Hell On Earth: The Feminist Dystopia of *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers a bleak look at what the future could hold if current trends continue to develop and reach fruition. In the tale, the protagonist and ostensible narrator, Offred, describes the course of her daily existence under the oppressive regime of a patriarchal theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists. In doing so, the tale provides a plausible vision of feminism gone awry and patriarchy as expressed by religious and governmental totalitarianism. From a sociological standpoint, Atwood’s story is a valuable tool to examine through the theory of Cultural Feminism as it is the dominant mainstream form of feminism against which such a situation could be compared. With the application of this theoretical analysis, it is revealed that the world depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian nightmare which subjugates women to the point of sexual slavery, severely impacts and indoctrinates them in a psychologically-damaging manner, and denies them the basic freedoms which most women in Western civilization take for granted.

To use the famous phrase, feminism is the radical idea that women are people, it is evident that the women in the Republic of Gilead are not people at all but rather socio-political tools and possessions with which to bolster one’s status in society and ostensibly propagate the Caucasian race, though that may have simply been another justification for their oppression. The nascent government has developed a patriarchal, chauvinist, bigoted, and downright sexist society. Individual freedoms have been revoked for the supposed benefit of the greater good, yet the only people truly benefitting from the new order are the male elites in society. Females, especially the sexually-enslaved Handmaids, experience incredible oppression at the hands of their male overseers; furthermore, even some women have been coerced or deluded into
contributing to the oppressive tendencies of the new regime, as evidenced by the presence of indoctrinating Aunts and indoctrinated true believers. Most women in this new society experience very little freedom due to the fact that they essentially belong to their male commanders and must submit to their will, based on the ideological framework of a Biblical precedent from thousands of years ago. Regarding the Handmaids, their very names are merely devices used to denote to whom they belong; broken up into their component parts, it is clear that the women are “Of Fred”, “Of Warren”, “Of Glen”, “Of Charles”, etc.

Environmental safety is shown to have significant consequences for the overall state of women in society. The fact that the air itself was so saturated with hazardous chemicals led to a sharp decline in birth rates; in addition, there were “exploding atomic power plants”, water that “swarmed with toxic chemicals”, a “mutant strain of syphilis” that resulted from an over-reliance on medication to which the disease eventually became resistant (Atwood 112). These factors combined to give the Republic of Gilead a viable excuse to dominate and regulate the reproductive rights of its inhabitants, especially the women among them. Women without the capability to successfully procreate were literally stripped of their gender-identity by being labeled as unwomen. From the standpoint of archetypal feminism, many of the unwomen embodied the archetypal category of Crone, which is the post-menopausal woman who can no longer bear children.

This is a prime example of Atwood’s point about women being viewed as nothing more than an ambulatory womb. Women whose wombs are not viable in terms of childbirth are not really women at all, according to the founders of this theocracy. These unwanted women are sent to toxic waste dumps, where they are doomed to literally work themselves to death in the process of cleaning up the sullied environment. Whether it involves going into labor or doing hard labor,
such narrow-minded treatment reveals the Republic of Gilead’s complete disregard for the actual lives and personalities of its female citizens. Essentially, men raped the Earth until it could not be raped any longer, so they turned their attention to raping women instead. By having the Republic of Gilead use the environment as a means of attaining power, Atwood seems to be making an ecofeminist critique of both the questionable practices of companies that deal with chemicals, oil, nuclear products, and other potentially hazardous materials and the external influences which politicians use to bolster their support and solidify their power.

From both a feminist standpoint, indoctrination was a strong and effective tool used by the Republic of Gilead to enforce its control over the subjugated female population throughout the story. It was especially prevalent in the Rachael and Leah Re-Education Center (better known as the Red Center) which Offred, Moira, and Janine attended. It was through the use of these centers that the Handmaids were forced into their new identities as semi-brainwashed submissive breeding-slaves.

The handlers in the Red Center managed to turn women against themselves and their own beliefs. Scientific studies on behavior and socialization have shown that behavioral and ideological restriction is an ideal way to recruit new members of a group and ensure their conformity to that group’s standards (Cushman 4). The behavior of the women in the Red Center was restricted in that their daily lives were strictly scheduled and their ability to talk, walk, read, and even use the bathroom was limited; similarly, their beliefs were ideologically restricted (and thus, altered) in that much of what they previously believed was depicted as evil and unhealthy. That idea is exemplified when Offred reflects on the fact that the indoctrination sessions seemed to be succeeding when she said “already we were losing the taste for freedom; already we were finding these walls secure” (Atwood 217). Sociologically speaking, it is common for members
of a restrictive group to eventually adhere to and uphold the values of that group even in the absence of their peers and overseers (Cushman 7); indeed, the inculcation at the Red Center went so deep that, eventually, the women internalized the lessons and reinforced the values of the Republic of Gilead within themselves without the need of an Aunt’s assistance and watchful, chastising gaze. This is illustrated when Offred reflects that the habits and traditions of her former life seemed “lavish, decadent almost; immoral, like the orgies of barbarian regiments” (Atwood 113). That is particularly poignant because the former habit that inspired that thought was simply the ability to store books and pens in a desk. Although such a small quirk of life is seemingly inconsequential at first, it is actually indicative of something deeper. The fact that storing a pencil in a desk was compared to degrading, immoral orgies shows the depth to which the Aunt’s indoctrination had penetrated.

Although Offred frequently thinks of these indoctrination sessions and shows that they have had a significant influence on her thoughts and behavior, as illustrated above, there are times when she reveals that she does not fully believe in the new regime under which she lives; for instance, when Aunt Lydia describes Offred and the other breeding-women as the front-line storm troopers of the new way of life, Offred dismisses it as “phony courage” and later says that she wants to strangle her (Atwood 113). Her disdain for the indoctrination is also evident in the fact that she is only truly happy during the furtive bathroom meetings with Moira, her secret friend for whom she often yearns. Further evidence of the indoctrination’s failure to totally convert her is illustrated when she kisses Nick even though she knows that he could very well be an Eye; when she thinks petty, bitter thoughts about Serena Joy even though she is supposed to be a respected, venerated figure in the household; and when she sneaks into the Commander’s room to meet him at night even though she knows that doing such a thing is explicitly forbidden.
As she put it, “I should have felt evil; by Aunt Lydia’s lights, I was evil. But I didn’t feel evil” (Atwood 157). From a feminist perspective, it can be seen that Offred is an intelligent and somewhat independent woman, as opposed to the one-dimensional caricature that the Republic of Gilead seems to hold as its dominant view of women. Much as with Moira, another intelligent and even more willful woman, it is likely that the indoctrination failed because the Republic of Gilead’s founders had view of women that was based on ideology (women are weak, subservient creatures) instead of fact (women are intelligent, capable people). Such a disparity between belief and reality surely sabotaged their efforts. A study by Gideon Yafee entitled “Indoctrination, Coercion, and Freedom of Will” postulates the idea that indoctrination will never be fully successful on any individual due to the fact that they already hold deep-seated beliefs that have personal and spiritual value; indeed, the only way to successfully convert someone is to start the process at birth so as not to allow any other competing influence to impinge on their developing brains (345).

Offred also realizes that verses from the Bible, which is the very book on which the Republic of Gilead is supposed to be based, are being purposely modified and manipulated, even to the point where their original meaning is completely changed. This realization and subsequent doubt appear again when Aunt Lydia shows pornographic films to the girls in the Red Center. Offred doubts that some of the more violent and outlandish films were ever watched by men in the old times or even existed back then, and Moira strengthens her suspicions when she says that the violent scenes were filmed using models instead of actual people. For an intelligent woman like Offred, the omissions, modifications, and fabrications inspire doubt about the truth and necessity of the new order, which serves to further separate her from the true believers.
In terms of true believers, the theocratic government ruling over the Republic of Gilead utilizes a strange hybridity of science and religion to rule the lives of its population of Handmaids. Although that fact is highlighted numerous times throughout the novel, the best example lies in the use of the line from Genesis that states “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” as a justification for refraining from the use of anesthetics, epidurals, and other pain-relieving methods during childbirth (Atwood 114). A similar concept is shown when Offred speaks of praying for emptiness so that she might be filled with grace, love, semen, and babies. In this, the ability to bear children is conflated with the possession of spiritual purity and worthiness. The Republic of Gilead can be seen as utilizing religion in such a way as to gain political control over its subject 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 (27). It is an effective political tool veiled in scripture, sacraments, and other dogmatic devices that deceive pious people into believing in and adhering to a religious creed that, in reality, actually reinforces the political creed of the dominant power group. The government used nature, religion, anatomy, biology, science, statistics, and anything else they could twist and manipulate in such a way that would serve to prop up and support their ideological mission.

From a feminist standpoint, Offred is completely justified in being skeptical of the Republic of Gilead’s claims about being true and righteous. Although there are numerous instances mentioned above that give her doubts, she is brutally awakened to the hypocrisy and hollowness of the whole system when she is confronted with that fact that the Commanders use the services of prostitutes, thus circumventing and subverting a system that they themselves helped to establish. From a feminist perspective, this is highly exploitative. By night, they are
exploiting the same women whom they ostensibly hold on a pedestal by day. The act of taking a
supposedly-sacred woman and thoroughly debasing her reflects a distinct lack of conviction and
lack of true belief; however, it is ultimately indicative of a love of having power and control over
others, which seems to have been the actual reason for the implementation of the Republic of
Gilead to begin with.

Although the Republic of Gilead harnesses advanced technology, it resembles a
developing nation in many ways, especially in its treatment of women. A major problem on
which cultural feminism has only begun to focus is the condition of women in developing
nations; for instance, women in many Middle Eastern countries can be stoned to death for being
seen in public without having fully covered their bodies, and they must almost always be under
the supervision of a male relative or spouse, around whom they must stay silent and only speak
when spoken to (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 209); likewise, women in the Republic of Gilead
can be arrested or shot for being alone in public or for conversing with one another about
anything other than the daily tasks assigned to them. Not all of the particular problems are
necessarily the same, but the oppressive spirit is similar; moreover, religious strictures stemming
from scripture is the reason for the oppression of women in both the developing Middle Eastern
nations and the Republic of Gilead.

Another way in which the Republic of Gilead is reminiscent of developing nations is its
limitations on the education of women. Women in developing nations often suffer from a lack of
representation in the education system; in many cases, they are even prevented from entering it
in the first place (Swets 44). The rationale behind such exclusion, both in developing nations and
in the Republic of Gilead, is that a woman’s role in that society as home-maker and child-bearer
does not require intellectual edification. Furthermore, to instruct women would be to allow them
to access the scripture on their own and thus interpret it on their own instead of having to rely on their male superiors to do so for them. In the case of developing nations, such male superiors tend to be priests or imams, while in the Republic of Gilead, they are the Commanders.

However, such religious restriction of education and reliance on interpreters is not limited to developing nations; on the contrary, it was standard practice throughout much of the history of supposedly-advanced Western nations to keep the majority of population uneducated and illiterate in order to solidify their reliance upon the Christian priests who read and interpreted the Bible for them (Kagan, Ozment, and Turner 802). By forcing the population to listen only to the version of truth approved by the patriarchal powers-that-be, these theocratic figures force the population to subscribe to beliefs and values that they might otherwise question or protest against given the opportunity to interpret it themselves.

Even something as basic and intrinsic as memories are shown to be dangerous to the power of the Republic of Gilead. They are vestiges of times gone by that could potentially jeopardize the success of the Republic of Gilead and its indoctrination of the women over whom it rules. This is clearly shown when Aunt Lydia describes Offred’s generation as a “transitional” one and goes on to say that the subsequent generations will “accept their duties with willing hearts” because they will not be able to remember any other way of life (Atwood 117). As part of the transitional generation, they are stuck in a conflict between the comfortable memories of their past lives and the forced beliefs of their present situation. Harkening back to Yafee’s study, it appears that the founders of the Republic of Gilead anticipated the problems inherent in indoctrinating adults and reached the same conclusion as Yafee: that, in order to successfully indoctrinate an individual, the process must begin at birth. Although the Handmaids try to repress the memories and accept their lot in life, it is clear that deep down, they resent having to
do so and truly want a return to the old ways, as expressed by Offred when she thought “I want everything back, the way it was” (Atwood 119). Unfortunately, memory is also shown to be unreliable in various situations, like when Offred cannot remember details about the murals in the University or the particular details about Moira’s face.

Because they are not allowed to read, write, or even speak in most situations, the breeding-women have been forced to endure long bouts of boredom; eventually, they become accustomed to sitting idly and thinking of nothing as though doing so were a normal way of life. Even at a moment when a woman’s thoughts would normally be filled with anticipation, fear, excitement, anxiety, and hope, Ofwarren is described as simply sitting on the bed, licking the sugar from her lips, and “thinking of nothing” (Atwood 116). Even the events of the day become monotonous and boring, so the women adopt a mental state that Offred describes as a “holding pattern that passes for attention” (Atwood 119).

Aunt Lydia speaks of “women united for a common end” in the future, once the population has been brought back to an acceptable level of stability, yet that common end is not the standard goal of feminism (Atwood 163); rather, it is an inversion. Instead of banding together to fight for equality, independence, and freedom from such being forced into such traditional roles as homemaker and housewife, the women in Aunt Lydia’s idealized view of the future are united to help one another in daily mundane tasks around the house. The ultimate goal of women in the future of the Republic of Gilead, according to Aunt Lydia, is “a little garden for each [woman]” (Atwood 163). This shows how the feminist dream of female solidarity and a gynocentric way of life held by the members of Offred’s mother’s generation was taken advantage of and corrupted; furthermore, it many aspects of daily life, it reached the point where
females were turned against one another. Instead of banding together, they were driven apart into a caste-like system.

Within that hierarchy, women were often envious of one another instead of being supportive. The Econonowives resented the Handmaids because of what they perceived to be a pampered, care-free way of life; in fact, almost all of the other female castes seemed to resent the Handmaids. The Wives resented them for stealing away the sexual attention of their husbands, and the Marthas resented them because of the responsibilities and chores that taking care of the Handmaids entailed. Scientifically, this hierarchy represents a significantly foreign way of life for most women. Most female hierarchies throughout the majority of human history have focused on cooperation and mutual dependence without the strict division of ranks and status-laden positions (Ridgeway and Diekema 81).

During the “ceremony” on which so much of the importance and future hopes of the Republic of Gilead seem to hinge, the Commander must refrain from touching Offred’s face while he has sex with her because it might seem too intimate. Although intimacy during that moment is not a concern of Offred’s, she does yearn for a connection with him in other ways. Even in such dire circumstances, when Offred has been subjugated nigh to the point of sexual slavery by an oppressive patriarchal regime, the need for human contact, conversation, and interaction causes her to maintain a strange sort of friendship with the very man who represents the enforcement of her oppression. Although this might stretch the limits of suspension of disbelief, it is actually a commonly-documented occurrence in cases of people who have been held against their will, especially those who have been held captive for extended periods of time; specifically, it is known as Stockholm syndrome. It is a term used to describe the phenomenon of kidnap victims and other captives held against their will who bond with their captors (Auerbach
et al. 209). In the light of how much danger and risk is faced by these victims, such bonding seems almost paradoxical; however, there is a deep and abiding human urge to belong, as opposed to being in the midst of a hostile environment. The fight-or-flight response and other reactions resulting from the stressful effects of being held captive do not continue indefinitely; instead, the brain adjusts in such a way that allows it to cope with the victim’s new situation and surroundings (excluding the possibility of post-traumatic stress disorder, in which the brain fails to adjust and instead remains in fight-or-flight mode) (Karp and Karp 392).

The phenomenon of Stockholm syndrome is especially prevalent amongst battered and abused women. In a way, the relationship within the Commander’s home (and within the entire Republic of Gilead, by extension) can be seen as a sort of domestic abuse situation. Although there is no overt violence, the threat of such violence is ubiquitous; moreover, such violence could come from any number of individuals: the Eyes, the Wives, the Angels, the Aunts, the Commanders, commonplace soldiers, resentful Econowives, and more. The hangings on the wall by the market, the Salvagings, the black vans, and the electrified cattle-prods are all unspoken threats used as a sort of psychological violence against the women. Abusers in cases of domestic violence thrive on controlling their victims, and evidence of such control is abundant in Gilead; for instance, limitation of contact with the outside world combined with the limitation of access to education and communication, as well as the forced beliefs, forced intercourse, and imposed schedule, are all common forms of psychological abuse psychological restriction that are common in abusive relationships (O’Leary and Maiuro 198).

Bonding with her Commander in this way allowed Offred to relieve at least a portion of the mind-numbingly monotonous boredom which dominated the majority of her day-to-day existence. It also afforded her the opportunity to learn various bits and pieces of news about the
current state of affairs in the country of which she would have otherwise remained ignorant. Ironically, even the rallying cry of resistance used against the patriarchal oppressors by Offred and her predecessor, *Nolite te bastardes carborundorum* (a bastardized Latin phrase meaning “don’t let the bastards grind you down”), was learned from the man who represented and enforced that oppression.

In regard to the ceremony itself, the idea that women forced into sexual slavery would actually enjoy the coerced intercourse is a mistaken male fantasy that pervades the majority of cultures wherein sexual slavery is common (Barry 74). However, Atwood does not make it clear as to whether or not the founders of the Republic of Gilead intended for the Commanders and the Handmaids to derive sexual satisfaction from the ceremony. All that is clear is the fact that neither Offred nor her Commander found the experience pleasurable. By extension, it is possible that the founders of the Republic of Gilead were primarily concerned with reproduction and procreation when they decided to sexually enslave a substantial portion of the female population; however, the need for psychological power and control is also a plausible reason for their hostile take-over of the country and sexual enslavement of women.

It could be argued that Offred’s situation of oppression was not true sexual slavery because she had a choice in the matter; however, when the alternative involves cleaning up nuclear and toxic waste materials with no protection, it is, as Offred says and as a great deal of feminists would likely say, not really a choice at all. Another objection some might make is the fact that sexual slavery in many countries in modern-day times is associated with certain accoutrements such as whips, chains, shackles and other articles more suited to a grotesque medieval torture chamber or a trading vessel at the height of the slave trade than the bedrooms where intercourse takes place; however, while some sexually-enslaved women are indeed
chained down, either because of the risk of resistance or simply because their overseers and patrons enjoy such obvious signs of their subjugation, many others are allowed to exist in better conditions, partially because better treatment lengthens their beauty (and thus, their usefulness), and partially because their male dominators want to believe that their sexual acts are engaged in willingly (which is a fallacy, as mentioned earlier, but still a factor nonetheless) (Yoon 425). It is also important to note that the history of Margaret Atwood’s world has suffered a significant diversion from the course taken by true historical events; consequently, the standards and stereotypes that apply in our world do not necessarily transfer over to her fictional creation and its inhabitants. Therefore, it can be said that although Offred’s situation may not match traditional models of sexual slavery, she is nevertheless sexually enslaved.

Given her enslavement and near-total domination by her male overseers, there are scant few opportunities for Offred to embrace her femininity, yet she manages to do so at various points throughout the novel; however, these are not aspects of femininity which the patriarchal regime would likely even recognize. One such instance is the scene in which Offred slathers her face and hands in butter in order to maintain their softness. Like a female MacGyver, she makes do with the materials on hand in order to meet her needs. Even in the face of deprivation from almost every creature-comfort of her former life, she finds a way to sustain one small comfort in her new austere life. Another instance that is more significant than merely smearing butter is the fact that Offred measures time by the moon, which is a traditionally feminine symbol; by extension, she seems to be implying that she measures time by the cycles of her menstruation. Unfortunately, such moments of female empowerment are few and far between. In general, she has become alienated from her previous society’s conceptions of femininity.
Alienation is a key concept that is illustrated throughout the book in numerous ways. In sociological terms, alienation is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one’s surrounding environment, work, products of work, or self (Adams and Sydie 89). In The *Handmaid’s Tale*, multiple characters have been alienated from various aspects of their lives as a result of the take-over by the Republic of Gilead and the enforcement of its rigorous new rules. For instance, a prime example of this is the alienation faced by the Handmaid’s following the birth of their children. Instead of being allowed to properly raise their children as mothers should be, they are forced to turn their children over to the care of unfamiliar (and unfriendly, in most cases shown in the novel) women. They cannot even name their own offspring.

Another example of alienation is the alienation the Handmaids face from their former lives. This is strongly evidenced by Offred, who often finds herself reminiscing about her old family, job, and social life but feels an insurmountable distance between her current situation and those former times. In one scene, Serena Joy manages to obtain a picture of Offred’s daughter through a secret network of household women. Upon seeing her daughter, Offred realizes that she would actually prefer to stay alienated from her daughter rather than know what has become of her because that knowledge also carries the realization that her daughter has all but forgotten about her. In this way, alienation serves as a psychological buffer to distance her from strong emotional pain.

Although it seems to have been effective in implementing its new system of running society, one major problem with the Republic of Gilead is the impossibility of its perpetuation. Given its practice of forcing women into acting as Handmaids, it would have to provide Handmaids for each subsequent generation. The Commanders and Aunts acknowledge that the Handmaids of future generations will be more easily indoctrinated, yet they fail to take into
account the fact that those Handmaids will most likely have to come from the offspring of the Commanders and their Wives. Even taking into account the rigid religious fundamentalist mindset of the Commanders, it is unlikely that they would be willing to give up their own daughters to a position of sexual slavery. Perhaps the Handmaids would be phased out once the birth rate reached an acceptable level; however, it is plausible to posit that many of the men will be unwilling to relinquish the absolute power and control they wield over the lives, minds, and sexuality of the subjugated women beneath them; indeed, the fact that the Republic was ultimately doomed to fail is proven at the end of the book in the Historical Notes.

Taking all of the aforementioned evidence into consideration, it is plain to see that the Republic of Gilead is indeed a dystopian nightmare. From the standpoint of cultural feminism, it has harnessed a variety of tools such as propaganda, religion, and psychological indoctrination in order to dominate its female populace. Women in that society are not people at all; instead, they are simply walking wombs. Everything that happens in *The Handmaid’s Tale* has a precedent in history or has begun to emerge as a trend in human history; therefore, this story should serve as a warning and as a wake-up call to the dangers to which our society could fall prey in the near future.
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