

Chapter II

The Handmaid's Tale: A Journey through Repression

A dystopic world, where nothing is right for anybody and nobody is happy for themselves, instead are happy, for there are no other choice, is what *The Handmaid's Tale* is all about. Margaret Atwood, best known for her speculative and dystopic works of fiction, is the author of this novel. As she herself has proclaimed in *Moving Targets: Writing with Intent 1982-2004*, this is not a science fiction but is a work of speculative fiction:

... in *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or which it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We've done it, or we're doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion. So I think of *The Handmaid's Tale* not as science fiction, but as speculative fiction; and, more particularly, as that negative form of Utopian fiction which has come to be known as the Dystopia. (102- 103)

The Handmaids are transformed into beings who think in place of others. They have nobody to think for. To put it in a right way, they do not know whether they have somebody to think for, which becomes an even-more worse situation. They think, but they do not know for whose sake they are thinking, or what they are thinking for. They do not think of others because of

the fear of death, for they do not have the intention to live their torturous lives. Although this is the state of the Handmaids, they cannot satisfy themselves, for things that they do not know what. In Offred's words, "We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air..." (13).

The people of Gilead are hierarchised based on their physical and economic status. There are the Wives, the Marthas, Aunts, Handmaids, Econowives, Widows, the Unwomen and so on among the women; Captains, Guards, Angels, and so on among the men. Whatever may the position be, neither women nor men are truly happy. None of them can be trusted also, by the other. When explaining the position of Gileadean men, Offred says,

No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us.... (14)

Without any reason, without any personal or societal advantage, one is ready to point the finger at the others' mistakes even when he/she knows it will result in the other's death. It is perturbing to notice how the society has seen a dramatic change in so short a period. The minds of Gileadeans have gone through traumatic alterations to accept all these.

The Aunts, who hold the position of looking after the Handmaids, are not trusted even. They are given only electric prods and not guns. Guns are permissible only for the use of Guards. This does not mean that the Guards are trusted either. People always have an eye on the Guards also. They are one among the people who are thought to help the Handmaids to escape and to get pregnant. This shows that nobody in Gilead trusts any.

The Handmaids are in a state of hopelessness. They do not know what their future will look like. Their future is unsure. They may be allowed to live, hanged or left to suffer and die a slow death in the radiation; they do not know where their kith and kin are. Their position is to live in an imaginative world, deceiving themselves that their close ones are alive at some corner of the world.

The handmaids do not have to escape their punitive lives. There is no place to escape to, or no reason to do it. But their physique and their psyche urge them to go off, either from Gilead or from the world. They are on a constant look-out for a way to escape. If the Angels or the Guardians are trustworthy and ready to lend a hand, there are chances for them to evade the bondage, although it is a known fact that it is one of their fantasies.

The Handmaids have convinced themselves that their sole function is to produce heirs to the Commanders. They see to that they are fit for it in every way. Knowing that thinking about their loved ones and worrying about them can reduce the possibilities of getting pregnant, they even shun their thoughts about them. The Marthas, the Aunts and the others instruct and succeed in

changing the Handmaids' minds to bear children. What is worst is that the Handmaids do not even have the option of dying. There is no way that they can commit the act of freedom through death, as all the means have been spurned by the Gileadeans. Offred laments about this restriction, as, "Like other things now, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last" (17).

The whole environment had slowly filled with pollution in Gilead, until the situation got worse. "The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells" (143). The dystopian situation in the novel is the outcome of extremely polluted environment. Atwood has metaphorically stressed upon the need to keep a check on the degradation of environment. The infertility caused by toxic environment in the novel, has made women to live miserable lives. They prefer death rather than this type of maltreatment. They are treated like child producing machines, having no connection to any other intellectual activity.

The dystopia in the novel depicts the dark picture of the contemporary world. Environment is becoming increasingly toxic leading to the origin of many new diseases. The research on radiation from medical procedures has proved that U.S. population's exposure to medical x-rays is also a factor in causing over half the deaths from cancer and over half the deaths from heart disease. Scientific research on the connection between cancer and contact with pesticides proved that farm workers who spray pesticides display a clear

increase in the incidence of gastro-intestinal cancer. Many other blood diseases and cancers can also be the result of contact with pesticides. These toxins have been detected in milk, cheese, and various other foods also. They have acute toxicological effects in humans. The human activities like the release of CFCs have resulted in the depletion of ozone in the upper atmosphere and UVB rays reaching the Earth's surface at an increased level. Increase in skin diseases has been found in such areas. There is an expected increase in skin cancers also.

Exposure to environmental pollution remains a major source of health risk throughout the world. The risks are higher in developing countries where poverty and weak environmental policies combine to cause high pollution levels. In recent years, several attempts have been made to find the global burden of diseases caused by environmental pollution. It has been found that human fertility has deteriorated due to exposure to pollutants. Waterborne diseases are a major cause of deaths in many parts of the world, particularly in children. Many areas show high levels of arsenic, fluoride, or contamination by pathogens in water. The exposure to ionizing radiation increases the risk of cancer and hereditary diseases.

The deterioration in the environment is the cause of decreased population in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Women give birth to deformed babies. "What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog's, or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet" (143) The only hope of the handmaids is that one day they will become pregnant and give birth to a normal

baby. The handmaid who luckily gets pregnant is treated with respect and others envy her. Women are bearing the burden of deteriorated environment, although they are not responsible for it. They long for giving birth to a normal baby.

In some countries, an act or incomplete act of suicide is considered to be a crime. In Gilead, too, committing or trying to commit suicide is a crime. But the Gileadeans are devoid of such a chance. Even when they create such a chance, the results are torturous.

I know why there is no glass, in front of the water- colour picture of blue irises, and why the window only opens partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof. It isn't running away they're afraid of. We wouldn't get far. It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge. (17- 18)

Fertile women are so scarce that they are kept safe. But when they go against the higher authorities, both women and men are hanged as an example of misbehaviour.

Endangered species are kept safe. Hunting them or aiding it is a punishable offence in almost all the countries and it is seen as a crime if anybody indulges in such an activity. Forest turtle, Asiatic Cheetah, Sumatran Orangutan, Chimpanzees, Japanese Crane and many other species of animals and birds are listed as endangered. In Gilead, fertile women are the one and only species that are listed as endangered. They are never left to die or to be killed. Mercy killing is legal in some places. Persons, who are ill and suffer a

lot, are sometimes killed in order to relieve them from pain. But the Handmaids of Gilead are not allowed even the pleasure of death, as there is no mercy and only “faith”.

Offred, the protagonist, is made to believe that the Handmaids are a privileged lot. She says, “. . . a chair, sunlight, flowers: these are not to be dismissed. I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight. Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/ or” (18). Each Handmaid is given a small room with limited furniture as in a prison, with which they are made to feel as if they were living a luxurious life. Their lives are themselves a luxury for them, as the other women lead even more terrible lives. The Handmaid satisfies herself by experiencing the warmth of the sunlight. Women of this kind vent out their feelings of experience pleasure through these kinds of activities involving nature. But some other activities like gardening are restricted to the handmaids although the wives are allowed this pleasure. The wives deceive themselves with power by taking control over the Guardians who do the menial jobs while gardening. But they also know that the same guardians can turn to be their slaughterers when they defy Gileadean law.

None of the Gileadeans live their lives according to their personal wishes. The totalitarian society has specific law for each group of people of the society. Neither men nor women are exempted from the law. The aftermath they have to face is death, sometimes violent death. The restrictions start with the colour of the dresses people wear and go on with what hierarchy of people

has the authorization to talk. No specific person, a king or a president, is needed to control the people of Gilead. They are their own dictators. None of them go against the law, even when there is nobody to keep watch.

The totalitarian society, in order to keep the Handmaids under the thumb, has made them to think that nothing belongs to them. The Handmaids have forgotten that they have once been an earning member of the society and that they too enjoyed the possession of certain things. But in the totalitarian regime they are only the possessed. Nothing belongs to them and they refuse to even think about the word “my”: “The door of the room- not my room, I refuse to say *my*...” (18) says Offred. This act, makes sure that the Handmaids depend upon the Commanders for everything and that they do not go out of their control.

Atwood uses a lot of symbolisms throughout the novel to bring out the hidden feelings and emotions of the characters. At numerous places Offred is seen comparing herself to a nun and once when she sees herself in the mirror, she refers to herself as a “Sister, dipped in blood” (19). Blood here, can refer to fertility. The position of the Handmaids, on one side looked at with great respect and on the other, respected just for their fertility, is as clearly described as possible. Offred is also compared to “some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger” (19), which might refer to Little Red Riding Hood, who, because of her carelessness, gets into the hands of a cunning wolf. The vague, unclear lives of the Handmaids are brought out in the novel when Offred after seeing herself in the

mirror, describes herself as “a distorted shadow, a parody of something...”

(19). Her position in the society is just a parody as she herself explains.

The simple use of certain words indicates things about the state of Gilead or about a character. For example, Offred’s use of language may be different depending on the context and it tells the reader something about how she thinks and feels. Language can create mood and tone, and control the reader’s responses. One needs to identify and consider these elements of language use. It is important to understand that the writer’s use of form, structure and language all contribute to how meaning is created and expressed.

Atwood makes use of the image of flowers at various points in the text. The first reference to note is the use of the image of red tulips. However, what is really important is not the tulips but the women’s reactions to the flower – first Offred’s, and later Serena Joy’s. For Offred they symbolise life; for Serena Joy, who takes off their heads, they are an ending, a symbol of useless seed pods. In this context the innocent image of the flowers is threatening because of the colour red, which can be a signal of danger and also because the Handmaids are supposed to be like the flowers – fertile.

The colour red signifies different things in different countries: love, hate, courage, force, energy, happiness, well- being, seduction, sexuality, eroticism, passion, and so on. The handmaids experience all these because they are handmaids. “... Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us” (18). All Gileadeans including the

handmaids are allowed life just because they have a body that is expected to reproduce.

The Handmaid's Tale as a speculative novel attempts to show the kind of fractured oppressive and sterile society that might evolve if environmental crisis is not handled carefully. The foolishness and greed of humans hurt the environment and, in turn, the people. Radiation from atomic power plants has rendered almost everyone in Gilead sterile, cutting off population growth and creating the need for surrogate mothers-the handmaids. The unwomen-mostly lesbians and poor women who cannot or will not be surrogate mothers-are sent to clean up the toxic mess. The toxic mess is the creation of men who always pay much attention to the strength and power that science and technology bring to them, and burn their energy on increasing their ability in competition and rivalry.

Technology got so out of control in Gilead that, instead of freeing women from domestic tasks, technology took away women's freedom. Computerized banking took away women's money in a few short mouse clicks, making women financially dependent on men. Easy computer access to public documents quickly identified which women were morally fit to remain in their privileged lifestyles and which women were undesirable; for example: lesbians, feminist, and even those married for whom it was a second marriage. These were the women who became the servants, the handmaids, or the walking dead at the toxic dump sites. Due to the overdependence on technology and misuse

of nuclear power, the technological tactics were needed in order to establish and maintain the system of handmaids.

Technology is not, in itself, innately good or bad, useful or harmful, but can be used for bad things. The novel is a clear manifestation of irresponsible use of technology by the patriarchal society. This novel demonstrates that employing technology within current patriarchal systems of power, privilege and oppression to the point that people overstep their ability to control its potentially harmful effects serves to reinforce binary systems of who benefits and who suffers from technological progress.

As many critics of Atwood have claimed, *The Handmaid's Tale* does not display the sufferings of women alone. People of Gilead, regardless of gender, fear the laws of the state consciously or unconsciously. Women in Gilead are not totally innocent and not all Gileadean men are demonic, as [Malak](#) says in one of his essays. When women like Offred, Ofglen and others including the Marthas, Unwomen and Econowives suffer a lot because of the laws of Gilead, soft-hearted men like Nick engage in the underground activity of rescuing Handmaids to the outer world.

All male members of the state are not treated equally. Equality is entertained only in meting out the punishments. It could be an Angel, Guard or Commander. None can escape the laws of Gilead. Whoever goes against it will end up hanging at the Walls. None of the Gileadeans could believe another Gileadean, even the doctors could not be believed nor one Handmaid, the other. When Offred says about her new shopping companion Ofglen, she says, “The

truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers. If either of us slips through the net because of something that happens on one of our daily walks, the other will be accountable” (29).

The power of the “church-state”, as commented by Malak in *Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition* (15), is so much that they have had immense success in transforming everybody, including the Handmaids, according to their desire. It is deep-rooted in the minds of the Handmaids that bearing children to the Commanders of the Faith is their sole object in life. Their mantra of life is “Give me children, or else I die” (71). They are also made to memorise, “They also serve who only stand and wait...” (28). These various words can mean something else, for they are written for a different context. But the totalitarian regime has twisted their meaning and their contexts so as to aid whatever the rulers say and whatever they want people to do.

Success comes if one succeeds in making others believe what he says is true. He can even transform others’ activities to support his own. Gilead is such a nation of success. It is successful in transforming each citizen of itself to follow and accept whatever it says or even thinks. Gilead’s people think that whatever is the rule of their nation is for their own good, although they consciously understand that those are acts to quash them.

Names can connect people with a face, personality, culture and also a family heritage. It can be the most important and the sweetest word a person can hear, which can also be tied intimately to a person. The author of the book

How to Win Friends and Influence People, Dale Carnegie, believes that calling a person by his name is extremely important. According to him, a person's name is the sweetest sound in any language for that person. "A name is the core part of our identity, and so hearing it validates our existence, which makes us much more inclined to feel positively about the person who validated us" (web). Names can be so much influential. The rulers of Gilead have diplomatically buried the original names of the Handmaids to make them devoid of their originality. The Handmaids start to slowly forget their past, that they once- not very long back- had jobs of their own, that they were economically independent (though they have already forgotten what any kind of independence is), and even the fact that they once had families of their own. All these things occur to them only as vague dreams or seem to be just their imaginations. They even start to feel the normal woman's life to be alien that they have only heard about somewhere. Instead, they consider themselves lucky to be in such a condition as theirs, which only cages them in the name of protection and does no more.

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: don't open your door to stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night...

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles.

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. (34)

When the Handmaids want to plot against the regime, they must have to discuss issues and plans. Cunningly, the regime has prevented the Handmaids from having any kind of discourse, except for the permitted, official greetings. The Handmaids themselves fear to talk beyond those greetings as they suspect the other Handmaid to be a spy. "The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (29). The reason that the Handmaids are ever ready to spy on each other is that, when one of them slips from the net, the other Handmaid is accountable.

The other kind of hold they have on the people of Gilead is by snubbing any kind of news or information. Only if they know what is happening around them can they at least think of ways to protest against what they do not like. The Handmaids crave for any kind of news. "But I'm ravenous for news, any kind of news, even if it's false news, it must mean something" (29), says Offred. They try to get something out of any news. But it is well understood that their minds lack anything that would be of any help to them. It is in vain that they try to devise plans against the regime. For example, Moira, a

courageous woman who attacked the aunts and escaped from Handmaid-hood, could only end up at the Jezebel's.

At least this generation of Handmaids nebulously remember what it was to be normal human beings. But it is sure that even their following generation will never understand what a normal human life will be like. To them the tough, repressed life of the Handmaids will be normal life and they may even start to enjoy it.

Oppressed by the establishment of the Gilead regime, handmaids face constant adversity throughout their everyday lives. With their names, family, and identity stripped from them and with no hope for a return to their pre-Gilead life, many will succumb to the hardships they face. However, there are certain individuals that defy the odds and survive, both mentally and physically, through it all. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred demonstrates that she is an unparalleled survivor through the various means by which she creates a life for herself as a handmaid that becomes livable. Characters like Offred are extraordinary and possess the will to change and take chances in order to improve the most crucial aspects of their life.

Margaret Atwood portrays not only the condition of women in the future but also the future of a country. Whatever Atwood says of the Handmaids is also applicable to America. Gilead is supposed to be future America. As [Sandra Tomc](#) in *The Missionary Position: Feminism and Nationalism in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* says,

For a novel so overtly offered as a piece of feminist doctrine, *The Handmaid's Tale* delivers a curiously and, for Atwood, an unwontedly, conservative interpretation of women's exemplary social actions, advocating what looks more like traditional femininity than an insurgent feminism. But I also want to propose that this conservatism is, in fact, politically motivated, not by Atwood's feminism in this case but by her nationalism. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is not generally regarded as part of Atwood's nationalist canon, its understanding of female independence is nevertheless determined by Atwood's sexually coded understanding of the relation between Canada and America. (74)

Gilead's leaders use their background in market research to create an appearance of peace and order that functions to convince those within and outside of Gilead not only that everything is under control in Gilead but also that there is no use resisting. This appearance of control and stability is ultimately designed to disguise the fact that the ruling body of men, the Commanders, are sterile. It is illegal to say that a Commander is sterile. Children stolen from inappropriate parents are raised by Commanders and their Wives as their own, and Handmaids routinely have sex with men other than their Commanders, especially their doctors, in an attempt to become pregnant and avoid punishment for failing to reproduce. The Handmaids are manipulated to the core and they are made to believe that there is no such thing as sterile in

the Commanders. This is evident in one of Offred's reactions to hearing from the doctor that most of the Commanders are sterile: "I almost gasp: he's said a forbidden word. *Sterile*. There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (70-71). Although Offred seems to know intuitively that the Commanders are sterile, her shock at hearing the doctor voice this truth demonstrates how easily people can accept as a social fact even what they know is a lie. Because this particular lie is enforced as law, Offred has accepted it to some extent- it does, after all, have life or death consequences for Handmaids.

It is categorically men who are the oppressors in this novel, but it is also a romance in which it is a male who comes to the rescue of Offred and liberates her from the Christian theocratic oppression that she suffers. Hence there is no utopian declaration or vision of women who will somehow come to liberate themselves from their male oppression, indeed Atwood's vision is that while males imprison, they are also the potential liberators or redeemers of women as they can use their Biblical based power inscribed in patriarchy to set women free.

Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, imitates the epistolary form with a slight difference: it is recorded and not written - a cumbersome exercise in the twentieth century with all technical amenities at our command. Writing or recording, both a form of speech, is denied to the protagonist in the theocratic society of Gilead, situated in South Dakota, U.S., and established by

religious fanatics. The protagonist's own story recalled from memory is transcribed by Professor Pieixoto, an activist. It cannot be the authentic version, yet it reaches the reader. It may be controlled and altered by patriarchy, but it is surely an approximation to and reconstruction of the protagonist's version.

In attempting to create the illusion of truth, Gilead censors intimation that contradicts its version of reality. The regime consequently wages a war against history, especially recent history, and relies heavily on spectacle and mass media forms in this effort. As an example, men and women in Gilead are required to attend dramatic public hearings and to participate in public executions, which the regime's leaders use to provide the citizenry with an outlet for pent up frustration and anger. Later, the bodies of those executed are displayed theatrically on the wall, their faces hidden behind bags and a sign hung around their necks indicating the official reason for their execution. Though Gilead forbids or limits many kinds of looking, the regime encourages people to look at the bodies on the Wall. Offred observes, "It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them" (42).

The Handmaids are forced to believe the present and to anticipate the fate of the people who go against law, which will make them restraint from doing the same and will make them forget their past. As [Angela Laflen](#), in one of her essays say, "Through these spectacular displays, Gilead enforces historical amnesia" upon the Handmaids (89). Gilead's success in enforcing

amnesia is evident in Offred's continual struggle to retain memories of her former life throughout the novel, and she realizes that, because, the next generation of Handmaids will have no memories of any other way, they will accept life in Gilead as normal.

Despite the strict regimentation at their training centre, the handmaids communicate with one another "through whispers, lip reading and touch, while lying flat, each in her own bed." The protagonist manages to communicate with her former friend Moira who also arrives at the same training centre despite the ban on all communication between the handmaids and the Marthas, one of the housekeepers, Cora develops a liking for Offred and is even willing to lie for her once.

In the place of the recent past, Gilead claims a legacy from the Puritans, and images of stern Puritan women and men provide background to Gilead's homes and communities. In a small church museum near the Wall, Offred notices "paintings of women in long somber dresses, their hair covered by white bags, and of upright men, darkly clothed and unsmiling. Our ancestors" (41). Similarly, in the Commander's living room, Offred observes "two paintings, both of women, one on either side of the fireplace. Both wear dark dresses, like the ones in the old church, though of a later date.... their backs and mouths stiff, their breasts constricted, their faces pinched, their caps starched, their skin grayish white, guarding the room with their narrowed eyes" (89- 90). The Puritan images function largely to grant Gilead legitimacy by

grounding the regime in America's Puritan, and more generally religious, history.

One key characteristic that sets apart Offred from the other handmaids is her unique ability to establish mental mechanisms to cope with the things that have the potential to affect her the most. An example of this coping mechanism in action is seen through Offred's internal explanation of Luke's fate. As a means of attempting to keep herself sane, Offred believes, "at one and the same time" (121), that Luke is dead, has escaped, and is still being tortured. Crucially, she states, "I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke," (121) and it is through this belief in all three possibilities that Offred is able to be both realistic but not be consumed by grief over the likely fate of her husband.

Further evidence highlighting Offred's survival instincts and one of a kind mentality is seen through her use of flashbacks to engage in memories of her past. As stated by Offred, "it's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, giving a cutting edge" (8), crucially removing her momentarily from the treacherous reality of her daily life and helping her survive by seeing beyond the present moment where she does not wish to be. However, beyond being a coping mechanism that is used as a method to distract Offred from the life that she is living, these flashbacks are her strongest link to her pre-Gilead identity, giving the reader a glimpse at the full range of her experiences and the truth behind the reasons for which she is motivated to survive.

In order to achieve the aspired orderly society, then, the Gilead government has to resort to a form of iron-fisted rule – an application of a

higher-self government ruling over lower-self individuals in order to help them achieve what is best for them, which is their real self. They do this through the implementation not only of new bans, but also laws, regulations and new words that create a sort of constraint on both the actions and the mentality of the people. The higher selves believe themselves to be knowledgeable enough to make decisions for the rest of the nation, and one can see this exemplified through such instances as when the new, higher government begins to *prescribe*, pass laws that dictate what are and what are not temptations to the people. For instance, the government, in an act that frames women as individuals who are nothing but an unthinking entity that will respond only to temptations, dictates what kind of attire women should wear, what they can or cannot see, even what they can or cannot know.

While Gilead freely uses images of Puritan men and women to claim legacy from the Puritans, the regime carefully edits other images that do not so neatly support its ideological agenda. The images used for educational purposes at the Rachel and Leah Center are edited in this way. Handmaids-in-training watch a film once a week; the film will usually be “an old porno film, from the seventies or eighties” (152) or documentary footage of feminist, or Unwomen, protests from before the takeover of Gilead. The pornography depicts graphic violence against women, and the soundtrack is played because “They want us to hear the screams and grunts and shrieks of what is supposed to be either extreme pain or extreme pleasure or both at once” (153).

Pornographic images are used as evidence by the regime of the mistreatment of

women in American culture and to justify Gilead's excessive protection of women. Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids to "Consider the alternatives... You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women then" (152). Gilead does protect women from such violence, but only at the expense of basic freedom and the underlying motivation for creating and viewing pornography is still active in Gilead.

The Handmaid is proclaimed an unwoman if she does not succeed by the end of her third two-year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment of being banished to the Colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as slave labourers. In contrast, male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says: "There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (57). So, women are judged by double standards of morality in respect of infertility.

Moreover, the state cancels the original names of the Handmaids in order to erase their former identity and labels them according to the names of their Commanders. The state given names are a metaphoric suppression of women's identities. Hence, "Offred", the narrator's relational naming is not a name but a tag that she wears to signify that she is the Handmaid "of Fred". As Offred says: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because it's forbidden" (THT 80). "... name is like your telephone number, useful only to others" (THT 79-80). Similarly, other Handmaids' names are Ofglen, Ofwayne, and Ofwarren. They are doomed to wear the scarlet robes signifying their adultery. Thus a deliberate and systematic attempt is made in

Gilead to obliterate all sense of individuality and identity in women, by taking away their names from them. A Handmaid's name indicates merely the male to whom she is assigned. The name Offred is composed of the preposition of, indicating possession and the name of her Commander. It is the Gileadean variation of the contemporary patronymic Mrs. Fred.

The destruction of the individual name is part of the attempt to destroy a woman's past and force her to live in the present moment alone, in a two-dimensional existence. But Offred carves a free space for herself in her flashbacks, contrasting her free and casual style of life in the past with her present regimentation, her past friendship with other women like Moira and her own mother with her present enforced isolation. She often recalls the views and actions of her mother, a militant feminist who believed that "A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women" (130-31) and spoke of networking or forging ties with other women. She often recalls vignettes of her life with her husband Luke and their daughter, perhaps to convince herself of the objective reality of the former state of affairs before Gilead. As narrator, Offred apologizes for her frequent flashbacks: "You'll have to forgive me. I'm a refugee from the past and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I've left or been forced to leave behind me" (239).

According to Offred, language in the Republic of Gilead is officially forbidden because the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead only the ruling class has access to books. As part of the training, the handmaids are required to recite the

Biblical injunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness
Biblical and Marxist teachings are blended and distorted in the effort to
brainwash the handmaids.

Offred faces Gilead's terrible might as she tries to survive with a sense of self and with constructive social interactions. Gilead seems able to overwhelm any potential opponent. To suppress individuality and maintain the regime, Gilead re-writes history, asserts governmental control of television news casts, forbids books, magazines, and newspapers, and leaves only as an independent source of knowledge. Gilead simplifies and manipulates language, eliminates the written word where possible, generates its own forms of Newspeak, debars women from writing, and keeps sacred texts locked away, inaccessible to most people except in carefully chosen readings or recordings. It establishes a strict moral code supported by public ceremonies, the omnipresent fear of the Eyes, and the mute warning proclaimed by the hooded and robed dead who hang along the wall. Squealing on your fellows is rewarded, and trust is dangerous.

Gilead also adopts measures specifically aimed against women, their individuality, and their identity. Immediately after the coup, women were fired from their jobs, lost the rights of abortion and birth control, were subjected to arranged marriages, found that their testimony in a court of law was not accepted without corroboration, and discovered their charge cards closed and their bank accounts placed in the hands of their fathers, husbands, or other male custodians.

When Offred looks inside herself, she does find a set of memories that allow her to recall a sense of self. She can remember her job, her love for her husband Luke, her child, her friends, her education, fun- the successes and failures of everyday life. Throughout the book she tries to hold on to these, but they fade away.

When Offred looks outside herself, at the other human beings with whom she is in proximity, she finds little scope for satisfying interaction that could develop a sense of self. The structure of the household isolates Handmaids: each is the only Handmaid in the house, usually disliked by the Commander's Wife, and more trouble than help to the Marthas, whose tasks include cooking the Handmaid special, healthy food and cutting it, because she cannot be trusted with a knife.

Handmaid has few activities. Daily she shops among the scarce supplies of food, standing in lengthy lines, buying only what the Marthas request, using tokens not money. Monthly she has intercourse with her Commander. Otherwise, she leads a boring life in which vast spaces of time repose unfilled. Lacking friends in the household, where every woman is of a different rank and every man is officially off-limits, condemned to public silence except for official platitudes or surreptitious whispers with the Handmaids with whom she is paired for shopping expeditions, she has little to do. Defined in terms of her reproductive potential, she has little to be, other than a set of ovaries, a receptacle. Prevented from intersubjective interactions and communications of any but an extremely limited and repressed sort, without privacy and scope for

her own will, and lacking any socially-sanctioned purpose or self beyond her reproductive organs, each Handmaid, like Offred, must struggle to maintain any sense of her identity as she faces empty days and lonely nights. She always lives on an edge: essentially powerless herself, she is vulnerable to the lurking Eyes, the spies of the regime who whisk wrong-doers away to death, and to the power, interests, and machinations of others.

Offred's accommodation of herself and her life to the misogyny of the contemporary United States, her acceptance of such conditions as ordinary and usual, is mirrored by her gradual succumbing to the conditions of Gilead. In a long, poetic passage where Offred describes the effect upon her self-definition resulting from her absolute reduction to her reproductive capacity, she also acknowledges that "the expectations of others . . . have become [her] own" (95). Under Gilead's discipline, Offred is rapidly being stripped of what capacity she did have to act: "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. . . . Now. . . I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (95). Instead of fighting this dehumanization through active resistance, however, Offred falls back on her romanticism.

Offred's ignoring, romanticizing, and accommodating contrast starkly with the attitudes of her mother and her best friend, Moira. In some ways Offred's conventionality is a reversal of the traditional generation gap. In this tale, it is the mother- not the daughter- who revels in challenging the status quo.

Offred's mother, whose name the reader never learns, was an ardent feminist, an activist in the women's movement. Through Offred's reminiscences, one can see her mother burning pornography, marching to Take Back the Night, and demonstrating for abortion rights. She often voices concerns about her daughter's lack of consciousness. Offred's mother is indeed absolved, lamentably not by a growth in the consciousness of her daughter's generation but by the dreadful realization of Gilead, which leads to her agonizing death cleaning up toxic waste in the Colonies.

Moira and Offred's mother share several important characteristics, which Offred admires but cannot emulate. They both possess a rebellious, impertinent, and public humor. They both define themselves, overcoming society's powerful expectations of women like themselves. They both act, in the company of others, in a feminist manner. Neither of them, however, is a hero, despite Offred's romantic expectations for them. Offred herself acknowledges this when she comments on her hopes for her mother, "But I know this isn't true. It is just passing the buck, as children do, to mothers" (47).

Though very different from Offred, Moira and Offred's mother can neither prevent nor survive Gilead. But Gilead as an imagined dystopia in Atwood's fiction is a warning to present-day readers about how perilous is their present, in which it is possible to imagine and project a Gilead, in which everything described in Gilead has recently been enacted in some form in some society. The practices and powers of Gilead- and its ability physically to constrain Moira and Offred's mother and to convert Offred- exist in

contemporary societies. But the novel is more than a warning. It also suggests what is required to combat existing proto-Gileadean practices and powers, to construct and maintain a strong sense of self, and thereby to move towards a liberating society.

Women in the Gilead period are subjected to strict observation, no matter where they go. They are observed with the excuse of keeping them safe and protecting them from any form of rape or harassment. This observation is not confined to males observing females. Women are also observed by their own kind as well – Aunts and Marthas are assigned to observe every move of the handmaids. Women in the Republic of Gilead only serve childbearing purposes and have no control over their own bodies. Their sexuality and bodies are basically used as political instruments by the government in order to have control over reproduction. Women are merely treated as ovaries and wombs, whereby they are only useful if they are fertile enough to bear children for the Commander. Besides, they are also examined like objects by doctors and harassed and molested by these so-called professionals.

In the beginning of the *Handmaid's Tale*, one encounters Offred, a woman separated from all she knew and loved and threatened between choosing to be a birthing vessel or being cast out to die. In order to survive as a Handmaid in Gilead, Offred is very careful to live within the rules set before her and limit any risks on her safety or survival. She does this by resisting connection, friendship, self-expression and honesty in a society where any of these traits, if acted on, would risk her safety and survival. Early on in the

novel, Offred tells the reader, “thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last” (8). She wants to last, even though this society is oppressive of her human spirit, she will put aside her human desires to survive. She mentions thinking, which she does a lot. In the text, she shares with the reader her incessant thinking, which demonstrates the amount of desperation she is experiencing concerning the oppression of her human desires. The fact that she’s aware that too much of this kind of thinking can hurt her chances points to the fact that she is consciously choosing to quiet her wants and desires in order to “last”.

Through several passages, it is seen that Offred’s human desires lurk just below the surface, pointing to this desperation that is growing within her. One day, she is strongly compelled to connect and “fraternize” with the Marthas. Offred states that even though Rita shows a “...closed face and pressed lips, I would like to stay here, in the kitchen” (10). She goes into telling about her fantasy of the Marthas and her sitting down at the table with coffee and listening to one another and showing understanding. She watches Rita make bread and she visualizes her own fingers sinking into that soft dough. Offred states, “I hunger to touch something!... I hunger to commit the act of touch!”(11). This shows Offred’s growing desperation in being able to express herself an act on her human desires. Through the passages it is learnt that fraternization is forbidden in Gilead, and Offred chooses to stuff her needs down, ignoring her desires for connection and friendship with the Marthas, and instead going on with the daily routines in order to assure her safety and survival. Offred is further enticed to act on these needs in her interactions with Nick.

One can only repress one's feelings for so long, as Offred shows by her thoughts and actions immediately after the monthly ceremony. She shares, "I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued... I want to steal something." (97) One reads on to discover her going downstairs, a completely illegal move. From here one could see Offred's character changing. She says, "I like this. I am doing something, on my own" (97). It could be seen that her repressed needs and desires for self-expression and freedom coming out, completely undermining her safety. What's more, she says she likes it. This simple act helps her remember who she is and what she is capable of. At this point she lets go of protecting her safety and survival because the needs of her heart have become too great. She begins to act on her desires, compromising her safety. As it is known, in the sitting room she steals a dry flower and encounters Nick in the darkness. She tells, "He puts his hand on my arm, pulls me against him, his mouth on mine, what else comes from such denial?" (98). This further strengthens the notion that when oppressed, human desires can come out with a vengeance. Both of these characters realize the danger they are exposing themselves to, but temporarily allow themselves this expression of their hearts.

Offred also fails to maintain her identity- to structure a sense of self, to connect with others, and to act- because in Gilead even apparent forms of resistance or attempts to create, maintain, or grasp an identity frequently turn into complicity with the regime. Individuals become unindicted co-conspirators in their own oppression. Gilead's power reaches into every nook and cranny,

every thought and act, of Offred's existence, taking apparent resistance or transgression and neutralizing it or turning it into a support for the system.

Offred's willed excursions into the "distant past" (94) – along with her nightmares – flesh out the narrative. In these sequences, one learns something of her personal history – her prickly relationship with her ardently feminist mother, her marriage to Luke, the birth of their daughter, and her tendency to take too much for granted: "I trusted fate, back then" (37).

One also gets fragments of knowledge about the coup and the changes gradually instituted in the months following. Women were let go from their jobs, denied employment, and – with the regime in command of all the computer data banks – their money and property were transferred to the control of husbands or male relations. "There were marches, of course", Offred recalls, "a lot of women and some men". But when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. For her part, the narrator attempted withdrawal into domesticity, "doing more housework, more baking". Too often though, she found herself crying "without warning" (189).

When Luke remained insistently reassuring, she realized – to her horror – that "he doesn't mind this He doesn't mind it at all. May be he even likes it? We are not each other's anymore. Instead I am his" (191). Only when their marriage is decreed invalid – because of Luke's prior marriage and divorce – does Luke attempt escape. But their forged documents are detected at the Canadian border and a desperate run into the woods is quickly thwarted.

Luke is shot, the narrator captured, and their five-year-old daughter taken away. In the worst of her nightmares, Offred can still “see her ... holding out her arms to me, being carried away” (85). Except for a small Polaroid photograph purloined by her Commander’s wife, Offred never sees her daughter again; nor does she know what has become of Luke, whether he is alive or dead.

Following the capture at the border, her memory lapses. “There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn’t have lost that much time without help” (49). When the narrator regains full consciousness, she is at the Leah and Rachel Centre, formerly a high school, now converted for the training of Handmaids. Here – in a flashback sequence – the novel opens.

In Gilead, women are alienated from their own bodies by the elaborate clothes that have to be worn by them at all times, covering them fully in many layers. The Handmaid’s clothes are specially designed to hide bodily contours and the wings and veils are meant to prevent her “from seeing and also from being seen” (18). She is not even allowed to bathe by herself. Around her ovulation time, on the night before the “Ceremony”, she is given a bath by a Martha. After the bath, she waits for the Ceremony, feeling completely dehumanized: “I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (79).

The separation of women according to their functions in Gilead, promotes their fragmentation. The Wives are mainly decorative in function and are dressed in blue. The Marthas are the middle-aged housekeepers, and they are dressed in green. When they become weak and sick and cease working,

they are deported to the Colonies. The Handmaids, dressed in red, are young women in their twenties or thirties and serve as child-bearers to elderly childless Commanders. The Biblical precedent of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah, who served Abraham and Jacob as handmaids are quoted in support of the practice. Prostitution continues in Gilead, though its presence was assiduously denied by the establishment. These women are dressed in feathers and sequins and the system of prostitution is justified as being dictated to by Nature: “Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason; it’s part of the Procreational strategy” (249).

Of all these functional roles assigned to women in Gilead, the Handmaids’ role is the most dehumanized. Handmaids are valued only as walking wombs, for their child-bearing function, all other personal traits having been annihilated. They are a “national resource,” (75), “containers” (107), “two-legged wombs”, “sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (146). In the case of most of the Handmaids, Gilead succeeds in reducing woman’s perception of herself to a mere function. Offred experiences anguished disappointment because of her failure to conceive: “I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (83). She herself thinks of herself only as a womb, that is, only in the child-bearing context and regards herself as a failure when that function is not fulfilled.

Offred is forced to procreate in order to bear children that will not even be hers. She has no power over her body, no choice over her ability to make love or to have children. The idea of a woman having a choice over her body,

often exemplified in pro-choice versus pro-life debates, has been taken further in Gilead to mean that women must be forced to create life. Women no longer have agency over their own bodies or choices regarding the employment, recalling much of the rhetoric from pro-life groups. This rhetoric stresses the life of the unborn and the importance of the mother to the traditional family unit.

Gileadean women are alienated from the universe around them by the severe restriction on their freedom of movement. They are forbidden to read and write, for that is a man's prerogative in Gilead. By thus being denied self-expression through writing and speaking and being denied perception of reality around them through reading, they are isolated from the world around them. However, they try to keep in touch with the world through stealthy reading, whenever possible, and through a secret exchange of oral information with one another.

Women try to overcome this externally imposed interpersonal alienation by reaching out to one another secretly. The bonding among women and the slow forging of a caring sisterhood is a strategy by which female space is acquired in the novel. The ethic of care and relationships is most commonly at the center of women's lives; it provides people with space to think differently, another model for doing things. Despite the strict regimentation in their training centre, the Handmaids communicate with one another through whispers, lip reading and touch. Despite being constantly warned against the evils of talking

and reassured by the advantages of silence, the handmaids communicate, in different ways and defy the vigilance of Aunts:

We learn to whisper almost without sound. In the semi- darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (13- 14).

These soldiers of revolution, apparently passive, voiceless, erased, circumscribed, assert their identity by exhuming their names from the pit of obscurity with the help of a new mode of speech. Their new code language is carried to the other with the movement of “silent lips, looks, smiles, whistles, and winks” (18), or Ofglen's Mayday message or Moira's conversation with Offred through the “wooden holes” in the “wooden stalls” (83). “Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (161), comments Offred and her statement is accurate.

According to Offred, language in the Republic of Gilead is officially forbidden because the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead, only the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead, only the ruling class has access to books. As part of their training, the handmaids are required to recite the Biblical injunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness.

Offred also uses the language of art to describe the experience of being a Handmaid. She graphically describes herself caught in the always present visual image, clearly indicating her identification with the female art object: “you live with your face squashed against a wall, everything a huge foreground, of details, close-ups, hairs, the weave of the bed sheet, the molecules of the face. Your own skin like a map, a diagram of futility, crisscrossed with tiny roads that lead nowhere” (185). She specifically invokes nineteenth-century harem paintings in order to characterise the life of a Handmaid for readers. Offred imagines,

... walking in art galleries, through the nineteenth century: the obsession they had then with harems. Dozens of paintings of harems, for women lolling on divans, turbans on their heads or velvet caps, being fanned with peacock tails, a eunuch in the background standing guard. Studies of sedentary flesh, painted by men who'd never been there. These pictures were supposed to be erotic, and I thought they were, at the time: but I see now what they were really about. They were paintings about suspended animation; about waiting, about objects not in use. They were painting about boredom.

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men. (89)

Like the women depicted in the harem paintings, Offred is inscribed as an object and often an object not in use by Gilead. Forbidden from activities that would help to pass time, such as reading, knitting or smoking, Handmaids hold

a place in their Commanders' household that compares to that of a "prize pig" (90), and Offred's narrative is characterized by long stretches of time spent waiting.

Atwood was not specific about the time frame of her novel, except for the final chapter where it mentions that the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, where the 'Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*' will be presented, is being held in the year 2195 at the University of Denay, Nunavit. Based on observations of a few different incidents that are mentioned in the novel, however, it is possible to locate the events in *The Handmaid's Tale* in the general years of the late 20th century, most probably after the 1960s.

Within the timeline of a feminism war, experts have acknowledged the existence of three waves of feminist activities. The first wave of feminism was generally concerned with overcoming obstacles to gender equality, such as voting rights, whereas the second wave of extended its issues to include such topics as sexuality, family and reproductive rights. The third wave of feminism, however, fights for various differing racial and class identities, as well as nationality, which exist within women themselves. Thus, one can safely say that the demonstration in which Offred's mother partook was one that happened during the second wave of the feminist movement, which then allows the reader to locate the time frame of this text to the late 1960s or early 1970s. Further, more accurate proof lies in several carvings that Offred encounters on a desk in the Rachel and Leah Center: "On the top of my desk there are initials, carved into the wood, and dates ... *M. loves G. 1972* ... There are no dates

after the mid-eighties. This must have been one of the schools that was closed down then, for lack of children” (113). Thus, the year can be narrowed down to after 1972.

Margaret Atwood frequently uses metaphors, symbols and images in her novel. Offred plays scrabble, which is symbol of reading and writing. The Scrabble game functions as a spatial metaphor of the freedom and restrictions existing for Offred in the novel, for she can write but not communicate by writing and choose her moves but only within the confines of the board and the Commander’s room with his complicity. The novel can be interpreted as a metaphor of the condition of women which has changed minimally over the centuries.

The language used by Offred is her weapon for she, who herself was a librarian in pre-Gilead has language in her mind that enables her to survive in Gilead who is initially silenced by Gileadean culture. The very thing that is denied Offred, the freedom to speak up, speak out, be heard, becomes the medium through which she defines herself. Offred realizes the centrality of language to the process of self- realization and the struggle for equality. Language which is the ability to speak, to tell one’s own story, is at the heart of Offred.

The Handmaid's Tale has often been called a feminist dystopia, but that term is not strictly accurate. In a feminist dystopia pure and simple, all of the men would have greater rights than all of the women. It would be two-layered in structure: top layer men, bottom layer women. But Gilead is the usual kind

of dictatorship: shaped like a pyramid, with the powerful of both sexes at the apex, the men generally outranking the women at the same level; then descending levels of power and status with men and women in each, all the way down to the bottom, where the unmarried men must serve in the ranks before being awarded an Econowife.

The novel suggests that the privileging of history, in the form of authentic first person account of the past, as something more truthful and accurate than fiction, is fallacious. The narrator insists that the tale she is telling is a reconstruction which is going to be at some level inaccurate, partial, incomplete, because it is retrospective. But she suggests that this status, neither wholly fact nor complete fiction. *The Handmaid's Tale* is dystopian fiction, with a confessional journal-style first person narrator.

In Gilead, Offred decides against being a victim. Especially early on in the novel, she is alert to every detail around her. Some of her observation is undertaken to fill the time, as when she minutely inspects every corner of her room. Some of it is a device to distance herself from the horror of her situation: “One detaches oneself. One describes,” she remarks as the Commander does his “duty” on the lower half of her body (89) in the Rachel ceremony, or as she lays her hand on the rope about to hang two women. Most of her attention is in aid of survival. Entering the Commander’s household, meeting her shopping companion Ofglen for the first time, she pays the closest heed to the smallest gestures of everyone around her, ‘reading’ them constantly. “Watch out,

Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. Once false move and I'm dead" (83).

Offred also realizes that her sexuality is the only real resource that she has; the Commander even escorts her to a secret Jezebel sex club because of his fascination with her. Offred is able to exploit her position at Jezebel's because of the Commander's lust. Even when she is trying on an archaic sequin outfit, she states that she "want him to feel like I'm doing him a favor" (THT 231). While Offred does not gain anything beyond a strange night-on-the-town and a conversation with her lost friend Moira, her relationship with the Commander has changed, even if just slightly. Their relationship is no longer like that in the past. She tries hard to change herself according to the Commander's wishes but could not do so.

Offred's desire to survive and to know comes with a necessary degree of complicity and a tendency to relapse. In her new self-awareness, Offred specifically accepts the element of complicitous choice in her situation. Lying on her back, she reasons: "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (88). She also recognizes and acknowledges her enjoyment of her own small exercises of power, however ignoble: her sexual teasing of the Guardians at the checkpoint, her slight power not only over the Commander, because he wants something from her, but over his wife, whom they are deceiving. She comes to understand that the Commander craves some unspoken forgiveness for the conditions of her life and that to bestow or to

withhold forgiveness is “a power, perhaps the greatest” (126), as well as a temptation. “How easy it is to invent a humanity, for anyone at all,” she reflects, thinking of the Commander’s request that she play Scrabble in the same breath as she recollects an interview with the mistress of one of the supervisors of a concentration camp (137).

Gilead also displays predictable strategies in trying to perpetuate, if not consolidate, its rule. Similar to Iran, one is immediately struck by the intensity of Gilead’s forced statecraft like the imposing display of security forces, the omnipresence of the eye, public executions, the threat of banishment to the colonies, and the rigid policy of censoring anything from the earlier time. Yet, Gilead is no exception to the rule that even the most coercive regime must generate some degree of compliance if it is to survive.

The 1980s is the period when many writers wrote about, what Deitering calls in the *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, “toxic consciousness” (196). It was a period when nuclear accidents, greenhouse effect and ecological collapse were taking place in many parts of the world, and which formed the plot of many works of literature. Many works by popular writers from all over the world focused on these issues. Some of them are: Richard Russo’s *Mohawk*, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Walker Percy’s *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Saul Bellow’s *More Die of Heartbreak*, and Paul Theroux’s *O-Zone*. These works, as Cynthia Deitering has pointed out “...offers insight into a culture’s shifting relation to nature and to the

environment at a time when the imminence of ecological collapse was, and is, part of the public mind and of individual imaginations” (196).

The Handmaid's Tale is also a novel that tells about the after effects of an atomic explosion. Rather than focusing on the direct effects of the explosion on the body of human beings, the novel focuses on the mental turmoil of people because of the changes in a state due to the explosion. Khajuria while writing about *The Handmaid's Tale* in *Ecofeminism in the Selected Novels of Margaret Atwood* asserts that, “*The Handmaid's tale* authenticates Margaret Atwood as a visionary” (220).

The novel highlights the web of oppressions that plays various roles in a society. Women are treated far inferior than men, the wives of higher officials further dominate other women, and infertile women are also made to live miserable lives. The imbalance and disharmony reflect the incapacity on the part of human beings in creating a loving and caring world. The emotions that dominate in such a society are fear, anxiety, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction. Women have to idle away their time in useless activities because they are not allowed to participate in the important works and to take independent decisions. Handmaids have been kept alive mainly for the process of reproduction. The rate of congenital abnormalities is so high that very rare babies turn out to be normal or viable. This has been the result of abuse of nature and environmental degradation. The deteriorated environment is an aftermath of the continuous oppressive policies.

Margaret Atwood portrays not only the condition of women in the future but also the future of a country. Whatever Atwood says of the Handmaids is also applicable to Canada. As [Sandra Tomc](#) says,

For a novel so overtly offered as a piece of feminist doctrine, *The Handmaid's Tale* delivers a curiously and, for Atwood, an unwontedly, conservative interpretation of women's exemplary social actions, advocating what looks more like traditional femininity than an insurgent feminism. But I also want to propose that this conservatism is, in fact, politically motivated, not by Atwood's feminism in this case but by her nationalism. Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is not generally regarded as part of Atwood's nationalist canon, its understanding of female independence is nevertheless determined by Atwood's sexually coded understanding of the relation between Canada and America. (74)

In Atwood's promotion of Canada's cultural autonomy from the United States, national and gender issues have had for her a commensurate and almost interchangeable status. Her 1972 novel *Surfacing* overtly identified the rape of the Canadian wilderness by American investors and tourists with the abuse of the female narrator's body by men. [Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature](#), published in the same year, indirectly elaborated this identification of Canada and victimised womanhood into an illumination of the essential Canadian identity as that of "the exploited victim" (35- 36).

While *The Handmaid's Tale* was a departure for Atwood in that it took up feminist issues to the exclusion of themes focusing on Canadian culture, her collapse of national and gender categories would, under any circumstances, make a consideration of her nationalism relevant to her feminist readings of contemporary culture. However, more than this, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not simply a non-Canadian novel, it is Atwood's first foray into an extended representation of America.

Most of the writers who write on Margaret Atwood consider *The Handmaid's Tale* to be a totally feminist novel. "However, not all the female characters in Atwood's novel are sympathetic, nor all the male ones demonic" (12), as Amin Malak says. The Aunts, a vicious elite of collaborators who conduct torture lectures, are among the church-state's staunchest supporters. These renegades turn into zealous converts, appropriating male values at the expense of their feminine instincts. One of them, Aunt Lydia, functions, ironically, as the spokesperson of antifeminism. She urges the handmaids to renounce themselves and become non-persons. She says, "Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen- to be *seen*- is to be- her voice trembled- penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls" (39). On the other hand, Nick, the Commander's chauffeur, is involved with the underground network, of men and women, that aims at rescuing women and conducting sabotage. Besides, Atwood's heroine constantly yearns for her former marriage life with Luke, presently presumed dead. Amin Malak in *Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the*

Dystopian Tradition comments: “Accordingly, while Atwood poignantly condemns the misogynous mentality that can cause a heavy toll of human suffering, she refrains from convicting a gender in its entirety as the perpetrator of the nightmare that is Gilead” (12).