



The Handmaid's Tale Through the Lens of Marxism

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Abstract

In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the handmaid of the title is most frequently viewed by critics as a symbol of female marginality whose innocence and sincerity expose the hypocrisy and artificiality of patriarchal society. We will argue that Atwood goes beyond establishing Handmaids as simply one side of a dialectical opposition between matriarchal society and patriarchal society. The handmaids additionally stand as a symbol of proletariat, subjugated by the bourgeoisie to the point of slavery, harshly indoctrinated in a psychologically-damaging fashion, and are denied the basic freedoms. From a sociological perspective, Atwood's story is an appreciated instrument to scrutinize through the theory of Marxism. With the application of this theoretical analysis, it is discovered that the world portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian nightmare which subdues the proletariats. Most criticism overseas the class to which the handmaid belongs.

Key words: Marxism; Proletariat; Bourgeoisie; Handmaid

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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is most frequently viewed by critics as a feminist novel and the heroin is deemed as a symbol of female marginality

whose innocence and sincerity expose the hypocrisy and artificiality of patriarchal society. Mitrovic writes "*The Handmaid's Tale* could be easily catalogued as a feminist novel. A feminist reading seems to be the most obvious perspective to analyse the text. Feminism is indeed developed throughout the narration showing how women are used in order to increase a political ideal". (Violeta, 2007, p. 4) Jones writes "understandably, most criticism focuses on the "hyper-patriarchy" of Gilead." (Jones 1996, p. 3). Alanna A. Callaway argues "Placing the novel in the contexts of Atwood's career, feminism, and dystopian literature, provides a fuller understanding of how the novel functions as an expression of the disunity of women. (Callaway, 2008, p. 6) However, we will demonstrate that Atwood goes beyond establishing Handmaids as simply one side of a dialectical opposition between matriarchal society and patriarchal society. The handmaids additionally stand as a symbol of proletariat, subjugated by the bourgeoisie to the point of slavery, harshly indoctrinated in a psychologically-damaging fashion, and are denied the basic freedoms. From a sociological perspective, Atwood's story is an appreciated tool to scrutinize through the theory of Marxism. With the application of this theoretical examination, it is found that the world depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian nightmare which subjugates the proletariats.

In Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* we literally and metaphorically follow the protagonist and ostensible narrator, Offred, experiencing her daily existence under the regime of a bourgeois theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists. The commanders are leaders of the system who rule the roost. This experience of the handmaid discloses the gap or rather the true character of the religious readers of her society or rather the true picture of the people for whom she is going to be a handmaid. She is going to spend her life in service and devotion to the spiritual leaders of the republic of Gilead who are the representatives of God. On her studying

the system of the Gilead, she questions the dominant hegemony of the Gileadan leaders. This leads us to conclude that she belongs to the proletariat. By exposing the lies of the Gilead and the hypocrisy of its leaders, the novel removes the veil from the cleverly disguised bourgeoisie. In one deft swoop, Offred publicizes the hegemony of the bourgeois religious leaders that has kept her and her fellow-handmaids in prison.

According to Marxism the bourgeoisie always debases the proletariat and demotes the proletariat to a position of slavery. Such a behavior is portrayed in the words of Serena Joy who, when first sees Kate who is going to be Serena Joy's Handmaid to give birth to a child so as to be Serena Joy's, says to Kate:

"I want to see as little of you as possible, she said. I expect you feel the same way about me. I know you aren't stupid. ...I've read your file. As far as I'm concerned, this is like a business transaction. But if I get trouble, I'll give trouble back. You understand?" (Atwood, 1986, p. 6)

When Kate says she understands her addressing Serena Joy as ma'am, Serena Joy gets irritated and says: "Don't call me ma'am. You're not a Martha." (Atwood, 1986, p. 6)

The kind of interaction between Serena Joy and Kate is the sort of relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The relationship is based on hatred. Serena is as in the words of Kate an arrogant woman "with a snub nose and huge blue eyes" (Atwood, 1986, p. 6)

The Handmaid's Tale lends itself very well to the ideas of Marxism. In this article we are trying to argue that the whole world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is created by the ideas of the dominant bourgeoisie class of American society who has every means of production in their hands. The world of Gilead is divided into two groups one is the bourgeoisie the other is proletariat. It is the handmaids who stand for the proletariat.

These handmaids live in a society in which they remember their real names but never reveal them and in which fertile women are forced to bear children for elite, bourgeoisie couples, these handmaids live in a society in which they show which Commander owns them by adopting their Commanders' names, such as Fred, and preceding them with "Of", such a society sucks the blood of the proletariat and the result is that the bourgeoisie reaps the profit and leaves the proletariat unprotected and without help. Although the novel talks about handmaids who are women, we can argue that handmaids belong to the class of the workers and hence the proletariat. This is reinforced when we understand Offred no longer has any family or any friends, though she has flashbacks to a time in which she had a daughter and a husband named Luke.

To prove that the novel is applicable to the ideas of Marxism, I have used Marxist ideas to apply to the novel to make this demonstration of Marxism in the novel perceptible. The novel includes the following Marxist ideas:

1. THE CLASS SOCIETY

The society in which the handmaids live is a class society in which every class is defined through a certain color. The Aunts are the class of women assigned to indoctrinate the Handmaids with the beliefs of the bourgeoisie and make them accept their fates. Aunt Lydia works at the "Red Center," the reeducation center where Offred and other women go for instruction before becoming Handmaids.

2. RELIGION IS THE OPIUM OF THE MASSES

Karl Marx called religion "the opiate of the masses," (Tyson, 2006, p. 59). Gilead is a religious state in which state and religion are actually the same and its official vocabulary includes religious terminology and biblical allusions. Domestic servants are entitled "Marthas" which alludes to a character in the New Testament; police are entitled "Guardians of the Faith"; soldiers are entitled "Angels"; and the Commanders are entitled "Commanders of the Faithful." Shops have names which come from bible: Loaves and Fishes, All Flesh, Milk and Honey. Even the cars have names which come from bible like Behemoth, Whirlwind, and Chariot. Making use of religious names to define people, positions, and trades distempers political trickery in religious terminology. It presents an ever-present notice that the creators of Gilead maintain they behave the authority of the Bible itself. There is no real separation between Politics and religion in Gilead. Bourgeois uses religion to justify their own acts and reap the result. Religion is a tool in the hand of the bourgeois people to manipulate the other classes.

The bourgeois society of Gilead can be observed as making use of religion in such a way as to achieve political control over the proletariat that it might otherwise lack. In her article "Religious Benevolence as Social Control: A Critique of an Interpretation", Lois W. Banner shows that religion has long been used as a way to control populations (Banner, 1973, p. 27). It is an effective political tool veiled in scripture, sacraments, and other dogmatic devices that cheat virtuous people into believing in and adhering to a religious dogma that, in actual fact, reinforces the political doctrine of the leading power class. The sphere depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian dread which subdues proletariat to the point of slavery, harshly influences and instructs them in a psychologically-damaging way, and denies them the basic freedoms. By forcing the proletariat to listen only to the version of truth approved by the bourgeoisie, these bourgeois authorities force the proletariat to subscribe to beliefs and values of bourgeoisie.

Religious censures coming from Bible is the motive for the harassment of the proletariat. Individual freedoms

have been cancelled for the fictional benefit of the superior good, yet the only people actually benefitting from the new order are the bourgeoisie elites in society.

By focusing the narrative on one principal character, Atwood discloses the humiliation and terror of living under a bourgeois regime. The heroine of the novel is one of several “handmaids” who, on account of their “viable ovaries,” are limited to a prison in order to be obtainable for occasionally planned sexual coitus with their “Commanders of the Faith.” This society of Gilead overlooks such an heretical practice on account of necessity to defeat a fertility emergency amongst the deteriorating Caucasian populace; as one of the novel’s witticisms proposes, the polygamy of the Old Testament presents the authorization. Similar to what happens in Genesis, the Commander’s Wife organizes and manages these sex meetings, in which the handmaid, debased and degraded, should participate.

We can look at the wives of the commanders this way that they do not want to be pregnant because pregnancy causes them to look ugly and makes them old and broken. In a recent research many women have agreed with the surrogate mother, one who is hired to give birth to a child. One of the novel’s successful features is about the skilled description of a state that theoretically claims to be based on Christian principles, nevertheless practically desolately does not possess spirituality and benevolence.

The spiritual leaders of Gilead do not observe the religious rights of the system themselves and it leads us to believe that religion is a tool in their hands because they are the dominant group. It also leads us as the novel itself wants us to believe that ‘how easy it is to invent a humanity for anyone at all’ (Atwood, p. 61). The rules of religion are not for bourgeois class rather they are for people of the lower class, the proletariat. The bourgeoisie does not give a damn to religious rules, it only keeps religion in its own hands in order to make proletariat obey religious rules so as for the bourgeoisie to do whatever they wish to do in their situation.

3. IDEOLOGICAL STATE APPARATUSES

In the novel the Ideological state apparatuses include the Eyes, the Wives, the Angels, the Aunts, the Commanders, commonplace soldiers, resentful Econowives.

If it is the antifeminist leaders who rent the other women to give birth to children for the elite, why then the same elite do not discard their own women as unwomen? If we are to read the novel as a feminist work we cannot answer these questions. The conclusion is that the wives and the Aunts are not considered weak women but they are considered as agent of the bourgeoisie. The Gileadan society is not at all against all women. The Gileadian society is not misogynistic completely. The Gileadan society is wholly and absolutely against the

proletariat. We should read the Aunts as regardless of feminism. Atwood is dealing with an ideology which is wrong.

The aunts in the handmaid are dismissed by some critics as possessing some sort of a power given to them by the leaders in the Gilead. This is because critics use to read this novel only through the lens of feminism while the novel cannot be read only through the attitude of feminism and it can be dangerous to read it through the lens of feminism because all the women are not treated badly in the novel. This is reinforced when we see that Aunts are given a privilege over other women. The best ways to look at the aunts is that they are agents of the bourgeois society or as in the words of Louis Althusser they are one example of “ideological state apparatuses” of the society in which they live. The aunts comprise one element of the ruling class. Aunt Lydia and her instructions haunt Offred in her daily life. Aunt Lydia’s slogans and maxims drum the ideology of bourgeoisie into heads of the proletariat women. In fact, Aunt Lydia stands for ideological state apparatuses of the bourgeoisie who indoctrinates the Handmaids with the beliefs of the bourgeoisie. The Gileadan society is clearly based upon principles that negate the rights of the proletariat.

I agree with Roberta Rubenstein who in her article “Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid's Tale*” believes that the Aunts only “retain power in the puritanical state through their role as indoctrinators of the handmaids” (Rubenstein, p. 104). This is in accord with what Margaret Atwood herself said in an interview. In that radio interview and conversation with fellow writer Victor-Levy Beaulieu, she said that the personality of Aunt Lydia “is based on the history of imperialisms. For example, the British in India raised an army of Indians to control the rest of the Indians... So, if you want to control women, you have to grant some women a tiny bit more power so that they’ll control the others” (Atwood and Beaulieu 78). The imperialism can be equal to bourgeoisie here in that the bourgeoisie tries to control the proletariat by any means even any group of the bourgeoisie and also from among the proletariat themselves.

Linda Myrsiades in her article “Law, Medicine, and the Sex Slave in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid's Tale*” simply portrays the Aunts as “a class of women assigned to educate the handmaids to their roles as surrogates” (Myrsiades, 1999, p. 227). David Coad in his article “Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid's Tale*” describes the role of the Aunts by suggesting that they are merely “sadistic propagandists” (Coad, 1994, p. 54). Johnson in his article “The Aunts as an Analysis of Feminine Power in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid's Tale*” argues:

“it could be argued, however, that the Aunts are responsible for sustaining the rituals of the Gileadan society, and not only the training of the Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center. When Janine, or Ofwarren, is ready to give birth, Aunt

Elizabeth plays an integral part in the birthing process for both Janine and the Commander's wife (158-62). At the assembly of the Handmaids, Aunt Lydia directs both the Salvaging and the Particution ceremonies (352-60).

Lucy M. Freibert in her article "Control and Creativity: The Politics of Risks in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" describes both ceremonies in this manner: "At the hangings each Handmaid must touch the rope in assent to the murders. At Particutions the Handmaids ritually dismember any man accused of rape. The Aunts supply the rhetoric that arouses the women to savagery" (Freibert, 1988, p. 284-85). The Aunts are also in charge of guiding the women who are not Handmaids. When Offred accompanies the Commander to the club, which plays the role of a warehouse for the Commanders, she is shocked to see that an Aunt is in charge of checking the conduct of her friend Moira and the other whookers. (Johnson, p. 71) The Aunt stipulates when the hookers take their resting times and for how long the resting times are (Freibert, p. 313). The Aunt also stipulates if they want to lose weight in their positions and will chastise them if they are overheavy (ibid, p. 309). Freibert continues and says If we compare the role of the Aunts with the role of Commanders we see that the Commanders are responsible for much lighter task. Commanders are responsible for the settled marriages service (ibid, p. 282-83). The Commander is in charge of reciting Bible texts to his family members (ibid, p. 114). The Commander is also in charge of impregnating the Handmaid in order for Gilead to survive (ibid, p. 122). It is clear that the Aunts have more responsibilities in the Gileadan theocracy than merely educating women for service as Handmaids.

The bourgeoisie needs to preach its ideas to other members of the society. This function more often than not is carried away by the aunts in the novel. Aunt Lydia fits this function very well. She advises the handmaids multiple times on multiple occasions. Sometimes she talks about satisfaction with what the handmaids have, sometimes she teaches the handmaids to be content with the situation in which they are. Sometimes she plays a porn movie in order to bring a lesson home to the handmaids. She is a moral advisor. For example at one occasion she says to the handmaid:

If you have a lot of things, you get too attached to this material world and you forget about spiritual values. You must cultivate poverty of spirit. Blessed are the meek. (Atwood, p. 27)

The ruling class needs such moral advisors in order to naturalize its dominant ideas or attitudes so as to control and manipulate the proletariat. To inculcate these ideas such as not attaching to the material world and forgetting about spiritual values, the Gileadan leaders use aunts as their ideological state apparatuses.

4. PROLETARIAT

The proletariats in the novel are the handmaids who possess nothing. The heroin of the story Offred on multiple times on multiple occasions refuses to use the word 'my' or the word 'mine' which show possession. For example when she is talking about her room, she says "The door of the room-not my room, I refuse to say my-is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly" (Ibid, p. 2). In another time when she feels "like to stay here, in the kitchen" to talk to Cora and Rita who also belong to the proletariats, she declares "we would sit at Rita's kitchen table, which is not Rita's any more than my table is mine" (ibid, p. 3). Not only do they possess anything in the society of the proletariat but also they themselves are considered like commodities and goods which are possessed by the bourgeoisie and hence the word 'Of' as attached to each handmaid's name.

Regarding the fact that the handmaids possess nothing in the new-made society of Gilead, it is suffice to say that Offred not only had a family but also she possessed a garden which now in this society she is deprived of. She says: "I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth, the plump shapes of bulbs held in the hands, fullness, the dry rustle of seeds through the fingers" (ibid, p.4). She is deprived of her garden and if we take garden for her heaven and her happiness metaphorically she has been deprived from everything. And this shows that we are dealing with a group who has been deprived of everything

She sees herself in the images of Cora and Rita with whom she identifies. She testifies to the fact that they are like her and she uses the pronoun 'we' to refer to themselves. This is evident in the following passages:

We would talk, about aches and pains, illnesses, our feet, our backs, all the different kinds of mischief that our bodies, like unruly children, can get into. We would nod our heads as punctuation to each other's voices, signaling that yes, we know all about it. We would exchange remedies and try to outdo each other in the recital of our physical miseries; gently we would complain, our voices soft and minor key and mournful as pigeons in the eaves troughs. know what you mean, we'd say. (ibid, p. 3)

She never identifies with any other women in the novel. For example she never identifies with Serena Joy. She never identifies with the Aunts. The only group with whom she identifies is the Marthas. And the reason for this lack of identification with the aunts and the Wives of the commanders is that they do not belong to the same group though they are all women. So reading this novel only through the lens of feminism is not suffice when all the women are treated differently in the system.

To conclude the essay from the point of view of Marxism the novel *Handmaid's Tale* criticizes the organized religion by revealing the ways in which religion damages the poor by encouraging them to overlook

the harsh realities of their lives, instead of organizing politically and fighting collectively for their fair share of the life's facilities. This is evident from what Aunts teach the handmaids. 'I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight. Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or.' (Atwood, 1986, p. 2). *The Handmaid's Tale* also critiques the organized religion when religion becomes a tool in the hand of the ruling bourgeoisie class by which the ruling class oppresses the proletariat and furthers its own progress. The ruling class uses religion as a vehicle to naturalize itself so as to keep the poor from realizing and resisting socioeconomic oppression. Furthermore the novel critiques the organized religion when the novel undermines classist values by exemplifying the inequalities suffered under the class system. The novel *The handmaid's Tale* condemns religion whose function is to emotionalize the masses so that the ruling class keeps them busy by getting them high. From the point of view of Marxist criticism *The Handmaid's Tale* is critical of religion which contributes to keeping the truthful and pious poor content with their portion in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a drug might do. The issue of God's existence is not the important issue for Marxist examination; instead, what human beings do in God's name—organized religion—is the focal point. In the name of religion the dominant group in the *Handmaid's Tale* dominates, controls, manipulates, oppresses, seizes, annihilates, destroys, kills the proletariat. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the dominant Christian group works to nourish, cover, and provide housing for, and even instruct the world's poor in the name of religion, the religious doctrines that are spread along with the food and clothing contain the principle that the poor, if they remain nonviolent, will find their reward in heaven. Atwood raises the consciences of the public to tell them that religion is a handmaid in the hand of the ruling class to keep them as workers or slaves. When in *The Handmaid's Tale* the dominant group of people brainwash other people here women in the name of religion in order to take advantage of them the work openly is critical of cruelties and bigotries and prejudices of the dominant class done to oppressed people.

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