

**Of the Mother and the Whore: A Depiction of the
Contemporary Socio-Political Events and their Impacts on
Female Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*
and *Oryx and Crake***

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

This thesis aims to outline the contemporary global socio-political events (those of the twentieth and twenty-first century), with special focus on the rise of fundamentalist politics and technological advancements to highlight how women are targeted and used for the agendas of the patriarchy in the real world and their reflection in the dystopian realities of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. The purpose is to show that these dystopian worlds are in fact depictions of the real world and stand as both a historical force and prophetic warning of what is to come if our present habits persist. Of the many aspects, this thesis particularly examines the role of patriarchal supremacy, fundamentalist politics and the growing consumerist culture in oppressing women through methods of politicising and sexualising their existence. The oppression of women is analysed in the ways motherhood is casted on to them, and the many other ways their bodies are objectified and commoditised, resulting in women being labelled with identities as decided by men. Simone de Beauvoir and Edward Said's concepts of "othering" have been substantial to the examination carried out in this paper, along with Adrienne Rich and Kathleen Gough's frameworks characterising male dominance which have given this paper an anthropological insight into how male power over females is projected. Therefore, this thesis shows how the twentieth and twenty-first century real world events have been depicted in the novels, focusing on patriarchy and its various roles in shaping women's identities by institutionalising motherhood, reproductive colonisation and sexualising or politicising their bodies to label them as either mothers, or the unwomen/prostitutes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Literature, as we know, has always played a huge role in reflecting the people, ideologies, politics and culture of the time it is written in. In the timeline of English literature, From Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a beautiful depiction and criticism of the Estate System of the Middle Ages to the contemporary novels of the twenty-first century that manifest young-adult emotions- literature stands as a picture of the society of its time. Different genres of literature that have emerged over the centuries have been a result of the need to portray the evolving societies of our world. Every literary movement or period and the literature composed during it, talks about the desires, dreams, hopes of the people as well as their disappointments and angst. The Renaissance Period saw a revival and return to the classics whereas the literature of the Neo-Classical or Enlightenment Period championed in producing voices that spoke of rationality and progress. The Romantic Period followed, its literature voicing the destruction of nature that came with the Industrial Revolution, and spoke of the God that is present in the nature. These periods and many more have produced numerous genres and sub-genres of literature, one of them being science fiction, or popularly termed as sci-fi. It is believed that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is one of the earliest work of science fiction, but research tells us that the earliest science fiction might have been written during the Age of Enlightenment, such as Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* and Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (Gramuglia). It is during this period that science and technology had started to advance therefore realising that two of the most earliest works of science fiction had been written during this time should not come as surprising, however, it cannot be denied that it is during the nineteenth and twentieth century that science fiction started to take shape as a genre of its own, a genre that is also known as speculative fiction. This genre has led to the formation of other related genres, one of them being dystopian fiction. The two texts that I shall be focusing on in my thesis are Margaret Atwood's two very celebrated dystopian works of fiction, *The*

Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake*. Through the analysis of the texts, by drawing parallels between real world socio-political events and those in the dystopian reality of the novels, I will attempt to dissect how political and religious systems work to maintain social order by oppressing women.

i) **Science Fiction and Speculative Fiction: Divisions and Overlaps**

Over the years, debate has existed regarding the differences or similarities between science and speculative fiction. Science fiction in its truest sense, is fictional work based on scientific principles that can be extrapolated with no bounds, whereas speculative fiction, as the name suggests, speculates on a real world aspect by painting a picture of what the future can hold if these aspects continue to exist and expand with time. Speculative fiction, in that sense, is inclusive of science fiction, dystopian and utopian fiction etc. In an interview with *The Progressive*, Margaret Atwood shares her insight regarding the distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction, saying that science fiction involves things that are quite unlikely to happen but “they are ways of exploring possibilities and human nature and the way people react to certain things” whereas speculative fiction explores “things that we could actually do” (Atwood). T. Horan, in his “Introduction” to the book *Desire and Empathy in Twentieth-Century Dystopian Fiction*, quotes M. Keith Booker in while discussing the sub-genre of dystopian fiction that has derived from speculative fiction, projecting attention towards the difference between the two, “Clearly there is a great deal of overlap between dystopian and science fiction, and many texts belong to both categories. However, in general dystopian fiction differs from science fiction in the specificity of its attention to social and political critique” (qtd. in Horan 5). The term ‘dystopia’ is the opposite of the idea of ‘utopia’, which means “the ideal world or society”. Over the centuries, the idea of ‘utopia’ has been replaced by the concept of ‘dystopia’, a result of the transformation of the nineteenth century dreams and expectations. Whereas science fiction can said to be a result of the advancements in the fields of science and

technology, dystopian fiction incorporates that influence with the other elements of the human society and beyond. Dystopian fiction tends to take one element from our society and does a fictitious hyperbolic examination or representation of it.

ii) **Dystopian Fiction in Contemporary Literature**

Although dystopian fiction can be thought of as a relatively modern literary concept, the earliest dystopian fiction can be traced back to the eighteenth century, an example being Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Popularly thought of as a result of Swift's creative imagination, the travel journal is a lot deeper than a child's bedtime story. It delves and critiques certain aspects of the English and Irish contemporary society. He critiques the obsession with science and rationality through the inhabitants of Laputa as much as critiques the primitive nature of mankind through the Yahoos. In 1925 Franz Kafka's *The Trial* was published, in which the dystopia was an oppressive shackle of legalities and the government, a matter which is still widely prevalent in our society. Followed by Kafka's *The Trial*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949) came out, and both of the novels are a depiction of how technology and an oppressive government try to impose unjust authority over people to keep them within a system of 'order'. The twentieth century also saw the publication of some more celebrated dystopian fiction, some of them being Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. What is common in most of these novels is the fact that they take one aspect of our society that we are slightly preoccupied or concerned about and amplify them in the fictitious dystopian world, showing us what our future could hold. This brings us to the idea that dystopian fiction may be the genre that deals with the real, ongoing concerns of our world and reflects our individual psychological crisis. This further guides us to the understanding that the birth of dystopian fiction itself is an outcome of very real world events in matter or power dynamics, politics, socio-economic and cultural issues.

iii) Dystopian Fiction and Gender

Nevertheless, it is essential to understand that even though the triggers that generate certain dystopias are similar, they can be experienced in different ways by different classes, races or genders of people. Suffice to say, the female experience in the real world and in dystopian reality is not the same as that of a man. Most apocalyptic or post-apocalypse dystopias are narrated from the male perspective, but it is not difficult to understand the position that the female gender holds in them. However, there have also been dystopian fiction with female narrators, one of the prominent ones being *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Set in the near dystopian future where women are reduced to mere means of reproduction, the novel highlights the condition of women under a totalitarian government that does not hesitate to resort to 'justified' murder when someone tries to break out of the system. Published in 1945, its inspiration comes from the global political upheavals and the second wave of Feminism that critiques the treatment of women. Nevertheless, to have a fair understanding of the situation of women, it is important to look through the perspective of both the female and male narrator. This is where Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* comes in, that portrays a technology driven society, which, fuelled by consumerism and destructive ambition, results in the wiping out of humanity, leaving Jimmy as the sole survival among the genetically modified creatures called the Crakers. In the novel, power-politics in relation to sexuality is highlighted besides the heavy criticism of growing technology that is breaking down the ecology, resulting in genetically modified organisms replacing human life. Needless to say, the Republic of Gilead as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* has a very different setting and theme in comparison to the community that Jimmy grows up in and the post-plague world, yet they are bound by the manner in which the women are treated- marginalised, stereotyped and heavily sexualised. Moreover, the social and political stimuli in the novels work towards generating a certain dystopia for its female species, which is why the novels, when compared, can facilitate a certain apprehension for us to look

at it from a feminist perspective. Therefore, my thesis will outline the world events in fields of global politics, power dynamics and culture that have been contextualised in a hyperbolic manner in the aforementioned novels, to thoroughly examine the idea of the female or the feminist dystopia. The aspect that I shall highlight would be how in the novels, oppressive government, political and sexual repression and gender dynamics are the major themes that even though considered exaggerated, stem from actual social and political issues that have been faced by women over the centuries.

The question that I will attempt to answer through this paper is:

- In what ways are the novels representative of the female struggle in the real world in light of the global socio-political situation during the twentieth and the twenty-first century?

The aim is to justify the idea that the dystopian struggle as portrayed by Atwood in the novels is not too far-fetched, rather is a jarring representation of how closely socio-political and religious agendas are connected to one's sexuality, especially that of a woman, and how these agendas work towards oppressing females by binding them to certain gender roles that persist in both the reality and dystopian fiction. Therefore, to justify so, I will attempt to present a few events in the global socio-political events to show how they are reflected in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.

Chapter 2: Historical and Political Context

i) Women under Totalitarian Regimes:

The Handmaid's Tale, set in the Republic of Gilead, showcases the life of Offred as a serving Handmaid among the many other Handmaids assigned to different houses after an environmental disaster has depopulated the region. The Handmaids are reduced to mere reproductive beings, their previous identities scraped off. The other women characters in the story, who, if not used for reproduction, are assigned different tasks, nevertheless their position in the society is still that of the marginalised. This highlights the idea that no matter what the political situation, the women are always affected in a different and in a more terrible manner. As we see in the novel, that the war and environmental decay have of course caused a change in the structure of the society where the men are somewhat the pawns of the government too, yet, it is the females who experience more severe effects of the totalitarian government and its political apathy. The obvious themes that are present in the novel are that of patriarchy, a totalitarian system and repressed female identity. Connecting these themes to the socio-political scenario of the twentieth century, it can be made apparent that their trigger lies in the real world problems.

Although debatable, it cannot be totally negated that a strong criticism of the Hitler regime is present in the novel. Hitler's political agenda was facilitated by his propagation of strong "family values" which helped him win over the sentiments of his supporters. I believe, reproduction as seen in *The Handmaid's Tale* is to some extent symbolic of the same political agenda. When nationalism is credited with the need to reproduce in such a manner that gives the people a sense of importance, it is easier to maintain the gender dynamics in the society, which is by default stereotyping females into the roles of wives and mothers beyond which they are not allowed any respectable identity. Moreover, the burning of books by the Nazis is echoed in the way the Handmaids are prohibited from reading or writing. However, these

symbolisms are present yet not as strong as the other political representations, such as that of Romania under Ceaușescu.

ii) Conservative Politics and Women:

As discussed earlier, women in Gilead, under the totalitarian theocratic rule, suffer a fate much worse than the men do. Their previous identities are dissolved and are named after the “Commanders” they serve- a patriarchal situation that reduces the women to mere commodities. The women who do not directly serve the Commanders are either the “Aunts”, responsible for mentoring the Handmaids, and the “Marthas” work as house helps. It is to be mentioned that the term “Marthas” has a Biblical origin,¹ which is one of the many religious symbolisms that Atwood has used in the novel to highlight how women are exploited in the name of religion. This is also a very microcosmic representation of the rising religious fundamentalism from the 1960s in global politics, especially the rise of the New Right in the United States.

The New Right was a branch of conservative politics, a coalition of scholars and activists in reaction to several ongoing socio-political issues such the Equal Rights Amendment, Homosexuality, Abortion etc. That is, the New Right was a sort of a rising Republican supremacy in the late twentieth century against the New Left ideologies. It gained momentum during the 1960s and 1970s by mostly the support of the white, protestant, middle class society, and propagated conservative political ideologies in response to growing social liberties in term of drugs, forwardness regarding sexuality especially among women, unrest regarding race, civil rights and many more. A strict anti-Liberalism stance was taken, thus a horrifying duo of fundamentalist religion and politics was created. It does not require to be

¹ Martha’s symbolic attributes are brooms and keys and her patronage includes but is not limited to butlers, cooks, domestic servants, housemaids and homemakers. See Gospel of Luke and Gospel of John.

pointed out that yet again, this anti-Liberalism stance that of course disregarded many terms of human rights, quite openly targeted women under the façade of religion.

iii) **The Reagan-Thatcher Politics:**

Moreover, the United States' politics under Ronald Reagan too administered politics influenced by fundamentalism. The Moral Majority, founded by a religious leader called Jerry Falwell, worked to re-establish traditional moral values that Christian conservatives thought was being dissolved in changing social and cultural liberal values of the country. Gay Rights movements and other feminist movements were arising at the time of the formation of the Moral Majority, which again attests to the fact that religious sacrilege is yet again taking shape, facilitated by conservative politics to defeat liberal values- again and again turning women the major victim of such politics.

On the other hand, with Margaret Thatcher's reign in the Britain, certain socio-political agendas were created that affected the working class, which was made worse by her alarming anti-feminist attitude. Celebrated as Britain's first female prime minister, the women of the world did not seem to mirror her success. It is as though she broke through the glass ceiling, but still kept what is beyond it inaccessible to the women beneath. Not only was she a conservative politician, but apparently an individualist as well, and her anti-communist ideals helped little in terms of the progression of the women. Considering that *The Handmaid's Tale* had been published right after the elections of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, we can indeed establish the idea that Reagan and Thatcher's conservative ideals and the growing religious fundamentalism in general may have been the triggers for the novel.

iv) **The Reproductive Colonisation of Women:**

Taking a look at the "Historical Notes" or the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, it becomes increasingly evident that the inspiration indeed comes from real world events.

Professor Pieixoto, in the section, refers to the “pre-Gilead”, a period representative of the events following 1970s. He mentions the situation in Romania, where birth controls and abortions were prohibited after 1966s under President Ceaușescu in hopes of increasing the population. Women who had reached the age of child-rearing were expected and forced to have children, which not only led to a huge number of unwanted children being born, but also caused a lot of them to be abandoned. Atwood paints a similar picture in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred's daughter is taken away before she is forced to bear a baby for the family she serves. However, as it has been previously mentioned, some of the historical events still persist today, a notable one being the banning of abortion in Alabama in May 2019. This shows that even though as a species, we may have evolved and advanced, but our treatment of women has not seen much improvement. Even in the twenty-first century, women lack the agency to make decisions for their own bodies, they are still being controlled by the still prevailing patriarchal values and systems.

v) The Sexualisation of Women in Consumerist Culture:

It is important to understand what the turn of the twenty-first century meant for the world. The technological and scientific advancements that have occurred in this century have been remarkable milestones in the history of society. Nevertheless, it has also generated a strong capitalist and consumerist society that has commoditised every aspect of human life. It brings up the question as to what such advancements in this consumerist culture could entail. Genetic engineering has developed at an increasing rate over the past two decades, the possibilities that we have are endless, yet what could it mean for our environment and climate in the future? *Oryx and Crake* seems to be Margaret Atwood's way of answering these questions. She takes the context of such scientific heights reached within the past few years and amplifies the consequences, which eventually shows us the irreversible damage done to the climate. I also believe, through this, Atwood also highlights the hyper-sexualised tendencies

that come with advanced technologies through the portrayal of child pornography and the male characters' attitude towards the women in the novel.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Since the publication of her collection of poetry *Double Persephone* in 1961, Margaret Atwood has been undoubtedly one of the most celebrated and versatile authors of our times. From children's book to cultural and literary criticism that have been translated into over twenty two languages, Margaret Atwood has become an international sensation on whom an entire academic society is devoted (Macpherson 3). Her works, even though contemporary, explore themes and ideas way ahead of her time, encapsulating emotions that are expressed through her brilliant narrative. An international literary sensation and recipient of awards as celebrated as the Booker Prize, Atwood has proven herself over and over through the astounding way she has mixed different genres together in her writing. Although she has been mostly focused on contemporary culture, her works nonetheless highlight very core issues of the society, such as the societal construction of gender, female identity, social power-politics etc., which is why many-a-times her texts can be viewed as social satires. "Atwood has focused on core issues in her writing: on the social construction of female identity and the cultural denigration of the female body; on power politics not only in male-female relations... and on Canadian nationalism, Canadian identity" (Bouson 2). Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson adds to the "Contexts" to *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood* that one of the prominent contexts of her writing emerges from her position as a Canadian writer, her own criticism emerging out of the lack of a critical heritage, along with her relationship with feminism (11). As mentioned before, Atwood stands her ground as a "culturally and theoretically-aware writer", but refuses to let her work be considered solely of rigid feminist ideology (Tolan 1). To stay relevant to the rapid rise and expansion of the second-wave feminism that has resulted it to be less of a theory and more of "a discussion of multiple related ideas", the correct interpretation of Atwood should be done with the acknowledgement that she holds common political ground with feminist ideology (Tolan 2). On similar note, Macpherson adds, that to

make sense of Atwood's fictional perspectives it is essential that one reads them with a feminist sensibility, however, it should be regarded that Atwood dislikes rigid ideology. Referring to interviews given by Atwood, Macpherson says, "[Atwood] is not a propagandist but an observer; her work merely reflects the reality of an uneven distribution of power between men and women" (23). In addition, we must also consider the limits of feminism as a political force as stated by Atwood, which Macpherson refers to in light of *The Handmaid's Tale*, where Offred calls out to her late mother who had been a radical feminist that the women's culture and segregated society is here. "It isn't what you mean, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (Atwood 137). Needless to say solely feminist or not, her works have strong political and cultural context, which is prominent in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* among her numerous other creations.

i) Historical and Political Context

Senem Ertan, in her paper titled "Gender Equality Policies in Authoritarian Regimes and Electoral Democracies" explores the dynamics of gender equality policies in authoritarian states versus non-authoritarian states. She points out that, contrary to popular belief, many authoritarian states seem to have better gender equality policies and have more female participation in all sectors than some non-authoritarian states. Which points us to the fact that the United States, which is not by definition an authoritarian country, fails to have progressive laws in many of its states to facilitate women's rights. Till 2019, nine states have banned abortion after varying terms, however Alabama's law seems to be the most rigid, which bans abortion at any point unless the mother's health is at severe risk. This being one example, still brings up question that, when it comes to women, does it really matter if the state is authoritarian or non-authoritarian? As somehow, this gender always falls the victim of patriarchy and lately, capitalism that only ensures its progress as long as it facilitates the ruling class/gender of the society. This turns our focus to the idea that the underlying factors behind

the treatment of women are universal, and what matters is to what extent a state, authoritarian or non-authoritarian, are influenced by those factors. Ertan discusses some of the factors which may play a role within a state to affect the gender equality policies- eventually affecting the position of women in the society. Of these factors, religion is the first one she mentions. “. . .) countries where religion (all major world religions) is highly involved in the policy-making process are less likely to protect women’s rights as well as most likely to produce oppressive practices against women” (qtd. in Ertan 10).

From this, the idea that religion, when incorporated with politics, may turn into a major drawback in terms of women empowerment, or hinder gender equality in general comes up. Linking this to the understanding that conservative politics work towards making socio-political reformations that bind women to their gender roles in the name of religion, we can analyse *The Handmaid’s Tale* in the real life political context that it has been influenced by.

Muhammad Arif Zakaullah, in his article titled “The Rise of Christian Fundamentalism in the United States and the Challenge to Understand the New America” breaks down the history of Christianity in the land of America since its discovery by Columbus in 1492. He outlines the split that divided the believers into two parts, the Protestants and the Catholics. Zakaullah narrates the religion’s historical transformation in a very detailed manner, but what is relevant to my research is the understanding of conservative Christianity, and its political significance. As Zakaullah states, with industrial revolution and scientific advancement came social and philosophical transformations that overwhelmed the conservative Protestants, who so far had been concentrating on individual salvation. “The penetration of scientific thinking was also challenging the fixed religious views and positions on social issues and their traditional solutions. New ideas like Darwinism had not only gained acceptance but were included in the curriculum by the education system at various levels” (Zakaullah 443). Zakaullah then goes on to discuss the twentieth century, the Modern Era, where liberal

worldview was gaining popularity. This is the part where Christianity again, saw a split in its faith- the Fundamentalists were formed who championed in orthodoxy and the Social Gospel was the other part, which was more accommodating of the modern and liberal values and ideas. After the 1950s, from 1954's Desegregation Decision by the US Supreme Court to 1973 when it granted women the right to abortion, various steps in the process of inclusion and equality were taken that angered the fundamentalists and evangelists, urging them to reenter the political arena, again reinstating the idea that religious political forces have developed as a reaction to liberal values and culture, and within the layers of these liberal values are the fundamental rights of women that are opposed by such political ideology in the name of religion. As stated before, such a situation is contextualised in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Atwood.

“More importantly, for many ordinary people, the language of religion is the only language of morality” (Feldman and Clark 14). In their article title “Women, Religious Fundamentalism and Reproductive Rights”, Rayah Feldman and Kate Clark attempt to examine the layers of religious fundamentalism and what it means in terms of women's reproductive rights. Linking religious fundamentalism with politics, Feldman and Clark outline similar social agenda that I have discussed previously in light of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The article upholds the argument of Women against Fundamentalism (WAF), a British organisation that states that “At the heart of the fundamentalists' agenda is the control of women's minds and bodies. [All] support the patriarchal family as a central agent of such control. They view women as embodying the morals and traditional values of the family and the whole community” (qtd. in Feldman and Clark 13). Fundamentalists generate ideas that use the religious sentimentality of people to facilitate their social or political goals, which somehow always end up making women that pawn in this vicious agenda. Feldman and Clark explain that “the attempt of contemporary fundamentalist movements to control women can be seen not just as an idiosyncrasy but rather as a typical characteristic of authoritarian regimes and

political movements, which have placed the regulation of women's reproductive capacities and sexuality at the forefront of their agendas" (Feldman and Clark 15).

The political mobilisation of the conservative Protestants during the 1970s and the emergence of the Moral Majority, formerly popular as the Christian Right in 1980, had a great role to play in Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign. Understanding the electoral potential of the conservatives, whose alliance was a reaction against the sexual revolution of the 1960s and on the matter of women's rights, Reagan did not waste much time and very soon met up with Moral Majority's Jerry Falwell. His presidential campaign promoted the same Evangelical ideologies of the conservatives, as Françoise Coste discusses in her article titled "Women, Ladies, Girls, Gals...': Ronald Reagan and the Evolution of Gender Roles in the United States." Coste goes on to elaborate to the mishaps that took place within Reagan's campaign board that was yet again suggestive of why the women's groups were so harsh on Reagan. Fast forward to November 1980, a historical distinct gender gap was noticed in the voting pattern, with majority of the female voters choosing the pro-women's rights candidate Jimmy Carter over the conservative candidate (Coste 5). Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, previously mentioned, has been influenced by these events of the U.S. election of 1980, and reading Coste's narration of the events, one can understand why.

The topic of Margaret Thatcher as a feminist icon has been controversial since the time of her reign as the first woman to hold the office, nonetheless she lived up to the title of "The Iron Lady" with her uncompromising and determined leadership style. A woman in power does not mean a win for the womankind in general, and Thatcher, with her affiliation with conservative politics and relations with the U.S. President Ronald Reagan proved that. Mary Eagleton, uses Thatcher as an example in her chapter titled "Literature" published in the collection of essays edited also by her- *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, and the relevance of Eagleton's discussion with my research is not limited to the example, but extends

to the discussion she uses the example for. Eagleton says, Thatcher can be considered a “powerful female” but not a “feminist”; the distinction between the two is similar to that “between ‘being’ a feminist (which Margaret Thatcher clearly is not) and producing feminist effects (which Margaret Thatcher – inadvertently, unwillingly and in restricted areas – has done). Lest anyone misinterprets me here, I have to add immediately that she has also produced lots of anti-feminist effects, not to mention lots of policies that adversely impacted on women” (Eagleton 154). This, I believe, is of great relevance to the political scenario of the time *The Handmaid’s Tale* was written, as the power dynamics within the females of the novel can be seen to be a reflection of such a political context.

ii) The Two Chosen Texts:

Coral Ann Howells, in her chapter called “Margaret Atwood’s dystopian visions: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*” discusses her aforementioned two novels as a synthesis of Atwood’s political, social and environmental concerns manifested into the genre of speculative fiction. These are the same concerns that are of relevance to my examination of the novels. Howells mentions “the rise of right-wing Christian fundamentalism as a political force, and deep hostility to the post 1960s feminist movement” which is of major focus in my dissection of the novel in light of how it reflects the historical events of the 1970s and 1980s and what it signifies for the women presented in the dystopia and those in real life (162). On similar note on both the novels, Howells adds, “*The Handmaid’s Tale*, centered on human rights abuses and particularly the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime, is entirely social and political in its agenda, whereas *Oryx and Crake* projects a world defamiliarized not through military or state power but through the abuse of scientific knowledge” (163). However, the main area in which I have been able to find close connections between my ideas and that of Howells on which I could further develop my research was in her discussion regarding *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The dissident narrator tells the story of the

marginalised women in the hands of oppressive political power- Atwood's narrative strategy that "reverses the structural relations between public and private worlds of the dystopia", allowing her to "reclaim a feminine space of personal emotions and individual identity" (Howells 164). Moreover, what makes the female narrator a person of more significance is the fact that, as I have mentioned earlier, the Handmaids were not allowed to read or write; and as it turns out later, Offred's narration comes from recordings made over time. This symbolises a woman's act of resistance against what Howells terms as "patriarchal tyranny", and again, as Howells puts it, "by an irony of history", this silenced Handmaid becomes Gilead's principal historian (Howells 165).

Abigail Rine comments in the third chapter of her book *Irigaray, Incarnation and Contemporary Women's Fiction* "This novel is an incisive expose of women's marginalization in Western religious discourse, particularly regarding their corporeality, sexuality and autonomy (. . .) relying on biblical precedent, Gilead enforces extreme gender roles; women are banned from reading and writing, owning property, earning money and they are allocated to different positions in society based upon social class and fertility" (Rine 53-54). Rine also points out that even though on the surface it seems like an age old story of female oppression under totalitarian regime, what is to be understood is the layers of politics and religious indoctrination that are working to sustain this ancient system of oppression. However, merely recognising the politics of the novel is not enough, as Rine states, although the critics correctly recognise *The Handmaid's Tale* "as a novel of power and sexual politics", they fail to identify the fact that religion precedes "these power imbalances, not merely a manifestation of them" (Rine 54). She adds, "Stillman and Johnson, for example, read the religious elements of Gilead as superficial means to a political end, rather than the driving force of Gilead's power: 'The founders of Gilead generated a right-wing fundamentalist reading of the Bible, grafted it onto patriarchal attitudes, and imposed it throughout society' (. . .) they primarily read religion

serving politics in Gilead, rather than politics conforming to religious precepts” (54-55). Considering that I intend to highlight how fundamentalism and politics blend together to form a social order in which the women are marginalised, Rine’s chapter has been incredibly insightful for my research.

Adrienne Rich, in her highly celebrated book called “Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution” delivers through her words her experience as a mother in combination with her feminist perspective on motherhood as an institution. In the foreword section of the book, Rich states, “Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and children; and the *institution*, which aims that that potential- and all women- shall remain under male control” (Rich 13). She goes on to say how this institution has formed the keystone of most of the social and political systems, and that under patriarchy, motherhood has “literally massacred” any female possibility (13). Rich’s perspective brings forth strong ideas that can help strengthen the argument that I have tried to form so far. As I have mentioned earlier, through making motherhood an irrevocable duty of a woman towards her family or the nation, a duty that when ornamented with the veil of religion seems nothing less than a blessed fruit that is only bestowed upon the deserving and ‘good’ women, the patriarchal society not only ensures that women stay within their assigned gender roles, but ultimately politicises the female body and the greater female existence for its own benefit. Similar thoughts are expressed by Rich, as she addresses the layers of motherhood as an institution:

Motherhood- unmentioned in the histories of conquest and serfdom, wars and treaties, exploration and imperialism- has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism. My individual, seemingly private pains as a mother, the individual seemingly private pains of the mothers around

me and before me, whatever our class or color, the regulation of women's reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology, and extrauterine experiments- all are essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers (33-34).

Marie Louise Davis, in her paper titled “Sexuality and Reproduction in Dystopian Fiction” highlights in context of *The Handmaid's Tale* and a few other works of her focus how, taking away or interfering in a woman's sexual and reproductive control and legislating them to the state causes her sexuality and biological capabilities to become the defining features of her existence. Davis also talks about “breeders”, “to categorize a woman whose prescribed destiny is to reproduce, without thought or complaint, the children who will literally and metaphorically continue the political practices which allowed or ensured their birth. The term is meant to convey an element of dehumanization (. . .) in contrast to ‘mother’ (both as experience and institution)” (Davis 38). The description is very apt for the Handmaids in *The Handmaid's Tale*, which no amount of religious façade could prove otherwise. She also adds, that being reduced to mere breeders also stratifies them in a manner which puts them both socially and economically in a disadvantageous position-

Women are forced to relinquish control over reproductive decisions in order to satisfy the needs of the political state. They are diminished to one-dimensional pawns, a permanent underclass which has little or no control over the future of self or state... As breeders, I will argue, they are at the mercy of those who seek to control them biologically to perpetuate a political system; the result is the formation of a new class, and a further repression of women. The breeder class, so vital to the success of the political regime, is least valued, and most likely to

be denied basic rights and privileges in order that its biological capacity to reproduce might be controlled (37-38).

Continuing with the discussion of the dehumanisation of women that we see in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is necessary to point out that it is not under socio-political and environmental situations that require a society to go back to its religious roots where women are commoditised, dehumanised and oppressed, but even in a technologically advanced and progressive community could demonstrate similar treatment of women, as seen in *Oryx and Crake*. Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* takes its real life context from the events of the past few decades that have marked milestones in the history of humanity in fields of science and technology. These achievements, in the era of late capitalism, have fuelled a consumerist culture that we see take shape in Atwood's dystopia. In such a scenario, the women are still objectified and stereotyped and we can understand this if we refer to Martha Nussbaum's comprehensive framework for objectification which include instrumentality, denial of autonomy, ownership, denial of subjectivity and inertness (qtd. in Malik 89). American philosopher Martha Nussbaum's comprehensive framework for objectification is very crucial to feminist theory. To understand the sexualisation and objectification of women that takes place in *Oryx and Crake*, her framework is quite insightful. The historical significance of the novel becomes much easier to apprehend in the light of the article written by Shaista Malik, titled "Women's Objectification by Consumer Culture." Malik points out that historically, "Man was associated with thought, rationality, meditation whereas woman was considered a deviation from that norm hence she was associated with body and feelings divorced from intellect", and this is a conception that is still made use in the consumerist culture in terms of advertising (Malik 88). Whether this statement is true in all cases or not, it is a fact that in my reading of *Oryx and Crake*, I have found Atwood making use of this idea in the manner she

has portrayed Jimmy's mother and Oryx within the technologically advanced and consumerist boundary of the compounds.

Sharon R. Wilson in the chapter "Blindness and Survival in Margaret Atwood's major novels" discusses distorted "voyeuristic" vision that commoditises female bodies. Oryx, who is seemingly the love interest of both Jimmy and Crake, is made to be viewed by the readers through the eyes of Jimmy and Crake, as the "object of a scopophilic gaze on a kiddie porn show, and she continues to function as an object in this book filled with images of walled, one-eyed, fish-eyed, ruptured, blind, and ultimately empty-socket vision" (Wilson 186). Although the narrative point of view is third person limited, which gives us access to Jimmy's thoughts only, it is at times distinctly made clear by Crake's character's speech and behaviour, that he, as Wilson points out, "reduces art to a desire to get laid, dismisses female artists as misguided, and seems to feel little human emotion except for competition with Jimmy to possess Oryx and the single-minded effort to eradicate a society obsessed with sex and war games" (Wilson 186). This helps one figure that even though Crake appears to be above sexual and emotional desires on the surface, he too sexualises females and goes as far as to pretend to have feelings for Oryx in order to possess her and eventually use her for his own benefit. This is very significant to my analysis of the objectification of women that is seen in *Oryx and Crake*.

Edward Said, in the "Introduction" to his book *Orientalism*, discusses the invention of the Orient by the West which determines itself as the Occident, and how this determination facilitates the Occident's definition of the Orient, giving it characteristics of that of the other—the exotic, the romantic and the barbaric. Said also mentions how this establishes the Occident's position as the centre or the self, being both the creator and the observer of the Orient on its own term. I believe, that this sense of exotic otherness that Jimmy feels towards the existence of Oryx is what further causes the sexualisation of her that is witnessed in the book. Fiona Tolan, in the chapter "Oryx and Crake: A Postfeminist Future" expresses similar

thoughts, saying “Much of Jimmy’s obsession with Oryx is bound up in her exotic appeal” (Tolan 287).

Simone de Beauvoir, in her book called *The Second Sex* presents how women have historically been oppressed and positioned in a disadvantageous manner in the society. The text is divided into two volumes, one being “Facts and Myths” and the other being “Lived Experience”. The first volume is her attempt at deconstruction of the ideas and theories existing regarding women, and the second one is more of her own account on the everyday experiences of women. In the first volume she regards the failure of biology, psychoanalysis and economics to completely describe the female condition, and goes on to say how historically women have always been considered inferior to men, and the oppression of women have been institutionalised through religion, advent of private property etc., and even though with time women have gained some of their much deserved rights, women are still oppressed in regards to their labour, reproduction, sexuality and more. De Beauvoir also explores the way women are mythicised as goddesses or mothers, which ultimately, from my understanding, shackles them to their societal gender roles. Both the volumes have been substantial in providing theoretical basis to my analysis of the novels for this paper.

Laura L. Lovett in her book titled *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938* explores American pronatalism- its politics and triggers where in the first chapter she highlights the concepts of how nostalgic ideals regarding family, home and motherhood is what had driven the reproductive politics of the United States in the 20th Century. Mentioning Judith Blake, Lovett discusses that the regulation of reproduction was a result of socio-cultural pressure or conventions that determined family norms and sex roles, thus controlling the female body, assigning it the “responsibility” to reproduce (Lovett 2). This established the ability of politics to use social constructions to intrude what used to be the private spheres of life.

Acclaimed British anthropologist and feminist, Kathleen Gough's very detailed examination of the evolution of family and marriage in her essay "The Origin of the Family" has been a crucial anthropological insight in understanding how male dominance over females have developed, and how the intensities or categories of such dominance varies in different societies. Gough several characteristics of male power since the primitive to the contemporary society, which is one of the theories through which I shall be analysing of *Oryx and Crake*, for it is in this novel that we see the relationship between monopoly over certain weapon or technology and power.

Rich, in her article titled "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" discusses the sexual power dynamic that prescriptive heterosexuality creates, which results in a collective sense of power imbalance in the society, the power concentration lying within the male demographic. This imbalance is stratified within the layers in itself, however, even though Rich's focus is on enforced or conscious acceptance of heteronormativity and the limitations in the representation of the lesbian existence or experience, the socially facilitated male domination over females or their sexuality that Rich discusses has been of particular interest to me, as it is in this discussion that I found elements of male control that I could connect with my readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Mentioning Kathleen Gough's aforementioned characteristics of male power, Rich elaborates on each of those characteristics in light of how they simultaneously enforce heterosexuality, however, many of the descriptions are relevant to my analysis of *Oryx and Crake* to highlight the sexual objectification of women. Her addition to the characteristics in terms of exploitation of labour, motherhood, abortion, policing of clothes further act as relevant material to my study of both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.

The existing literature on the two texts of focus and the relevant events and concepts have been incredibly helpful for my research in terms of providing proper direction and

information. My purpose throughout this literature review has been to summarise and analyse the literature that discuss ideas relevant to my research, but I have also attempted to bring together ideas that formerly have been addressed in isolated manners in several different studies. That is, I have brought together discussions on motherhood, fundamentalist politics, commodification of women (both in terms of sexualising them and colonising their reproductive capabilities) in light of real world events in my thesis. In doing so, I have addressed and tried to fill the gap that I believe has existed in regards to the impact on female identity these issues have had as portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The research methodology for my thesis has been qualitative. Existing data and literature has been reviewed and analysed for the purpose of this research, further supported by an in-depth textual analysis of the two texts within the theoretical framework discussed later in this chapter.

i) **Feminism: The Three Waves**

Feminism has been a movement in regards to the cultural, social, political and economic positions of women, with its purpose rooted in the demand for equal rights for women. It involves political, psychological and sociological theories that are concerned with the affairs of gender discrimination that not only question the societal construction of gender, but also aims at eliminating it.

The nineteenth century and the early twentieth century are considered to be a part of the first-wave feminist activities, mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States. It was concerned with equal contract and property rights for women initially, but the first-wave's highlight is mainly the political participation demanded by the suffragettes through their demand for the voting rights for women. The second-wave was concerned with cultural and social inequalities as well as the political inequalities, starting in the early 1960s and lasting till the end of 1980s. Many believe that second-wave feminism still continues to co-exist with the third-wave feminist ideas. One of the major slogans of the second-wave feminism has been "The Personal is Political", which still speaks for itself, indicating the personal spheres of a woman's life are connected by the systemic discrimination that she faces in the society, making her personal life politicised by the patriarchal power structure that exists as a norm in that society.

The third-wave feminism, that started in the 1990s and has been claimed to last till 2010 is more inspired to resist threats to women's rights that have come about with the new global world structure, which many a times require to criticise earlier feminist ideas in the sense that they try to present universal answers. Globalisation has resulted in a complex redistribution of power, which requires the third wave feminists to question but also, when necessary, reclaim and redefine existing notions of gender, sexuality, womanhood, femininity, masculinity, etc.

ii) Of the Other, the Mother and the Spiritual: Deconstruction of the Patriarchy

Of these three phases, many scholars, philosophers, activists and writers have emerged who have analysed women's oppression in the society and have generated theories and ideas that delve deeper into the structure that supports such oppression. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most prominent authors and philosophers of the second-wave feminism, in her book titled *The Second Sex* the process of "othering" women through social construction, which she believes is one of the fundamental reason behind women's oppression. She argues that historically, women have been considered as the deviant "Other" whilst men have been regarded as the norm or the ideal. "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (de Beauvoir 26).

What is essential to my analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the way de Beauvoir discusses the female biology. In her discussion, she talks about how females are centralised around their reproductive capability which is also a method of discrimination against them, so much so that women who reach menopause are many at times categorised as "a third sex" (de Beauvoir 65). "So woman finds herself freed from the servitudes of the female; she is not comparable to a eunuch, because her vitality is intact; however, she is no longer prey to powers that submerge her" (de Beauvoir 65). While discussing in reference to historical materialism, de Beauvoir again explores how women are not seen as workers, "her reproductive function is as important as her productive capacity, both in the social economy and in her personal life"

(de Beauvoir 92). Being reduced to mere reproductive beings when not inextricably linked to it, is an important part of my analysis of the Handmaids, and this examination by de Beauvoir has been critical to it.

Moreover, in the chapter titles “Woman’s Situation and Character” in part two of the second volume, de Beauvoir tries to summarise how women’s personalities or characters are affected by the social constructions they are subjected to. Here, de Beauvoir states that in many cases, women turn to religion, or religion is somehow used in a way to justify the subjugation that is expected from them- “There is a justification, a supreme compensation, that society has always been bent on dispensing to woman: religion” (de Beauvoir 746). “The woman is less often asked to accept her inferiority in the name of God than to believe, thanks to him, that she is equal to the male lord; even the temptation to revolt is avoided by pretending to overcome injustice” de Beauvoir adds “the Church sees to it that God never authorizes women to escape from male guardianship” (de Beauvoir 747-748). What de Beauvoir presents here is the idea that the injustices done towards women are justified as though some divine order is being served that requires women’s sincere obedience, and women frequently, to cope with her desires unfulfilled, turn to religion to find purpose. In light of this, when we look at *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we see similar indoctrination of women in the name of religion that politicises their being in order to further oppress them.

To provide an anthropological insight, Kathleen Gough’s very detailed examination of the evolution of family and marriage in her essay “The Origin of the Family” that outlines the manner in which male dominance over females have developed, and how this dominance exists in different categories and intensities with varying societies has been very important to my research. As mentioned in the literature review previously, Gough several characteristics of male power since the primitive to the contemporary society- “men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor or to control their produce;

to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments” (Gough 768). Through these characteristics of male dominance presented by Gough, I shall attempt to examine the novels in regards to how male dominance is practiced in them. Especially in *Oryx and Crake*, we see Crake subjecting Oryx to his dominance and objectification in manners of these characteristics.

In addition to that, Adrienne Rich, in her article titled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience” builds on Gough’s characteristics of male power, elaborating on each, mentioning “to force [male sexuality] upon them” and including within it “pornographic depictions of women responding pleasurably to sexual violence and humiliation (a subliminal message being that sadistic heterosexuality is more ‘normal’ than sensuality between women)”, which is very significant in my analysis of the female objectification in *Oryx and Crake* (Rich 639). Under “to command or exploit their labor or to control their produce” Rich includes “by means of the institutions of (. . .) motherhood as unpaid production; male control of abortion, contraception, and childbirth; pimping” which again is facilitates my examination of both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. Rich additionally elaborates that to enforce “‘feminine’ dress codes; the veil; prescriptions for ‘full-time’ mothering; enforced economic dependence of wives” fall within Gough’s category “to confine them physically and prevent their movement” and that “pogrom against independent, ‘unassimilated’ women; restriction of female self-fulfilment to marriage and motherhood” as seen in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is but an extension of the male power characteristic “to cramp their creativeness” (Rich 639).

Edward Said’s argument in his book *Orientalism* that states that “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’” and that it is in fact not “an inert fact of

nature” puts forward the idea that because of being able to create the concept of the Orient, the Occident has tried to create distinction between itself and those of the East (Said 9-12). The Occident has therefore generated knowledge that has established its superiority and hegemony over the Orient, and this is the knowledge that portrays the Orient as the “Other”, the knowledge that invites the “West to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other” (Said 56). This creates the West’s fascination regarding the “spectacle of the Orient” (Said 102). From my reading of *Oryx and Crake*, I see Jimmy’s similar fascination with Oryx, which brings me to believe that her exotic strangeness that he perceives is what causes Jimmy to see her as an object of desire, and Said’s argument regarding the concept of Orientalism is very important to examine the sexualisation of Oryx in the novella.

Chapter 5: Analysis

i) The Dystopian Patriarchy

“Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman.

Always.” - Khaled Hosseini, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

a) Examining the Power Structure in the Gileadean Regime:

It is a fact that any sort of authoritarian rule puts its subjects in a disadvantageous position, and it would therefore be unfair to say that only the women in Gilead are seen to be affected by the theocratic rule. The men too are put in positions varying in hierarchy: Commanders, Eyes, Guardians and Angels, all working together to keep the system functioning, and perhaps not all of them had an alternative but to choose this way of life. However, just like the Commander tells Offred “Better never means better for everyone (. . .) It always means worse, for some”, similarly, the “worse” is not the same for everyone, somehow it is always the women who have it the worst (Atwood 182). What begins with firing the women from their jobs, freezing their bank accounts and transferring their assets to the closest male of kin, reaches the point where Christian fundamentalism takes over, and the state, in the face of environmental collapse, decides to go back to its Puritan values where women are not only awfully marginalised, but a group of them who are considered to be fertile, are forced to reproduce. Reflecting on the day Offred was fired from her job and all her money was transferred to her husband Luke, she says that Luke wanted to make love to her that night but she felt like something had changed- “It occurred to me that he shouldn’t be saying we, since nothing I knew of had been taken away from him (. . .) something had shifted, some balance (. . .) We are not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I am his” (Atwood 155-156). Here, I believe that we can see Offred sensing the shift in the power dynamics, and if we connect this to Gough’s idea that “to confine them physically or and prevent their movement” is a way of subjecting women

to male dominance upon which Rich build's the idea that essentially also enforces "economic dependence of wives" (Rich 639). This enforcement of such dependence that causes a shift in the power dynamics of the society, making it even more patriarchal is what we see in the novel.

This is a clear representation of how any social unrest, environmental disaster or a political emergency of the state can take only a few days to unravel all the progress that women have made, to shove them back to where they had started from. As the political and historical context of this paper points out, historically women are always targeted to facilitate the motives of the society which is dominantly patriarchal. A female's body, her mind and her labour and its products- all of it is taken out of her control and numerous barriers to her self-determination are created, the control of her reproductive decisions being one. Referring to de Beauvoir, I believe that for centuries this has been the pattern because of the way women have been the Other, as previously discussed in the methodology section. When the history of patriarchy rests on the process of "othering" the woman- either she is deemed weak with inferior qualities labelled on her, or she is glorified or mystified as the mother or the goddess, which only strengthens the patriarchal norms and gender roles that are assigned to her. Similarly, I believe, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, because the society had already been one where the women were still the Other, the sexualised and the inferior, "Women were not protected then. I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but every woman knew", it was so easy for the new Gileadean regime to further marginalise them (Atwood 32). The new order ensures their protection from many of the previous horrors, but forces upon them a life of domesticity, servitude and dehumanisation. In the conversation where the Commander tells Offred that better always means worse for some, he says how previously women had been failing to mean something to men, "there was nothing to do with women" (Atwood 181). It is as though the existence of women is to give men something to do with them besides reducing them to the functions of their womb, and their oppression is justified because now they are giving the men

a purpose in a world so devoid of meaning. Being the Other, women's subjugation in the process of strengthening the social construct of the male being the Self is what in turn gives their life meaning- a very patriarchal notion. Moreover, the concept of the Other, I believe, is strengthened again when Offred goes to the doctor for her routine check-up. The doctor offers to impregnate Offred, saying that either the most of the guys "can't make it anymore", or are sterile- "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren" (Atwood 50). Offred's reaction is a reflection of the social "othering", as de Beauvoir has said, which shows us how the environmental collapse that has caused the birth-rates to go down, which has not been the doing of only the women, is still somehow being used to further degrade and subjugate women; men are still the centre of the universe, no plague touches them, no harrowing disease emasculates them but the self-determination of women, thus it must be the women who are barren, so they must endure the oppression and political degradation they are being subjected to, for they are, at the end of the day, serving a divine purpose.

The women are separated into different groups just as the men, the Handmaids are the ones who have to bear children for the sake of the nation and the state, the Marthas who act as the domestic helping-hands, the Econowives who are mainly the working class women serving the state through their labour and different services, the elite ones being the Wives of the Commanders, who too have to suffer through the humiliation of the "Ceremony", the monthly ritualised sexual intercourse between the Commander and the Handmaids, the Unwomen, who are the ones considered in no way usable to serve the needs of the state and the Aunts, who have been bestowed with the responsibility of the indoctrination of the Handmaids and later, as seen in the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, also have an extensive contribution in educating the daughters of the Commanders so that they conform to the existing social structure and the sense of being the Other prevails, for generations.

Moreover, the power that is dominantly in the men's hand is strengthened by forbidding the Handmaids to read and write, because what must someone, whose existence only serves the purpose of reproduction, have to do anything with pen and paper? "Alas! A woman that attempts the pen / Such an intruder on the rights of men"-Gilbert and Gubar, in light of these lines by Anne Finch, pose the question, "Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" (Gilbert and Gubar 3). Aunt Lydia's very famous words, "Pen is envy", can therefore be said to be a modification of Freud's "penis envy", but in this case the sense of lacking comes from the absence of knowledge or the tools to propagate it (Atwood 159). If we bring in Gough's characteristics of male power, we can relate this part of the book amongst the many other parts where men's ability to "cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments" is portrayed (Gough 768). Taking away majority of the women's right to read or write or even hold a pen for that matter, shows the power dynamics of Gilead, where women are rendered helpless with their fundamental rights snatched away.

b) Commodification or the Objectification of Women as seen in the Novels:

From dictating the clothes for the women, especially those of the Handmaids that are designed in a manner that not only cover them fully but obstruct the view of their surroundings to reducing them to the position of breeders, Gilead is a dark picture of patriarchy at its worse. As de Beauvoir perceives, the Handmaids are commoditised as "her reproductive function is as important as her productive capacity, both in the social economy and in her personal life" (de Beauvoir 92). Not only we see numerous breaches of human rights taking place, but as mentioned previously, in the light of Gough and Rich's ideas on how male power is forced upon women, enforcing "'feminine' dress codes; the veil" is a way of physically confining them (Rich 639). Building on another characteristic as suggested by Gough which states male power subjects women "to cramp their creativeness", Rich says that "program against independent 'unassimilated' women" causes similar change in power structure which

oppresses and objectifies women, and is evident in the way homosexuals or “gender traitors” and the Unwomen are treated in Gilead (Rich 639).

In *Oryx and Crake*, we discern that one necessarily does not have to go back to Puritan values to undo women’s progress and establish patriarchal social control over them. We see that with the advancement of science and technology, the people in the novella also advance towards a state of desensitised existence, where they easily satiate their primal instincts with the technology available in their bedrooms, and how the masculinist arrogance of a man brings about the end of humanity as we know it. Crake is portrayed as a person whose goals are realistic and important in the pursuit of science, however, he is continuously seen to put Jimmy down for his passion for the arts, which he considers feminine, thus inferior. I believe, that this substantiates the idea that even goals and aspirations are gendered, and those which are socio-culturally considered feminine, are not good enough, they are the Other, a shadow of the Self that are the masculinist pursuits of the world, which in this case is genetic engineering. I can further support this idea by mentioning how the smarter, more brilliant Crake goes to Watson-Crick Institute and Jimmy, the “words” person, ends up at the Martha Graham Academy.

Additionally, we see how this gendered pursuit of a goal makes Crake use Oryx as a tool. Of course, Jimmy too is a victim of his friend’s scheme, but he is not as affected or as taken advantage of as Oryx is, and it is mainly because Oryx’s gender and the position her gender put her in made it so easy for Crake to do so. Referring again to Gough’s concept to how male power is established, “to command or exploit their labour or to control their produce; (. . .) to use them as objects in male transactions”, I can analyse how Crake is symbolic of the power dynamics of the society, where through his use of Oryx, he demonstrates the power males still hold over females (Gough 768). As we see in the book, he makes Oryx distribute his BlyssPlus pills, and even though Jimmy suspects that Oryx may know something about the greater scheme of Crake, once the plague breaks out, it is made clear that Oryx has had no idea about

what Crake has been making her do , “Oryx was crying (. . .) ‘Oh Jimmy,’ she said. ‘I am so sorry. I did not know.’ (. . .) ‘It was in the pills. It was in those pills I was giving away, the ones I was selling.’ (. . .) ‘Those pills were supposed to help people! Crake said...’” (Atwood 194-195). We see yet again how a woman has been a tool for a man to use and objectify for his own purposes, and this has only been possible because Oryx had already been in a disadvantageous position for her gender, a position constructed by the society that no amount of advancement could alter.

Furthermore, she was also a victim of what Rich classifies as “pimping”, and this highlights the global concern of child sex trafficking the novella has upheld (Rich 639). Oryx is sold by her mother when she was very young, just like various other children of her village. Oryx’s mother also sold her brother along with her, not because she was “hard up”, but because she wanted someone to keep Oryx company. This is the part where Oryx mentions that “Fewer boys were sold than girls, but they were not therefore more valued” (Atwood 70). Through this we understand that the patriarchal system that objectifies and oppresses women has its grasp even on children, where they too are distinguished by their gender. Therefore, girls, for the sin of being born with a vagina that too in a poor country, are sold like a sack of flour, however, not all boys living in the same situation as those girls have to face this horror. I am not of course expressing my anger at the boys at being spared, but at the power structure of the society that determines its control over women from their childhood, thus highlighting the fact that the process of “othering”, as de Beauvoir has suggested, begins very early.

c) Role of Male Dominance in Shaping Women’s Identity

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we see another patriarchal aspect at play, we see the use of patronymic, where each Handmaid is assigned a name that is representative of the Commander she belongs to. Offred means Of-Fred, as in belonging to Fred. Similarly the names of the other

Handmaids, such as Ofglen and Ofwarren are representative of the Commanders they serve. Names are very important in the study of any subject, a name is an integral part of someone's identity. However, in the book, we see how easily each Handmaid is replaced, their names are not constant, the moment they stop serving a Commander and move on to the next, their names are changed like the clothes on a doll. A name gives one a sense of Self, and by stripping them off their names and identities as individuals, the regime seems to dissolve that sense of self, thus yet again establishing itself, a state that is run dominantly by males, the constant, the Self, rendering the women as the nameless, the Other.

ii) Religion and the Oppression of Women

“Patriarchy has God on its side.” – Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*

a) Religion as an Advocate of Women’s Subordination:

As previously discussed, the rise of fundamentalism in politics was a reaction to liberal ideas that promoted equality regardless of one’s gender, class, religion or race. Historically, religion has been often pointed out to be unjust towards women, let alone being kind to those who identify themselves as homosexuals or of non-binary genders. Counter arguments exist, and many find justification for the way their religion treats men and women. Since from the beginning of this paper, my focus has been on how dystopian fiction is reflective of real world concerns, and as I have tried to establish that argument in my favour in the historical and political context section of this paper, I take it for granted that the consequences of the theocratic regime in the face of grave environmental collapse is a mirror reflection of how religion can be further exploited for sacrilegious agendas of politics. In the pre-Gilead time, when the government was overthrown, Offred remembers how initially it had been blamed on the “Islamic Fanatics” (Atwood 147). However, the theocracy that prevails in the Republic of Gilead is that of Christianity, where Puritan values are revived once again to restore social order. In the face of war and environmental degeneration that is causing both men and women to go sterile, only the women are being targeted; the religious indoctrination that they are being subjected to are resulting in them being dehumanised in the very state they try to call home.

Many religious allusions are present in the book, such as the portion of Genesis that states:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me Children or else I die. And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld

from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (qtd. in Atwood)²

The Republic of Gilead justifies the subjugation of women it causes by the ceremonious use of the verse it makes. Moreover, women, as mentioned before, are made to dress modestly as a good Christian would, circumscribing their existence in a cloud of red. Here, the analysis of how religion is used in a political context to oppress women, I can bring the discussion of de Beauvoir regarding religion. As stated before in this paper, de Beauvoir says, - “There is a justification, a supreme compensation, that society has always been bent on dispensing to woman: religion” (de Beauvoir 746). Similarly, in the Rachel and Leah Center (another Biblical reference)³ or the Red Center, we see that women who have been forcefully abducted are put through a process of religious indoctrination to create a sense of acceptance within them regarding what they are to face in the future, “Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said” (Atwood 5-6).

Reading the book, one can easily take note of the language that is being used in daily practices, such as “Blessed be the fruit”, “Praise be”, “Under His Eye”- these phrases continuously reinstate the religious faith that is being put in the sacrilegious acts being committed. The kind of teaching and training they receive are similar to those that a nun or a sister might receive, for one listening to the instructions without may mistake them as religious teachings being provided to women who seek to spend their lives in the servitude of God, however, in the reality of the book, they are in fact being treated to act as concubines for the Commanders behind the façade of religion. In chapter two, when Offred addresses herself as a

² See the epigraph to *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.

³ In *Genesis*, Rachel and Leah are two sisters who were married to patriarch Jacob. Their relevance to motherhood is such that Leah beared Jacob six sons and a daughter, which according to the scriptures is suggestive of God opening her womb as she was “unloved”. On the other hand, Rachel offered her handmaid to Jacob to bear a child as referred in 2. See *The Legend of the Jews* by Louis Ginzberg, vol I, chapter VI.

“Sister, dipped in blood”, I find it symbolic of how she has given religious teachings of chastity only to amount to her role that her flesh of a woman makes her play- she is a derivation of her womb and her blood and her body that she must use against her will to repent for the previous life of sin she has led (Atwood 6).

De Beauvoir also says, “The woman is less often asked to accept her inferiority in the name of God than to believe, thanks to him, that she is equal to the male lord; even the temptation to revolt is avoided by pretending to overcome injustice” (de Beauvoir 747). Similarly, the indoctrination of the Handmaids are done in such a manner, as to make them oblivious of the political degradation that is being done to them. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia telling them that “Yours is a position of honour” (Atwood 11). In a different instance, Aunt Lydia also tells them “The future is in your hands” (Atwood 38). Additionally, Aunt Lydia seems to hardly ever let the Handmaids forget how easily they were accessible to men, whereas now, they are segregated, no man dares to touch a woman except the one she is married to, or belongs to, in case she is a Handmaid. “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it” (Atwood 22). Through this, a false sense of superiority is trying to be instilled within the Handmaids, so that they believe that they are now they are free from the dirty, groping hands of men and negate the fact that they are, in fact, being grossly violated by the treacherous fundamentalist political propaganda. Perhaps, like de Beauvoir suggests, some even find a sense of purpose in the oppression they are being subjected to, like Janine, who seems to be a pet of Aunt Lydia (Atwood 24).

However, even though there are mostly very literal interpretations done of The Old Testament in Gilead, I also understand that religious scripture is nevertheless partially misinterpreted or to be precise, violated for the gains of the state. I find a particular instance from the novel symbolic of this idea I just proposed. In chapter 15, just before the Ceremony

when the Commander is about to read the Bible, Offred narrates, “The Bible is kept locked up (. . .) It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?” (Atwood 72). This suggests that the Bible, or religion in general, is vulnerable to misinterpretations, and thus it is only accessed by those who are in power, the males. These males are the ones who interpret it and set the rules and morals of the society, and if once in the hands of the women, they could possibly make the same use of it. Therefore, this is one of the many ways in which religion, with its grasp on the patriarchy’s politics, can be used to gain the social subordination of women.

iii) More on Dissolving Identities

“The living, politicized woman claims to be a person whether she is attached to a family or not, whether she is attached to a man or not, whether she is a mother or not.” –Adrienne Rich,

Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution

a) Assigning the Institutionalised Roles of Mothers to Women:

Since the start of the feminist activism to even as late as 2019, women have voiced out their concerns regarding the lack of reproductive decisions they get to make. As mentioned earlier, Lovett points out how pronatalism is rooted in the government’s control of the private sectors of life, in the aspiration to attain socio-cultural ideals regarding family that are obviously, intensely patriarchal. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, we witness how the reproductive colonisation of the Handmaids take place, where they are forced to bear children. Abortion has become a crime that is punishable by death. “Women’s autonomy is a threat not just to manhood but to social order (. . .) As the key signifier of reproductive choice, abortion becomes a focal point in the ethical conflict between rights and duty” (Feldman and Clark 17). In addition, it is taken for granted that the Wives of the Commanders would want to experience motherhood in such a grotesque manner, therefore they are left with no option but to either actually believe in the cause of the Republic of Gilead, or put on an act of doing so. It is also inhumane to bring a child into the world in such a manner, as we later see in the sequel to the book, *The Testaments*, that Offred’s daughter Jemima, after the death of the Wife who adopted her, is neglected by her new mother and after their Handmaid gives birth to a boy, she is cast aside even further.

As previously discussed, just the way religion is given to women to “learn in silence all subjection”, motherhood too is coerced in a manner that women do not usually detect as being coerced into (Atwood 190). In the novel, during a Prayvaganza, in the context of Adam and Eve’s fall from the heaven, a fall that was Eve’s fault for “Adam was not deceived, but the

woman being deceived was in the transgression”, it is reinstated that the women now “shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety” (Atwood 190-191). I analyse this not only with relation to the social construct that dictates women are born to be mothers, motherhood is what ultimately fulfils them but with the notion that just like the fall of Adam and Eve was Eve’s fault, similarly the evil that has brought about the sterility in the people of Gilead is because of the wrongdoings of women, of how they used to live that had resulted in a “society dying (. . .) of too much choice” (Atwood 22).

Motherhood is not an institutionalised experience only coerced upon women in a state that has gone back to its “traditional values” (Atwood 5). Even in an advanced society where everything is available at the push of a button, a society that some even might claim to be post-feminist (having achieved all the goals and demands of feminism), the power structure still instigates women to adhere to certain conventional or stereotypical roles, motherhood being one of them. In a society as stratified as the Compound Jimmy lives in that establishes the privileges he is accustomed to, he still resents the ways his mother fails to act as a mother. It is very evident in the text that his mother does not support the sort of genetic engineering that the company Jimmy’s father works for does, causing her to suffer through depression, yet, Jimmy expects her to put aside her own traumas and despairs as an individual and tend to his needs. On her good days, Jimmy notes, “She was like a real mother” (Atwood 19). What is a “real” mother supposed to be like? Someone who gives up her own aspirations, who hides her own failures as a person just to fill the role constructed by a society that is vastly patriarchal? Soon, we see that Jimmy’s mother, Sharon, cannot continue to bear the atrocious activities going on within the Compound and leaves, leaving Jimmy wondering, “Maybe she had loved Jimmy (. . .) In her own manner (. . .) Maybe, on the other hand, she hadn’t loved him. She must have had some sort of positive emotion about him though. Wasn’t there supposed to be a maternal

bond? (Atwood 35). The maternal bond being described is again, a patriarchal notion propagated to attain the subjugation of women.

When Oryx is employed by Crake, we yet again see how this brilliant man has saved a woman from a life in the porn industry, only to have put her in a position where he can exploit her labour, in a different and respectful manner. He assigns Oryx the job of being Goddess-like figure to the group of Crakers he has created. Going back to the discussion of de Beauvoir, a certain mysticism regarding Oryx is created, like millions of times before that women have been essentialised as the mother figure, the Goddess, the Earth or the Nature- as the bearer of life. Even though Oryx has not ever given birth, in Snowman's story to the Crakers, she has- "Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself" (Atwood 55). However, even then, the power dynamics does not falter; Crake still is superior in the sense that he is the creator of the Crakers, whereas Oryx, is the Goddess of the small, inferior creatures.

b) Jimmy's Obsession with Oryx: The Girl from the Video

Oryx's past is a haunting story of being sold when she was a child, appearing in pornography at an age as early as eight. Through Oryx's representation, Atwood gives voice to thousands of women who have been victim of child sex trafficking and of the unregulated and heavily commercial sex industry. From the moment Jimmy caught a glimpse of her on a video that he had been watching with Crake on a pornography website where the content was especially made for paedophiles, something struck him even though she was "just another girl on a porno site" (Atwood 52). However, the description of the moment continued as such, "None of those little girls had ever seemed real to Jimmy- they'd always struck him as digital clones- but for some reason Oryx was three-dimensional from the start" (Atwood 52). What I

understand from this description is that how little women had meant to him, how he disregarded their existence even though right in front of his eyes, on the screen, they had had been doing unspeakable things to please men, to please him, none of that, none of the existence and value of each of those little girls as individual human beings had ever had any meaning to him until one day he was fascinated by one. For the first time he feels “culpable” of the degradation being faced by the girls, a feeling that he should have felt months ago (Atwood 53). Bringing in de Beauvoir again, I see this as a process of “othering” where the Other has little or no value to the Self simply because of the State of being the Other, until the Self is somewhat amused of the “otherness” (we notice how much Jimmy’s obsession with Oryx is based on the idea that she was not like the others).

In addition to this, Oryx’s past includes a history of child labour, pornography, child sex trafficking, prostitution and extortion- crimes that happen regularly against children and women. When Jimmy shows Oryx the printout of what he considers her eight year old self from the pornography because of her eyes, Oryx says “A lot of girls have eyes (. . .) A lot of girls did these things”, which I believe is suggestive of the idea that not only is her story that of many other women’s, but that these things happened to girls too that Jimmy did not care about (Atwood 54). This upsets Jimmy, which makes Oryx say, “It might be me. Maybe it is. Would that make you happy, Jimmy?” (Atwood 54). This shows how readily she lets go of her past to fit Jimmy’s idea of her, how easily she dissolves her identity- symbolic of the ambiguity women like Oryx may have to maintain because the power men hold over them.

Later, when Jimmy questions Oryx about what she was thinking at that moment and Oryx asks why did he want to know that, Jimmy answers, “Because I need you to” (Atwood 54). Jimmy dominates Oryx in a manner, where with innocent curiosity regarding her past he extorts stories from her, stories that would make him desire Oryx in his own way, completely disregarding the place of trauma and abuse the stories come from. I do not see anyway Jimmy

could have been in love with Oryx, just obsessed. With all his emotional troubles since childhood, he uses Oryx to feel better about himself, to look like the better person after each of her stories end. “Jimmy displays an unconscious desire to cast Oryx in the role of a debased victim” (Tolan 287).

The “otherness” of Oryx, as previously discussed, also is a part of her descent that I believe attracts Jimmy. From the first moment he sees her on the screen, he notices her as “exquisite” (Atwood 52). What would make anyone call an eight year old girl exquisite until and unless he or she sexualises the girl in regards to her exotic appeal? As mentioned previously, I analysed this situation in reference to Said’s *Orientalism*. Here, Oryx also acts as the Oriental Other, therefore her mere existence is romanticised with a sense of cultural exoticness, wildness, and the tragic Oriental inferiority which becomes a part of her appeal to the representative of the Self and the Occident, Jimmy. Even the porno site Oryx was first seen by Jimmy was especially a “global sex-trotting site”, where “real sex tourists” were “filmed while doing things they’d be put in jail for back in their home countries” which shows how acceptable it is to do sexually degrading acts to people of a different culture, to the Other. The reason I bring in this discussion is because I see how this way, Jimmy sexualises Oryx even more, and this sexualisation comes from a place of power which allows him to deem certain genders or race inferior to him- and here Oryx’s identity plays a huge role. Forgetting all her ambiguity, even if we see her as a girl belonging from the Eastern part of the world, there may be little to nothing to stop a male from having a sense of power over her simply because of her Oriental descent, which would further allow him to sexualise or exoticise her.

c) The Unwomen: Of the Colonies, and of the Porn

When read in light of Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, we see the resurfacing of the male projected angel/monster paradigm in the novels. In *The Handmaid’s*

Tale, each Handmaid is given three chances before she is deemed infertile, and thus useless. It is to be reminded that the Handmaids are the chosen ones, granted the ‘sinners’ and the ‘adulterers’ of the pre-Gilead period, but they are the ones who are specifically chosen in hopes that they are fertile and can thus bear children. However, if they fail to serve this function, they cannot be assigned any other position in the society, other than being tossed in the colonies to work within radioactive waste and rot away; either they are the mothers, or to be factually correct, breeders, or they are the Unwomen. Not all have to spend their lives at the colonies if they fail to get pregnant, many are seen to escape that terrible fate and settle for something less, or as opinions vary, equally terrible- life at Jezebel’s. It is a brothel where the women can serve as prostitutes, which is not much of a change from their life clothed in red. As Moira informs, in Jezebel’s homosexuals are also free to express themselves, “the Aunts figure we’re all damned anyway, they’ve given up on us (. . .) And the Commanders don’t give a piss what we do in our off time. Anyway, women on women sort of turns them on” (Atwood 218).

On the other hand, in *Oryx and Crake*, Oryx’s identity is somewhat similarly dissolved in the decisions that the men make for her. Her ambiguity is such that either she is a prostitute or a girl on porno sites, or she is the earth mother when Crake decides for her that that is what she is. While being employed by Crake, her sexual availability to both men yet again blurs her identity- the moment she steps away from the Crakers and enters Crake’s room, she stops being the Goddess to be worshipped and turns into a sexual partner, and later, when she visits Jimmy, from his perception he again reinvents her as his exotic object of desire. Even if we take the romantic component out of it, in the capitalist economy that renders underprivileged women to be consumed by men, Oryx becomes symbolic of thousands of women who have to choose between the two extremes- of a mother, or a whore.

To summarise the analysis that has been done in this chapter, we can say that often fundamentalist ideologies infiltrate politics as a reaction to social changes that threaten the

existing patriarchy assigned gender roles, and somewhat these attempts to fix the social issues eventually happen at the cost of controlling women's lives to the extent where their sexuality and reproductive choices become a political tool to mobilise the mass. The events discussed in Chapter 2 and briefly again in Chapter 3 are real world events which are somewhat reflected in the two novels discussed. Every milestone towards the progress of women seem to be at the cost of the dignity of their community, or specifically, the men of their community, and fundamentalist politics targeting women in the name of religion seems to be an attempt at restoring that dignity. Thus when the government restricts access to abortions or contraception, or promotes pronatalist ideologies, on the surface a religious sentimentality is being made use of but in reality, the society is being structured in a manner that fixates on restricting women to their reproductive roles even if it is for the sake of religion, or for the greater good of the community. *The Handmaid's Tale*, gives us a glimpse of such a society where this situation extrapolates to the point where religious corollary is used for political agenda that benefits the patriarchy, a society that is a depiction of the women in Puritan times to modern day US. Similarly, beyond the events as described in Chapter 2 and 3, *Oryx* is emblematic of issues such as representation and sexualisation of women in consumerist culture, child sex trafficking, poverty induced oppression and matters as controversial as pornography. The novels takes the discussion of motherhood, reproduction and sexuality in the face of fundamentalist politics and manifests realities that stand as warnings to our present trends.

Conclusion

Dystopian fiction or speculative fiction, as discussed in this paper, is a reflection of our world with extensions to certain aspects being made. They act as a historical guide and also a prophetic warning as to where humanity is headed. The novels discussed in this paper target rising fundamentalism in politics and the immense investment of time and capital that is being put behind science and technology only to capitalise each and every invention to show that fundamentalism and consumerism can both cause destruction to our society in manners far worse than what have been depicted in the books, however my concern primarily have been to highlight the struggle, oppression and the sexualisation of women that comes with enhanced power structures of the society that does not diminish patriarchy but introduces new ways enforce male control. The research and study has been done in hopes that we reach an understanding of how layered patriarchy can be, and how it may play a great role in the destruction of the world as we know it. To conclude, of all the severe concerns that we pose on each other and our environment, reaching a state where women are treated as humans without their bodies being politicised or sexualised is one, and we can only hope that we make changes to our society and our perception before it is too late.

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