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A Dystopian Future: Social Oppression and Religious Extremism in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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المستقبل البائس: الاضطهاد الاجتماعي والتطرف الديني في رواية مارغريت اتوود حكاية خادمة

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المستخلص

تعاملت العديد من الابحاث الادبية مع رواية مارغريت اتوود - حكاية خادمة ١٩٨٥ - بوصفها عملا نسويا. لكن القليل من الدراسات تقريبا تجمع على أنها عمل يجمع بين الاضطهاد الاجتماعي والتطرف الديني. ومن أجل سد هذه الفجوة البحثية، تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى استكشاف استعمال الثيوقراطية الشمولية للإرهاب لقمع مواطنيها باسم الدين. بعبارة أخرى، إنها تهدف الى توضيح الطريقة التي يستعمل فيها الدين لقمع واستغلال الناس عامة بشكل وحشي والنساء المستضعفات بشكل خاص. ومن أجل تحقيق هذا الهدف، اتبعت الباحثة المنهج النوعي الوصفي لغرض وصف كيف يتم استعمال الدين بوصفه وسيلة تناقضية تحكمية في خطاب جلعاد. فضلا عن هذا استعمال نظرية فوكولت في تحليل بيانات البحث، و توضيح وسائل الارهاب في الرواية و تشخيص سمات نظام جلعاد الحاكم. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن محنة النساء لا تحدث من فراغ، وانها نتيجة وانعكاس لماضي الناس وحاضرهم، ونتاج الخطاب الديني المتطرف الذي يسهم دائما في العنف والقمع. أخيراً، تسلط جمهورية جلعاد الضوء على النقطة المشتركة بين العصور المظلمة والحديثة حيث عاشت المواطنات في ظل الحكومة الأبوية القمعية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: البؤس، التطرف، التعصب الديني، جلعاد، الظلم

Abstract

Many literary research papers have dealt with the work of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) as a feminist work. However, nearly few studies combine social oppression with religious extremism. To bridge this gap, the present study aims at exploring the use of totalitarian theocracy of terror to oppress its citizens in the name of religion. In other words, it explicates the way religion is used to brutally suppress and exploit people in general and vulnerable women in particular. To meet this objective, the study adopted the qualitative descriptive method to describe how religion is used as a contradictory controlling means in Gilead discourse. It also adopted the Foucault theory in analyzing the data of the study, illustrating the means of terror in the novel, and identifying the features of the Gileadean regime. The study has concluded that the plight of women does not happen in a vacuum. It is a result and a reflection of people's past and present times. It is the extremist religious discourse that almost always contributes to violence and oppression. Finally, the Republic of Gilead highlights a common point between the dark and modern ages where the female citizens lived under the oppressive patriarchal government.

Keywords: Dystopia, extremism, fundamentalism, Gilead, oppression



1. Introduction

An examination of recent history reveals how human life has been ruined in modern era due to wars on social oppression, religious extremism and nuclear pollution. However, human beings claim to be civilized and modernized in the contemporary age. Yet, history repeats itself, as it shows many wars over race and religion that have destroyed communities. Not only are the extremist wars being the negative side of the modern history, the only dilemma of modern age, but also the danger of environmental disasters like nuclear contamination also threatens man's life. In this regard, many literary works were written in an attempt to disclose the human calamities of the time. Among these works is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), a dystopian novel that depicts the downfall of a current U.S. regime by religious fanatics who capture fertile women to exploit this valuable resource. Due to pollution and nuclear disasters, many males and females started suffering from infertility (Kouhestani, 2012).

Atwood composed her narrative to highlight people's desperations in modern age. Part of her book was inspired by a trip to Afghanistan in the late 1970s. She and her husband admired the beauty of the country and the calmness of its women who seldom spoke or looked directly at them. This predates the current history of Taliban, though the ideas were already taken root during their visit to historical places in Afghanistan. Atwood herself noted, dictatorships were particularly established in times of national crisis where Afghanistan was ravaged by years of civil wars and revolutions. This conflict led to the rise of religious fundamentalism which Atwood saw as a threat to democracy and freedom. Consequently, Atwood saw that social oppression, religious extremism and nuclear disasters are the biggest issues that have pushed the world from contentment to destruction, turmoil and despair (Kouhestani, 2012).

Thus, the study is set to examine qualitatively a specific literary genre, namely

Utopia that widely characterized the writing of *The Handmaid's Tale*, such as those written by Orwell, Huxley and Bradbury. Such an examination involves shedding light on many backgrounding issues in the novel, such as: religious fundamentalism, totalitarianism, environmental destruction and religious patriarchal control of women. The paper is thus aims to investigate the influence of religious fundamentalism on the rise of the misogynistic regime in the Republic of Gilead.

Based on the objective of the study, the researcher is to answer the following research question: What is the influence of religious fundamentalism on the rise of the misogynistic regime in the Republic of Gilead?

The study is beneficial, as it demonstrates how Atwood's narrative allows its readers to meditate upon numerous issues that are affecting the contemporary world.

2. The Theoretical Background

2.1 The Concept of Dystopia

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* belongs to the dystopian genre. Dystopic scenarios are commonly used to criticize current events, social norms or political agendas that are taken to the extreme. A dystopia does not necessarily mean an inverted utopia. In fact, the nature of the universe itself makes dystopia, i.e., chaos more reasonable than utopia, an order. Moreover, people frequently recognize their environment as dystopia, and find in these dystopian works their lived experiences rather than the optimistic future offered by utopias. In this vein, Gordin et al. (2012) stated that:

Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now. (p. 2)

The exploration of a "terrifying future" is what dystopian fiction aims at. According to Fromm (1984):

The irrationality and futility of the First World War, the failure of the socialist



Utopia, the insanity of the Second World War and use of nuclear weapons seem to confirm the ideas of Sigmund Freud about the brutality and irrationality in each one of us. The realization that the mind of man is the most dangerous weapon on earth has resulted in the emergence of negative Utopias, also called dystopia. (p. 257)

In Fitting's view (1988), the dystopian novels are considered as more ominous signs than the utopian texts. They used to caution readers about the real social and political events which take place in the same dangerous circumstances as our present lives do.

2.2 *The Handmaid's Tale*

Written in the mid-1980s, *The Handmaid's Tale* describes a world that reflects the New Right Ideology in the American culture of that era. The New Right is one of Atwood's main targets; it warns against the declining birthrate, its anti-feminist position, its racism, and its strong adherence to the Bible (Howells, 1995).

Inspired by the readings of literary dystopias, such as those written by George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Ray Bradbury, Atwood, in her narrative, explored a futuristic scenario driven by pessimistic political, social and environmental evolutions. In the historical notes, the last section of the novel, Professor Pieixoto described why there was a decrease of birthrate that made the establishment of such a social system a necessity. This represented Atwood's prime concerns about the modern world, stating that:

...this was the age of the R-strain syphilis and also of the infamous AIDS epidemic... Stillbirth, miscarriages, and genetic deformities were widespread and on the increase, and this trend has been linked to the various nuclear-plant accidents, shutdowns, and incidents of sabotage that characterized the period, as well as to the leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic-waste disposal sites, of which there were many thousands both illegal and legal...and to the

uncontrolled used of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays. (1986, p. 341) Unfortunately, what Professor Pieixoto explained was not so far from the effects that human activity has done in the environment during the present time. As a committed environmentalist, Atwood here referred to one of the essential problems of the 2st Century, the real threat of a catastrophic natural disaster.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood portrayed a futuristic, dismal, dystopian society where all humans, especially women, are denied their basic rights. Atwood did not intend to write a feminist novel. She was interested in totalitarian regimes in which marginalized women became the victims of their society. On one hand, the novel presented a number of women characters who were being sexually abused in the male-dominated society, a considerable issue for feminist writers. On the other hand, Atwood was mainly concerned with the destiny of humans (men or women) living under the control of totalitarian systems.

The aim of this dystopian fiction was to make readers recognize all the disasters in their society. *The Handmaid's Tale* certainly worked as a tale where Atwood attempted to caution readers of the inequalities in this world: "the lack of rights and freedom, anti-human attitudes, fundamental beliefs and extremism that were merely some of the misfortunes of our age" (Kouhestani, 2012, p. 131). Atwood herself claimed that "there is not a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical facts" (as cited in Judith, 1988, p. 284). There are many communities where men always control women. Further, there are many totalitarian regimes in the world, communist or religious extremist systems that have complete power over their citizens' minds and actions.

The Handmaid's Tale showed a dystopian society that was colonized by a regime named The Republic of Gilead that combined two extremist ideologies: "the Puritanical right that denotes women proper place in the home- like



many extremist countries- as the property of men", and "the fundamental extremists who want to control every aspect of people's life and have constant control on society- totalitarian governments" (Kouhestani, 2012, p. 130).

The novel was presented from the point of view of a woman called Offred, a Handmaid, who recorded her memories of the different forms of oppressions that happened in the Gileadean Republic. The ideology and ideas of this Christian government were presented through Offred's first-person narrative. Besides, flashbacks also provided a picture of the society before Gilead. The story began with a terrorist attack, led by Christian fundamentalists that killed the president and most of the Congress. Those fundamentalists represented a movement named "Sons of Jacob" that made a revolution to establish a new regime. As a cautionary novel affirming "the extrapolated, exaggerated horrors of the new future" (Gayret, 2019, p. 105), the reader is warned against the possible evils in the current time. It speculates what could happen if we ignore the risks of the potential dangers of the existing Medieval mind that calls for one's dominance and supremacy over the other. As Davidson (1988) observed, Atwood reprimanded "the present propensities that make Gilead possible" through "envisioning an appalling future already implicit in the contemporary world" (p. 113). Thinking of the terrifying plausibility of the social and political exaggerations in her dystopian work, Atwood indeed urged her readers to question and refuse probable destructive tendencies and consequences of the current totalitarian stance and mind that intend to dehumanize what is human.

2.3 Foucault Theory

Michael Foucault, the French philosopher, has been hugely influential in shaping an understanding of power. His theory named after his name chiefly addresses the relationship between discourse, power and knowledge/truth and how they are used as a form of social control through societal institutions. The term discourse

refers to spoken patterns and usage of language within a community. A discourse is what can be said and thought, and power is the ability or authority to control people. It is not something that is acquired, seized or shared. Instead, power, as Foucault stated, "is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1998, p. 61). Knowledge, on the other hand, is the understanding, the skills one gets through education and experience. For Foucault, knowledge/truth is a product of the shared meanings, conventions and social practices operating within a discourse. Discourse is interwoven with power and knowledge; they together help to oppress, marginalize, silence people in a society. Foucault believed that power is a relational force that constructs social organization and hierarchy by producing discourses and truths, imposing discipline and order and by shaping humans' desires and thoughts (Bhattarai, 2020). In this regard, a discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication. The discourse that is accepted and verified by a society becomes the absolute truth/knowledge.

3. The Analytical Part

3.1 Methodology of the study

The present work is qualitative descriptive study that involves a systematic subjective approach. Such an approach helps to describe life experiences or phenomena and give them meaning through exploring the depth, richness and complexity inherent in the phenomenon (Introduction to, n.d.).

To meet the objective of the study, which reads **examining the influence of religious fundamentalism on the rise of the misogynistic regime in the Republic of Gilead**, the researcher has passed through the following procedures:

- Selecting Gilead as a facet of dystopia;
- Clarifying the features of the Gileadean Regime;
- Describing the social stratification of the Gileadean republic;



- Stating the way religion is used as a controlling means;
- Analyzing the paradox of Gilead republic following Foucault's theory.

Besides, Atwood's work is examined in the light of Foucault's theorization to emphasize the manipulative quality of the totalitarian regime and justify its new-founding discourse. Such an aim involves exploring the Gileadean social stratification, emphasizing the imbalance between the social structures in Gilead. In addition, it requires describing the means of terror in the novel, i.e., the different methods the totalitarian regime used in order to oppress its citizens.

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 Gilead as a Facet of Dystopia

Gilead discourse created what Foucault (1994) called a "fundamental truth"; "each society has its regime of truth. It's 'general politics' of truth- that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanism and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements" (p. 131). Such a manipulation of "truth" was very common in authoritarian regimes, such as Gilead. The regime of Gilead was manipulative and used the negative aspects of the previous society to justify its own "truth" and make the new current mindset necessary. One clear example was that women were blamed for male violence towards them. Through Offred's flashbacks, stories were being revealed about the unsafe circumstances of women in the past:

Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to a stranger even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a Laundromat, by yourself, at night. (Atwood, 1986, p.33)

The Handmaids were told such stories to justify their new situation. They were taught that "men are sex machines... and not much more. They only want one thing" (Atwood, 1986, p.165). This is part of changing the "truth" in Gilead that men could not be held responsible for their actions because it was something "natural". It is women's freedom that caused men's sexual assault on women. As men could not be blamed for their behavior, women's freedom must be taken away. This was what the Aunts constantly adopted in teaching the Handmaids. They wanted the Handmaids to believe that their plight was their own fault. One of the Handmaids admitted being gang-raped and having an abortion at the age of fourteen. Instead of soothing her, the Aunts humiliated her and turned all the other Handmaids against her:

But whose fault was it? Aunt Helen says,

Holding up one plump finger.

Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chat in unison.

Who led them on? Aunt Helen beams, pleased with us

She did. She did. She did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

To teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. (Atwood, 1986, p.86)

Despite the fact that men were the ones who committed sexual offences, it was women who were to blame. Women must alter their behavior and attitude of freedom. The absence of this change of attitude in the society before Gilead, which resulted in the sexual violence against women, was one of the pretexts for producing Gilead.

Another justification for the emergence of Gilead discourse, and of the absolute importance of having Handmaids, was the decreasing birthrates in the society prior to Gilead:

Aunt Lydia [...] showing the birthrate per thousand, for years and years: a slippery slope, down past the zero line of



replacement, and down and down. Of course some women believed there would be no future, they thought the world would explode. That was the excuse they used, says aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding. Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow: such wickedness. They were lazy women, she says. They were sluts. (Atwood, 1986, pp. 129-30)

In the society before Gilead, women used to have jobs and property which many prioritized over having children. Therefore, the first step the system of Gilead made when came to power was to take away women's rights and property and dismiss them from all aspects of social and political life. Before Gilead, Offred was used to have possessions, rights and a career, yet suddenly, she found herself stripped of all these rights. The fact that women should control their lives and carnal desires was replaced with the principle that what was important was procreation. The Handmaids were expected to think of themselves as "two-legged wombs" with procreative features that could save the world from the threat of sterility. As a consequence, the need for and urgency of such a regime were justified by the crisis of childlessness.

In addition to violence and the decline in the birthrates in the past that justified the production of Gilead, Offred's Commander had other reasons why the change was urgent. In a conversation with Offred, Commander Fred attempted to explain things to her:

The problem wasn't only with the women...The main problem was with the men. There was nothing for them anymore...the sex was too easy, anyone could just buy it. There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for. We have the stats from that time. You know what they were complaining about the most? Inability to feel. (Atwood, 1986, pp. 239-40)

Hammer (1990) discussed that the Commander: calmly justifies the oppressive regime which he partly masterminded with the observation that in the old society men felt

they were no longer needed by women; he thereby suggests that women's liberation forced American men to take this drastic action; ergo the present regime is ultimately the women's fault. (p. 39)

According to the Commander, women had got too much power in the society. Therefore, they were no longer dependent on men as they were before. The "nothing for them" that the Commander referred to was one of the reasons behind the sexual assault against women in the society prior to Gilead. Men would use violence, as they could no longer control women who got the ability to make their own choices. Besides, the absence of moral values, such as prostitution, made men lose their "ability to feel". Sex was "too easy" and available which contributed to the banality of sexual assault against women.

In fact, the values and lifestyle of the pre-Gileadean society were the foundation upon which Gilead was built. This contributed to the notion that the discourse of the society before was the one which results in the oppression and violence against women, a situation which made the creation of Gilead a necessity.

3.2.2 Features of the Gileadean Regime

In order to preserve social order and class distinctions in a society, dictatorships worked to eradicate individuality and freedom, making social life uniform. Gilead did the same; it established the public rituals and ceremonies and imposed strict behavior codes on its citizens. In doing so, Gilead prescribed a social life of terror, conformity and censorship enforced by a totalitarian system. To discourage dissidents from planning protests and acts of rebellion, Gilead established a rigid penalty system that instilled fear in its citizens through surveillance, tortures and mutilation. The government publicly executed dissidents accused of endangering Gilead's religious beliefs and its control of society, such as: gynecologists, who performed unlawful abortions, homosexuals, who were considered gender traitors, and citizens of different religions including the Roman Catholic priests as well as the Children of Ham, the



Republic's name for African-Americans. These were all considered heretics and were therefore arrested and executed. Their bodies were hanged at the town's Wall as a warning for all and a reminder of the regime's power. In order to prove its right to rule, every regime must find its own scapegoat. The Handmaids were encouraged to stop by the Wall on their daily walks, and think about the sins of those men:

These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples for the rest ... what we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn. (Atwood, 1986, p.43)

Another effective way of instilling fear was through allowing the Handmaids to kill the state enemies with their bare hands. This ritual was similar to the ancient practice of sacrificing human beings for goodness. The Handmaids were, thus, given the power by taking part in such atrocities. Gottlieb (2001) argued that "allowing the victims to act as executioners of other victims is probably the single most important ritual expressing the essential mechanism of dictatorship" (p. 108). To kill, the Handmaids participated in the same dehumanizing act that oppressed them. Mohr (2005) mentioned that "the annihilation of the *other* presupposes the dissociation of the self from the other, the negation of humanity" (p. 248). Killing the other meant to exterminate every sense of sympathy that should be a part of humanity.

In Gilead, citizens were terrorized, opposition was not tolerated and even speech was considered a dangerous act. The themes of the novel "operate[ed] by positing polarized extremes: a decadent present...and a totalitarian future that prohibits choice" (Malak, 1987, p. 13). These contemporary polarities were exemplified in Aunt Lydia's speech: "there is more than one kind of freedom...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" (Atwood, 1986, p.33-34). The problem; however, lied in the fact that while the "present" might be decadent, Atwood's vision of the future was certainly oppressive. Gilead granted its citizens an illusion of freedom, brainwashing them into thinking that they were free. However, they were totally confined both physically and mentally. The "freedom from" of the future could only be seen in the most restricted context. The Handmaids were denied the freedom to do whatever they wanted including ordinary activities, like going out for a walk, reading or shopping, which in the pre-Gileadean society were taken for granted. Now with this system, they were strictly forbidden. Being a valuable property of the Republic due to their function as breeders, the Handmaids were a protected social category. In other words, the concept of "freedom from" denoted security and protection, implying that the Handmaids could not be raped, sexually assaulted or even murdered. They promised "freedom from" sexual violence and degradation which used to be existed in the pre-Gilead society. Ironically, in Gilead, rape was institutionalized and sex was politicized for the purpose of reproduction.

One of the ritual acts established by the Republic of Gilead that mostly degrade women was the "Ceremony", a sexual encounter taking place once a month during the time of ovulation between the Handmaid and her Commander. It preceded by the Commander's ceremonial reading of a passage from the Bible. The Ceremony was merely a mechanical act devoid of any emotions or feelings and it was conducted under the supervision of the Commander's Wife. During the Ceremony, the Handmaid lied on the bed between the Wife's open legs, while the Wife raised her hands to show that they became one flesh. Offred described the Ceremony as follows:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it is the Commander fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say



making love, because this is not what he is doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (Atwood, 1986, p.110)

The ceremony prohibited affection as well as any kind of love, pleasure and bonding between man and women that sex was typically associated with. Any additional physical contact such as touching and kissing was strictly forbidden. These rigid rules reflected Gilead's fear that sexual encounters would cause opposite sexes to form intimate bonds, thus jeopardizing the social and political order.

Moreover, Bowen and Daniels (2003), feminist thinkers and literary critics, referred to the use of sex as a means of reducing women's control of their bodies, and hence their individuality: "Atwood's *Handmaids* are an extreme example of almost complete loss of personal leisure space. They have no choice regarding the treatment of their bodies; no permission to select the individual with whom they pass time; no control of their lives" (p.428). During the Ceremony, Offred was completely detached from her own body which was used for so long by others for the sole purpose of procreation. For her, sex was a matter of duty. Offred's right to have her "personal leisure space" was usurped by the rigid restrictions of Gilead.

As a consequence of the Ceremony, the Handmaids were brainwashed into thinking of themselves as a "national resource", a commodity. They were taught that their mission was so sacred, moral and essential for the survival of the entire society. Even their own bodies were no longer theirs to use as they pleased. Offred said: "I resign my body freely to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. Am abject" (Atwood, 1986, p.322). Offred was not even allowed to bath by herself as she was alienated from her body. On the night before the Ceremony, she was given a bath by a Marth. After the bath, she waited for the

Ceremony, feeling totally dehumanized: "I waited, washed, brushed, fed like a prize pig" (Atwood, 1986, p. 83). To seize control of women's individuality, their bath was arranged by others; their food was not chosen by them to enhance their health and fertility. For trivial offenses like reading and writing, their arms and legs, which were deemed inessential for reproduction, were ruthlessly chopped off.

To further control women through sexual abuse and violence, the Handmaids must undergo a monthly examination to make sure that their bodies were functioning properly for pregnancy. The entire evaluation process seemed to be more akin to sexual assault than a medical checkup. Offred felt that the doctor who examined her was annoying her inappropriately by calling her "honey" and by touching any part of her body that he wanted. In fact, the doctor threatened her with his power. The Handmaid was just a passive, helpless patient during the examination, allowing the doctor to examine the interior of her body. Furthermore, the doctor took advantage of his official position by attempting to offer Offred his sexual services in order to get her pregnant: "It's time. Today or tomorrow would do it, why waste it? It'd only take a minute, honey" (Atwood, 1986, p.72). This, once again, contradicted Gilead's assumption that women were protected from sexual harassment and abuse, and hence proved the regime's hypocrisy.

As a part of their re-education in submission, Offred and other Handmaids were forced to watch pornographic videos from the seventies and eighties in which women were subjected to different forms of subjugation, brutalization and horrific mutilation. To this Offred questioned: "Is this a thing we're intended to see, to remind us of the old days of no safety?" (Atwood, 1986, p.137). In fact, it's Gilead's new-founding ideology that made women think they had a much more difficult, unsettling and immoral life before Gilead and now that "they are protected, they can fulfill their biological destiny in peace" (Atwood, 1986, p.250). Women's "biological destiny" proved that their



only worth resided in their biological function. Freibert (1988) indicated that "the religious trappings that pervade the political structure foster the idea that the primary purpose of the system is to protect women, while the actual purpose is to control them and reinforce the notion that their biology is their destiny" (p. 248). To keep them obedient to the regime, the Handmaids were taught by the aunts, the thought-police of Gilead, to walk with their heads bent down low. Furthermore, any conversation that deviated from the carefully prescribed norm was risky and confined to cautious whispers. Offred confessed how she and Ofglen, her fellow Handmaid, would:

continue on our way, heading as usual for some open space we can cross, so we can talk. If you can call it talking, these clipped whispers projected through the funnels of our white wings. It's more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech (Atwood, 1986, p.229).

Offred and other Handmaids were bounded by strict behavior codes, and even the smallest deviation might result in death.

To intensify its disciplinary as well as the biblical way of life, Gilead imposed a prescribed dress code on the Handmaids. The dresses were limiting and concealing, similar to those worn by nuns: a red, floor-length robe and red veil with a white bonnet called "wing". The most restricting items were the wings which enclosed their faces. The dress was meant to prevent the hands "from seeing and also from being seen" (Atwood, 1986, p.14). Aunt Lydia said "to be seen is to be penetrated" (Atwood, 1986, p.38). Offred understood the purpose of the wings: "Given out wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view of the sky, of anything...we have learned to see the world in gasps" (Atwood, 1986, p.40). Gilead forced women to act and look like nuns, which was ironic, since the new regime did not hesitate to use them as sex objects. Offred's nun's habit became so much a part of her that when she saw a group of Japanese guests dressed in short skirts, with bare

legs and uncovered hair, she is both surprised and repulsed by the way these women dress: "They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds about things like this. Then I think. I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (Atwood, 1986, p.38). Pettersson (2010) remarked that the theocratic values of Gilead were so powerful that they affected Offred's way of thinking:

What used to be Offred's way of dressing in the time "before" has now become something that is not done. She thinks it is wrong to dress in that manner and to wear makeup. She cannot help herself having that opinion. The discourse of Gilead is too powerful. However, she is aware of it and she knows that she actually does not want to think like that, yet it is unavoidable. (p. 9)

It is clear that Gilead's totalitarian control over ordinary life and its standards warped Offred's mindset. The current strict puritan view filled her mind with guilt and embarrassment in the presence of these free, foreign women.

Not only were the Handmaids compelled to dress in a certain way, they also followed a prescribed ritual speech when greeting one another: "Blessed be the fruit", "May the Lord opens", "Praise be" (Atwood, 1986, p.27). These phrases served essentially to restrict communication, as it was not likable in Gilead, and to foster a religious discourse whose purpose was to guarantee the Handmaids' compliance. Moreover, "under his eye", also a common greeting, indicated a permanent reminder of their inferior position under the observation and power of the Gileadean regime. Through speaking in a certain way, the Handmaids became uniform. Not only they lost their individuality, but also their ability to shape rebellious and hostile thoughts that could lead them to revolt against the regime.

To further impose the established principles of Gilead, the Handmaids were submitted to the re-identification process in which their old identity was replaced by a new one more befitted



to the principles of the new regime. One step in that process was to give them new names: The founders of Gilead changed the names of women who eventually became Handmaids. A part of the system prompted at the Red Centre, each Handmaid was compelled to give up her name and have a patronymic that consists of the preposition "of" and the first name of the Commander to whom she was tentatively assigned. Consequently, the heroine of the novel was named Offred, since her Commander's first name was Fred. The reader never knew the narrator's real name because her identity was eradicated by a system which considered her a "wandering womb". Hence Offred's name was merely a tag that she wore to identify herself as the Handmaid "of Fred". As Offred said: "My name is not Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because it's forbidden...your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (Atwood, 1986, p.99). Similarly, other Handmaids' names were Ofglen, Ofwayne and Ofwaren. Pettersson (2010) remarked that "the re-identification process is crucial for the survival of a totalitarian regime like Gilead". The destruction of the individual's name was part of an attempt to erase one's past. The regime wanted the Handmaids to forget their former lives and values, and one way was to change their names.

Obviously, the way Gileadean people acted, spoke, and dressed showed that they were compelled to fulfill stern behavioral requirements and rituals to preserve the authority of a terrorist regime that violently governed all aspects of human life.

3.2.3 Social Stratification of the Gileadean's Republic

The Gileadean republic was a fascist and patriarchal theocracy which combined Christian fundamentalism, racism and misogyny. The founders of Gilead used their own perverted version of Bible-based religion to justify the violation of human rights. Following their conquest of power over the United States, all the citizens were divided into social classes based on their functions. They also wore uniform color

coded to these functions. The most oppressed category of society was women. The majority of them were deprived of power, confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from the political affairs. In fact, the novel posited "a future culture in which feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function" (as cited in Tandon & Chandra, 2009, p. 141).

At the top of female hierarchy were the Wives who were mainly decorative in function, mostly infertile and dressed in blue. They were married to the Commanders who were the highest-ranking men in the Republic. However, their role was quite pitiful, as they quietly observed their husbands having sexual intercourses with their handmaids. Despite their high status, they only dominated the domestic sphere. However, they were excluded from the public sphere where they had no political power. They led a life filled with only occasional celebrations, meetings with other wives, sewing or knitting scarves for the army. These meaningless tasks provided by the regime seemed to keep them busy and "to give them a sense of purpose" (Atwood, 1986, p.20).

The Aunts, dressed in brown uniforms, were the other social class that possessed a certain amount of power. They were middle-aged women whose role was to indoctrinate the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre with brain-washing slogans. As Ollier (n.d.) noticed, the Aunts were "the instruments that will propagate the language and slogans designed to brainwash women into accepting their new reproductive role". The Aunts were the perfect product of the totalitarian theocracy. They exercised power by instilling fear and using physical violence. Many of them served as Aunts because they believed in the Gileadean system of values no matter how misogynistic it was. Many others, on the other hand, became Aunts for the advantages they could obtain from such a privileged status. After all, "when power is scarce, a little of it is tempting" (Atwood, 1986, p.148).



The Handmaids, the third group of women in the Gileadean social hierarchy, were young women in their twenties or thirties, always dressed in red and acted as child-bearers to the elderly childless Commanders. Of all the functional roles given to women in Gilead, the Handmaids' role was the most dehumanized. Restricted to their "sexual and reproductive organization", the Handmaids were subjected to a form of sexual slavery only to get pregnant (as cited in Al-Alwan & Ghazi, 2013, p.182). They were constantly threatened with being labeled as "Unwomen" and sent to the colonies where they would have died if they failed to procreate after three attempts. The Handmaids were valued only as "walking wombs", and for their child-bearing function, they were a "national resource" and "containers". Offred's mind was trained to think of herself in terms of her womb because she was defined solely by her body and her functioning ovary. She herself said: "We are containers; it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood, 1986, p.113). Wilson (1993) mentioned that "Offred... has been captured, violated and debased. Despite her patriarchal society's ironic worship of fertility... she is forced to be the eternal fucking machine rather than being honored as the bearer of life" (p. 281). The Handmaids were nothing more than sexual slaves who lacked privacy, freedom and personal property. If they did not humbly adhere to the regime, they were brutally punished, beaten and mutilated. Confined to their bedrooms, and not even allowed to read and write, the Handmaids led a wrecked and dull life, and the only source of excitement was the public ceremonies.

The Marthas, dressed in dull green, were the next group in Gilead's social hierarchy. They were elder, sterile servants who were responsible of housekeeping. Incapable of bearing children, fulfilling the regime's sacred purpose, the Marthas were invisible members of society: "nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" (Atwood, 1986, p.16). Like the Handmaids, their life was insecure; they could not afford to fall ill, as it would be fatal. They

"avoid illness. The Marthas don't want to be forced to retire, because who knows where they go?" (Atwood, 1986, p.177).

At the bottom of the social hierarchy, there were the Econowives, the Unwomen and the Jezebels. The Econowives, identifiable by their striped red, blue and green clothing, were the wives of the poorer men. They were not divided into functions, but they were expected to do all the tasks assigned to various social groups. The Unwomen were the inhabitants of the notorious colonies. If the Handmaids did not fulfill their function of procreation, they were inevitably declared as Unwomen and sent to the colonies to clean up toxic waste, where they starved to death. Finally, the Jezebels, dressed in feathers and sequins, were women who served as prostitutes. In Gilead, the system of prostitution continued and was justified as being dictated to by nature as Commander Fred points out: "Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason; it's part of the procreational strategy" (Atwood, 1986, p.270). The Commanders always preached that the only function of sex should be procreation. However, they regularly indulged in sexual intercourses with Jezebels to satisfy their desires.

The social hierarchy included not only women, but men as well. At the very top of the male hierarchy were the Commanders. Being the founders of Gilead, the Commanders controlled every category of society and were mainly representatives of the Gileadean system of beliefs. Despite their high social status, the Commanders must adhere to certain rules or norms of behavior, especially when it came to their wives. Such behavior was evident in the following example: "The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed: the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory [his wife's territory], he's supposed to ask permission to enter it" (Atwood, 1986, p.102). Besides, they were not portrayed as brutes, rather they were gentle and it seemed that they were stuck in that rigid society too.



Below the Commanders was the secret police known as the Eyes. They had complete authority over every member of the society from the Handmaids to the Commanders, regardless of their social position. They prevented any illegal activity against the regime. Then, there was Gilead's military apparatus named the Angels. The Guardians, who wore green uniforms, were at the bottom of the male hierarchy. Their main task was keeping the Commanders and their wives safe. However, as Offred stated, "the Guardians are not real soldiers. They are used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the commander's wife's garden, for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young" (Atwood, 1986, p.28). Sometimes, this was just a ruse to disguise; however, they were in fact "Eyes incognito".

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the community of Gilead was not considered as separate individuals, but rather they were divided into groups and treated as such. The regime oppressed differences by "censoring the threatening force of creative self-expression" and defining people into groups (Staels, 1995, p. 459). In Gilead, people were entrapped in the roles assigned to them by the government and forced to live a monotonous life.

3.2.4 Religion as a Means of Control

In order to discipline the society first, the problem that faced the state of Gilead was that cultural memory should be eliminated, as it endangers the existence of the new regime. The Republic of Gilead could not survive without destroying the cultural memory and historical awareness. Therefore, the regime of Gilead "attempts to erase the past, culture and history to achieve the power of surveillance and govern the society in a totalitarian manner" (Kouhestani, 2012, p. 131). The totalitarian systems, like the one Gilead embraced, assume a total control over their citizens in two manners: "the complete destruction of human personality" by building "authority, orthodoxy" regarded as "ideological control"; and a "complete disciplinary control" over "beliefs and ideas" through "ordering and

regimentation of society" via indoctrination (as cited in Gayret, 2019, p. 106). As other totalitarian practices of societies, the Republic of Gilead formed a sort of mental abuse, so as to make its female masses disciplined by affecting their minds and lacking fortification of the self through the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Centre where the Handmaids were brainwashed and trained to obey and fulfill their duty as child bearers.

In Gilead, religion was one of the most effective tools of ideological implementation to "divert people's point of view into believing in and adhering to religious creed that, in reality, actually reinforces the political creed of the dominant power group" (as cited in Gayret, 2019, p. 106). Nordstrom (2008) remarked that the whole society of Gilead was built upon a "warped form of Christianity where the scriptures of the Bible are used to find precedents for laws and regulations that the regime has created". The new social order was built on a biblical story of Rachel, Jacob's wife: infertile Rachel tells Jacob: "Give me children, or I shall die" and asks him for having a sexual relationship with her handmaid to have a child (Atwood, 1986, p.105). The state of Gilead presumed this biblical story through assigning fertile women, Handmaids, to lie with men in higher status, known as Commanders to overcome the risk of population crash resulting from a nuclear explosion. The system justified the Handmaid's sexual servitude as blessed by perverting the religious context, so as to empower its beliefs and needs. In this way, the Republic of Gilead justified its "sexiest policies with the social-biological theory of natural polygamy and legitimize[d] its racist policies as having biblical precedent" (Vevaina, 1990, p. 224). The Handmaids were forced to believe that childbearing is their blessed duty and salvation. This was because "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression", and "she shall be saved by childbearing" (Atwood, 1986, p.251). As a result of the religious indoctrination and enactment of



laws, the state perpetuated and normalized this mindset, guaranteeing as a female citizens' submission to the authority of the regime. Exploiting parts of the biblical Scriptures complying with its policies was the primary destructive power of the Republic to normalize and justify the new norms that reduce women to baby factories. As Offred said: "We are too legged wombs, that's all, sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1986, p.156). In this way, the Handmaids were "desexed and dehumanized"(p.156) in the name of religion. In fact, the founders of Gilead generated a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, integrated it with patriarchal attitudes and imposed it on their society. In other words, "they read religion serving politics, rather than politics conforming to religious aspects" (Rine, 2013, p. 54).

All religious doctrines were made up to serve the policy of the new state. For instance, the subject of the sterility of men in Gilead or rather the absence of sterility was another example of how the regime worked to vindicate its policy. To oppress women, the policy claimed the failure of pregnancy can only be woman's fault, not man's. Offred was taught to believe that only woman can be barren. Offred's inner response to the idea that man can also be sterile showed her realization of religious teachings being deteriorated by the state: "I almost gasp...There is no such thing as a sterile man...There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren. That's law" (Atwood, 1986, p.72). Hence, the Handmaids were defined not only by the category of gender, but quite narrowly by that of female sterility. A Handmaid would, if unlucky, end up with a Commander who was in fact sterile. However, she would be blamed for the failure of pregnancy and referred to as "Unwoman", which was a death sentence. Therefore, the Handmaids' "reproductive potential becomes their means of survival" (Billy, 2011, p.3). In addition, the Handmaids were indoctrinated as follows: "Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful.

Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent" (Atwood, 1986, p.105). Although Offred disconfirmed these teachings and recognized their invalidity, there was no way to check them as Offred said: "I knew they made that up. I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking" (Atwood, 1986, p.105). In Gilead, the woman was not allowed to own and read religious books because the system did not want anyone to reason and check the sections, which do not overlap with the regime's doctrines. Offred said that "the Bible is kept locked up...who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (Atwood, 1986, p.103). If the Handmaids could get their hands on any of the real teachings of Christianity, they would have a Biblical proof of the Gileadean regime's hypocrisy and selectivity. Offred was right because Gilead distorted the religious context to legitimize its ideologies, hence playing a crucial role in stifling, silencing and sexually abusing women. With reference to this aspect, Atwood remarked that "a new regime would never say, we are socialists, we are fascists. They would say they were serving God. You can develop a set of beliefs by using the Bible" (as cited in Tandon & Chandra, 2009, p. 137). Thus, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood exposed the danger lurking in the process of institutionalizing the sacred text. In Gilead, the Bible was manipulated to assure the regime's power and legitimacy.

3.2.5 The Paradox of Gilead Discourse

Despite the disciplinary system of Gilead which was full of stringent laws and regulations, no one actually followed or believed in them. Offred's Commander, for instance, used his powerful position to do things that were once permissible in the pre-Gilead society, but were in this system prohibited. In his private chambers, Commander Fred kept magazines that he permitted Offred to read though; a matter which was not allowed previously. When Offred asked him why he kept them, he replied: "Some of us... retain an appreciation for the old things" (Atwood, 1986, p.181). His private meetings



with Offred were not permitted too. In fact, Gilead had its ideology, but the characters were still influenced by the one of the previous society and were unable to become entirely committed to the rigid regulations of the new state's discourse. Though no character was fully dedicated to the new-founding ideology, no one dared to reveal a lack of conviction. This was because this would result in death. Moreover, when all of the characters seemed to have doubts, they all became "liars and hypocrites" as Hammer (1990) pointed out:

...an allegedly profoundly Christian society ironically transforms every citizen into a sinner in so far as each person must become a liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system. This is, of course, the supreme irony of Atwood's fictional future; this is a theocracy where not one person is devout and where such notions as faith and morality simply have no meaning. (p. 39)

The Commander was perhaps the biggest sinner of all. He read forbidden books, had private meetings with his Handmaids, though prohibited, and visited secretly a brothel where he and other Commanders drank and met the whores who worked there. This place provided an ironic picture of Gilead as a place founded on higher values and morality. The Commander described to Offred different types of women working there:

Well some of them are real pros. Working girls' –he laughs- from the time before. They couldn't be assimilated; anyway, most of them prefer it here. 'And the others?' 'The others', he says. 'Well we have quite a collection. That one there, the one in green, she's a sociologist. Or was. That one was a lawyer, that one was in business, an executive position; some sort of fast-food chain or maybe it was hotels. (Atwood, 1986, p.271)

This brothel represented the exact paradox to the ideology of Gilead, a place which was devoid of the moral values that the Aunts used to

indoctrinate the Handmaids with. In this place, the women were subjected to the same type of sexual assault so common in the society before Gilead. The new regime did not meet its promise of protecting women and giving them "freedom from" violence and degradation. Ironically, the Commander explained previously how prostitution resulted in the idea that "sex was too easy, anyone could just buy it". However, he continued visiting such a place and showing no regret in doing so. Through suggesting that, these women preferred a life in a brothel to a life in Gilead. The Commander insulted Gilead which he helped to create. Besides, the women who worked there in that place used to be successful career women, but in Gilead they were nothing more than sex objects available to entertain the elite of Gilead who were supposed to uphold the state's higher values. Women in Gilead were, thus, degraded and sexually exploited in ways other than the use of the Handmaids. This enabled Atwood to further her critique of fundamentalists in that it was not only sexist, but also hypocritical.

Among those who were not totally devoted to the "truths" of Gilead is Serena Joy, the Commander's wife. In her pre-Gileadean days, Serena was a lead singer in church choirs and gave speeches in TV shows about "the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home" (Atwood, 1986, p.56). She was, then, an agitator of the principles that would, later, become law in Gilead. Ironically, Serena was advocating that women should not be involved in public affairs, yet that was exactly what she was doing. However, Serena was never convinced with what Gilead became. She seemed bitter as Offred noticed: "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood, 1986, p.56). Serena was dissatisfied with her new situation. Her bitterness caused her to lose respect and conviction of the strict values of Gilead. This was shown when she advised that Offred should try to conceive with



someone else, since the Commander was incapable of doing so:

'May be he can't', she says [...] 'No' I say. 'May be he can't' [...] 'May be you should try it in another way' [...] 'what other way?' [...] 'Another man', she says. 'You know I can't' I say. 'It is against the law. You know the penalty'. (Atwood, 1986, pp.233-34)

This conversation showed first that Serena did not agree that men cannot be sterile. Rather she actually doubted that her husband was, in fact, infertile. Secondly, she suggested that Offred should commit a crime that was punishable. All this demonstrated a disregard of the values of Gilead, since all these characters lived in a society opposite to Gilead and absorbed its values.

Not only were the founders of Gilead unconvinced of the values of the new state, but there were other Gileadean people who disregarded these values. Offred's mother, for instance, stood for everything that the Gileadean regime attempted to suppress. Before Gilead, she was a single mother and an ardent feminist. She was involved in feminist movements supporting women's rights. She was frustrated about Offred's lack of interest in the social issues and her habit of taking her rights for granted: "You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are" (Atwood, 1986, p.139). Offred's mother feared the consequences of slacking in rights, a fear that Atwood proved to be justified. After the creation of Gilead, she was declared as "Unwoman" and sent to the colonies where she faced her death.

Furthermore, Offred's best friend, Moira, also refused to live by the rules of Gilead. In the past, she was, like Offred's mother, an active feminist. She worked for a feminist publishing house, publishing "books on birth control and rape and things like that" (Atwood, 1986, p.204). Moira was open about her sexuality and fought the regime. At the Red Centre, she refused to obey the Aunts, attempting to escape more than

once. In the end, she managed to escape. Galloway (2008) argued that "the manner of her escape-taking off her state-issued Handmaid robes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt-symbolizes her rejection of Gilead's attempts to define her identity". On the other hand, Offred seemed the less revolutionary woman. She preferred survival to rebellion. Before Gilead, she was a privileged white woman with a family, a career and a bank account, showing indifference to all the women marginalized due to their ethnic and cultural diversity. She did not participate in the feminist movement which she viewed unnecessary. After being degraded and deprived of everything, she realized the significance of such stories of social struggle. In fact, Offred's former passivity towards the social and political issues as well as her lack of critical thinking contributed to the creation of a totalitarian regime that denied freedom to its citizens. As Dodson (2010) observed: "Offred here discloses that her acquiescence to the sexual and racial imperialism of contemporary America was based on a false sense of freedom that comes from ignoring" (p. 219). Offred failed to understand the socio-political reality of America and its discriminatory and imperialistic tendencies. Her ignorance prevented her from resisting the events that led to the rise of such a theocracy. Through Offred, Atwood wanted to tell her readers that being politically aware and constantly paying attention to what was happening around us was necessary to prevent such a sudden change in the course of events. In fact, Offred was similar to many, nowadays, whose passivity and unawareness of the prevailing political and social climate paved the way to the establishment of dictatorships.

4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis done, the researcher is to answer the following research question: **What is the influence of religious fundamentalism on the rise of the misogynistic regime in the Republic of Gilead?**, as shown below:

The idea of religious fundamentalism and the existence of misogynistic regime made up a



great deal of *The Handmaid Tale*. Religion, in a way, provided a high potential for the erection of the misogynistic regime. Emerson and Hartman (2006) argued that "fundamentalists are reactionaries, radicals attempting to grab power and throw societies back into the dark ages of oppression, patriarchy and intolerance" (p, 131). The Republic of Gilead bore semblance to the dark ages; its female citizens lived under the oppressive patriarchal government. Fundamentalists had strict rules concerning the male and female roles in the society. Women were reduced to the roles of child-bearers, housekeepers and submissive wives. On the other hand, men were given the authority over the society.

The Handmaid's Tale revealed Atwood's excellence not just as a writer, but as a thinker and defender of human rights. Through her story, Atwood provided readers with a new perspective through which one can see the world in a different way, hence allowing readers to become more aware of the dangers which surround them whether in society, politics or in the field of human rights. Inspired by literary dystopias and by the dictatorships of the 20th century, Atwood presented a regime that, similar to many nowadays, abolishes all human and civil rights, establishing a system of terror to avoid revolt and preserve the social order. Through her story, Atwood encouraged her readers to see the inequality and oppression in their lives and work to eliminate them. She warned that a lack of caution and an ignorance of connection to this planet might contribute to the upsurge in the horrors of repressive regimes like Gilead. As evil is inherent in all humans, such an upsurge can occur anywhere at any time. The novel is a disturbing cautionary vision of mankind's bleak future, a kind of anti-utopia set in the not-too-distant future. It paints a picture of what can happen if people become indifferent, tending to trust that things that remain the same and failing to see the gradual changes and all the rights they are secretly deprived of.

The Handmaid's Tale is more than a story about the plight of a young woman. Every aspect of this nightmarish society is a reflection of people's past and present time. Not much has changed since the book was written and published in the 1980s: religious extremism, racism and environmental destruction caused by man's savagery are still ordeals even within the 21st century. In the novel, Atwood pointed a finger at fundamentalism, rigid dogmas and political agendas that might currently gain "a deceptive popularity" (as cited in Hodson, 1997). In fact, the aim of this dystopia is to make readers reflect upon the historical context they live in. The book might initially strike the reader as a shock, yet after a precise reading one cannot but realize that what is really shocking is the real world outside the pages of the book. *The Handmaid's Tale* works as a shock treatment, which seeks to awaken readers' minds in the hope of making a change.

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