon themselves to secure the survival of mankind. Thus, the rise of 'Sons of Jacob, a Christian fundamental group that overthrew the government of the United States and formed the Republic of Gilead.

The first command to restore order was disempowering women by taking away their rights and set laws that repudiate their basic civil liberties, such as disenfranchising them and denying them jobs, money, properties and education. For they argued that the women's disgraceful freedom is the reason behind the wrath of God and the apocalyptic state the world has come to.

The Handmaid's Tale is Offred's tale, the main character and protagonist of the novel, who narrates her story under the repressively conservative rule Gilead. Gilead's women are categorized, and the position of a handmaid' fertile woman' is the best and worst position a woman can take for it guarantees 'relatively, secure life' virtual slavery' as long as she bears children for the Commander and his wife though they have no claim to the children and they're deprived even from their real names. They are labeled patronym of the men who control their lives-as in "Ofcharles" and "Ofwarren".

The story unfolds by a scene where Offred is gathered along other handmaids in-training in the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center (formally an old high school gymnasium, also called the Red center,) a center where they indoctrinated into Gilead's ideology and instructed on how to be handmaids. The building is guarded by the Eyes or the Angels, either act as law enforcement in Gilead.

Emotionally charged and gripping from its beginning, the story is told by a first-person narrator, Offred. The women's struggle is painted so vividly throughout the first chapter, as they try to exchange survival tips, yearning for freedom, contemplating to get intimate with the Guards in exchange to some privileges and declare their real names to one another. '*Alma, Doloris, Janine, Moira and June*' (4). The Handmaids are instructed and terrorized by sadistic elder woman called the Aunts, who are armed with electric cattle prods and whistles. The Aunts,

Aunt Lydia and Aunt Elizabeth in particular, give speeches preaching Gilead as the salvation that it is for women to elevate them to the sole noble purpose they are made for, serving men and bearing children.

Offred was captured by The Eyes when she was trying to flee the country to Canada with her husband Luke and their daughter, she seen neither of them since. She, then gets assigned to the house she is to serve in, where her life takes a restrictive routine. As the story evolves, we get to know more of Offred's past life in the old world through her haunting flashbacks that she frequently slips into as an escape from her nightmarish present. Offred remembers her husband and her five-year-old daughter, her vocally feminist mother and her fiercely independent best friend Moira.

Offred is entitled to The Commander Fred Waterford; one of Gilead's architects and leaders, and his wife Serena Joy, a former gospel singer and strong advocate to Gilead's ideologies. The Handmaids are privileged with shopping trips to purchase the needs of the household, these trips include two handmaids, Offred's companion is called Ofglen. One of their trips help a frightening event when they passed by the Wall; outside what used to be Harvard University, to see hanged bodies of rebelled men.

Offred's routine is restricted between shopping trips, monthly medical exams, birthing ceremonies, Salvaging (public executions), Prayvaganza (public prayer sessions) and endure the Ceremony. The Ceremony is the most vital and abusive act to the position of handmaids, it is an impersonal intercourse between the Handmaid and the Commander. Every month Offred has to lay in bed between the Wife's legs, Serena, as the Commander, Fred reads verses from the Bible before he performs the Ceremony. The next visit to the Doctor, Offred is confronted with the

suggestion to get pregnant by the Doctor with the insinuation that the Commander could very possibly be infertile, which is forbidden statement in Gilead. That makes Offred suspicious.

Although it is the only alternative Offred has; since her life depends on getting pregnant, the proposition is too risk, she refuses. *“I’ve crossed no boundaries, I’ve given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It’s the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation”* (61).

As the days passed, ceremonies get more personal and intimate because Offred and the Commander start having more interactions outside the bedroom. He sends his Gardner and Chauffeur Nick to summon her to his office, they play scrabble and he lets her read, another forbidden act in Gilead as women aren’t allowed to read. She realizes that the previous Handmaid hanged herself and the Commander explains the Latin inscription in her room. *Nolite te bastardes carborandorum* (59). She reveals to him one night how unhappy she is under such regime.

Offred then grows fond of the chauffeur Nick, and they start having a secret affair. After few months of unfruitful ceremonies Serena suggests that Offred and Nick have intercourse as a final attempt to get Offred pregnant, she then pursues her by with the promise to show her a picture of her Daughter. Offred realizes that Serena knew the whereabouts of her [Offred’s] daughter all along.

During one of the usual shopping trips, Ofglen reveals that she is a member of a rebellious underground organization called Mayday and asks her to join by gathering information about the Commander. Offred neglects Ofglen’s request as she gets too preoccupied with her and Nick’s affair and her and the Commander’s nights. Shortly after, Offred meets the new Ofglen and learns that the old one hanged herself when the Eyes were coming to get her.

One of those nights, the Commander gives her old makeup and clothing and asks her to visit 'Jezebel's' with him, a prostitution house that Gilead commanders visit secretly. Offred meets Moira there, and she learns that she got captured after few months of her running away. Serena finds out about the trip to Jezebel's and promises Offred of severe punishment. Waiting in her room, Offred sees a black van of the Eyes approaching, Nick goes to get her saying that they are actually members of the resistance 'Mayday' and they are have come to save her. Offred enters the van to an uncertain fate.

The novel then ends with an epilogue in form of 'Historical notes' in the year 2195, two hundred years after the fall of Gilead. Lectured by Professor Peixoto, Offred's story is found in the form of cassette tapes in Bangor, Maine, explaining the world of Gilead and suggesting that the 'supposed' Eyes, as Nick said were a part of the Resistance, yet the fate of Offred remains unknown.

### **2-3 Critical Reception:**

When *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985, Margaret Atwood did not anticipate the immediate and lasting immense success of the novel or that it would still be relevant over 30 years later. "*The Handmaid's Tale has not been out of print since it was first published, back in 1985. It has sold millions of copies worldwide and has appeared in a bewildering number of translations and editions*" (Atwood 2012, pars.1). Margaret Atwood confesses that whilst creating her dystopia, she was already haunted by the dreaded reviews the book would have received, "*I lose my nerve, or think instead of the horrors of publication and what I will be accused of in reviews*" (Atwood pars.3).



The Handmaid's Tale owes its popularity to the daring taboo breaking and the horrific triumph of totalitarianism, which generated a diversity of reactions and opinions. Critics were bound to clash as variety of lauding and condemning voices arose simultaneously.

In 2017, after the adaptation of the novel into a television series, The New Yorker labeled Atwood as the 'Prophet of Dystopia', "*Her fiction has imagined societies riddled with misogyny, oppression, and environmental havoc. These visions now feel all too real*" (Mead 2017). After Mary McCarthy's review, in the same platform heavily criticized the work back in 1986. McCarthy, Elliot Krieger, along with other critics argue the '*ludicrous overestimation*' of the far right: '*I just can't see the intolerance of the far right, presently directed not only at abortion clinics and homosexuals but also at high school libraries and small-town school teachers, as leading to a super-biblical puritanism by which procreation will be insisted on and reading of any kind banned.*' (McCarthy pars.3)

From a strictly literary perspective most critics praise the writer however, the novel did not receive the same enthusiasm and was rather faced with disappointment. Paul Skenazy reviews to the Mercury News his admiration to Atwood yet criticizes the novel's ending and describing it as '*inept*'. Mary McCarthy further declares that the novel lacks imagination and phantasm "*the book is simply too obvious to support its fictional context*'. *so hard to put down, in part so striking - that it lacks imagination, but that, I fear, is the problem.*" (McCarthy pars. 10)

The Handmaid's Tale, created a critically intense dialogue. It divided scholars and critics and diversified their perception and reaction towards the novel. On this matter, the Japanese professor Tae Yamamoto, in her article '*How Can a Feminist Read The Handmaid's Tale*', suggests that the function of the narrative is cautionary. *It defamiliarizes our society and warns*

*from the existing evils through an outside satiric observation.* (Yamamoto 2009, 197). She implies that Atwood uses irony through a fictional lens in her narrative to shed the light on the current social obscenities.

Critic Natalie Cooke in her book *'Margaret Atwood Critical Companion'* confirms that *'The Handmaid's Tale'* is Atwood's *Full-length satire* (Cooke 2004, 114), suggesting that the writer with her wit managed to create a serious narrative in an ironic mode. She also argues that, as other dystopian novel, the novel paints a picture of nightmarish world either imagined or largely real. Another critic observed that projections of Atwood, though startling, were not illogical. Although most critics embraced the dystopia as a homage to Orwellian tradition, others had a different intake on the novel. *'The Handmaid's Tale'* was perceived by one critic as *'disquieting and not nearly futuristic nor phantasmatic as we might wish'* criticizing the novel as being unsettling, short sighted as well as failed to meet the expectations. (qtd In Oudenaarde 9, 2017),

Various critical essays of the novel and the author has been published throughout the years criticizing all of its themes and dimensions. *'Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale': "False Borders and Subtle Subversion"*, (1995) an article of Debrah Raschke, in which she explores the relationship between language and thought, presents in the novel and examines the way language is used as a method of control, reinforcing the patriarchal structure of power. On the other hand, critic Ildney Cavalcanti highlights the duality of language within the genre in *'Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias*, where she debates the way language is used to empower the present regime yet fails to address the oppressive use of rhetoric by women against other women. (qtd In Callaway 6). Critics Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen examine *'The Handmaid's Tale'*, among others, from a feminist perspective in their *"Feminist Implications of Anti-Leisure in Dystopian Fiction."* Arguing that one of the solid patriarchal

traits in Gilead is denying its women privacy and leisure, however also fails to address the way women of high rank have access to such activities yet deny other women of them. (qtd In Callaway 7).

The television adaptation and relevance of the *'The Handmaid's Tale'* to nowadays climate helped the novel become one of the most read and talked about presently with an intense reaction from the public opinion. Although the narrative has been praised by feminists with the constant change of the terms of the feminist movement so changed the perception of the novel. Arielle Bernstein from The Guardian argues that it isn't feminist enough, she maintains that the narrative focuses on the female suffering in a misogynistic society while neglecting the current female stature. (Arielle2018, pars.11). Alexandra Schwartz defends the novel in the New Yorker by confirming that it is indeed feminist, implying that it serves the feminist movement justly (Scwartz 2017 pars.9).

#### **2-4 Challenges:**

Academically the novel was well received on the higher education institutions yet quite daunted and challenged on other levels. The novel is enlisted as one of the ' most frequently challenged books' between 1990-1999 in the United States on the American Library Association's website ( Rushowy 2009). In Canada however, the novel was not as challenged as it was in the USA yet it was accused of being 'anti-Christian and pornographic'. In 2008 Toronto, a parent formally complained about the use of this dystopian novel in a Grade 12 English class. The parent said that the novel's "*profane language,*" *anti-Christian overtones,* "*violence*" and "*sexual degradation*" probably violated the district school policies that require students to show respect and tolerance to one another (Challenged Works).

Often challenged and banned from classrooms along 30 years due to parents' complaints of the mature themes the story explores, like the sexually explicit material it illustrates. Other arguments include: profanity, violence, hopelessness and anti-biblical attitudes. On the censorship of the novel *"The Handmaid's Tale wasn't likely written for 17-year-olds, but neither are a lot of things we teach in high school, like Shakespeare... And they are all the better for reading it. They are on the edge of adulthood already, and there's no point in coddling them," he said, adding, "they aren't coddled in terms of mass media today anyway"...* He said the book has been accused of being anti-Christian and, more recently, anti-Islamic because the women are veiled and polygamy is allowed... But that "misses the point", said Brown. *"It's really anti-fundamentalism"* (Rushowy 2009).

## **2-5 Historical Context:**

Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* in the spring of 1984 when she was living in West Berlin, Germany, encircled by the Berlin Wall, as the soviet empire was still stronger in place. Influenced by her daunting experience of visiting some countries behind the Iron Curtain, she declares *" I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing"*(Atwood 2017 pars. 2). The dramatic events and conditions were evident in the details of *The Handmaid's Tale* and the culture of that society can be felt throughout the novel which animated its dystopian element.

During her studies at Harvard about American Puritans in 17th-18th century, Atwood absorbed the New England Puritan tradition. She then observed the rise of the US political far

right and compared both ideologies. A striking parallelism between the Christian Right, Moral Majority “God’s own party”, and Gilead’s “Sons of Jacob.” is apparent, if not intended.

The Moral Majority felt the need to a Christian voice to be heard within the political force, hence the forming of the organization was necessary. The party believed that the decay of the traditional American family is the basis for the spread of immorality within the American society, and supported praying in schools. They believed that homosexuality is a sin and fought harshly any state or politician that supported it. They also fought the ‘Equal Right Amendment’; that seeks gender equality of rights, and opposed abortion and rejected any form of anti-Christian attitudes. This party is almost identical to ‘Sons of Jacob’, in the novel the regime was founded on the basis of religious fundamentalism, on reviving the traditional family values as well as limiting personal freedoms, women’s freedoms in particular. According to Atwood Gilead would have replaced the US if the Ultra Conservatives did actually achieve power within the government, she claims to have created the scenario in which a coup d’état occurred and turned religious rhetoric into authoritarian policies. (Atwood 1985). “The Republic of Gilead is built on a foundation of the seventeenth-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day America we thought we knew.”

Another reason to Atwood’s inspiration was her fascination with dictatorships and how they function. “*not unusual in a person who was born in 1939, three months after the outbreak of the second world war*” (Atwood, *pars.15*). She mirrors Nazi Germany to the Republic of Gilead, *with suspension of constitutional rights, racial cleansing, torture, perpetual sectarian wars, public execution of homosexuals and dissidents, a repressive police and spy operation, and assignment of roles to women based on their childbearing capabilities* (Ellen, Cliffnotes. *pars.1*).

According to Atwood, Hitler's fascist candor is very much the same as The Commanders of Gilead.

Dystopian writings have been a major influence on Atwood, the year 1984, seems to have been an inspiration of dystopian writings. Margaret Atwood's "*The Handmaid's Tale*", written in 1984, follows the steps of its predecessor George Orwell's 1984, and it seems to have continued where he left off. Inspired by the Orwellian dystopia, Atwood managed to create her own, thought covering a different angle, but sharing the same futuristic pessimism. One cannot help but draw attention to the similar portrayal of Orwell's Oceania and Atwood's Gilead. Both being governed by totalitarian regimes that is utterly oppressive physically and spiritually.

She declares in her article 'My hero: George Orwell that she grew up reading Animal Farm, "*To say that I was horrified by this book would be an understatement*", (Atwood 2012). The politics were too complicated for a child's mind yet Orwell managed to fascinate and shock her at an early age. Moreover, when Nineteen Eighty-Four came along it instantly became a best read and solid inspiration for Atwood's own dystopia. "*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 pars.5).

## **2-6 The Relevance of the Novel:**

### **2-6-1 Then: Political Background**

Margaret Atwood's masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale* written and published in the 1980s, inspired by the revival conservatism in the West, after the election of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and after the election of Ronald Reagan in America.

The United States was experiencing a full pushback in the women's reproductive rights after the growth of The American New Right backed with the strong support of the Republican Party and President Reagan. President Reagan had a clear principle that outline the concept of the real "family", which demanded a 'Judeo-Christian' prospect built on patriarchal gender roles.

This movement warned about the falling of fertility rates, what was referred to as '*Birth Dearth*' along with rising concerns about abortion, the decline of public morals, the illegitimate births along with the rise of divorce rates and the growth of the Gay Right movement. As well as what they perceived '*excessive sexual revolution*'. As a reaction, the hyper conservative group sought to implement legislations against these issues and invited the revival the American Puritan heritage and go back to the traditional family values and religious morals. The feminist fears were as heightened as the pushback from movement. For the great gains and triumphs of women in the past decades, like legalization of abortion, access to contraception and female political influence, were about to be demolished and reversed.

Paradoxically, several prominent female activists advocated this movement, namely the infamous Phyllis Schlafly who toured the country making speeches and rallying women to support the conservative policies. All of these issues have prevailed in the novel as it is evident that the Republic of Gilead fought against and opposed the very same matters as the Right-Wing Christian group did, and an even more direct embodiment can be witnessed in the character of the Commander's Wife Serena Joy, who mirrors the public figure Phyllis Schlafly.

## 2-6-2 Now:

### 2-6-2-1 Pop Culture

The Handmaid's Tale has not been out of print since it was first published in 1985 (Atwood pars.1). It was made into a film in 1990, an opera, a ballet and a graphic novel. However, a renewed interest and captivation with the novel has towered this last two years. After the book has been adapted to a successful TV series by *HULU*, in 2017.

The dramatic series created by Bruce Miller, aired in April 27th, 2017 with a 10 episode first season that modelled the original story with few differed details added like richer backstories for some characters and some modern settings adjusted to fit the present-day television .Other differences are giving some of the roles like Moira and Luke to African-American actors whilst in the novel Gilead discriminated '*Children of Ham*'. Noteworthy that four out of five directors of the first season were women, while Atwood herself was one of the producers along with the actress Elizabeth Moss who portrays the role of the main character Offred. Atwood also made a cameo in the first season as an Aunt.

Since the first season ends with the same scene as in the novel, Offred stepping into the black van to an unknown fate. Having exhausted all the material on the first season, the second season resorted to an all original story, emphasizing a more feminist stance and giving more agency to the female characters. With the blessings but not involvement of Atwood. The first episodes of the third season were aired by the beginning of June 2019.

The series deemed most dramatic on TV, received high critical acclaim, and since won many prestigious awards. The first season was nominated for thirteen Primetime Emmy Awards and



won eight of them including, Outstanding Drama series, along with Golden Globe Award for best Television Series- Drama.

The hauntingly vivid incarnation of the novel echoed an intense reaction from the world under the alarming political environment hence, *The Handmaid's Tale* became a symbol to women oppression and resistance “*The adaptation couldn't have come at a better—or more terrifying—time.*” “*The iconic red and white outfit is now an internationally understandable meme, popping up in state legislatures and cosplay conventions alike and in such diverse locations at Texas, Scotland and Sweden,*” (Atwood 2017). Turned hit TV series, is often heralded as a critical commentary on the socio-political conditions of modern America.

#### **2-6-2-2 The Trump Effect:**

The post-apocalyptic world created by Atwood has been considered an allegory to President Donald Trump's world to be. An ongoing sentiment of rebellion and resistance resonates with the American public, women in particular, as a reaction to the spectacle that is Trump's presidency. Since President Trump's election, the novel got back to being a bestseller and most read in the United States 2017, according to Amazon as it is labeled a ‘*vital read*’ for the Trump era.

A new layer of anxiety and worry falls upon women with every new executive order and law from the infamous President, collided by the United States' Republicans' efforts to roll back women's reproductive rights and health care programs .On different social media platforms people started responding and commenting at the Republicans regarding their efforts to ban contraception and abortion by religious expressions quoted from *The Handmaid's Tale* such as: ‘*Under his eye*’ and ‘*Blessed be the fruit*’.

Women from all over the world have adopted the show's iconic costume as a symbol of protest against women oppression, the phenomenon emerged as one of the most powerful and significant feminist reactions. In the United States, when the Vice President Mike Pence visited Philadelphia on July 2018, he was welcomed with a wall of women protesters dressed as Handmaids. Recently protests intensified after the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court for his abortion stance and the credible allegations of sexual misconduct, women in Washington protested in front of the Senate building and Capitol Hill chanting 'We do not Consent'. Women protesters in the UK also, put on the red cloak and white bonnet unwelcoming the visit of Donald Trump and opposing his policies and administration, and in anti-Trump rallies in Warsaw as well, and even anti-corruption protests in Russia.

*"The Handmaid's costume has been adopted by women in many countries as a symbol of protest about various issues having to do with the requisitioning of women's bodies by the state,"* she told the Guardian. (qtd In Beaumont et al Pars.5). Margaret Atwood, confirms the extreme impact of the symbolic uniform in protests against decisions being made controlling women by the majority-male representatives.

Women's Marches have since adopted the iconic red and white uniform all over the world. It has been donned by pro-choice protesters during campaigns to overturn abortion laws, in Northern Ireland as well as Buenos Aires, Argentina. Along with the MeToo movement (#metoo), a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault. (Beaumont et al pars.2)

The costumes make visual statements in a haunting display that demonstrates just how small the distinction is between the real world and the Atwoodian one. *'Make Atwood fiction again'*, one of the significant slogans to the movements that demands a serious warning to the dystopia

the male legislators are creating. It is unlikely that women activists will be putting aside their red cloaks and white bonnets anytime soon.

**Conclusion:**

The novel's reception has been ambivalent. A sentiment of fear and skepticism hovered among critics. Due to the alarming similarities between the novel's events and real-life events, people perceived it as a prophetic warning. The political climate of the 1980s conservatism that resurfaced in the present day validated those rational fears. Atwood's iconic plot and costumes have become a symbol of female resistance. 'The Handmaid's Tale' is now considered THE dystopian story of our time, and it seems as if it will be forever relevant.

**Chapter Three:**  
**Patriarchal Dystopia and The**  
**Problematic Feminism**

### 3-1 Introduction:

In the *Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood paints a grim picture to the consequences of the diminish of human and women's rights under a totalitarian regime disguised in religious fundamentalism. This regime resulted with the creation of dystopian society ruled by a patriarchal order. However, the upheaval of this system shows an alliance between both men and women. Hence, in this chapter we are tracing the elements and features of Patriarchy that are used to impose its tyranny, as well as the compliance of the matriarchal order which proves to be vital to the success of this regime.

### 3-2 Patriarchal Dystopia:

Thinking of Dystopia evokes images of ruin, destruction, mass genocides, natural disasters, apocalypse, decaying civilizations, wars, suffering, disorder and lawlessness. Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale's dystopia is displayed through a different image. Instead of disorder and lawlessness, there is order and lawfulness. Ironically, this order resulted in a despotic regime that embraced religion fundamentalism as a doctrine and the sole source of constitutional decrees. Thus, turning Gilead, a supposed utopian state to a dystopian tyrannical one with complete absence of any respect to human rights. As Claeys defines it [dystopia] *'The antithesis of Utopia. A hellish state brought about by attempts to construct unrealizable ideal systems'* (Claeys 8). Hence, dystopia is identified as a 'failed utopia', as many authors and critics correlated dystopia to totalitarianism. Gilead is evidently a totalitarian state, based on a hierarchical order. The striking feature of Gilead is its politics and exercise of power mainly over women. Women in Gilead are stripped from their basic human rights, they can hold no possession, instead they are one.

The consequence of this radical political change was the creation of a tyrannical patriarchy. The patriarchy of Gilead isolates women and then relegates them to the domestic periphery. For this reason, the novel has often been labeled a feminist dystopia, it is presented with various issues that concern the feminist ethos. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a nation purely based on female subjugation, forced child bearing and complete diminish of the female identity.

Patriarchy is a system where men hold power, and women are excluded from it. The sociologist Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as "*a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women*"(qtd In Sultana 2, 2011). Furthermore, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a dystopian patriarchy, a system which is based not only on excluding women but enslaving, oppressing and exploiting them.

Gilead becomes a dystopian patriarchy through imposing various elements that are legitimized by the religious indoctrination. Religion is the prior source and feature to this regime, it is used to organize the hierarchical order, legislate laws, disempower women and empower men by positioning both to certain roles.

### **3-2-1 Hierarchy:**

Gilead is a strictly regimented society formed on gender-based classification where people have defined roles and hold titles. Naturally, Gilead's chain of command is of mounted by men. 'Commanders of the Faithful' are high ranked officials, they serve as the politicians and lawmakers military leaders of the republic.

The Commanders, Fred, Warren and Glen. Primarily, they are strong believers who helped create and supported the rise of this regime, ironically, they tend to break their own laws secretly, like getting involved in forbidden luxuries and activities; visiting the brother Jezebel's and indulging the black market to obtain contraband products as alcohol and cigarettes.

Angels, among the highest-ranking men; second to the commanders they are devoted soldiers who fight Gilead's wars inside and outside, they have many privileges among which is having a wife. Guardians of faith, are uniformed police, they serve as personal soldiers, bodyguards and unmarried servants to the commanders, like Nick. They are low ranked than Angels, above ranking ordinary men. Guardians are promoted to Angels eventually after their good service. The Eyes of God, members of Guardian 'Incognito Guardians' that function as secret police, attempt to discover any violations of the law, and retaining law and order. Other men classes exist under the category of Econopeople and they hold normal ordinary jobs, like doctors.

Gilead's women are stripped from all their statuses and rights and forced to live out lives of servitude in such patriarchal regime. All women in Gilead are subjugated to men regardless of their rank. They have no right to vote, read, write, make money, own property, hold occupations, lands, or any kind of position. As it is the case for men, women hold just a handful of roles that Gilead's law allows based on their moral virtue, their fertility and their sins in Pre-Gileadean life. *All the options are bad, some are worse, yet each is uniquely awful in its own special way.*

(Silman pars.1, 2018). The Wives, of the Commanders of the Faithful are then by extension, the highest ranked women in Gilead, they are pure virtuous women who support the regime and some who were instrumental to its foundation like Serena Joy, Commander Waterford's wife who was a conservative activist, ironically, she was pushed out by the system she advocated. The Wives are infertile women yet they have it best in comparison to other Gileadean women, they're

responsible for their households and enjoy some luxuries. The Aunts, another high-ranking group in Gilead, similar to Catholic nuns, true believers of faith in of Gilead, they are responsible for the indoctrination of the handmaids in the Red Center.

Other women who have fallen victim to the new system, include:

The *Marthas*, are domestic household servants to the ruling class, they cook and clean and look after the household. unmarried and infertile women, usually of older age, they get to keep their names unlike the handmaids. They have some authority within the household they serve, like delegating tasks as shopping to the handmaid.

*Econowives* are the wives of the lower ranking men, such as Guardians. Once they are widowed, they wear all black mourning their husbands, before they are reassigned to a new role. If the Econowife is infertile and crime free she becomes an Aunt, if not she's to become a handmaid.

*The Jezebels*: a bunch of sterile women who work as prostitutes in the secret brothel 'Jezebel's' serving the high ranked men, essentially, Jezebel is a place for the women who could not be 'assimilated' to the new regime as the Commander put it, most of them were former 'professionals' in pre-Gilead days, others were punished by serving there. Moira, Offred's friend was given the choice after she was captured in a failed escape attempt, either be a Jezebel or an Unwoman.

*The Unwomen*: As dehumanized as the above-mentioned women classes as they may be, at least they're considered 'woman' in the eyes of Gilead. This category of women is even deprived from that. They are the women who cannot perform any role that the patriarchy system offers,



hence, they are deemed less than women. Old women, feminists, political activists, gender traitors (lesbians), unsuccessful Handmaids, sinful women and overall any woman that is considered a threat to the republic's strict laws and has no viable service to offer is deemed as an Unwoman and sent to what is called the Colonies. A nuclear toxic place where they are forced to hard labor of cleaning radioactive waste. They are expected to survive *'three years maximum'* as Atwood suggested: after that *"your nose falls off and your skin pulls away like rubber gloves"*.  
(qtd In Silman pars 11)

### **3-2-1- The Handmaids: The Future if Female**

#### *'Fertile women in infertile land'*

The Republic of Gilead is a theocracy founded on conservative religious extremism, and is built around a single goal: control of reproduction. In the novel, the prime issue is the declining population and low fertility as well as the ability to have viable babies. Hence, the premium goal is to enhance the population and conditions for better chances to survive. In order to enforce this solution, the ruling class monopolizes the most valuable resource, the fertile women, and forces them into domestic slavery by assigning them as Handmaids. As Atwood suggests that under any totalitarian regime, the elite monopolize valuable things, in this case the Handmaids. *"Since ruling classes always make sure they get the best and rarest of desirable goods and services- the rare and desirable would include fertile women"* (Atwood pars 9 2012). Since, The Handmaids are the scarce source of reproduction; thus, they are the entity most prone to control.

They become nothing more than 'Two-legged womb' as Offred comments. The Handmaids live in seclusion, a lifeless routine that consist of nothing but trips to the local market, public prayers or visits to the Wall, where they get to see people hanged for different crimes. The

criteria of recruiting the Handmaids is somehow complex. The Handmaids are the least virtuous women of Gilead, former adulterers like Offred, prostitutes, homosexuals, Offglen having had an abortion or been raped like OfCharles.

The Handmaids are red uniformed fertile slaves, *'sisters dipped in blood'* they function as nothing more than breeders. Women who have viable ovaries are recruited to be Handmaids, assigned to serve the high ranked houses of the Commanders and their Wives. They are deprived from their own names as they are labeled with a patronymic name of their commanders, such as Offred, 'Of Fred', Offwarren, 'Of Warren' Ofglen Of Glen.

Once a month they practice the ritual of the Ceremony, a rape with forced consent, as they lay between the legs of the Wives while the Commanders try to impregnate them with the hope of conceiving a child. The Ceremony is one of the worst rituals the Handmaids have to endure, along with the Wives. A ritualized rape that starts with the Commander recites passages from the bible that validates the Ceremony "The epigraph Genesis 30:1-3 " *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*" ( Atwood 88). In the Bible, women in Israel lose their honor by failing to conceive and bear children for their husbands, which is the fundamental idea behind the inviting of 'maid' or 'Handmaid' into a childless marriage to act as surrogates. Gilead adapts the same practice by creating the position of the Handmaid.

*"The biblical precedent to the creation of this position is the story of Jacob and his two wives Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids. One man, four women, 12 sons — but the Handmaids could not claim the sons. They belonged to the respective wives"* (Atwood pars.7 2017). During the monthly Ceremony, the Handmaid lays between the Wives' open legs while

the Commander tries to impregnate her, adapted from the literal interpretation of the verse ‘*She shall bear upon my knees*’. Just as this act cannot be more demeaning and agonizing to both women involved. The Handmaids who fail to conceive after serving three houses, are sent to the colonies. Although the Handmaids fertility makes them occupy the most important place in society and employ the most noble role yet instead of being cherished and praised, they are enslaved and degraded in the worst ways possible.

### **3-2-2 Religion:**

Religion is the primary form of identity; fundamentalists believe they have transcendental experience which entitles them to preserve their identity as a people and a group. Consequently, they oppose plurality, modernity and equality, they advocate a return to ‘traditional gender roles’ and ‘values’ under complete male authority as described in the Old Testament (Ruthvan 8, 2005). The theocracy of Gilead embraces the same fundamental doctrine and principles, creating a state with a regressive caste system that controls all citizens and oppresses women. This system classifies all citizens with clear distinction of position, dress and duties. A power structure that seeks to eliminate cultural and religious trends, control freedoms and dominate women. “*There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.*” (24).

It is historically precedent that religion is used as a tool to impose power over women specifically. The Christian doctrine sees women as the original source of sin from the pretext of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from paradise driven by sexual desire. Therefore, women are the targeted element in this regime, for they are seen as immoral and sexual beings and subjects to one purpose that is to serve men and fulfil their biological role. This stratification is best

illustrated by Christopher Jones in his article "Women of the Future: Alternative Scenarios" as a "hyper-patriarchy" in which *"men reclaim harsh dominance over women"* (3-4). In Gilead, women are at the bottom of the social ladder, occupying merely domestic positions.

According to Gilead's creators, a religious totalitarian republic is the only way to salvation and survival. The republic formed in response to the dramatic decrease in birth rates after the spread of nuclear warfare, however oblivious to the real reasons, they blamed the danger of existence of the human race on God's wrath on women's freedoms and the widespread of sexual freedom. They put forth the argument that a return to 'traditional values' and women's traditional role is the way to preserve.

The principles of Gilead are handpicked from the Bible, only to control the people to serve the ruling class's personal objectives. *"Like any theocracy, this one would select a few passages from the Bible to justify its actions"* (Atwood pars 10), As Atwood argues that is how religion is often used, An excuse to manipulation and justification to the republic's most savage laws. *"God is in the details, they say. So is the Devil."* (Atwood pars 4)

It is historically precedent that religion is used as a tool to impose power over women specifically. The Christian doctrine sees women as the original source of sin from the pretext of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from paradise driven by sexual desire. Therefore, women are the targeted element in this regime, for they are seen as immoral and sexual beings and subjects to one purpose that is to serve men and fulfil their biological role.

Parallels between Christian fundamentalism and The Handmaid's Tale's totalitarian regime can be drawn. First, the literal interpretation of the verses from the Old Testament suggests that *"fundamentalists are selective when it comes to the texts they use and their mode of*

*interpretation*” Ruthvan (2005), which they use to legitimize their most brutal and savage laws. They use violence and extreme torture to exert fear, manipulation in the name of Religion and lawlessness to assert lawfulness. For instance, any lawless relationship between a man and a woman from fraternizing to adultery is considered ‘fornication’ and is punishable by death to all parties involved. Contraception and abortion are recognized as great sins, even doctors who once performed abortions in Pre-Gileadean state are executed. Homosexuality is referred to as ‘Gender Treachery’ and one of the greatest sins as well, punishable by death.

*Fundamentalists do not want the church and state to be separate from each other; they want their worldview to dictate others* (Ruthvan 2005). Similarly, in Gilead ‘Sons of Jacob’ are against pluralism and religious tolerance, this animosity extends to even other Christian denominations (eg: Roman Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodoxy) to which they see them as evil and ‘traitors’ to the one true faith. They are also involved in discrimination to the people of color, even by religious rhetoric referring to African-Americans as ‘Sons of Ham’, as they execute massive deportation against the Jews.

Biblical intertext inspired laws and principles govern the way of life and the politics of Gilead. In this gender classified hierarchy, modesty is glorified and emphasized, particularly to women who are obliged to wear a color-coded humble and covered clothing, often with veils.

Similarly, fundamentalist groups around the world today seek to dictate women’s dress and behavior. It is believed that they are immoral and more prone to sin. David Coad's "Hymens, Lips, and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," examines how the veil, worn by all women in Gilead, functions as a crucial tool of subjugation, as a part of the politics of dress in Gilead. *“Modesty is invisibility...Never forget it. To be seen—to be seen—is to*

*be...penetrated. What you must be girls, is impenetrable”* (Atwood 28). The veils ‘wings’ worn by the Handmaids are not only to disrupt the male gaze to them but their own. Their vision is limited through the wings which limits their vision to the society as a whole “*Given our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view of the sky, of anything.*” (Atwood). The wings prevent the handmaids to break out of the illusions of their society. The politics of dress goes beyond modesty to significant colors. The modesty costumes worn in Gilead are inspired by Western Religious iconography (Atwood). “*We are secret, forbidden, we excite them*” (37).

The Wives dress in blue for purity, representing the Virgin Mary, the Aunts dress in brown, the Marthas dress in green, the Handmaid’s dress in red from the blood of parturition also from Mary Magdalene( Atwood pars 21), the Econowives dress in multicolored striped robes, blue, red and green for they fulfill all those roles in their homes, Wives, Marathas and Handmaid. Many totalitarianisms have used clothing, both forbidden and enforced, to identify and control people (Atwood 2017). Thusly, the Commanders dress in a black military uniforms, nothing more says power than the color black on such uniform.

### **3-2-3 Language:**

Ruthven (2005) suggests that fundamentalist movements such as these employ sexist language and policies in protest of modernity’s attack on patriarchal principles in such spheres as the family, the economy, and politics. It is evident that one of the strongest weapons to enforce the dystopian patriarchy in the state of Gilead is the use of language as a tool of power. Gilead creates an official particular vocabulary that ignores and warps reality in order to serve the needs of the new society’s elite. The Commanders give themselves the freedom of language to

distinguish themselves from the other classes by in order to exercise and maintain their power, they censor language, forbid reading, and monetize the population speech to their favor. For instance, to use the word sterile or infertile in describe any man is forbidden punishable by death because in Gilead only women can be 'not fruitful'. Dystopian novels often warn about the dangers of totalitarian societies repression through the perversion of language, Orwell's 1984 'Newspeak' is a prime example. And *The Handmaid's Tale* carries on this tradition. The Bible is also constrained because it is altered: "*It is an incendiary device*" (108). One of the altered verses reads, 'Blessed be the silent' on which Offred comments "*I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking*" (110-111). Curiously, the Commander is seduced by the image of Offred reading a magazine after he allowed her to "a curiously sexual act" (231), their private forbidden encounter also include playing Scrabble, a language game. Accordingly, the Commander offers yet another example of the corrupt system in which men of Gilead manipulate laws and freedoms at their own pleasure.

Religious language penetrates every part of the society, laws, names, titles and even greetings. Expressions such as 'Praised be', 'Under his eye', 'Blessed be the fruit', 'May the Lord open', inspired from the biblical testament are the standard greetings and any use of unprescribed or personal speech can fall under the suspicion of disloyalty.

Even the name Gilead is derived from the bible, by the meaning of 'heap of witness' in Hebrew, in reference to a mountainous region east of the Jordan River, in Palestine. According to the Bible it is a very peaceful and fertile place, as the Commanders want to brand their Gilead. However, Gilead's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the opposite of heavenly place, it is corrupt and imperfect which is a vivid example of how fundamentalists abuse religion to their benefits.

The duality of language is problematic, it is solely used to oppress women, and elevate men's status. These language systems are methods of control, and in particular, methods of controlling women. Since women are always under surveillance by The Eyes; Reference to God as the ultimate panopticon: "Under His Eye" (55), their conversations are always structured and formalized with only determined utterances allowed, like the standard greetings. Debrah Raske, in her article, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: False Borders and Subtle Subversions," explores the relationship between language and thought, by taking away free speech, Gilead imposes limitations that controls communication which further reinforces the regime's power, this limitation creates fear and despair.

Considering that it is illegal for women to have jobs, they are defined only by their assigned roles and association to men, whereas men are defined by their military ranks. One of the worst forms of patriarchal oppression to women in this novel is depriving them of their identity and the cruelest to deprive them from their own names. The Wives are referred to by their husband's names; for instance, the Wife of Waterford, Wife of Warren, Wife of Glen. The Handmaids have it even worse, as they are labeled with a patronymic name of their commanders, such as Offred, 'Of Fred', Ofwarren, 'Of Warren' Offglen Of Glen. Of Charles. Striping them from their names, is striping them from their individuality, their identity, their humanity even for they simply become an object, a possession to whichever house they serve.

All names in the novel are problematic. Feminists and deformed babies are treated as subhuman, denoted by the terms "Unwomen" and "Unbabies." We are not even introduced to the protagonist's real name in the story "*My name isn't Offred.*" "*I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden*" (104). However, we can deduce it from the first



chapter as the newly recruited Handmaids share their real names whispering almost without voice: “*Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June*” (4). Throughout the novel we are introduced to each of these Handmaids except for Offred, which leaves us with the only plausible correlation to her real name. Atwood confesses that it was not her original thought ‘*Some have deduced that Offred’s real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium/dormitory, “June” is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought but it fits, so readers are welcome to it if they wish* (Atwood pars 8).

In the Historical notes, professor Piexioto proclaims that the names included in Offred’s tale are most probably changed, hence a correlation between the characters mentioned and real-life figures could be impossible. Offred asserts that names are dangerous, and it is very risky to mention any. “*Dear You, I’ll say. Just you, without a name. Attaching a name attaches you to the world of fact, which is riskier, more hazardous: who knows what your chances are out there, of survival, yours?*” (50). Gilead maintains its control over women’s bodies by maintaining control over names.

The lack of names parallels the lack of voice. Offred sings, but only in her head (67). Hence, the lack of freedom, of identity. Serena Joy, the Commander’s Wife also suffers oppression and rendered voiceless, as a former gospel singer she can no longer enjoy the liberty to listen to her own self “*And sometimes from the front sitting room there will be the thin sound of Serena’s voice from a disc made long ago and played now with the volume low, so she won’t be caught listening as she sits there knitting, remembering her own former and now amputated glory*” (67-68). This also applies on the title itself for we are presented with a story of an unknown, unidentified handmaid, rather than the tale of Offred. Moreover, the fact that the story of Offred was found recorded on cassettes and not written emphasizes the loss of her control. Offred then

uses her voice in constructing her narrative as a means of control, rebellion, and hope for every recorded story must have a reader *“If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending”* (50).

### **3-3 The Future is Not Female Enough: The Matriarchal Order**

*“It’s not the husbands you have to watch out for, [...] it’s the Wives.”*

It is evident that most of Margaret Atwood’s major works, offer a critique to the traditional male power structure. However, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the complexity of power relations is immense. The novel offers a critique to both male and female exercise of power. As we have examined the manifestations of patriarchal oppression and gender inequality previously, women’s role in upholding this dystopia is to be examined.

While Gilead’s caste system represses both men and women, it is the women in power who make the system dangerous and unpleasant. The social structure in Gilead enforces female hierarchy and disunity through giving certain privileges and authority over each other.

The Gilead culture of women subjugation and female dissent stems from the pre-Gilead society that witnessed a conflict and disconnection within the female culture. As the 1980s witnessed the presence of different strands in the feminist sphere: Second Wave feminists, radical feminists, And anti-feminists. Hence, the female compliance and involvement in the creation and upholding of the patriarchy was not very difficult in Gilead.

Serena Joy, the Wife of Commander Fred Waterford is one of those women. She was a conservative activist, one of the instrumental elements to the foundation of the Republic of Gilead, as she supported its principles and advocated the return of traditional values and embracing the Christian way of life.

Serena Joy was a gospel singer, and a preacher who made speeches which "*were about the sanctity of the house, about how women should stay home*" (45), besmirching the condition of women who value their jobs and freedoms as opposed to traditional family life. Offred found these speeches and Serena's earnestness frightening (46). Atwood writes of her: "*her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn't do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she was making for the good of all*" (Atwood43). Ironically, Serena finds herself oppressed by the same system she once advocated and founded, Offred comments '*How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word*' (46).

Women pre-Gilead did not assert themselves in a united culture that would be a threat to the patriarchal and unjust system that have fallen upon them. Instead, they are complicit in their own fall. Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor in her article "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* observes that Offred is "*politically complacent before the takeover*" (83). Even before the coup, Offred was not an active agent against the dramatic changes that lead to the establishment of the system. She remembers protests occurring which she did not attend because "*Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes*" (180).

Consequently, Offred June was overwhelmed by the system and her husband's authority even before 'Sons of Jacob' seized power. Offred's compliance continues throughout her servitude under the regime, if not by believing in the system by passivity and submission. Offred, does not indulge in any act of rebellion, however she accepts her assimilation to the system and only strive to survive within it not to get out of it; which she believes impossible.

Another form of female discontent is Offred's relationship with her mother. Offred's mother was a feminist and an activist, something Offred did not appreciate. Atwood then passes a subtle criticism towards feminists who try to impose their own gender roles and ideals on other women creating a bigger conflict instead of supporting individualism. Just as Offred's mother tried to do with her, shaping her into a replica of herself. When she remembers her mother, only a sentiment of pressure and forced expectations from a harsh feminist is recalled. Subsequently, Offred criticizes her mother's radical ideology which was one of the causes behind the creation of Gilead: "*Mother... You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.*" (34). The matriarchal network ensures the upheaval of the system. Patricia Goldblatt points out in her article *Reconstructing Margaret Atwood's Protagonists*, "*the work women do conspire to maintain the subjection of their own kind*" (4).

There are two systems, public and private, that illustrate the enforcement this dysfunctional patriarchy: The Handmaid training system, and the household, governed by the Aunts and the Wives respectively.

### **3-3-1 The Aunts:**

The Red center, or Rachel and Leah's re-education center, is the Aunt's terrain of torture. The Aunts are responsible for the indoctrination and recruitment of the Handmaids to their appointed roles. Humiliation, physical and psychological abuse is their favorite method. They are the spokeswomen of the patriarchy within Gilead. The Aunts opt to condition and brainwash the Handmaids into thinking that by serving in Gilead they receive salvation; their obedience and weakness is 'blessed by the Lord'. The Aunts are speculated to be true believers in the regime or

opportunists who enjoy being privileged and have power over other women. *“When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting”* (308). They promote the regime as the Godly intended one, and the Handmaids’ role as honorable and redeeming for their previous sins: *“Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary”* (33). The Aunts try to convince the Handmaids that the regime is meant to restore their respect. The Handmaids who are now valued and appreciated because they are *“holding the future in their hands”* (55). Which is an ironic claim considering the context they are presented with.

The Aunts are among the powerful female agents in Gilead’s patriarchy, they are respected and obeyed and are the only women who are allowed to read and write for indoctrination reasons. *“The Aunts are allowed to read and write”* (139). One of the concepts the Aunts glorify is the idea of freedom. They advocate Gilead’s tyranny and suppression as a freeing method from the unrighteous past. The distinction between the freedom the Handmaids once enjoyed and the freedom they supposedly have now, is made by the Aunts as freedom to and freedom from. *“There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are given freedom from. Don’t underrate it”*. (24)

The Aunts condemn the rights that women had before the existence of Gilead, when women were independent and had freedom over their bodies and choices. They could dress the way they wanted, hold jobs, make money and enjoy sexual freedom. Hence, the Aunts believe that the new regime is not constraining women yet saving them from the burden of independence and freedom from the threat of immoral men, the harassers and rapists who generate constant fear to their safety. *“Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us, no one whistles.”* (33). According the Aunts, any domestic abuse, rape

or sexual violation that any women had experienced is her fault by flaunting her body and tempting men. They believe that sexual freedom is their source of victimization. "*Boiling themselves like roasted meat on a spit, [revealing their] bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and showing their legs without stockings*" (53). The irony is the same sentiment and notion shared with many Second Wave feminists, as they believe that men consider women merely a physical body to satisfy their urges and that this objectification is the primary source of women's oppression. Hence, Gilead managed to twist a prominent feminist ethos to their favor and use it against its own supporters as a method to oppress other women.

An example is manifested with the way the Handmaid in-training Janine was humiliated and condemned for being a victim to a gang rape in her teenage years that resulted in abortion that ruined her life. Janine suffered from what is called 'slut-shaming' in the presence of the other Handmaids who made a circle around her by the order of the Aunts. As Aunt Lydia articulated, an immodest woman is punished by God and he let this happen to her as the Handmaids shout "*teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson*" (72). Janine is one of the Handmaids who is having troubles in assimilation as she is constantly being abused and humiliated publicly, for instance, the Aunts do not allow her bathroom breaks and let her soil herself in front of the other Handmaids. She also suffers from a mental breakdown after giving birth to her daughter who is taken away from her.

As Gilead is known for the use of violence and torture against its sinners, the Aunts legitimize these methods and apply them on the Handmaids in the most brutal ways. "*Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their belts*" (4). If the psychological torture is not successful, they move to the use of physical violence. Offred recalls few events as the Handmaids suffered torture. Like her friend Moira, who was a 'gender

traitor' before Gilead, her resistance of the Aunts resulted in multiple torture sessions that left her unable to walk for weeks. Their methods of torture target the legs and arms since they are not important in the reproductive mission of the Handmaids. Nevertheless, Moira does not give up, unlike the rest of the Handmaids and eventually manages to escape dressing as an Aunt.

### 3-3-2 The Wives:

Upon their dismissal from the Red Center, and posting in the households, Offred and the Handmaids fall at the mercy of the Wives. The relationship between the Wives and Handmaids is filled with resentment and operates on mutual dislike. One of the Wives says during a Birth Day visit *'little whores, all of them, but still you can't be choosy. You take what they hand out, right, girls?'* (115). The Wives consider the Handmaids their number one enemy. They are envious of them, for their fertility and ability to bear children and continuous reminder for their failure.

The Ceremony is an emotionally agitating event for the Wives, to witness their husbands share such intimate act with another woman, a better woman, in their presence. Thusly, Aunt Lydia warns and invites the Handmaids to be empathetic towards the Wives', 'defeated women' as she describes them: *' . 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. [...] Try to pity them. [...] You must realize that they are defeated women. They have been unable—'* (46). Paradoxically, the Handmaids, although hated and abused under the jurisdiction of this tyranny, they are supposed to empathize with the women in power, instead of expecting empathy themselves which accentuate the antagonism under this matriarchal control. The resentment is mutual between the Wives and Handmaids as well. Offred hates Serena, first for *"her part in what was being done to her"* (161). As being an instrument in establishing the Republic. On a more personal level,

Offred hates her *"because she would be the one to raise my child, should I be able to have one after all"* (161). These sentiments are shared among all Handmaids for they are devoted to bear children yet they are prevented to enjoy the duties and happiness of motherhood.

Another form of imposing the system is the prohibition of any form of leisure, or communication. The Wives enjoy some privileges, for instance, they practice gardening or knitting and participate in gatherings and social events. However, the Handmaids are not allowed to practice anything, they are isolated. Their lives are full of silence and emptiness.

The Handmaids long for any form of intimacy or friendship, it is not even offered by the other women of any class because acts of friendship are punishable offenses. *"It's hard to imagine now, having a friend"* (25). Within the domestic hierarchy, every woman is a spy and an enemy, even other Handmaids. The Handmaids are painfully aware that they are not allowed to fraternize or communicate rather they are potential informants on one another. *"the truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers"* (19).

Even within the realms of the household, the two Marthas (Rita and Cora) react differently towards Offred, as she remarks, *"they talk about me as though I can't hear. To them I am another household chore, one among many"* (35). Rita objects to Offred's duty and her 'choice' on becoming a Handmaid, although her two other alternatives are either be executed or sent to the colonies. Offred yearns to befriend them, share the kitchen table with them or even chat with them. She longs to break the abiding silence with anything, even banal pleasantries: "How I used to despise such talk. Now I long for it. At least it was talk. An exchange, of sorts" (11). Offred however, understands their perspective and realizes that any attempt of friendship is dangerous. *"But even if I were to ask, even if I were to violate decorum to that extent, Rita would not allow it. She would be too afraid."* (11).



Gilead succeeds to penetrate under the surface and achieve in depth disunity, destroy female solidarity and domesticate the Handmaids in compliance of the other women and the establishment of the matriarchal order that functions as the most effective tool in enforcing the patriarchal control. The epilogue of the novel re-affirms the purpose of the matriarchy: *"the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves"* (308).

### **Conclusion**

In this dystopia Margaret Atwood paints a society of disunity and tyranny. The patriarchal order enforces its control through the manipulation of religion, language and social hierarchy, as well as the use of violence. However, the upheaval of this system lays heavily on the compliance of the matriarchal network. The writer warns from the dangers of totalitarian fundamentalism to women and the society as a whole. Furthermore, she passes subtle criticism to the feminist

## General Conclusion

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood paints a dystopian society based on tyranny and disunity. As the novel has often been speculated whether it was a series of events that could happen in real life or not, Atwood always asserted that she did not include any detail or event that hadn't already happened somewhere in the world at some point of time ' *So many different strands fed into "The Handmaid's Tale" —group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the Lebensborn program of the SS and the child-stealing of the Argentine generals, the history of slavery, the history of American polygamy . . . the list is long.* ' (Atwood pars 21) Inspired by real life events from history as well as from the present.

The focus of our analysis has been on the manifestations of male domination and female disunity within the regime. The writer succeeds in her depiction of a tyrannical order in this male-ruled theocracy. They hold all political leadership, moral authority; they decide what is lawful and what is not according to their own tendencies and conveniences, social privilege and hold control of all property, women included. Women in this regime are prevented from seeking education, hold any occupation, money or property. Moreover, they face radical measures specific to them, and are deprived from their basic human rights and freedoms, most importantly the freedom of their bodies, as the fertile ones are forced into reproduction slavery and birth control and abortion are prohibited. The patriarchal regime asserts its control by domesticating women into passive roles according to their physical abilities. These roles strip women from any power or identity which lessens the threat of a rebellion against the system.

Accordingly, the alarming resonation of the misogynistic and sexist discourse; particularly under the current administration of the American President, Donald Trump, this anti-feminist attitude is putting women's rights in jeopardy. Simone de Beauvoir declares:

*“Never forget that all it takes is a political, economic or religious crisis for women's rights to be put back into question. These rights are never truly acquired. You will have to be vigilant your whole life.”* (qtd In Marion 2015). Hence, the threat that awaits to unravel the unreliable rights of women are forever standing, which posits *The Handmaid's Tale's* relevance as everlasting.

For a long time, the novel has been held as a rallying feminist narrative because it depicts the female suffering and oppression. Through a feminist lens, the dystopia rooted in the novel is patriarchal based on unequal gender roles and regressive laws. However, lately it has been seen with a different perspective. The tyranny, violence and oppression enacted on women is rather executed by other women. Consequently, opening a new realm of control. *The Handmaid's Tale* is more about how the patriarchy is upheld by women and not men.

Margaret Atwood has been ambivalent about her stands on feminism; and her novel created the same confusion. She offers a plethora of issues blended to create such an insidious mechanism with a sharp focus on the efficiency of the female agency in this regime.

As a deduction, through Atwood's master of the speculative genre, she gives a critique to the division in the Second Wave Feminism and the disunity within the Woman's Liberation Movement as well as the excessive sexual freedom, for these elements have initiated the intense backlash on the feminist momentum. *The Handmaid's Tale* is after all, a story written by a woman, narrated by a woman, about a woman and addressed to women. Hence, this grim journey is a wakeup call for immediate changes and enforcement to the female solidarity. Margaret Atwood through her narrative empowers women to never stand down and stay united.

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## Résumé

Le mouvement féministe dans l'ère postmoderne a subi les contrecoups de la montée conservatrice aux États-Unis. Au cours des années 1980, la majorité morale gagna le pouvoir avec l'élection de l'ancien président conservateur Ronald Reagan. Ce groupe a préconisé le retour aux valeurs traditionnelles et l'adoption de l'ordre familial chrétien, à travers la domestication des femmes. En conséquence, les libertés des femmes ont été mises en péril avec les contraintes de leurs droits, qu'elles ont depuis si longtemps fait campagne. Cette crise a suscité plusieurs réactions féministes sur la scène politique et littéraire. La célèbre écrivaine canadienne Margaret Atwood s'est attelée à mettre en garde contre les conséquences de telles politiques. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) est un roman de fiction spéculatif, sans doute l'ouvrage le plus connu d'Atwood, dans lequel elle s'attaque aux problèmes liés aux contraintes des droits et des libertés des femmes, en utilisant la religion comme un facteur de tyrannie. Le roman dépeint la triste image d'une société patriarcale totalitaire dystopique, créée sur la base de la religion et qui diminue complètement pour les droits de la femme. En raison de la réapparition des problèmes qui menacent le statut et les libertés des femmes sous le gouvernement actuel du président Donald Trump ; dont le discours et les attitudes misogynes et anti-féministes sont considérés comme un cauchemar féministe, le roman est plus pertinent que jamais. Par conséquent, nous entreprenons cette étude dans le but d'explorer plus avant les principaux thèmes abordés dans ce récit spéculatif, à savoir : l'ordre patriarcal, ses éléments et caractéristiques, ainsi que la représentation de la conformité féminine dans le bouleversement de cette dystopie. En outre, cette étude descriptive vise à décrypter l'ambiguïté du roman et les tendances de l'auteur vers l'éthique féministe.

**Mots-clés:** *féministe, fiction spéculative, droits de la femme, dystopie, patriarcat.*

## ملخص

عانت الحركة النسوية في عصر ما بعد الحداثة، من رد فعل عنيف من التيار المحافظ في الولايات المتحدة. خلال الثمانينيات، حصل حزب الأغلبية الأخلاقية على السلطة بانتخاب الرئيس المحافظ السابق رونالد ريجان. دعت هذه المجموعة إلى العودة إلى القيم التقليدية واحتضان النظام الأسري المسيحي، من خلال إخضاع النساء. وبناء على ذلك، تعرضت حريات المرأة للخطر بسبب القيود المفروضة على حقوقها، التي حاربنا لفترة طويلة للحصول عليها. أثارت هذه الأزمة العديد من ردود الفعل النسوية على الساحة السياسية والأدبية. أخذت الكاتبة الكندية البارزة مارغريت أتوود المسألة في يديها لإثارة تحذيرات بشأن عواقب مثل هذه السياسات. حكاية أمة (1985) هي رواية خيالية، يمكن القول إنها أكثر أعمال أتوود شهرة، والتي تستهدف فيها القضايا المتعلقة بالقيود المفروضة على حقوق المرأة وحرياتها، مستخدمةً الدين كنوع من الطغيان. ترسم الرواية صورة قائمة للمجتمع الذكوري الشمولي الدكتاتوري الذي نشأ على أساس الدين وتناقص بشكل كامل لحقوق المرأة. نظرًا لظهور القضايا التي تهدد وضع وحريات المرأة في ظل الإدارة الحالية للرئيس دونالد ترامب؛ الذين يعتبر خطابهم ومواقفهم المناهضة للنساء كأنه كابوس نسوي، فإن الرواية أصبحت أكثر أهمية الآن من أي وقت مضى. وبالتالي، فإننا نشرع في هذه الدراسة كمحاولة لاستكشاف الموضوعات الرئيسية التي تمت مناقشتها حول هذه القصة المضاربة وهي: النظام الأبوي وعناصره وميزاته جنبًا إلى جنب مع تصوير امتثال الإناث في ثورة هذا التخبط. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة الوصفية إلى فك الغموض في اتجاهات الرواية والكاتبة تجاه الأخلاقيات النسوية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** نسوية ، خيال مضاربي ، حقوق المرأة ، الأبوية

