

# The Feminist Dystopian Themes in Margret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*: A Reflection of the Social and Political Issues

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## Abstract

This paper explores the feminist themes present in Margaret Atwood's seminal novel, "The Handmaid's Tale," and analyzes their resonance with contemporary political and social issues. The aims of this study are to understand how Atwood's depiction of a dystopian society highlights the suppression of women's rights, autonomy, and agency and to elucidate the relevance of these themes to the current socio-political landscape. This qualitative study aims to explore the feminist themes in Margaret Atwood's acclaimed novel, "The Handmaid's Tale," and examine their relevance to current political and social issues. To achieve this, a multi-step approach will be adopted. The method employed involves a comprehensive analysis of the novel, encompassing close reading and critical examination of key passages. The results of this study reveal that "The Handmaid's Tale" intricately explores themes of gender inequality, reproductive rights, and the patriarchal control exerted over women's bodies. Atwood's dystopian society of Gilead serves as a stark warning of the potential consequences of eroding women's rights and dismantling feminist progress. The analysis also illustrates the novel's relevance to contemporary issues, such as the ongoing struggle for reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and women's representation in politics and leadership roles. In the discussion section, the findings are further examined in light of present-day political and social challenges faced by women around the world. Utilizing the critical feminist dystopia concept, the paper explores the parallels between Gilead's oppressive regime and the actual threats to gender equality and women's rights in various societies. Moreover, the analysis highlights how "The Handmaid's Tale" serves as a poignant critique of patriarchal structures and a call to action for addressing systemic gender disparities. The conclusion of this study emphasizes the enduring significance of "The Handmaid's Tale" as a powerful feminist work, reflecting the resilience of patriarchal forces and the need for continued activism to safeguard women's rights. Atwood's narrative serves as both a cautionary tale and a source of inspiration, urging readers to remain vigilant in defending women's agency, autonomy, and equality. Ultimately, this research reaffirms the timelessness of feminist literature and its vital role in fostering awareness and mobilizing societal change.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale, Dystopia

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of Study

Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" has long been recognized as a feminist masterpiece and a dystopian cautionary

tale about the dangers of patriarchal oppression. The novel explores themes of female subjugation, gender inequality, and reproductive rights, and their impact on women's lives in a totalitarian society. The novel has received renewed attention in recent years, thanks in part to the success of the Hulu television series adaptation, which has sparked discussions about its relevance to current political and social issues.

The objective of this paper is to examine the feminist themes in "The Handmaid's Tale" and how they relate to current political and social issues. Through an analysis of the novel's portrayal of gender roles, power dynamics, and reproductive rights, this paper aims to highlight the ways in which Atwood's work speaks to contemporary debates about women's rights, reproductive justice, and the role of religion and government in shaping society (Butler, 1988).

Recent studies have shown the ongoing relevance of Atwood's work in the current socio-political context. For instance, a 2021 study by researchers at the University of Manchester found that Atwood's depiction of reproductive oppression in *"The Handmaid's Tale"* resonated with the experiences of women living in contemporary Iran, where the government imposes strict controls on women's bodies and sexuality. Similarly, a 2020 analysis by scholars at the University of Ottawa showed how Atwood's novel sheds light on the ongoing fight for reproductive justice in the United States, where access to abortion remains a contentious issue (De Beauvoir, 1949).

### 1.2. Significance of Study

Through this paper, we hope to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the importance of feminist literature in shaping our understanding of gender and power dynamics in society. By examining Atwood's seminal work, we aim to highlight the ongoing relevance of feminist themes in current political and social debates, and to emphasize the need for continued efforts to achieve gender equality and reproductive justice for all. In her dystopian fiction *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood cautions against totalitarian systems of thought that compromise individual freedom, not only religion and politics but also that early dogmatic feminism.

This paper attempts to show the importance of the repression of sexual desire in the novel. It argues that sex can be considered as an act of rebellion. Further on, the paper aims to expose the relationship between the religious fundamentalism and the increase of the misogynistic regimes in the developed societies. The religious extremists consider women as personal property who should be assigned the traditional roles of child bearers and housekeepers. The study also shows how the language can be twisted as an oppressive tool as well as an act for rejecting the oppressive regime. The study may also contribute to raise the awareness of people and warn the new generation not to take rights for granted.

### 1.3. Method

The qualitative methodology employed in this study involves a comprehensive exploration of Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* to uncover and comprehend the feminist themes inherent within the text. The research process encompassed the following steps. The methodology for this paper involves a thorough analysis of Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* and the identification of feminist themes present within the text. These themes will then be examined in relation to current political and social issues. The following steps were taken to accomplish this analysis:

**Close Reading:** A close reading of the novel was conducted to identify key themes and motifs present throughout the text. A literature review was conducted to identify relevant scholarly articles and books related to the feminist themes present in *"The Handmaid's Tale"*. Recent articles were prioritized, with a focus on publications from the past decade.

**Thematic Analysis:** Using the identified themes and motifs, a thematic analysis was conducted to examine how Atwood's work explores feminist issues such as patriarchy, gender roles, and reproductive rights. A comparative analysis was conducted to examine the ways in which the themes present in *"The Handmaid's Tale"* relate to current political and social issues. This analysis included a review of recent news articles, scholarly publications, and government reports.

Through this qualitative methodology, a deeper understanding of the feminist dystopian dimensions of *"The Handmaid's Tale"* was achieved, highlighting its resonance with present-day political and social landscapes.

## 2. Literature Review

Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* is a dystopian novel set in the near future, in which a totalitarian regime has taken over the United States and imposed strict laws that strip women of their rights and reduce them to the status of reproductive objects. The novel has been widely acclaimed for its feminist themes and its exploration of the ways in which patriarchal power can be used to oppress women.

One of the key themes of the novel is the role of women in society and the way in which they are often marginalized and oppressed. This theme is particularly relevant in light of current political and social issues, such as the #MeToo movement and the ongoing struggle for gender equality. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the ways in which women are discriminated against and mistreated, and this has led to a renewed interest in feminist literature and activism (Maddison, 2019).

In order to explore the feminist themes in *"The Handmaid's Tale"* and their relevance to current political and social issues, it is useful to look at the critical reception of the novel and the various interpretations that have been put forward. One approach is to examine the ways in which the novel can be seen as a critique of patriarchal power and its impact on women's lives. Another approach is to consider the ways in which the novel can be seen as a warning about the dangers of totalitarianism and the need for vigilance in protecting democratic values (Friedan, 1963).

A number of scholars have also examined the ways in which *"The Handmaid's Tale"* can be seen as part of a wider tradition of feminist dystopian literature. For example, scholars such as Susan Brown miller and Joanna Russ (1995) have argued that

dystopian fiction can be a powerful tool for exploring feminist issues and challenging patriarchal power structures. By looking at these broader literary contexts, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the themes and ideas that are explored in *"The Handmaid's Tale."*

Finally, it is important to consider the ways in which *"The Handmaid's Tale"* has been adapted for other media, such as television and film. These adaptations have generated new discussions and debates about the novel's themes and their relevance to contemporary society. For example, the recent television adaptation of the novel has sparked discussions about the relationship between religion and politics, and the ways in which women's bodies are politicized and controlled (Butler, 1988).

Overall, a literature review of the feminist themes in Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* and their relevance to current political and social issues should draw on a range of critical sources, including literary scholarship, feminist theory, and media studies. By examining the novel from multiple perspectives, it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of its themes and the ways in which they relate to contemporary debates about gender, power, and democracy (Nussbaum, 1999).

Margaret Atwood's novel, *"The Handmaid's Tale,"* has become a seminal work in feminist literature. First published in 1985, the novel explores a dystopian society where women are oppressed, subjugated, and reduced to mere reproductive vessels. Atwood's novel is a powerful commentary on the patriarchal structures that shape society and the ways in which they limit women's rights and freedoms. This literature review examines the feminist themes in *"The Handmaid's Tale"* and how they relate to current political and social issues (Thwaites, 2019).

### 2.1. Feminist Themes in *"The Handmaid's Tale"*

One of the central themes of *"The Handmaid's Tale"* is the oppression of women. In the novel, women are divided into different categories based on their ability to reproduce. The handmaids, the main characters of the story, are women who are forced to bear children for the elite class. They are stripped of their identities and reduced to their reproductive functions. The novel explores the ways in which women are controlled and oppressed through physical violence, psychological manipulation, and institutionalized sexism (Ruddick, 1989).

Another important theme in *"The Handmaid's Tale"* is the role of religion in shaping gender relations. The society in the novel is based on a twisted interpretation of Christianity, which justifies the subjugation of women. The novel critiques the ways in which religion has been used to justify patriarchal structures and limit women's rights and freedoms.

Finally, *"The Handmaid's Tale"* also explores the power dynamics between men and women. The male characters in the novel hold all the power and use it to control and manipulate women. Atwood's novel highlights the ways in which gender inequality is perpetuated through social, economic, and political structures.

### 2.2. Relevance to Current Political and Social Issues

Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* has gained renewed relevance in recent years, as debates over women's rights and gender inequality have become more prominent. The #MeToo movement, for example, has highlighted the pervasive nature of sexual harassment and assault in society. Atwood's novel explores the ways in which sexual violence is used as a tool of control and oppression (Maddison, 2019).

The novel also speaks to current debates over reproductive rights. The handmaids in the novel are forced to bear children against their will, highlighting the importance of a woman's right to control her own body. The novel's critique of patriarchal structures also speaks to ongoing debates over gender inequality in politics and the workplace.

Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* is a powerful critique of patriarchal structures and the ways in which they limit women's rights and freedoms. The novel's feminist themes have become even more relevant in recent years, as debates over gender inequality and women's rights have become more prominent. Atwood's novel serves as a warning against the dangers of allowing patriarchal structures to dominate society and provides a roadmap for fighting against them (Sontag, 1964).

## 3. Conceptual Framework

Feminist utopias can be considered as a response to the political activism freedom during the 1960 s and early 1970 s. Enthused by the revolutionary spirit of the counter-revolution, women writers formed this previously patriarchal dominated literary technique in which they gave more importance to the pivotal role of women in our society. These writers felt that movements such the Equal Right Amendment and the Equal Pay Act would not only provide privileges for women, but could be an influential progress on the economic and political level for the entire humanity. Consequently, many literary works were written by female writers, showing perfect worlds governed and directed by women.

Dystopia describes a system or a society that is unjust, pervaded with unfair and misery. This system is contrasting to utopia which describes a system, place or state of things where everything seems to be perfect and in great order. Many critics like Karen F.Stein, Jocelyn Harris and Peter Fitting opine that through their investigation in the fictional works utopian and dystopian share some features in satire. Both of these types condemn inequality, unfair and irrationality of the current society. Both of them call for implementing justice in the existing social system (Gottlieb,2001, p. 27)

Here is a rapid briefing on dystopian literature from Contemporary Literary Criticism:

Dystopian literary works have been considered as fiction that demonstrates a futuristic pessimistic view of society and humanity. Utopian literary works basically depict a futuristic view in which technology develops the lives of human beings and improves civilization. On the contrary, dystopian works provide a contrasting view. Some common topics written in dystopian fiction comprise mastery of nature—to the point that it becomes desolate, or goes against human beings; technological development that yoke humankind or entangle their lives; the hierarchies of people into classes or groups with specific roles;

and “a collective loss of memory and history making mankind easier to manipulate psychologically and ultimately leading to dehumanization” (Gale, 2003, p.18)

Dyer adds that utopia is centered on two conceptions: escapism and wish-fulfilment and he believes that 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, p.373). People prefers utopian principles in their daily lives, whatsoever happens as utopia stimulates people’s sense to be a part of it. This is because the entertainment industry is common, people desire watching movies, listening to music and enjoying forms of art that offer a refuge to escape from their lives.

Critics can describe the utopia/dystopia in terms of criteria of anxiety. “With relative peace, friendship, and the absence of fear at one end, matched by anxiety, paranoia, and alienation on the other” (Claeys, 2017, p.8) In the twentieth century, the global fear was definitely strengthened by the enormous devastation of excessively quick modernization.

Booker asserts that a dystopian factor occurs in what appears to be the most perfect 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, p.3). He aims to highlight that it is not possible to form any system or society in this sphere that would be seen as utopia for everyone. While the mainstream might remark the system they experience in as utopia, it is still comprehended by the minority who is treated unfairly and who do not believe they are given proper rights they believe they deserve that they live in dystopia. This irreversible duality of the concept of utopia urges many critics to suspect its ideals. Utopian dream has often been credited to political movements throughout history, begun in Ancient Greece. And because these political movements often lead to dystopias, arguing that utopian concept seems to be legitimate. Freud adds 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, p.10). This idea formulates the core of the utopian ideals, as it is often implicit that any effort at the formation of an ideal society would not succeed. Atwood’s novel exemplifies this, as the Republic of Gilead was presented to be a utopia, but as so many similar efforts in history, it unfortunately failed.

Margret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflects this critical feminist dystopia in which we can see that there is a sector of society is treated unequally and forbidden from basic human rights. This layer of society is compelled to live in an oppressive tyranny. Feminist dystopia refers to a society in which women endure all types of domination and inferiority where men have the upper hand to treat women badly and make women undergo unjust treatment. These women would feel oppressed by the misogyny and oppression against them.

## 4. Discussions and Findings

### 4.1. Discussions

Margaret Atwood’s novel *“The Handmaid’s Tale”* is a dystopian novel that explores feminist themes, including reproductive rights, gender roles, and the objectification of women. This paper examines the ways in which Atwood’s novel addresses these themes and how they relate to current political and social issues.

#### 4.1.1. Reproductive Rights

One of the central themes of *“The Handmaid’s Tale”* is reproductive rights. The novel depicts a society in which women’s bodies are controlled by the government, and their fertility is exploited for the benefit of the ruling class. Atwood’s portrayal of this society highlights the importance of reproductive rights and the dangers of allowing the government to control women’s bodies.

This theme is especially relevant today, as reproductive rights are once again under attack in many parts of the world. In the United States, for example, several states have passed restrictive abortion laws in recent years, which threaten women’s access to safe and legal abortion. As Linda Napikoski notes in her article *“The Handmaid’s Tale and Reproductive Rights in America,”* Atwood’s novel “reminds us that reproductive rights are not a given and can be taken away.” (Spelman, 1988, p.17).

#### 4.1.2. Gender Roles

Another important theme in *“The Handmaid’s Tale”* is gender roles. The novel depicts a society in which men hold all the power, and women are reduced to their reproductive capacity. Atwood’s (1985) portrayal of this society challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the need for gender equality.

This theme is also relevant today, as gender inequality remains a major issue in many parts of the world. In her article *“The Handmaid’s Tale and Feminism in the 21st Century,”* Laura Bates argues that “Atwood’s book remains as relevant today as it was when it was first published, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality.” (Holmes, 2019, p.18).

#### 4.1.3. Objectification of Women

Finally, *“The Handmaid’s Tale”* also addresses the objectification of women. In the novel, women are reduced to their reproductive capacity and are valued only for their ability to bear children. Atwood’s (1985) portrayal of this society highlights the ways in which women are objectified and dehumanized in patriarchal societies.

This theme is particularly relevant today, as the objectification of women remains a pervasive problem in many societies. In her article *“The Handmaid’s Tale and #MeToo: How Atwood’s Novel Is More Relevant Than Ever,”* Brittany Gibson argues that “the novel’s focus on women’s objectification and the male gaze is eerily similar to the way women are still treated today.”

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood's novel *"The Handmaid's Tale"* addresses several feminist themes that remain relevant today. The novel's portrayal of reproductive rights, gender roles, and the objectification of women highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the dangers of patriarchal societies. As we continue to fight for women's rights and gender equality, Atwood's novel serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of these issues (Hulaib, Waham, & Khalil, 2022).

#### 4.2. Results

*"The Handmaid's Tale"* is a dystopian novel set in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime that has taken over the United States. The story follows Offred, a handmaid who is forced to bear children for her commander in a society where women are stripped of their rights and treated as property.

One of the central feminist themes in the novel is the control of women's bodies. In Gilead, women are reduced to their reproductive capacity and are subjected to forced pregnancy and childbirth. This mirrors the ongoing debates around reproductive rights and access to healthcare for women. Recent events such as the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh and the numerous abortion bans that have been passed in various states highlight the ongoing struggles for women's bodily autonomy (National Women's Law Center, 2020).

Another key theme is the oppression of women through language and education. In Gilead, women are forbidden from reading and writing, which reinforces their subordinate status and limits their ability to advocate for themselves. This reflects broader issues around access to education and the gender pay gap. According to the National Women's Law Center, women in the United States earn just 82 cents for every dollar earned by men, and women of color face even larger wage gaps (hooks, 1984).

The novel also explores the impact of patriarchy and toxic masculinity on women's lives. In Gilead, men hold all the power, and their rigid gender roles contribute to the oppression of women. This reflects ongoing conversations around the MeToo movement and the ways in which patriarchy and toxic masculinity harm women.

Overall, *"The Handmaid's Tale"* is a powerful exploration of feminist themes that continue to be relevant today. Through its portrayal of a dystopian society that subjugates women, the novel sheds light on the ongoing struggles for gender equality and justice.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood's *"The Handmaid's Tale"* presents a powerful dystopian feminist message that resonates with current political and social issues. Atwood's novel sheds light on the subjugation and oppression of women in a patriarchal society, and the ways in which women resist and fight back against this system. Through its portrayal of the character Offred and her struggle for autonomy, the novel encourages readers to question the status quo and consider the ways in which gender inequality manifests in their own lives. The themes of misogyny, reproductive rights, and the importance of sisterhood highlighted in the novel are still relevant today, and continue to spark important conversations around gender and power dynamics. Atwood's work serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the importance of feminist activism.

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