

**Edita Bratanović\***  
Faculty of Philology  
University of Belgrade  
Serbia

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## FEMINIST DYSTOPIA IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S NOVEL *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

### Abstract

*The Handmaid's Tale* has sparked a lot of controversy by telling a dramatic and extraordinary story about the lives of women in the Republic of Gilead. The novel draws attention to a plethora of issues that concern feminists by depicting a reality where women are deprived of basic human rights. In this way, Margaret Atwood portrays a feminist dystopia as a warning to people around the world, trying to illustrate the consequences that human indifference to feminist issues may cause.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the main feminist themes in the novel, look into the possible reasons for the creation of a feminist dystopia and explore the messages that Atwood wishes to convey by depicting a bleak and demeaning future for women.

**Key words:** dystopia, female identity, feminism

### 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's work and the issues she explores are often described as feminist. This results from her attitude of a realist noting down the observations about the world that surrounds her: "Am I a propagandist? No! Am I an observer of society? Yes! And no one who observes society can fail to make observations which are feminist. That is just based on real-life common sense." (Jamkhandi 1983: 5 as cited in Brooks Bouson 1993: 3). What Atwood does through her writing is perceive the hidden truths of the world we live in that people are very aware of but seem reluctant to talk about. She comments: "I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community... fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects." (Margaret Atwood for *Dalhousie Review* as cited in Davey 1984: 162). She draws her inspiration from the world around her, and describes the consequences which might be felt in the future as a result of the complacent actions of the present.

When it comes to the inspiration for writing this novel, it could have been Atwood's visit to Iran. As Gina Wisker points out: "In Iran and Iraq and other parts

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\* PhD candidate, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Studentski trg 3, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia; e-mail: bratanovicedita@gmail.com

of the world where religious fundamentalism has taken hold, there is often extreme inequality, ironically and worryingly many of Atwood's predictions about excluding women from education, have been fulfilled in areas under the control of the Taliban." (Wisker 2010: 4). It is widely known that in many Arabic countries women are repressed by not being allowed to dress as they wish, having to cover their bodies fully, not being allowed to walk the streets without a man accompanying them, not having the right to attend universities and work. It appears that these women are only valued for their reproductive purposes and are forced into arranged marriages with the sole purpose of giving birth to as many children as possible. Perhaps Atwood's wish was to draw attention with her work to those countries which still implement strict regimes that completely oppress women. Additionally, what contributed to Atwood's motivation to write the novel are the circumstances she witnessed during her stay in Berlin and several other countries behind the Iron Curtain. She remarks: "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. So did the repurposed buildings." (Kalorkoti 2017).

## **2. The concept of feminist dystopia**

When it comes to an attempt to explain what dystopia means, the easiest way is to compare it to its contrasting concept – utopia. Unlike utopia, which describes a system, place or state of things where everything seems to be perfect and in great order, dystopia refers to a system or a society that is unfair, filled with injustices and suffering.

Dyer believes that utopia is based on two concepts: escapism and wish-fulfilment and he finds the entertainment industry as utopian in its nature, "Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized" (Dyer 1993: 373). People long for utopian elements in their lives, whatever appears as utopia provokes people's desire to be a part of it. This is the reason why the entertainment industry is popular, people love watching movies, listening to music and enjoying forms of art that offer an escape from their lives.

Booker writes about Disneyland, the perfect embodiment of utopian vision, as it is the place where everyone is happy and content and the worries of the world cease to exist once you step into this magical fantasy. Booker however also sees a negative side to it: "Part of this allure is pure escapism, of course, and Disneyworld clearly represents both the negative image of utopian dreaming as escape from reality and the positive image of utopian thought as the practical Aristotelian entelechy of the ideal Platonic

potential that already lies in reality” (Booker 1994: 1). Utopian places as Disneyland are often used as the means to avoid and escape the harsh dystopian reality and slip into the perfect careless world at least for a day. Still Booker insists that a dystopian element is present in what seems to be the most ideal example of utopia, “Among other things, the doubleness of Disneyworld indicates the simple fact that what one person considers an ideal dream might to another person seem a nightmare” (Booker 1994: 3). He wishes to emphasise that it is not possible to create any place or society in this world that would be considered as utopia for everyone. Even though the majority might perceive the society they live in as utopia, it is still perceived by the minority who are not treated equally and who do not believe they are granted all the rights they believe they deserve that they live in dystopia. This irrevocable duality of the concept of utopia forces many critics to question its values. Utopian dream has often been attributed to political movements throughout history, starting from Ancient Greece. And since these political movements often resulted in dystopias, questioning of utopian concept seems legitimate. Freud suggests that “primitivism or anarchy would be even worse, so there can be no ideal society, and any attempt to establish one is likely to do more harm than good” (as cited in Booker 1994: 10). This thought lies at the heart of the utopian discussion, as it is often implied that any attempt at the creation of a perfect society would fail. Atwood’s novel epitomizes this, as the Republic of Gilead was intended to be a utopia, but as so many similar attempts in history, it failed miserably.

Dystopian literary works have great importance because they draw attention to issues in the society that might escalate and that people do not pay enough attention to: “The principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (Booker 1994: 19).

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a critical feminist dystopia because it describes the country in which a particular layer of society is deprived of basic human rights and is forced to live in an unfair dictatorship. Feminist dystopias depict the world where women are inferior to men and where they suffer and feel oppressed by the unjust treatment towards them. This novel is widely connected to feminism as Margaret Atwood portrays the dystopian vision of women’s lives with the aim to warn the overall humanity of possible consequences of creating a society that would be considered utopian only by minority and men.

## **2.1 The Republic of Gilead as a feminist dystopia**

As Harold Bloom notes about *The Handmaid's Tale*: “Rereading it remains a frightening experience.” (Bloom 2004: 7). This statement seems accurate as the world

portrayed in the novel seems unimaginable but at the same time we get the impression that it might happen at some point. It gives readers a frightening experience because they are aware a feminist dystopia might actually happen in near future. Atwood herself commented: "It is an imagined account of what happens when not uncommon pronouncements about women are taken to their logical conclusions." (Bloom 2004: 7). Coral Ann Howells remarks: "There is always a *what if*, to which the novel is the answer." (Howells 2006: 161). What if we found ourselves in the situation of the denial of the basic human rights to women such as entitlement to name and identity? What if we faced a world in which the overall purpose of women's existence would be limited solely to reproduction? What if the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* became our reality? The novel portrays what that reality would look like without any censorship or embellishment.

Many critics have tried to define which genre this masterpiece belongs to. As Macpherson remarks: "Alternatively defined as science fiction, dystopic nightmare, futuristic prophecy, slave narrative or satiric romance, *The Handmaid's Tale* expands beyond such limiting frameworks as it explores a potential future." (Slettedahl Macpherson 2010: 53). Even though the questions of genre might occupy the attention of literary critics, readers have been more concerned with the powerful message that the novel carries and the ominous warning it sends.

Margaret Atwood said: "There's nothing in it that we as species haven't done." (Tolan 2007: 292). If we feel frightened or disgusted by the system portrayed in the novel, we should take a moment and think about how all of it happened at some point in history and how it was all brought about by people. She reiterates: "One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the "nightmare" of history, nor any technology not already available." (Kalorkoti 2017).

The position of the woman in Gilead is determined by the colour of the clothes she wears. Marthas are dressed in green and they are responsible for housekeeping and cooking. Econowives, women of the poorer men, are dressed in clothes with stripes. Handmaids are dressed in red, the red colour symbolizing the woman's ability to reproduce, to bring children into this world, as it is associated with blood and menstruation. Uniforms have always been used as special clothes to mark a certain profession or occupation. In the same way, women in the Republic of Gilead wear clothes of a particular colour which designate the job they are expected to do and determine the role that they are expected to perform.

Atwood remarks: "It's a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime." (Bloom 2004: 77). What lies at the centre of the novel is power. Those in power created the system and

those without power live within that system without any means to fight back. However, as Atwood herself commented, the power is not necessarily distributed in a way to be given to only one sex:

Some people mistakenly think that the society in *The Handmaid's Tale* is one in which all men have power, and all women don't. That is not true, because it is a true totalitarianism: therefore a true hierarchy. Those at the top have power, those at the bottom, don't. And those at the bottom include men, and those at the top include women. The women at the top have different kinds of power from the men at the top, but they have power nonetheless, and some of the power they have is power over other women. Like Serena Joy, like the Aunts... (Somacarrera 2006: 53)

Ironically, it is due to the power of reproduction, the ability to get pregnant and give birth, that some of the women are stripped of their human rights.

Naturally, Gilead also has some positive aspects when it comes to its treatment of women. When asked if there are any good things about Gilead, Margaret Atwood replied: "Yes. Women aren't whistled at on the street, men don't come climbing in the window in the middle of the night. Women are "- protected -". Sardonicly speaking, in totalitarian countries the streets are much safer for the most part." (Tolan 2007: 150). It is a fact that in a world where all rights are given freely to everybody, there will always be people who will abuse the liberties given to them by attacking women in the street, raping them, looking at them in an inappropriate manner. In Gilead, the punishment for these acts is so severe that man would not even imagine doing any of these things. In addition, in Gilead there is no pornography, no magazines or films that objectify women. Offred remembers how women were not safe before:

"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 the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night." (Atwood 1996: 34)

### **3. Female characters in *The Handmaid's Tale***

The variety of female characters present in the novel all have different types of personalities and react differently to their living conditions. What is interesting to notice is that the majority of women in the novel do not participate in any sort of

rebellion. Actually, some of them, like the Aunts and Commanders' Wives, participate in the regime, contributing to its establishment and success.

Offred is supposed to represent a typical woman of the time. Atwood comments: "The voice is that of an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than heroine), because I suppose I'm more interested in social history than in the biographies of the outstanding." (Bloom 2004: 16). Offred is neither outspoken nor brave, she accepts her fate as it is and the only thing she allows herself is to daydream about the family she used to have. Readers are used to having protagonists acting as heroes, revolutionaries, characters who do something to defy the system and immoralities, but Atwood purposefully chose her protagonist to be just like most other women, not special in any way, merely existing in the world of repression. However, although Offred does not represent a revolutionist, a person who fights to make changes, she is definitely a survivor - "There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last -" (Atwood 1996: 17). It is interesting to compare how Offred reacts and how upset and hurt she is when she initially loses her money and job when the new regime is established and how she complaisantly accepts her new life as a handmaid. When she loses her job and control over her finances, she feels like her basic human rights are denied, which hurts her terribly, and she says to her husband she does not want to depend on him. On the other hand, in Gilead, she completely loses her rights and is dependent on the system and whichever Commander she is serving at the moment, and yet she finds a way to follow the rules and not rebel. The reason why this happens is probably the lack of options that Offred observes. When the new regime is installed, it takes time for her to accept and come to terms with the new circumstances. However, the more she loses (at first it is only her money and job, but then it is her husband and child), the more aware she becomes that in order to survive she has to be obedient and accept all the rules imposed on her.

Offred is trying to overcome and survive the dystopia she lives in by imagining and dreaming about the world in which she used to live and which now seems like a utopia. Offred's telling her story is of paramount importance for her mental survival and wellbeing. She does not only describe Gilead in detail, including all of its atrocities and injustices, but she also uses her story to remember her family, to have imaginary conversations with her mother, to relive the life she used to have, all of which make her life more bearable. In addition, she creates a valuable source for future interpretations of history, "The voice of the repressed woman we only know as Offred survives longer than the regime that tries to silence it." (Wilson 1993: 291). Expressing her attitudes and having her voice heard regarding the injustices she suffers is something Offred cannot do publicly. As Atwood commented:

In any totalitarian take-over, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers and journalists are the first to be suppressed... The aim of all such suppression is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that's why so much trouble is taken to silence it. (Wisker 2010: 127)

The reason why the Commanders of Gilead do not want the handmaids to read or to talk to each other and the reason why all the media is prohibited is because it is the easiest way to maintain the oppression of women. In this way they have no means to express their disagreement with the system, no person they could talk to about their personal feelings and no way to organise a collective rebellion. The safest guarantee of a comfortable future for the handmaid is to get pregnant and deliver a healthy baby. They have three chances, two years per posting, before they are sent to the Colonies. Radiation, chemicals and pollution have increased sterility and the number of babies being born with defects. Every month handmaids go to obligatory medical checks, while Commanders, despite their age and possible sterility, never have to do the same as it is assumed that only women could have a problem. This kind of thinking is an example of discrimination towards women.

The matter of choice is a recurrent motif as Offred often thinks about the choices she has made in her life and the choices she is presented with in the current situation. She chose to be a handmaid over the possibility to go to the Colonies. She chooses every day to keep on going with her life, while she has the option to end it like many other handmaids do. The fact is that all the women living in Gilead have choices, but what kind of choices are these? "Nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose." (Atwood 1996: 105). Throughout the novel the only thing that Offred does that shows her personal choice and freedom is her decision to be with Nick. Tolan remarks: "Utopia has an intimate relationship with questions of liberty and autonomy." (Tolan 2007: 145). The handmaids have no autonomy or liberty whatsoever. They are not entitled to their names, which is the basic embodiment of human identity. They are not allowed to have families or friends, their whole life is based on obeying the rules and respecting the regime. Women are described by their functions and stripped of their identities, which appear irrelevant since the only important thing is fulfilling their purpose.

Moira and Janine are complete opposites, the first one defying the system and the second one completely adhering to it. Neither of them ends up happy. Moira manages to escape from the school for handmaids. She goes into hiding and Quakers and some other non-religious houses that oppose the regime help her, but then she is

caught and offered either to go work in a brothel or go to the Colonies, where women clean toxic dumps and radiation spills. After Offred hears about this, she feels sad and disappointed because she has wanted Moira to succeed and become a heroine and an example that there is a way out:

Here is what I'd like to tell. I'd like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time, or if I couldn't tell that, I'd like to say she blew up Jezebel's, with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn't happen. I don't know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (Atwood 1996: 262)

Ofglen is part of the resistance movement. She and Offred walk together to buy groceries and when they see Japanese tourists, they notice their makeup and their clothes which are revealing for these conservative times. They remember the times when they had the freedom to dress like them, but now they feel it is inappropriate. Living in these conditions has changed their perspective. However, when it is discovered that Ofglen is part of the rebellious organisation, she hangs herself in order not to be captured.

Offred's mother offers a glimpse of the past. She decided to raise her daughter without a man, and she fought for women's equality. Her famous words were: "A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women." (Atwood 1996: 130). She participated in marches for women's rights and in burning pornographic content. Even though her battle was one in favour of women, it seems wrong that books and magazines should be burnt. Perhaps Atwood suggests that this kind of behaviour is what brought Gilead into existence. It is the onset of censorship, the limitation of the freedom to publish books and magazines, even though they have pornographic content, that eventually brought the limitation of all women's freedoms and rights in general. Burning pornographic content eventually escalated into the burning of almost all printed materials and denying women the right to read.

Aunts, being women themselves, have chosen to be a part of the regime and there they occupy a somewhat superior position. It is possible to speculate that women could have prevented this totalitarian system if they had all been united and if they had all defied being part of it together. However, it seems that some of them (Wives, Aunts), were happy to take their positions and support the system. Aunts' job is to shape the girls' mindset so that they accept their fate. They constantly remind the women of the alternative and they are trying to make them embrace their situation and



focus on the benefits of it: "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 1996: 34). Aunts believe that the regime will continue in the future and that then it will be easier for everyone as they will be accustomed to it:

You are a transitional generation, said Aunt Lydia. It is the hardest for you. We know the sacrifices you are being expected to make. It is hard when men revile you. For the ones who come after you, it will be easier. They will accept their duties with willing hearts. Because they won't want things they can't have. (Atwood 1996: 127)

Serena Joy is a Commander's Wife, and as such she is privileged to live a wealthy and comfortable life, but at the same time she suffers by being disrespected because a handmaid lives with her and her husband. She used to have a career before, but that is not allowed for women anymore. In the life before Gilead she used to make speeches saying that the place of women is at home, and she got exactly what she wished for. Even though she thought that this way of life would be a utopia, once she receives it, she realises it is an anti-utopia. Serena Joy is trying to act dignified in the life that she was hoping for, but actually she is unhappy. According to Fiona Tolan, "*The Handmaid's Tale* points to Atwood's decision to advocate caution, and to defend liberty before ideology" (Tolan 2007: 173). Just because some ideas seem perfect and politicians believe they might make society better, it does not mean they should implement them without taking into consideration human rights and freedoms. "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 1996: 56). It seems that Serena Joy is jealous of Offred, of her youth, her relationship with her husband, and her ability to give her husband what she herself is not capable of. When she discovers they have been secretly meeting, she says: "You could have left me something" (Atwood 1996: 299), obviously aware of the fact her husband does not love her and is not interested in her.

The ending is bittersweet. We are unsure about what happened to Offred and whether her capture was a rescue mission or not. However, she managed to have her story heard, to make people aware of what happened, which is the most tremendous victory she could have ever imagined, as her life and her struggles were not all in vain, and they serve now to warn other women and other men about the way things should not be done.

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a feminist dystopia in the Republic of Gilead, where women are denied the basic human rights and are valued solely based on their reproductive abilities. Apart from being extremely discriminatory, the creation of this world also supports the thinking that the overall purpose and function of women is to get pregnant and give birth, while all their intellectual abilities, career aspirations, hopes, dreams and desires seem irrelevant. Many readers feel that the society described in the novel is unrealistic and far-fetched, but the truth is that women are still being discriminated against and feminism as the movement still has a long way to go before all of its goals are achieved.

The primary function of a dystopia is to warn the readers with the intention to awaken a reaction. It seems that Atwood's wish by portraying such a bleak and unimaginable future of female lives is to inspire the readers to think about feminism, women's position in the society and human rights in general.

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