

State Power as a Means of Oppression Towards Women: A Study
of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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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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Approval

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Abstract

This thesis aims to trace the political and social events of the 1970s to 1980s with the focus on the rise of Christian beliefs during that time. It highlights how the women of patriarchal society in the novel and reality have been suffered, and have been targeted for oppress. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel which is inspired from the real events in 1980s America, Romania and some other countries. This thesis examines the role of women through different categorizations in Gilead, the fixed position of women which divided them from each other. The three waves of feminism and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* have been used to understand the concept of Atwood's writing and which explores the identity of women in patriarchy for better analysis of the novel. The women's culture has also been discussed. Moreover, the oppression towards women through the use of the Bible has been analyzed. In this thesis, women are not only being used for procreation but they are being oppressed biologically and sexually. Therefore, this thesis shows how the real events of 1980's depicted in the novel by focusing on the role of women in patriarchy society, women as an object to fulfil men's desire and their sexual oppression to mark that state power is being used to oppress women.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Women are the most beautiful creation of God. Women should be praised and loved with affection. A variety of cases around the world suggests that within a world full of men, women are being treated as worst as animals. They are being controlled by society's rules and regulations, they are living in a cage by the religious laws. One of the examples of oppression towards women is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Therefore, this Thesis offers the overall view of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* meaning the connection between the imaginative world and reality through the use of power to oppress women. Considering women as a center, Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel was written in the mid-1980 and it got published in 1986. After the publication of *The Handmaid's tale*, it became a best-seller because it captures the 20th century's tradition of Dystopian novels. "A state in which the conditions of human life are extremely bad as from deprivation or oppression or terror. A dystopian society is characterized by human misery in the form of squalor, oppression, disease, overcrowding, environmental destruction, or war" (Green) The dystopian genre presents the imaginative worlds and society which is not ideal but restrictive and terrifying at the same time. To progress towards the novel, first, it is important to know about its background. Atwood wrote the novel after the elections of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. Every aspect of this novel was inspired by the early 1980's political and social events. It is more like the mirror of the U.S situation through the election of Reagan. The rise of conservatism, an increase of Christian rights, and more power to the male figure- the moral majority of the state. However, this thesis exploration of the novel to shows the use of state power to oppress women through the character analysis of Offred and Serena, women being used as colonized subjects, and the use of state power on women. The questions that this thesis is going to follow: How the state power is controlling women? What

is the role of women? what is the position of women in patriarchy society? Do the elements of the novel only deal with the imaginative world?

The Handmaid's Tale is considered a speculative fiction¹. The complexity and ideals it propagates make the novel more than a work of fiction. It deals with the real-life issues that occurred in modern-day societies. It seamlessly combines the fundamentals of modern religion with an ancient totalitarian regime. The setting of the novel might be complicated to a keen reader as it combines ancient, modern, and post-modernist affairs in an unnoticeable way. Chronologically, the novel is not so much set into the distant future. However, geographically the story happens in a lane where the U.S of America lies after a theocratic regime overthrows it. It is more like to throw back the reader to the ancient time when the government used religion to make oppressive regimes. The characters of the novel are also similar to the real-life characters and their emotions. The two main female characters who are opposite are Offred as the protagonist and Serena as a televangelist² and gender traitor³. Offred is presented here as a survivor, who used her female attribute to escape the state, unlike others. On the other hand, Serena Joy is here presented as the worst category of women. Before the state of Gilead, Serena used to give speeches about religious thoughts and views to convince people but after that, she was unable to give any speeches because the state she wanted, held her in. She is a gender traitor too because she is the one who brought the idea of Handmaid. Women in Gilead live under Christian beliefs.

The way colonized country got colonized, lands got exploited and confronted by the powerful colonizer, people got mentally and physically dominated and deprived of their basic human rights, women in Gilead faced the same but with power and oppression by political, social,

¹ broad category of fiction encompassing genres with certain elements that are nonexistent in reality, in history, and in the present universe.

² someone who gives a religious speech to convince people to become Christian and donate money for the organization.

³ A person who supports thoughts and activities against their gender.

and religious norms. Power and submissive behavior between Canada and America can be compared with the colonized world of Gilead. The novel uncovers the female anxieties which lead us towards the male domination and sexual exploitation that tormented women. The handmaids who do not obey the orders in Gilead are punished in some way or got executed. They do not have any permission to work or to take any independent decisions. The only decision-maker in this state is the men. Handmaids are here only for breeding and reproduction. They are being treated like an animal or worse than an animal. Christianity is used as an influential factor that helping to change the beliefs, norms, values, cultures, and the brain of colonized people by the colonizers. There, Gilead use totalitarian theocracy⁴ to subjugate women. Moreover, they are using women's bodies as a political device which will produce future generation. In every month's sexual ceremony, ⁵handmaid has no right to say no, nor they have any control over her body. The commander uses his power like western colonizers on foreign lands to take control over the handmaid's body and uses it for his benefit. The rise of Christian beliefs is a weapon to control production. The ritual of sex is one of the examples which cannot be identified as forced nor rape but a ritual act of breeding.

The character Offred is forced to experience lonely journey and is prohibited to have any kind of freedom, even the communication with others is also limited. Gilead imposed extreme restrictions on women- they are forbidden by law to read books; all the female employees cannot work in any company anymore nor they can have own bank accounts. The new government seized all the power from its female citizens. The women were allowed to use only prescribed expressions that they have learned from "the Rachel and Leah Training Centre". ⁶The wives of the commanders are also dominating the handmaids like the behavior of white women towards black in post colonies. Gilead also imposed clothing restrictions on

⁴ A theocracy is a mature ideocracy where supreme values are defined by religion

⁵ The ceremony is a ritualized sexual act that undergoes between the handmaid, commander, and wives.

⁶ known as the red center, established to train handmaids. It is named after the Biblical Rachel and Leah story

women. women have no freedom to even what to wear. They are classified and divided into groups and each group has a different clothing pattern and color to wear. Men manage all decision-making and made oppressive culture to control women in and outside. The limitation in speaking can also be seen in the novel where some handmaid's mouth is sealed. In Gilead, women should remain speechless and men should have the words. The handmaid's name, identity all are being manipulated and controlled to make them passive, silent, submissive, and sexual objects. It is more like a panopticon ⁷prison for women in Gilead, where they cannot break the rules or say any words.

Besides, the introduction and conclusion, this thesis has two sections. Above mentioned sections have some sub-sections under them. In the first section, I will discuss the role of women, categorization, unchangeable status and disunity of women. In the second section, I will discuss women being colonized subjects in Gilead State, the role of women being marginalized, Bible is a weapon to control, use of the ceremony to have ritual sex, the restrictions upon women, the biological and sexual oppression.

For this thesis paper, feminist theory will identify the role of the women in the text, their position in the society. Feminist theory is an extended version of feminism into theoretical and fictional writing. It seeks to understand the nature of gender inequality and explores the social roles, interests, experiences, etc. Feminist theory's focus is gender inequality, patriarchy, oppression, discrimination, and sexual objectification. Women are not being oppressed by the state only but they are also being downed by the country and their families. In *The Handmaid's Tale* women are being dominated by the women. The novel is the representation of women in real, the emotions and suffering cannot be unseen through this

⁷ a circular cell arranged prison where prisoners observed all the time.

first-person view nor the experience. Women are being oppressed because of their gender and position.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that features the risks of women in a Gilead that has dehumanized their status as well as made it practically criminal to be a woman. The novel features a brutal reality where ladies have no opportunity to take decision. In *The Handmaid's Tale* ladies are painted as objects for male self-centered longings and fulfillment. by using the law, men in Gilead withdrawn all the life worth living facilities from for women. IvyPanda stated in the article named "Literary analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* essay" that "In the republic of Gilead, women are not supposed to read, write or even listen to music. these are the luxuries only reserved for men, Women are also denied the natural pleasures such as love and romance". The novel is the combination religion with ancient totalitarian regimes of leadership. "The complexity of the novel and the ideals it propagates makes it more than a work of fiction because it highlights real issues that affect modern-day societies" (IvyPanda). The state power here is the mirror through Bible, the use of Bible as a totem for the totalitarian system.

The role of the Biblical in the state depicted in *The Handmaid's tale* is ambiguous. locked in a special wooden box, it becomes a totem of the totalitarian system in every house [...] others are forbidden to read it. [...] The bible is a trapped text turned into a lethal instrument because the regime make it generate oppressive laws (Filipczak, 171). Basically, the everyday life in Gilead is based on the principles which came from biblical model. The society represent the male dominance and captured female as an object, "the society fosters male domination and female object status, which is sanctioned by the patriarchal history of Jacob/Israel and by paul's first letter to Timothy. 'Let the woman learn her subjection' marks the crucial moment in the wedding ceremony" (Filipczak, 171)

In order to claim that *The Handmaid's Tale* is futuristic novel, “we can understand a world which differs considerably from the actual world and use that understanding to adjust our view of what is or could be the case in the actual world [...] while adjustment may be an important aspect of literature and imagination” (D. Murphy, 26). Atwood wrote the novel during 1985 right after the election of Ronald Reagan in the U.S. The election gave boost to the rise of conservatism, Christian rights, male dominance etc. The west party got fueled, during a period of conservative revival by strong and well-organized movement of religious conservatives. They criticized the sexual revolution: of 1960s to 1970s. Atwood used to keep the records of articles about women. She drew inspiration from the political stories of the day. she said- ‘clip, clipper, clip, out of the newspaper, I clipped things’ [...] she told Rebeca lead in a recent New Yorker profile- Atwood recounted saving articles about falling birth rates, repressive policies on contraception and abortion” (Weigel).

As a feminist Atwood also puts her experience and personal thoughts into novel beneath the events. “*The Handmaid's Tale* grew out of a tangled skein of roots. There was Atwood’s robust feminism, her already-deep ecological concerns and her abiding interest in her puritan New England ancestors, including Mary Webster, who survived being hanged as a witch in 1685” (Brian,45) this reminds me of the handmaid were almost being hanged for revolting in the red center for not throwing stones on Janine. Atwood resembles in her writing what she has saw so far with the future thoughts. The control of women is more like the control of half of the population and the future in hand. Controlling half of the population is more like having powers in hand, women’s sufferings during the three waves was unbearable. The state and whole country is like suppressing the women to seize the power and use it against them as a weapon. “Atwood observes what those people would have done then had they taken power was pretty clear, what their desired goals were” (Brian, 46). According to

Atwood, the desired goal was always to seize the power by controlling the women and the birth.

Two years before writing the novel, Atwood has clearly spoken that “Am I a propagandist? no! am I an observer of society? Yes! and no one who observes society can fail to make observation that are feminist. That is just common sense” (Shirley, 856). So, it is obvious that as a common observer Atwood stocked files of every incident in her particular time, which she later portrayed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “Atwood kept a file of these inroads on human rights and women’s freedom, which she took with her on book tours as evidence for her insistence that she had ‘invented nothing’ in Gilead” (Shirley, 856). “Atwood was aware of the atrocities happening around the world which impacted women and their decision concerning their bodies and she (Atwood) was strongly influenced by Romania’s suppression of abortion rights” (Oukiya). The power makes human greedy and blind as well. “By linking a seemingly fictional dystopia with real life, we have found ourselves examining the true nature of humans once given power, the mechanisms by which we nonchalantly let them abuse said power” (J, D.) Therefore, inventing nothing means it is the portrayal of 1980’s event which Atwood gave some futuristic views in the novel.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

This thesis is methodologically aiming at providing a critical reading of the text *The Handmaid's Tale* from feminist perspective. Doing so, it is the investigation of the portrayal of protagonist Offred, Serena Joy as commander's wife and other female characters. It explores the effects of the gender discrimination, objectification and colonized subject by seeking to understand how the women survived the oppression, and what is their position in patriarchy society. Moreover, Theoretical Framework is divided into two sections which is history of literary Feminist theory and feminism and *The Handmaid's Tale*. each section is elaborated with the connection of Atwood's writings and a discussion on second wave feminism to tracing the development of feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

i. History of Literary Feminist Theory

The term women's liberation can be utilized to portray a political, social or financial development pointed toward building up equivalent rights and legitimate security for ladies. Women's liberation includes political and sociological speculations and the issues about gender inequality. In the Western history, women were struck into domestic sphere, while the public life was reserved for men. In some parts of the world, women were not allowed to own any property, nor any kind of study was allowed for them to have. Besides that, they were restricted to participate in the public life and even if they go in public, they had to maintain some rules according to their continent. As example- "At the end of the 19th century in France, women were compelled to cover their heads in public, and in parts of Germany, a husband still had the right to sell his wife" (Burkett). Next, without male representative, women were not even allowed to conducting business and many more restrictions on women

may be still continue today as well. Furthermore, few rebellions came up in the late 14th and 15th century in isolated voice but not in a group for inferior status of women. In France around early 15th century, the first feminist Philosopher Christine de Pisan came forward with a bold call for “Female education” (Burkett). Later many feminists came up for the battle of women to fight. The defense of women become literary subgenre by the end of 16th century. The “debate about women” (Burkett) did not get into the England until late 16th century. Later, Albeit the expressions "woman's rights" and "women's activist" didn't acquire broad use until the 1970s, they were at that point being utilized in the public speech a whole lot sooner. Elaine Showalter is an American feminist writer and a critic. she is one of the founders of feminist literary criticism in U.S academia. Her writings in 1970s is a survey of the history of feminist tradition which is within the wilderness of literary theory and criticism. “Feminist Criticism in Wilderness” By Showalter is the exploration of the facts “like feminist creative writers, feminist critics also face certain obstacles which have got highlighted after the rise of feminism [...] tried to analyze in detail the belief that feminist criticism is in wilderness” (Jamal). Feminist’s target of 1970s was to escape the world of patriarchy, “the openness of feminist criticism appealed particularly to Americans [...] of the 1970s [...] the epitome of a pernicious masculine discourse from which many feminists wished to escape” (Showalter 181)

As indicated by Maggie Humm and Rebecca Walker, the historical backdrop of women's liberation can be partitioned into three waves. The principal women's feminist wave was in the nineteenth and mid-20th hundreds of years, the second was during the 1960s and 1970s, and the third reaches out from the 1990s to the present. Woman's rights have modified overwhelming viewpoints in a wide scope of zones inside Western culture, going from culture to law. Women's activists have lobbied for women’s legitimate rights⁸,for women

⁸ privileges of agreement, property rights, casting a ballot right.

entitlement to substantial respectability and self-governance, for early termination rights, and for conceptive rights⁹, for the safety of women from abusive behavior at home, from rape, for work environment rights, including maternity leave and equivalent compensation, against sexism, and against all different types of sexual harassment

During quite a bit of its set of experiences, most women's activist developments and hypotheses had pioneers who were dominantly working-class white ladies from Western Europe and North America. Be that as it may, at any rate since Sojourner Truth's 1851 discourse to American women's activists, ladies of different races have proposed elective feminisms. This pattern sped up during the 1960s with the Social equality development in the US and the breakdown of European imperialism in Africa, the Caribbean, portions of Latin America and Southeast Asia. Since that time, ladies in previous European states and the Third World have proposed "Third World" feminisms.

As I have mentioned that scholars have divided feminist movement history into three waves- First wave, Second wave and the Third wave. It is important to know about the waves in order to apply it to the novel. The primary wave alludes primarily to ladies' testimonial developments of the nineteenth and mid-20th hundreds of years (predominantly worried about ladies' entitlement to cast a ballot). The subsequent wave alludes to the thoughts and activities related with the ladies' freedom development starting during the 1960s (which lobbied for legitimate and social rights for ladies). The third wave alludes to a continuation of, and a response to the apparent disappointments of, second-wave women's liberation, starting during the 1990s. The idea about women's limitability raised from the early stage of human life as example, women should stay at home, they should take care of their children and husband etc. But Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) reprimanded the

⁹ counting admittance to contraception and quality pre-birth care

possibility that ladies could just discover satisfaction through childrearing and homemaking. As indicated by Friedan's eulogy in *The New York Times*, *The Feminine Mystic* "ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world and is widely regarded as one of the most influential nonfiction books of the 20th century" (Fox) In the book Friedan conjectures that ladies are survivors of a deception framework that expects them to discover personality and importance in their lives through their spouses and kids. Such a framework makes ladies totally lose their personality in that of their family. Friedan explicitly finds this framework among post-The Second Great War working class rural networks. Simultaneously, America's post-war financial expansion had prompted the improvement of new advances that should make family work less troublesome, yet that frequently had the aftereffect of making ladies' work less significant and important.

ii. Feminism and *The Handmaid's Tale*

The exploration of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a reaction of Second-Wave feminism through its development from 1970's root. We will see that Margaret Atwood adjusts herself more to Liberal Woman's rights, which was enlivened by First- Wave Women's liberation, than with the Subsequent Wave.

First-Wave Woman's rights centered around authoritatively commanded disparities Second-Wave Woman's rights saw informal true imbalances, like separation and persecution, as similarly significant. Defenders of Second-Wave Women's liberation saw the individual as the political and were resolved to assist ladies with understanding parts of their individual lives as profoundly politicized, and reflective of a sexiest structure of power. In her article "Changing the role of Women," Pollock explains that single direction to accomplish this

objective was to uncover that "The sexist mythology exists because the relationship between male and female is a political one, a relationship of superordinate to subordinate—and a relationship that obtains in the most intimate and personal as well as the most massive and public of our activities" (18). Recognizing the political element of ladies' private oppression was the beginning of the new women movement.

Second-Wave Woman's rights, otherwise called the Ladies' Freedom Development, started as what might later be called Liberal or Moderate Feminism. Advocated by figures like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, Liberal Woman's rights endeavored to change or fitting existing political designs to advance ladies' inclinations along a social equality mode. The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 encouraged women to admit and acknowledge the import of their feelings of personal dissatisfaction, urging them to seek out its social sources. The movement ignored working class and minority women, which later turned out as a sub-group are Separatism, Materialist feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism etc. These sub-groups were concerned with recovering cultural, artistic and traditions expressions that were uniquely female. The gynocentric culture's misassumption of women is gentler and kinder than men, Atwood breaks the assumption in her novel where we can see that a woman's culture is being maintained through another woman's cruelty. The downfall of separatism can be seen in the novel when the protagonist Offred's mother who was a dedicated Second-wave Feminist stated "I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women" (Atwood 121). It indicates that without solving gender inequality issue, she just reversed the social attitudes.

In the first place, the impact of women's liberation on *The Handmaid's Tale* is talked about. In following the advancement of woman's rights, a supported conversation of Second-Wave Woman's rights is advertised. Atwood's advancing women's activist feelings are additionally analyzed, fundamentally through some published interviews of Atwood directed among 1972 and 2005. It is placed that inside *The Handmaid's Tale* the genuine danger in Gilead comes not from male but rather from female control. A definitive consequence of the miniature definition in Gilead is the advancement of another type of sexism, not as we typically consider it, as men's contempt of ladies, however as ladies' scorn of ladies. Atwood portrays one practical reaction from our present women's activist energy: gynocentric Misogyny and "Traditional" sexism consolidated in one aggressive social and strict request—the Republic of Gilead. All in all, the male-overwhelmed power structure depends on ladies to manage each other also, uphold social guidelines. The way of thinking educating the social construction is not extraordinary to Gilead: “no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (*The Handmaid's tale* 308).

There are many utopian and dystopian novels like *The last men, Herland, 1984* etc. which influenced Atwood to varying degrees, but the analysis of the elements of sexual power politics, relations between the sexes etc. lead us that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a critique of Second wave Feminism and there is little that Atwood invented here but it is an extended mirror of those event.

iii. Historical Inspirations:

Atwood draws many historical events from different countries' perspectives which gives a strong sense that this State (Gilead) is nothing that hasn't happened in real. "Atwood was

highly influenced by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 as well as environmental incidents such as the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in Pennsylvania in 1979" (Ourkiya). The ban of technology-based tools during maternity was inspired by the suppression of abortion in Romania. "Issued Decree 770 in 1996 banning women from contraception as well as abortion" (Ourkiya). The law passed through the women as a form of slavery. As abortion is the most common form of controlling birth, the Romanians took the rights from women to have control over their bodies. It assigned all women under one term- Maternity job. Offred in the novel faced a similar situation when she had sex with a stranger made her felt like being undressed in public and let the state have control over her body. Romanian and Gilead banned contraception but not for the same reasons. Romanian did it to give boost their population for economic growth and Gilead did for re-establish its population from elite families. Some restrictions and rules of Gilead were inspired by the Catholic Community – The people of Hope. For example- the early marriage of women, the restrictions of social contact, etc. "The wives of the sects¹⁰ coordinator was called "handmaidens" which Atwood had underlined in the news article for obvious reasons" (J, D.).

Atwood's theocratic structure of Gilead is comparable with the people of Hope. Both used Bible as a weapon to exercise their authoritative and misogynistic beliefs. The main verse that Gilead used to justify its State-sanctioned rape as the ritual is "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees that I may also have children by her" (Atwood 27). Gilead modified Bible just as The Hope of People community did. Another great inspiration Atwood got is from the "Soviet Uranium Mines" event during the 1970s. "forced prisoners to perform manual labor in heavily radiated uranium mines [...] the camps were allegedly used as a death sentence [...] inspired Atwood to create the colonies, which are toxic dumps and radiation spills" (J, D). Gilead and The Soviet Union are similar

¹⁰ A group of people with different religious belief

in using this harmful site as a death sector. The historical inspiration left a great impact on the novel to show what happened so far in history and what can happen if everything comes up together. Atwood brought all the criticism together of society by creating Gilead.

Chapter 4

Analysis

i. Role of Women:

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. there were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. (Atwood 19)

The quote indicates toward new regime which took over the United States of America gradually without being noticed by its former citizens. Now, the citizens find themselves in a different society which is a totalitarian society. Society is structured hierarchically with women. The women here are divided into different categories according to their age and fertility. This section of the thesis will explore how the handmaids are treated in Gilead by the categorization, disunity, and unchangeable status between them.

a. Categorization:

There are 3 categories of women mainly in the novel but there is a lot more to the roles of them. There are more than 3 categories, in short- the women in Gilead are divided into 6 groups. These 6 groups are Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Econowives, and Unwomen. This chapter will merely discuss the groups and their relation with each other for further understanding of how each of the groups is being treated in Gilead.

Since the novel is being told from the perspective of Offred-the handmaid so, the most important group per categorization is the handmaids. They are the most powerless group among others. They have to bear children for the couples like rich, older, and powerful. These couples are those who cannot have their children due to the infertility of the wives.

Before Gilead's take over, the handmaids in the pre-Gilead state used to be homosexual, divorced, unmarried, married, and even the women who had already been married several times. The Gilead set such rules where all these handmaids come under it:

The regime created an instant pool of such women by the simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and nonmarital liaisons adulterous, arresting the female partners, and, because they were morally unfit, confiscating the children they already had, who were adopted by childless couples of the upper echelons who were eager for progeny by any means (Atwood 86)

Under such strict rules, Moira- the friend of Offred got arrested as she is lesbian and has a child without marriage with a female partner. So, she is unfit to keep the children. Next, Offred here is the main protagonist. Offred and Her husband Luke got targeted by the new government because of Luke's second marriage with Offred. As per the rules of Gilead only first marriage is valid. Offred's fertility pulled her under Handmaid's group. Janine who worked as the waitress came under this category because was gang-raped and had an abortion. Moreover, it is not mentioned that if she was married but she had a young daughter. Next, the handmaids dressed always in red with flat shoes and gloves. Head to toe a long dress, as if they are carrying the color of blood with them. "a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A sister dipped in blood" (Atwood 5) it's the color which defines them "Everything [...] around my face is red: the color of blood which defines us" (Atwood 5). there is no mention of it but the red color can be the mean of the capability of carrying a baby as well. The only thing white here is their wings around their faces which are made for them to not being able to be seen or to see "The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing but also from being seen" (Atwood 5). As I have mentioned above that this category is the most powerless group, they have no prestigious position in Gilead but they are

being used as options to give birth to babies. they are nothing in Gilead, "nothing entertaining [...] no rooms [...] for the flowering of secret lusts, [...] no footholds for love, we are two-legged wombs, that all; sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 40). Through the journey of Offred, it can be seen that each handmaid holds a different name from their commander. They never got called by their actual name, it takes away their identity and marks them as a colonized subject by the state.

The handmaids are not being controlled by the state but also being hated by other women because of their ability to reproduce. It also differs them from the 2nd group which is wives. The wives in Gilead are older and infertile, they are also married to powerful women. Like the handmaids, they are also being identified by their color of the dress, "light blue, the color of wives" (Atwood 68). Serena Joy came under this category as she is the one who advocated that all women should be confined to the home including herself. Serena used to sing but later she started giving the speech and advocate on women should "return to traditional values" (Atwood 5). The only thing that makes them powerful in some way is their husband- the commander. "It's one of the things we fought for, said the commander's wife" (Atwood 7). Moving on to the next group which is the aunts, they are not completely powerless. They hold the ability to torture, teach, and make the handmaids ready for their posting. They train the Handmaids in "The Red center" (Atwood 29). Aunt Lydia got taken by the soldier and got locked in a tank for sufficient time. After tremendous torture, she could not refuse to become an Aunt and to hang others who refused the role. The aunt created a new class of women. They have entrusted policewomen who train the young women to become wives besides the handmaids, they also help the families to arrange marriages in Gilead. The color of their dress is brown, an "electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts" (Atwood 4).

The Next group of women is Marthas. The Marthas here in Gilead do home chores like cooking and washing etc. They have no massive role in the novel but their identity is also shaped here by the color and their activity. The color of their dress is "dull green, like a surgeon's gown of the time before" (Atwood 5). 2 more groups that are less discussed in the novel are the Unwomen and Econowives. The Unwomen here mostly are the feminists, non-conformists, and homosexuals. Gilead sent those Unwomen to the colonies where they clean up nuclear waste. Moreover, the last group of women is the Econowives who can grasp all duties. They have all color in their "Striped Dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy" (Atwood 10) which indicate all duty combined. They got married to a less powered man, "Mark the women of the poorer men" (Atwood 10). Even though they are married to less powerful men like the drivers, Guards, they are still fertile. This means they can bear their child and make a family.

The category of the women in Gilead leads them in a different direction but all the women are being controlled through the state. their clothing style, colors, and also their activities are shaped by the state. It is very surprising to see that how all of these women including the wives from different job sectors lost their job and every right they used to have. The freedom of speech, the freedom of work everything they have lost from their life. It resembles the second wave of feminism "In 1961 [...] documented a national pattern of employment discrimination, legal inequality" (Burkett). The colors of their uniform shaping their positions in Gilead and dividing them from each other.

b. Unchangeable Status:

The role of the women in Gilead cannot be changed. More or less, they can go down as the Marthas, or the handmaids can be going down as Unwomen and sent to the colonies. The

men in Gilead can gain or lose their power as there is no one to question their fertility, they can grow from one position to another. For example, Nick in the novel. In the beginning, Nick started as a Guardian and ended up as a member of both the eyes and mayday. Where men's fertility is unquestionable, women's fertility is the main thing to assign them into a different role. Now the roles of women in Gilead are harsh and seem very dramatic but it's an extended version of 1980's women. Ferber asserts that "with industrialization when production moved into factories and work was increasingly equated with employment, that the 'traditional' housewife came into existence. her role was confined to caring for children, nurturing her husband and maintain her home" (274). Atwood here divided each work into each role- to maintain a home there is Marthas, to nurturing husband there are wives, most importantly to bear child there are handmaids. The other characters here may be added by Atwood deliberately. The one rule which united them under one umbrella is having access to reading and writing. All of the categories were not allowed to read or write. Having no rights to education is one way to oppress women from the state. As education helps to move forward with thoughts, Gilead put a full stop there. State took away their ability to communicate with others.

If women can read and write, they'll be able to communicate with each other. this would be threatening the powers that be as it might encourage women to join together and resist this barbaric regime [...] men in charge are determined to control reality and that means ensuring that women only believe what their menfolk want them to believe (Morrison).

For Aunt Lydia, the pen is the most dangerous object of desire "Pen is envy" (Atwood 54). The rules by Gilead controlling women's ability to read and write are also preventing from the thoughts of changing their status. Changing the status of women can be threatening for the state.

c. Disunity of Women:

Besides, all of these categorizations, there is a women's culture in Gilead state. Not the women's culture one can think or wish for. what do we think when we hear about women's culture? united women? women taking care of other women? Maybe that's what we wish for. In the memory lane of Offred, she was addressing her mother by saying

By now I'm wrung out, exhausted [...] it happens this way with some of us. we sit on our benches, facing one another, as we are transported; we're without emotions now, almost without feeling. [...] mother I think wherever you are maybe. Can you hear me? You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. it isn't what you meant but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies (Atwood 38).

The women's culture was designed by the state of Gilead. The men of the state make sure to give no chance to the women to unite. The groups that divided the women created a strong tension between them, especially between the handmaids and the wives. The wives are jealous of the handmaids because they get to perform the ritual which is sexual intercourse with their husbands. They even backbite behind their back "little whores, all of them" (Atwood 34). Another reason for their jealousy is fertility. The handmaid's fertility made the wives very tentative in terms of behavior. As in the novel Serena Joy is being nice, she was expecting Offred to be pregnant, but when Offred was not pregnant the behavior suddenly changed to animalistic. More reasons can be considered for the hate for the handmaids are affair with the commanders. This can be seen through the case of Janine and Offred. Handmaids do also envy the wives for their power. Offred in the novel admitted that "he wouldn't be able to intervene, to save me; the transgressions of women in the household, whether Martha or the Handmaid, are supposed to be under the jurisdiction of the wives alone. she was malicious and vengeful women" (Atwood 47) The Marthas also envy both

groups- handmaids and wives. They wish to be in their position. It can be felt through their behavior. Offred once commented on Martha's behavior that they should not be "Fraternize" (Atwood 6)¹¹ with the handmaids. The system of Gilead makes sure that the women do not unite and protest against them like grouping. Handmaids are not even allowed to talk with each other because they are the ones who are being tortured and controlled all over. So, the chances of rebellion from their sides are high.

The duality of women in the State of Gilead can be seen through the Aunts. The state uses women to control women. The Wives and the Aunts are controlling the handmaids. The Aunts here play the role of duality, they torture the handmaids like animals but then again, they speak up for them more like a paradox. "Many women were willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called 'Traditional values' or for the benefits they might thereby acquire. when power is scarce, a little of it is tempting" (Atwood 87). In the entire disunited state, wives and handmaids got united under one roof is during the monthly ceremony. Offred's perspective-

above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thigh is on either side of me. She too is fully-clothed, my arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being (Atwood 29).

Wives holding hands lead us toward the controlling rule in women. The handmaid here works as an invisible medium. Still the rules of holding hands during the ceremony made by the State power. The only place and time when the handmaids are not being controlled is the birth-giving time. That time wives sit and act like the handmaids as if they are giving birth. The only thing Gilead cannot control is the birth ceremony.

¹¹ form a friendship with the one is not supposed to

The role of women in Gilead is connected with the deprivation of rights which is dividing them and stopping them from united together. The State created a barrier by women's group "female control agency known as the Aunts [...] the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproduction and other purposes were through women themselves" (Atwood 87).

All the categories of women are connected by one thing which is reproduction. The State power is being used to control women, to control their ability to think.

ii. Oppressed and Disfigured Life:

1970 was a decade of progression of women's right but "by 1984, totalitarianism and other groups had managed to attack many of these progresses [...] Atwood given the conservative climate of the United States, where Ronald Reagan was president and the religious right was on its way to success" (Surmund). The political situation was visible in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood did not use "the elements of the soviet system and the puritans but also the Christian right" (Surmund). People will always do what they always wanted to do if they get chance, Atwood took Evangelicals¹² in her novel to show what they can do if they get a chance to, as a result, the State of Gilead came out. This section of the thesis will discuss what happens to the women in Gilead by the use of the Bible as a weapon, by biological and sexual oppression in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

a. Bible as a Weapon to oppress:

History always tends to repeat itself so, Atwood takes the chance in her novel to set logical consequences which put a thought in us that "Christian right will try to reach its goal once

¹² a set of spiritual principles practiced by Protestant Christians [...] affirm traditional protestant teachings on the authority as well as the historicity of the Bible (Wikipedia)

they were given chance" (Surmund). She manages to show covert ¹³oppression of women in the State of Gilead but the oppressions can be felt through the journey of Offred in the novel. The political system of the 1980s made it easier for the Evangelicals to reach their popularity with their traditional beliefs. The main goal was not to put back God in State but to control the women through power by using Bible to make more sense. "It is Judd who is credited with devising the form [...] Particution ceremony, [...] act as a steam valve for the female elements in Gilead. Scapegoat has been notoriously useful throughout the history" (Atwood 87). The use of religion and its language to manipulate people in the novel can be seen through Aunt Lydia's statement "This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television [...] but this is the center, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood 9). They rephrased the world with Christ's words "The kingdom of God is within you" (WritingBros). Religion and power constantly grow with each other in terms of control over the other half and the future generation-women. Gilead's use of selective biblical language and the Bible enforce the system of patriarchy. The fundamental idea behind Gilead was clear by the epigraph at the beginning of the novel which is a "reference of Genesis 30: 1-3" (WritingBros). "Give me children or else I die" (Atwood 20) to seize the women as handmaids in Gilead's childless marriage to rise future generations- the heirs. According to the epigraph "Genesis 30:1-3 is one of several passages that make clear that in patriarchal Hebrew times it was legitimate for a man to have sex and even beget children by his servants, particularly if his wife was infertile" (George). Some specific parts of the Bible glorify marriages and allow the men to be free from the guilt of adulterine- Gilead took those specific parts and turned them into laws. It is more like Gilead is a Biblical place itself. For example- The store names where the handmaids are allowed to are named as per Bible "Loaves and Fishes" (Atwood 48), "Milk and honey"

¹³ Not displayed openly.

(Atwood 81), "All Flesh" (Atwood 81), and "Lilies" (Atwood 10). The hotel where the handmaids were kept was named "Jezebel's" (Atwood 73). All of these references reinforce the idea behind making the state of Gilead. Because of the falling birth rate in elite families, the formation of Gilead took place. The main concern of the state is the children- the heirs. Sexual intercourse becomes ritualistic because of Bible. "Some aspects of Gileadite life reflect the Baal Peor rite. Intercourse ceremonies for Commanders and handmaids can be termed ritualistic because they are sanctioned by the state, and are normally preceded by a kind of religious service" (Filipczak 176). The use Bible is nothing to purify in the State but a modified version to oppress women, "As every totalitarian regime, Gilead has its ideology that is a corrupted version of the Biblical way towards a better reality" (Filipczak 177).

b. Biological oppression:

Women's identity is nothing in the patriarch society except being able to biologically active to give birth. Beauvoir asserts "Women? very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb. an ovary, she is female. this word is sufficient to define her [...] the term female is derogatory not because it emphasized women's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex" (33). As I have mentioned before that in Gilead women are nothing but "Two-legged wombs". The state "controls and manipulates women's biological and reproductive capacities" (Zarrinjooee). In Gilead, the fertility of the women is the main cause of their oppression. The Handmaids are nothing but a reproductive machine that only produces children, once they are done, they shifted to another commander. It is more like a deliveryman is giving the delivery of the products but Gilead made the Handmaid's status worse than the delivery man. As Offred says in the novel "we are all for breeding purposes" (Atwood 40). The handmaids are also considered as "Ambulatory" (Atwood 40) wombs. They have no identity if they lose their fertility- the capacity for bearing a child. Moreover,

maternity is considered the biological task for women. The commander of Offred made it sure to her by stating "This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace, with full support and encouragement" (Atwood 64). "For the biological differences between men and women [...] most important factors for society to determine women's subordination" (Zarrinjooee). The male has normal interaction with the world where the female body has more to do, it is more like prison itself. In the novel, Aunt Lydia asked Offred to clean down there because unhygienic will cause the baby harm. Gilead is more conscious about a child's health more than a person's condition. They considered the handmaids as a product which will give services for the well-being but they will never be considered as a human being.

The handmaids are the most oppressed group among the other groups. The bedroom becomes the prison for them, other than their bodies. Offred the protagonist describes her thoughts of dividing her room "I explored this room, not hastily, then like a hotel room, wasting it, I didn't want to do it at once, I wanted to make it last. I divided the room into sections, in my head; I allowed myself one section a day. this one section I would examine with the greatest minuteness" (Atwood 17). As Offred was careless in her pre-Gilead life, now she regrets everything. She becomes a slave and victim of Gilead, the state treats women as if they are immature, they have no idea or identity of their own. They belong to their commander as a property of them. As the names of the handmaids suggest "Offred, Ofglen, etc." are the names of each commander they are working with. 'Of-Fred' means of Fredrick Waterford. The name of handmaids works as devices which indicates whom they belong to. "total male ownership as one of the bases of patriarchal state of Gilead and also emphasizes the deprivation of women's self-identities, Handmaids are sex slaves and fertility machines who are controlled by high-class males in the society" (Zarrinjooee). Moreover, preventing them from education as I have discussed above is another oppression to force them to go with

their body because it leaves nothing in them- no use of brain, no use of rationality, no use of thoughts. They are obliged to play the role of maternity, the institution "The red center" is the biggest example of it. It reinforces the thoughts that this is the last destination of the women and they cannot deny it or ignore it- they are bound to do it. The body becomes the prison from where women want to be free. In the novel, it is also mentioned by Offred-

I know this can't be right but I think it anyway. everything they taught at the Red Center, everything I've resisted, comes flooding in. I don't want pain. I don't want to be a dancer, my feet in the air, my head a faceless oblong of white cloth. I don't want to be a doll hung up on the wall, I don't want to be a wingless angel. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. they can do what they like with me. I am an object (Atwood 82).

In the State of Gilead, women's body seen as an object which got exploited by the men. Gilead tries to establish and extend the male domination, the power structure by various means. The aunts in The Red Center teach the handmaids that their feet and hands are useless, Aunt Lydia tells the handmaids to consider themselves as "seeds" (Atwood 8), as seed refers to offspring- it reinforces the biological exploitation of women's. Even in some places of the novel some damaged handmaids are infants are still being used because of their fertility, some of their mouths are stitched and covered with red cloth which again shows the objectification of women. They do not need any mouth, nor hands, or feet to serve the society only a uterus, an ovary is enough.

c. Sexual Oppression:

Sexuality in Gilead is extremely appropriated and manipulated by the men of the state. The handmaids have restricted and subordinated positions in Gilead which prevent them from regulated sex during the maternal task. Even the intercourse ritual has no feelings or

attachment but just an act for procreation. Zarrinjooee asserts in his paper that "Heterosexuality and the notion of love embedded in such an institution play a significant part in demolishing female sexuality in Gilead". As per the state's rule, the handmaids here are for maternity but deep down in the novel, it shows several occasions where men found to be sexually active in underground colonies. Frederick Waterford Offred's Commander took her out of the house to have sexual interactions out of this Gilead rule. Offred expressed what she saw down there "The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off-balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. their head is uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality" (Atwood 11). The women here are not for only the maternity task but to satisfy men's needs and pleasures as well. The women Offred talks about are the women who play the role of prostitutes for men because of the domination and authority they. Moira named the place "Butch Paradise", where women can at least drink, talk and have sex regularly but still under supervision. They are still sexually being oppressed "Jezebel's with fifty Commanders inside it. I'd like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her" (Atwood 73).

Women's sexual desires are oppressed, they are inferior and men are superior. The handmaids submit themselves to the commander and his wives, they act as an invisible medium yet active during the monthly intercourse- the ritual in hope of getting pregnant. There is no love nor any eye contact during the act, at least not officially. The desire for sex attracts Offred towards Nick. The need for sex, an attraction made her visit Nick every night. In the state of Gilead, sex for pleasure is not allowed, so Offred chose to do it secretly with Nick and the Commander with Offred. As sexuality is under the control of the State, breaking the rules cause big punishment in the result. For example, Janine and her Commander Warren Putnam broke the rules by getting engaged in sexual acts with the desire of getting married caused Warren to lose his hand.

The summary of this chapter is that women are being oppressed in every possible way in Gilead. They are not here to only produce but to satisfy society officially and unofficially. They are being exploited by the men in the state of Gilead. The rules of Gilead disfigure their life with no identity. They have violated sexually and biologically. The incidents in the novels through Offred make it clear how one woman is going through all of the oppression under one regime.

Conclusion:

As mentioned before, Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* after the election of Ronald Reagan. So, Atwood captured the essence of past events and portrayed it in a novel, she wrote the novel from what society and the people had done to women. Atwood combined the true reflection of what the state can do and has done so far in different countries including Romania. The ban on the use of contraception and abortion- the law that passed in 1967 inspired Atwood to restrict any use of medical tools during maternity in her novel. Romania not only denied women's rights but also controlled their bodies and turned them into baby-makers. Like Romania, Atwood had collected many articles about subordinated women from other countries. Atwood built the controlling theocratic structure of Gilead which is relatable to the People of Hope- The Catholic community, New Jersey. Gilead used some specific verses from Bible and used it according to their wish and ignored the facts that does not goes with their ideologies. The force of the Soviet Union in the 1970s on the prisoner is the relatable scene on the unwomen group in the colonies. This leads to again the usage of women, Gilead kept the fertile women for use and sent the old, infertile women to the colonies as a death sentence for no use. Atwood portrayed her criticism of society by portraying each aspect separately in her novel. The categorization of women is needed to separate the useful ones and non-useful ones for Gilead. The separation is a kind of tactic to get what Gilead wants which is future heirs from the elite families. The categorization separates the women from themselves from being united to avoid group attacks and rebellions. Gilead used Biblical references for all women in the state that education is prohibited for women. Moreover, Gilead is seen having men use powers for the exploitation of women in various ways, sexually and biologically.

The connection between the domination of women and the subordination of nature is seen in *The Handmaid's tale*. It shows how women can become the product when the

situation of the state got down in need of reproduction. In the name of bringing back the traditional values, Gilead imposed strict rules over second marriages to separate the women because according to Gilead, the first marriage is only valid. From those women, Gilead separated the fertile women for maternity jobs. They divided all the women by colors and uniforms but most importantly fertility. However, the main concern here is to show how the women are being treated in Gilead by categorization, by being alone- disunited and what happens to them in Gilead. It shows how women become the victim of sexual exploitation by men. State power here is not used to save the future but to oppress women, to control them for men's pleasure and desire. More research can be done with Atwood's other novels *Oryx and Crake*, *The Edible Women*, *Power Politics*, etc., most importantly, Atwood's recent novel *The Testaments* published in 2019. Further analysis including these texts can give more insight to this discussion.

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