

# A Dystopian Society in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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**Diplomski studij Engleskog jezika i književnosti (nastavnički smjer) i  
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**A Dystopian Society in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's  
Tale***

Diplomski rad

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## ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel set in a totalitarian theocracy. This thesis analyzes dystopian elements in Atwood's novel. It explores the Gileadan social hierarchy, emphasizing the imbalance between different social structures in the Republic of Gilead. It describes how the regime uses its power to limit one's freedom, comparing the Atwood's work with the classic slave narrative. Additionally, it explores the mechanics of fear in the novel, i.e. different methods the totalitarian regime uses in order to oppress its citizens. Since Atwood's novel is a representative of the female dystopia, the position of women in the Republic of Gilead is discussed in detail. The paper focuses on different interpretations of women and their position in the overall society, relying on the principles of the second-wave feminism, as well as Plato's understanding of women in *The Republic*. Further on, it debates whether sex is an act of compliance or rebellion. It compares the sexual repression present in Atwood's novel with the one explored in Orwell's *1984*. This paper explains the influence of religious fundamentalism on the rise of the misogynistic regime in the Republic of Gilead. It compares Gileadan regime with the fundamentalist groups, listing several prominent fundamentalist features present in Atwood's novel. The paper explores the notion of language in the *Handmaid's Tale*, exemplifying how it can be used both as the means of oppression and act of rebellion.

KEY WORDS: Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, dystopia, feminism, fundamentalism

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## Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* belongs to the dystopian genre. The genre itself gained its popularity in the twentieth century. However, the term dystopia appeared in the nineteenth century when it was used by John Stuart Mill in a parliamentary debate. However, one cannot fully comprehend the term dystopia without its opposite: a utopia. The term utopia is used to describe perfect imaginary societies. Therefore, its counterpart dystopia can be described as "a utopia gone wrong" (Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 1). Atwood relies on the work of her predecessors; therefore, *The Handmaid's Tale* has similar dystopian elements as Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*. Additionally, it heavily relies on feminism and religious fundamentalism in achieving the dystopian atmosphere.

The most prominent dystopian features present in Atwood's novel are the social hierarchy, the loss of freedom, and the intricate mechanics of fear. There are clear similarities between *The Handmaid's Tale* and Orwell's and Huxley's novels. Additionally, Atwood has been influenced by the second-wave feminism, which is evident in Hook's theoretical overview of the feminist movement in *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate Politics*. Also, the social position of women in Plato's *The Republic* is significantly different than the one presented in Atwood's novel. This paper explores the repression of sexual desire in both Atwood's novel and Orwell's *1984*. It argues that sex can be used as an act of rebellion, which is evident in Offred's forbidden relationship with the household's Guardian. Further on, the paper explains the connection between the religious fundamentalism and the rise of the misogynistic regime in the former United States. The totalitarian theocracy in Atwood's novel is established by the religious extremists who believe that women should be assigned the traditional roles of child bearers and housekeepers. Therefore, The Sons of Jacob have similar ideology to Christian fundamentalist groups of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The paper relies on Emerson and Hartman's list of nine characteristics of fundamentalist groups in order to prove that the Republic of Gilead is based on the same principles. Lastly, the language can be used as an oppressive force as well as the tool for rebellion against the regime. This is evident in the Handmaids' discourse which is quite limiting and oppressive.

## 1. Dystopian Features in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

In order to understand Atwood's novel, one must be familiar with the term dystopia and its historical context. Gregory Claeys states that the term itself became widespread in the twentieth century, although "it appears intermittently beforehand (dys-topia or 'cacotopia', bad place, having been used by John Stuart Mill in an 1868 parliamentary debate)" (107). Most dystopian novels were written in the twentieth century. However, dystopian tendencies can be traced further back in the literary past. Stock traces the origins of the genre, stating that "dystopian fiction developed from a (post-) Enlightenment tradition that ran through the Victorian era and into the work of writers like H. G. Wells" (10). In the twentieth century dystopia gained its popularity due to the prevailing social and political climate. During the post-war tensions such dire visions of the future were not difficult to imagine. Some of the most prominent representatives of the genre are Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We*), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) and George Orwell (*1984*). Their work has been influenced by literary modernism – especially in relation to modernist concerns and the use of the experimental narratives. However, it is "more accurate to see them as fully embodying the legacies of modernism rather than being strictly 'modernist'" (Stock 18).

The term dystopia cannot be completely understood without its opposite - a utopia. The term utopia was coined in 1516 by Thomas More. Since then it has been used to denote the perfect imaginary societies. However, Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash define dystopia as not necessarily the opposite of utopia:

Despite the name, dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia. A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society. (1)

Atwood's novel contains several prominent dystopian features, such as the social hierarchy, the loss of freedom and intricate mechanics of fear. These features are being explored with the help of a first-person narrator – the main protagonist Offred – who tells the story of her life as a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead.

Through Offred's narrative, the reader learns that the democratic United States have been abolished in favor of a new political regime founded by Christian fundamentalists. The Republic of Gilead is openly misogynistic – the power is granted only to men. As Malak suggests, "dystopias essentially deal with power: power as the prohibition or perversion of human potential; power in its absolute form (...)" (10). Atwood's novel deals with the power as the perversion of human potential – in the Republic of Gilead healthy women are being indoctrinated with Gileadan ideology and forced into sexual slavery.

The citizens of Gilead are forced to live a life based on "frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror" (Malak 10). Therefore, Atwood's novel is essentially dystopian.

## 1.1. The Social Hierarchy

Hierarchical nature of a dystopian society is evident in most dystopian novels. Atwood's predecessors, Orwell and Huxley, knew that in a dystopian society the power is never balanced. There are always those on the top who control the rest of the society through various means: brainwashing, providing pleasure, or keeping the citizens of such society in a state of the constant fear. In Atwood's novel the oppressors are the Commanders of the Faithful – the founders of the Republic of Gilead. They control the rest of the society: the lower-ranking men known as the Guardians and Gileadan official army – the Angels; but, more importantly, they control groups of women known as the Aunts, Marthas and the Handmaids. To understand how dystopian societies work, one must realize that "dystopian regimes are (...) kept in place by the acquiescence of a complacent citizenry that accepts and may even enjoy its comforting oppression" (Weiss, par. 12).

The social hierarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale* consists of several functioning bodies – from women who serve as the maids, to the Commanders of the Faithful. Every person in the Republic of Gilead has their function. However, there are two groups of women who are not divided into functions. They are known as the Unwomen – the inhabitants of the notorious Colonies, and women of the poorer men – Econowives. Although these two groups do not have their formal functions, they are an integral part of the dystopian social structure. The Unwomen, as well as the Econowives, may be observed as a cautionary tale. Women of Gilead, primarily Handmaids, are led to believe that if they do not follow the existing rules, they are going to be exiled to the Colonies "where women clean up radioactive waste as slave laborers" (Malak 9).

At the bottom of the social structure are women known as Marthas. They perform menial tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the household in general. They are the embodiment of the stereotypical role of women; they are compliant and prone to gossiping. Due to their inability to bear children, they are considered less worthy and denied the right to marry. As all the other fractions of the society, they are dressed according to the official government rules – in dull green dresses, "like a surgeon's gown of the time before" (Atwood 9). Since Marthas do not serve to procreate, they have more freedom regarding their physical appearance. Offred describes Rita, a Martha employed in the same household, in the following way: "The



dress is much like mine in shape, long and concealing, but with a bib apron over it and without the white wings and the veil. She puts the veil to go outside, but nobody much cares who sees the face of a Martha" (Atwood 9). It is evident from Offred's brief description of Rita that Marthas are not valued in the society; they are almost invisible.

Marthas take pride in their household. They are satisfied with their position in the overall society – this is how the government ensures that they will never rebel against the system. By accepting their passive role, the Marthas have granted power to those above them. They blindly follow the rules of the oppressive society. By doing this they are equally guilty as those who oppress them.

Atwood borrowed the idea of submissive maids, Marthas, and the name itself, from the Bible. Martha and Mary were sisters who lived in Bethany, a small village near Jerusalem. When Jesus and his disciples visited their home, Mary sat at his feet listening to his words. On the other hand, her sister Martha was preoccupied with all the necessary preparations, i.e. cooking and cleaning. She complained to Jesus, who replied: "Martha, Martha, he said, you worry and fret about so many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part, and it is not to be taken from her" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Luke 10.38-42).

Jesus scolded Martha for worrying over meaningless things, such as cooking and cleaning. At the same time, he praised Mary for doing the right thing – focusing on his teachings. The same distinction between Mary and Martha is evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this case, Mary can be observed as a symbolical Handmaid – woman who firmly believes in official ideology and obeys those above her. The Handmaids take Gileadan teachings seriously. Therefore, they are to be praised by the rest of the society. On the other hand, Marthas cannot bear children, i.e. fulfil regime's sacred purpose. Because of this they are reduced to the role of the maids and forced to perform meaningless tasks. Their choice, unlike biblical Martha's, is not voluntary. Therefore, it serves as a form of punishment.

Surprisingly, one of the lower positions in the social hierarchy belongs to men – precisely, to the Guardians. The Guardians serve their masters – the Commanders. Their main task is keeping the Commanders and their wives and daughters safe. However, as Offred states, "the Guardians aren't real soldiers. They're used for routine policing and other menial functions, digging up the Commander's Wife's garden, for instance, and they're either stupid or older or disabled or very young (...)" (Atwood 20). They wear special uniforms which distinguish them

from the high-ranking men, i.e. the Commanders. Their uniforms are green "with the crests on their shoulders and berets: two swords, crossed, above a white triangle" (Atwood 20).

The Guardians must treat the Handmaids with respect – avoiding direct eye contact and performing a special type of salute – three fingers raised to the brim of the their berets. Nick, the Guardian of the household in which Offred lives, serves as a proof that there is a certain hierarchy even among the Guardians. He does not even own his own home, but lives modestly above his employer's garage. Offred suggests that the fact that he has not been issued a woman implies that he "doesn't rate: some defect, lack of connections" (Atwood 18).

There are also the Guardians specialized in taking the Handmaids to their gynecologists – a task performed once a month. They differ from the rest of the Guardians by wearing red arm bands which symbolize their position.

The Guardians are, as has already been said, usually old, very young or not very intelligent. That may explain their passive role in the overall society. They observe their submissiveness as something honorable. Although they are almost at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, they do nothing to change their predicament.

The only women in this novel who possess a certain amount of power are the Aunts. As their name suggests, they represent a fairly authoritative figure and their main task is preparing the Handmaids for their procreative purposes. They operate at the Rachel and Leah Reeducation Center, where they reprogram young women to believe that their bodies are used for the higher good. The Aunts are the perfect product of the totalitarian theocracy. They never question the government and they firmly believe in the Gileadan system of values, however misogynistic it is.

The Aunts are quite hypocritical in their beliefs. They value women and their role in procreation above anything, but they firmly support the Republic of Gilead – a republic whose healthy females are turned into sex slaves. They preach the importance of procreation – the Handmaids' sacred duty. On the other hand, the Aunts manage brothels for the Commanders – they teach prostitutes how to behave and regulate their life and duties at the brothel. Johnson states that the Aunts have three main goals they want to accomplish: "The first is to delete the women from history. (...) The second goal is to teach women how to betray other women. (...) The Aunts final goal is to teach the handmaids that rape is acceptable" (72). The Aunts accomplish these goals through rigorous preaching sessions – a type of the brainwashing

technique. However, their main weapon is fear. They physically abuse the Handmaids with the help of "electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts" (Atwood 4).

The Commanders' wives are at the very top of the social hierarchy, just beneath their husbands. However, their role in the society is quite pitiful – they quietly observe as their husbands have sexual intercourse with the Handmaids and pray for the possibility of the conception. They lead empty lives, filled with occasional gossip and rare celebrations if one of the households is blessed with the newborn. They are unable to have children on their own, so the government keeps them busy by giving them meaningless tasks, such as knitting scarves for the army. The unfulfilled nature of their lives is suggested in Offred's reflections: "Sometimes I think these scarves aren't sent to the Angels at all, but unraveled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted in their turn. Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (Atwood 13).

They differ from the rest of the females in the way they are dressed – they wear blue, the color of the royals. They have no actual power – they despise the Handmaids but cannot do anything to change the way the society operates. They are provided with the false sense of power through Scriptural precedent which allows them to physically punish the Handmaids "but not with any implement. Only with their hands (Atwood 16).

Additionally, the Wives are the most powerful when they are the weakest. These are the moments when "true to the precedent set in Genesis, the Commander's Wife arranges and supervises (...) sex sessions, in which the handmaid, desexed and dehumanized, is obliged to participate" (Malak 9). Therefore, it is evident that their power comes from the dominance over humiliated Handmaids.

At the very top of the social hierarchy are the Commanders of the Faithful. Their role in the Gileadan society is pretty unclear. They are mainly responsible for reading the Bible to the members of their household. Therefore, they serve to reinforce the existing system of belief. However, due to the low birth rate, their main duty is impregnating the Handmaids. Interestingly, the Commanders are not portrayed as brutes; their behavior is quite meek and impassive. They too follow certain rules, or patterns of behavior – especially concerning their wives. Such behavior is evident in the following example: "The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed: the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy's territory, he's supposed to ask permission to enter it" (Atwood 86).

The Commanders too are ranked among themselves, and thus given more money and power. When Offred visits one of the Handmaids during the labor, she notices "wide steps with a stone urn on either side – Ofwarren's Commander must be higher status than ours (...)" (Atwood 114). The Commanders wear black – a color which emphasizes their power.

The hypocrisy of the Gileadan society is evident in the Commanders' behavior. They preach that the only function of sex should be procreation. On the other hand, they regularly indulge in sexual intercourse with Jezebels – women who serve as prostitutes. Atwood named Gileadan prostitutes after ninth century BC Phoenician royalty. Jezebel became notorious when she married Ahab, king of Israel. Williams states that "two major accusations are made against Queen Jezebel. One is promoting the worship of *false gods*, the other is orchestrating the execution of an innocent man to secure his land" (12). Jezebel's fate is tragic – she was murdered and her corpse was eaten by dogs. Her name is often associated with prostitutes or adulterous women who have no moral boundaries. However, biblical stories never mention that she was unfaithful to her husband. Adultery is in Jezebel's case spiritual: "being unfaithful to Yahweh by worshiping other deities was equated with adultery or *whoring after false gods*" (Williams 14). Most written accounts state that she wore fine clothes and makeup. Similarly, in Atwood's novel, the only women who are allowed to wear makeup are Jezebels. Whether this image of historical Jezebel is true or not, Atwood used her name to denote promiscuous women who are willing to sell their bodies in order to stay alive.

Lastly, there is a group of women who cannot be ranked – the Handmaids. The position of Handmaids in Atwood's novel remains unclear. They are highly valued because of their purpose. However, they are despised by other women – especially the Wives. Although they are highly respected and well-kept, one must not forget that these women have been semi-brainwashed and forced into a form of sexual slavery.

The Handmaids wear government-issued clothes which almost completely conceal their bodies. Offred describes her clothes in great detail:

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat

yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood 8)

The Handmaids are deprived of their privacy, personal possessions, and freedom. When women become Handmaids, they are stripped of everything – even their names. “In order to erase the former identity of the handmaids, the state, moreover, cancels their original names and labels them according to the names of their Commanders, hence the names Offred, Ofglen, Ofwayne, Ofwarren” (Malak 11).

The Handmaids live under the constant threat of being declared as the Unwomen and sent to the Colonies. If they fail to produce the offspring even at their third posting, they are no longer of any use to the society.

Gileadan social hierarchy is similar to that of Huxley’s *Brave New World*. In Huxley’s novel, the citizens are divided into five different casts: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon. In this particular society, women no longer bear children. They are artificially created in the Hatchery and raised in the Conditioning Centre. The fate of each individual is predetermined – each fetus is bound to become a member of a certain caste. Alpha caste is intellectually and physically superior. They retain a certain level of individuality since they are allowed to develop naturally; unlike lower casts who are the product of the Bokanovsky’s Process, in which one egg can create up to ninety six individuals. Members of the lower casts are intellectually and physically inferior to those of the higher ranking castes. They are destined to perform menial tasks.

The similarity between Atwood’s and Huxley’s social hierarchy is evident in the government-issued clothes. In *Brave New World* each caste wears certain color – Alphas wear grey, Betas mulberry, Gammas green, Deltas khaki, and Epsilons black. The color-coded clothes serve to differentiate between members of the different castes. Similarly, in the Republic of Gilead one can easily guess the function of each individual just by looking at their clothes.

In both novels, the individuals are conditioned to accept their social position. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Handmaids are taught to embrace their procreative purpose through series of brainwashing techniques at Rachel and Leah Reeducation Centre. In *Brave New World*, all the individuals are conditioned to love their social caste. Through years of intensive hypnopaedia, or sleep-teaching, they have been taught numerous things – such as taking contraceptives regularly, or maintaining personal hygiene. At the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre, the

Director explains the importance of hypnopaedia, stating that it is even more efficient than color-coded clothes or physical punishment:

Roses and electric shocks, the khaki of Deltas and a whiff of asafoetida—wedded indissolubly before the child can speak. But wordless conditioning is crude and wholesale; cannot bring home the finer distinctions, cannot inculcate the more complex courses of behaviour. For that there must be words, but words without reason. In brief, hypnopædia. The greatest moralizing and socializing force of all time. (Huxley 27)

In both novels, human beings have been deprived of their individuality and conditioned to behave according to their social status.

## 1.2. The Loss of Freedom

Freedom, i.e. the lack of it, is a predominant issue in dystopian literature. Most dystopian novels depict totalitarian societies in which freedom is strictly limited or inexistent.

The ruling class – the government or some other form of social deity – often brainwash their citizens into believing that they are free; actually, they are completely restricted – both physically and mentally.

The citizens of such societies are rarely given any leisure time. Therefore, they do not have the opportunity to think about their predicament. Ferris states that the repression of one's emotional and intellectual freedom creates passive citizens:

The repression of the “free radicals” of the human mind and heart, such as love, spiritual awakening and discovery, creativity and invention keeps a person focused on their tasks, allowing no time or space to think, consider, reflect or ponder. One's motivation is not for themselves, but only for the State they are conditioned to love. (12)

On the other hand, the citizens of Gilead, especially the Handmaids, are given more than enough leisure time. However, they have been either completely brainwashed by the government into believing that their reproductive purposes are sacred; or they are too scared, submissive, or exhausted to fight back.

Offred's story is similar to the classic slave narrative – it deals with the same issues, primarily the “freedom, inequality and the nature of domination” (Varsam 210). As in the classic slave narrative, the Handmaids are enslaved by the dominant minority – the Commanders. They behave, speak and dress in a government-prescribed manner – their freedom is strictly limited. Although the government wants the Handmaids to believe that their social position is high, and their purpose in the Gileadan society sacred, they are not equal to those on the top. The Handmaids are nothing but sexual slaves who have been completely ostracized from the rest of the society and used once a month for sexual purposes.

The reader learns about the issue of freedom in the Republic of Gilead through Offred's narrative. As has already been mentioned, the Handmaids wear government-issued clothes. The clothing itself is quite limiting – it is long and shapeless, depriving the Handmaids of their femininity. However, the most restricting items are definitely the wings which enclose the

Handmaids' faces. They dehumanize the Handmaids, making them uniform. Additionally, they keep the Handmaids from seeing the world as it is. Offred understands the purpose of the wings: "Given our wings, our blinkers, it's hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. (...) We have learned to see the world in gasps" (Atwood 30).

The Handmaids, as well as the other members of the lower class, are denied the right to read and write. When religious fundamentalists established their power in the former United States, most books, newspapers and magazines have been destroyed. Only the Commanders of the Faithful are allowed to read or write – this is yet another way of establishing dominance over the lower-class citizens. Offred often thinks about the Handmaid that had lived in the same household before her. The readers learn that she had committed suicide – her act of defiance against the restricting government. However, she had disobeyed the government in more than one way – at the bottom of the cupboard Offred finds one sentence scratched on the floor: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" (Atwood 52). Offred accepts this sentence as a proof that the Handmaids are not completely powerless. Even a small act of defiance is better than the complete submissiveness. In 1984, Orwell describes a similar rebellion against the ruling party. The citizens of Oceania are not allowed to keep private possessions, such as photographs, documents or diaries. The main protagonist, Winston Smith, rebels against the totalitarian party by writing a personal diary. This small act of defiance helps him to regain control over his thoughts and see through government's imposed lies. Additionally, the citizens of Oceania are allowed to read only government-issued pamphlets, or news which have been censored in order to fit the official politics of the Party. Similarly, in Atwood's novel, the Bible, which has probably been modified in order to support Gileadan propaganda, is a mandatory read.

The complete restriction of freedom is evident in the government's attitude towards songs "songs are not sung anymore in public, especially the ones that use words like *free*. They are considered too dangerous. They belong to outlawed sects" (Atwood 54).

The Handmaids can never become completely free – they are branded like cattle with a small ankle tattoo: "four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse" (Atwood 65). By doing this the government ensures that its most important asset, the women owned by the government, can never leave without being discovered.

The viable ovaries are the only thing the Handmaids are valued for. Therefore, they are banned from drinking coffee, alcohol and smoking cigarettes. They must perform their daily



exercises – mainly Kegel, or pelvic floor exercises, in order to maintain the health and vitality of their reproductive organs.

The citizens of the Republic of Gilead are completely aware of their limitations. The Handmaids are being taught that they are now enjoying a different form of freedom. "There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 24).

"Freedom to" refers to the basic right of every human being to act, dress, and speak according to their own free will. In the United States the women had that type of freedom; however, they were often sexually abused. The Republic of Gilead takes pride in the fact that women, primarily the Handmaids, are sufficiently protected. In such a society "women have few freedoms, but their fertility is respected and they are free from the threat of sexual violence in the streets" (Jadwin 31).

However, Offred is completely aware of exactly how limiting her life as a Handmaid is. She knows that every act of freedom has its limitations: "The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet. As long as I don't move. As long as I lie still" (Atwood 37).

One may find it difficult to understand how it is possible that people gave up on their freedom, as they did in Atwood's novel. Weiss argues that "in a crisis, however, it is common for people to surrender their freedom willingly to a government or other authority offering them security and freedom *from* uncertainty, danger, fear, hunger, etc. " (par. 9). The Republic of Gilead created false sense of security and led its citizens to believe that they were safer under the imposed restrictions.

The false sense of security is one of the most powerful tools that totalitarian regimes use in order to control their citizens. In *Brave New World*, the citizens of the World State are ready to sacrifice their personal freedom in order to retain social stability. The most successful method of maintaining social stability is creating identical citizens who will perform identical tasks. These people are preconditioned to love their social position. They do everything in the name of the planetary motto: "Community, Identity, Stability" (Huxley 6). The citizens of the World State are deprived of their individuality because it marks them as socially unstable. Such individuals are too dangerous for the regime. As the Controller explains, there is "no civilization without social

stability. No social stability without individual stability" (Huxley 41). The totalitarian oppressor uses social stability as an excuse for controlling people and making them uniform.

### 1.3. The Mechanics of Fear in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Republic of Gilead is a theocracy founded on the constant fear of its citizens. This method of inducing fear in order to establish power is often used in many dystopian narratives. Gottlieb explains the impact of fear on the citizens of various dystopian societies in the following way:

In the dystopic societies of *Fahrenheit 451*, *Player Piano*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* the ruling elite no longer desire to evoke in citizens a belief in party's immortality, or in a quasi-eschatological system of a particular ideology; they confine their activities to evoking fear in the population that anyone could be pushed into the circle of the outsiders. (40)

The circle of the outsiders in Atwood's novel refers to the Unwoman – women deemed unfit for the Gileadan purposes and sent to the infamous colonies.

However, the submissiveness of the overall society – its male and female citizens – is established through constant fear of war. What makes Atwood's novel plausible is the fact that the Republic of Gilead was established after a staged terrorist attack. The citizens of the United States felt vulnerable and unprotected. In the overall state of panic, they have found the desired protection under the right-wing religious extremists – a movement called "The Sons of Jacob".

In order to retain the newly established power, the Gileadan government continues with, most-likely, false pretense of ongoing war with the members of other Christian denominations, such as Catholics and Baptists.

The citizens of Gilead are not familiar with the details of the war itself. Offred accepts this ignorance as something normal and does not question the authorities: "This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves" (Atwood 23).

Since reading and writing is forbidden, and television is owned only by the Commanders and their wives, it is easy to keep the low ranking citizens under the pretense of threat. Also, the foreign satellite stations are being blocked – the government's way of ensuring that its citizens will never find out the truth.

The citizens of Gilead are allowed to watch the news. The news serve as a tool for spreading the government's propaganda. They usually feature action-packed clips, showing the defeat of the enemies:

The Appalachian Highlands, says the voice-over, where the Angels of the Apocalypse, Fourth Division, are smoking out a pocket of Baptist guerillas, with air support from the Twenty-first Battalion of the Angels of Light. We are shown two helicopters, black ones with silver wings painted on the sides. Below them, a clump of trees explodes.

Now a close shot of a prisoner, with a stubbled and dirty face, flanked by two Angels in their neat black uniforms. (Atwood 82)

Offred suspects that the news are false; however, she does nothing: "Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. But I watch it anyway, hoping to be able to read beneath it. Any news, now, is better than none" (Atwood 82). Offred's passivity could be the result of the fact that she has been successfully frightened into submissiveness. Additionally, as a human being deprived of touch and emotions, she longs to be comforted: "If only it were true. If only I could believe" (Atwood 83).

Offred often comments on the lack of basic necessities, such as food and gas: "Ever since Central America was lost to the Libertheos, oranges have been hard to get: sometimes they are there, sometimes not. The war interferes with the oranges from California, and even Florida isn't dependable (...)" (Atwood 25). The government blames food shortage on war – this is yet another way of retaining the submissive state of its citizens.

The government publicly executes people who are seen as the enemies of the state – former doctors who have performed abortions, Catholic priests or various scientists. Their bodies are then exposed on the Wall – a remnant from the past to serve as the warning. The Handmaids are encouraged to stop by the Wall, as a part of their daily walks, and think about the sins of those men:

These men, we've been told, are like war criminals. It's no excuse that what they did was legal at the time: their crimes are retroactive. They have committed atrocities and must be made into examples, for the rest. Though this is hardly needed. No woman in her right mind, these days, would seek to prevent a birth, should she be so lucky as to conceive. What we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn. (Atwood 33)

Another effective method of imposing fear and punishing the so-called war criminals, or state enemies, is allowing the Handmaids to execute those men with their bare hands. This ritual resembles the ancient practice of sacrificing human beings for the greater good. The Handmaids are thus given the semblance of power – they feel more important than the men they are allowed to kill. Gottlieb argues that “allowing the victims to act as executioners of other victims is probably the single most important ritual expressing the essential mechanism of dictatorship” (108).

In Orwell’s *1984*, the citizens are kept under control in a similar manner. Gottlieb claims that in *1984* the dictatorship is “defined by the science of terror, the systematic and sophisticated perpetration of violence directed by the Inner Party against its own people in the name of socialist ideals” (79).

Everything one does is closely monitored with the help of the telescreens installed into every apartment. Therefore, the citizens of Oceania live in constant fear of being caught doing something that the Party would disapprove of. The telescreens are also used to propagate the Inner Party’s official beliefs. In Orwell’s novel, “the persuasive power of every medium, technique and genre of communication is exploited to its maximum potential and single-mindedly put to work” (Yeo 51). The power of propaganda is evident at the beginning of the novel when the Inner Party claims that the Oceania is at war with Eurasia. During the Hate Week the citizens are expected to proclaim their hatred towards the enemy. However, in the middle of the protest, the government proclaims that Oceania has always been at war with Eastasia. Although that is obviously a lie, the citizens of Oceania continue to believe in Inner Party’s official propaganda.

By keeping its citizens under the pretense of war, the Inner Party managed to convince them that they are safe as long as they do not question the authorities. When Winston reads Goldstein’s book, he learns that war is just a pretense. Gottlieb explains how totalitarian systems preserve their power by instilling fear in their citizens:

After the war in the 1950s, with the help of the atom bomb that only superpowers could afford to manufacture, the world was divided among three totalitarian dictatorships. The perfect, unchangeable equilibrium among the three has created the precondition for world peace. However, each dictator has been pretending to be at war all the time because only continual war gives him the excuse to keep his own population enslaved, undernourished,

overworked, as well as in a permanent state of fear of the "satanic" enemy and traitor, and consequently ready to worship the dictator as the Saviour. (82)

As in Atwood's novel, the enemies of the regime are severely punished – they are usually sentenced to death and publicly executed. Those executions serve as a constant reminder of the regime's power – just like public hangings in the Republic of Gilead.

## 2. The Position of Women in the Republic of Gilead: A Feminist Dystopia

One of the most important issues that *The Handmaid's Tale* deals with is the question of women – their social and political position in the Republic of Gilead. Atwood's concern with the question of sexual equality stems from the second-wave feminism – a movement which attempted to establish complete gender equality. Hooks defines feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (1). The second-wave feminism started in the 1960s and lasted into the 1980s. Although the movement itself was short-lived, it "radically transformed medical research and services, sports, education, family life, the professions, law, popular culture, literature and the performing arts, social work, international development thinking, and even religion, and made possible the gay liberation movement" (Gordon 8).

The question of gender equality has been vastly explored throughout the civilization's history. In *The Republic*, Plato discusses the difference between men and women. He claims that the only real difference between the sexes is that the women "can bear children and the men cannot" (Plato 383). He also refers to men as the stronger sex – but this difference does not apply to all men and women, since some men are physically weaker than women. Plato also states that men differ from one another – that is the reason why some men rule the city, while other men serve them. He believes that both men and women should be given equal opportunity, according to their individual capacities. Unlike in the Republic of Gilead, "in a Platonically just society, men and women will be assigned to the same social tasks and pursuits on exactly the same basis. It will be just that some men and some women be rulers, some men and some women be soldiers, and some men and some women be producers and traders" (Santas 31). In Atwood's novel, however, all the power belongs to men. Therefore, Gileadan society is based on sexism and social injustice.

Atwood's novel presents a perverted image of the society in which women have no rights. Women with viable ovaries are used as sexual slaves. However, they are, ironically, completely deprived of their femininity through the oppressive dress code – another way of men's display of dominance over women. The complete sexual oppression of women in Atwood's novel is the result of the right-wing Christianity which enabled men to dominate over women. However, Atwood criticizes extreme feminism as well as the extreme Christianity. Offred remembers

public burnings of pornographic materials which were conducted by radical feminists. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Atwood juxtaposes two seemingly opposing cultural forces, feminism and right wing Christianity, to show how strict lines separating the labels in ideology blur in practice" (Braza 134).

In the Republic of Gilead, sexual oppression has been enforced in a quick manner – allowing women no time to fight back. The self-imposed government forbade women to work or hold any personal property. Women were cut off from virtually all aspects of social and political life. The reason for this sudden imbalance between sexes is simple: "the crisis of childlessness in Gilead provides an excuse and impetus for men to seize control of women's production and reproduction" (Billy 1).

The most obvious way of establishing dominance is depriving women of their sexuality. Without their sexual identity, the Handmaids became just a tool for reproduction. They are banned from using various vanities, such as makeup: "There's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us. Such things are considered vanities. We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood 96). Their dresses are limiting and concealing, similar to those worn by nuns: "some people call them *habits*, a good word for them" (Atwood 24). Men require women to look and act like nuns, which is ironic because they do not hesitate to use them as sexual objects. When Offred sees a group of Japanese tourists she is both fascinated and repelled by the way those women dress: "They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom" (Atwood 28).

In the past, women had a certain autonomy regarding their bodies. They were free to use contraceptives and undergo abortions. However, in the Republic of Gilead, that form of freedom has been lost. Women have no right to choose whether they want to have a child or not – their bodies are no longer theirs to use as they please. Medical procedure such as abortion is regarded as the greatest sin against nature. On the other hand, the Handmaids are completely deprived of motherhood. They have no right to keep the children they give birth to; instead, "their reproductive potential becomes their means of survival" (Billy 3).

The Handmaids are more or less successfully brainwashed into believing that they are a national resource, a commodity. They are led to believe that their purpose is sacred, moral, and crucial for the further existence of the entire society. Since money does no longer exist, the



Handmaids are used as payment, or a reward. They are the focal point of Gileadan economy, the country's most valued good. Gilead "uses women to maintain its hierarchy" (Billy 3). For example, in order to become a Commander, an Angel must obtain his own Handmaid – the Gileadan status symbol. Equally, low-ranking men are paired with Econowives – poor women who are of no value to the official government. The hypocrisy of the Gileadan value system is evident in the fact that they do not care about the children born to the lower-class parents. Additionally, if Econowives "cannot produce children, that is unfortunate but unimportant" (Billy 3).

While the Handmaids are just a commodity, there are two groups of women who have a certain amount of power in the Republic of Gilead. These two groups, the Wives and the Aunts, "participate in gift giving and the trafficking of other women" (Steuber 25). Although their power is not absolute like the Commanders', the Wives and the Aunts are equally oppressive towards the Handmaids. By being involved in the very act of sexual trafficking, those two groups of women actively participate in Gileadan sexist politics. The Wives oppress the Handmaids out of sheer jealousy; they despise the idea of other women making love to their Husbands, but, more importantly, they are envious of the Handmaids' ability to bear children. During the sexual act, the Wife holds the Handmaid's hands the entire time: "This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus the product" (Atwood 94). Also, the fact that the Wives are given a permission to physically punish the Handmaids proves their dominance in the female social hierarchy.

The Aunts are, interestingly, equally oppressive towards women as are the Commanders. Atwood implies that in order to retain certain amount of power women must act like men. The Aunts' sexuality is ambiguous – they degrade other women, but at the same time they display a certain disdain for men. Steuber states that although "the physical description of the Aunts' body language is more indicative of a masculine gait and posture, the detail about how the Aunts purse their lips when uttering the word "men" also contributes to their separation into an ambiguous gender group" (24). At the Red Center, the Aunts use various methods, such as inflicting fear through physical punishment or repeating the regime's official propaganda, to train the Handmaids. They teach the Handmaids that their sexuality is perverted. The Aunts want the Handmaids to believe that their predicament is their own fault. At one point, one of the

Handmaids confesses that she was gang-raped at the age of fourteen. Instead of comforting her, the Aunts humiliate her, turning all the other Handmaids against her:

But *whose* fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger.

*Her* fault, *her* fault, *her* fault, we chant in unison.

*Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

*She* did. *She* did. *She* did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?

Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. (Atwood 72)

The Aunts are essentially anti-feminist. Their beliefs and the overall behavior are degrading to other women. In contrast, the behavior of two other characters in Atwood's novel is purely feminist. These two characters are Offred's mother, and Moira, her best friend. Offred's mother represents everything that the Gileadan regime wants to suppress – a strong and powerful woman who refuses to accept men as her rulers. In the former United States she was a single mother and an active feminist. Offred remembers her mother and her close circle of friends coming back from a protest: "They'd been in a march that day; it was during the time of the porn riots, or was it the abortion riots, they were close together" (Atwood 180). This proves that Offred's mother was active in her pursuit of gender equality. Her open feminist worldview marks her as the enemy of the regime. Therefore, she is sent to the Colonies, which is equal to the death sentence.

Offred's best friend, Moira, is often seen as "Offred's revolutionary alter ego, engaging in the sorts of subversive acts that Offred herself is afraid to" (Weiss, par. 24). In the past, Moira used to sell sensual lingerie. Later on, she worked for a feminist publishing house, publishing "books on birth control and rape and things like that, though there wasn't as much demand for those things as there used to be" (Atwood 178). Moira is open about her sexuality and fights the oppression. At the Red Center, she refuses to obey the Aunts, attempting to escape more than once. In the end, she manages to escape. Callaway argues that "the manner of her escape – taking off her state-issued Handmaid robes and putting on the uniform of an Aunt – symbolizes her rejection of Gilead's attempts to define her identity" (54). However, eventually, she is caught and forced to work as a prostitute. Offred sees this as Moira's final defeat: "I don't want her to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swash-buckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack" (Atwood 249). Though her

position at Jezebel's can be observed as something negative, Steuber thinks that "Moira's existence among other women allows her to express her true sexuality and experience female nurturing, while subverting the hierarchy" (29). Since Moira is openly attracted to the same sex, her current position is sexually liberating. She reassures Offred, telling her that "it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it" (Atwood 249).

On the other hand, Offred is completely different from both her mother and Moira. Even before Gilead, she was compliant. She viewed her mother and Moira's feminism as something unnecessary. Additionally, she always listened to Luke, her husband. Although she realized that his statements are somewhat sexist, she never addressed the issue of gender equality. However, she clearly felt the imbalance between her husband and herself: "We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his" (Atwood 182). Later on, as a Handmaid, she does nothing to save herself. Instead, she relies on men to save her. She hopes that Luke will rescue her, although she presumes that he is dead. In the end, she finds comfort in Nick: "Being here with him is safety; it's a cave, where we huddle together while the storm goes on outside" (Atwood 269). Instead of trying to fight against oppression, Offred accepts her predicament stating that it is "amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (Atwood 271).

## 2.1. Sex: A Form of Compliance or Rebellion?

In dystopian literature sex is often used as a means of imposing submissiveness, or as the individual's way of rebelling against the regime. In Atwood's novel, most female characters are forced into submissiveness and required to have sexual intercourse in order to procreate. The Handmaids are not given any choice – once a month they are forced to participate in the Ceremony. The Ceremony, or the sexual intercourse between the Commander and his Handmaid, is completely devoid of emotion. Offred describes the Ceremony in the following way:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below is the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. (Atwood 94)

During the Ceremony, Offred detaches herself from her own body. She perceives the physical relationship between her and the Commander as her duty. Consequently, she is disappointed whenever she fails to conceive, i.e. fulfill the regime's expectations. Although she is aware of the fact that the Gileadan regime is using her body against her own will, she has been forced into submissiveness. She knows that she must perform her duty in order to survive, for she can only be "saved by childbearing" (Atwood 221).

On the other hand, at Jezebel's, the Commanders covertly mock their own regime by indulging in sexual intercourse with the prostitutes. Women who work at Jezebel's cannot bear children. To escape certain death in the Colonies, they have accepted to work as prostitutes. They are required to wear various exotic costumes which are banned by the official government. At one point, the Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's. His intentions are clear – he wants to have sex with Offred without his wife watching. When Offred demands to know why he brought her there, he simply answers: "I thought you might enjoy it for a change" (Atwood 254). His answer is ironic because, according to the Gileadan teachings, the only purpose of sex is procreation. Offred considers the Commander's sexual desire as her opportunity to escape: "I know I need to take it seriously, this desire of his. It could be important, it could be a passport, it could be my downfall" (Atwood 144). However, she never actually uses her femininity in order to seduce the

Commander. She has lost the ability to feel that way about her own body. Instead, her body is just a container which holds a possibility of an offspring.

Since Offred fails to conceive, Serena Joy arranges a secret meeting with Nick – the Guardian employed at their household. Offred has sexual intercourse with him. In the beginning, she does that in order to get pregnant. However, she gets emotionally involved and sneaks out to meet him on several occasions. She openly admits that she is enjoying herself: “We make love each time as if we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that there will never be any more, for either of us, with anyone, ever” (Atwood 269). Although she is breaking the official rules by having a sexual relationship with someone other than her Commander, Offred’s act of defiance cannot be perceived as heroic. She does not have sex in order to fight the regime’s imposed rules – she does that to escape her reality. Weiss argues that her relationship with Nick is “a means of escape, even escapism” (par. 5). This is evident in the fact that she refuses to flee Gilead, even though she is given an opportunity. When Ofglen, a Handmaid involved in the underground resistance, offers to help her escape, Offred refuses. She is ashamed to admit that she no longer wishes to be free: “The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him” (Atwood 271). She feels relief, not disappointment, when Ofglen gives up on her.

There is an obvious difference between Offred’s view on sex before her forbidden relationship with Nick, and after. At one point in the novel, Offred and Nick accidentally meet in the dark. He kisses her and she perceives this act as an open rebellion against the oppressors: “Both of us shaking, how I’d like to. In Serena’s parlor, with the dried flowers, on the Chinese carpet, his thin body. A man entirely unknown. It would be like shouting, it would be like shooting somebody” (Atwood 98). However, when her fantasy comes true, Offred loses her courage and stops fighting. Her sexual relationship with Nick is an act of compliance. She surrenders to him in order to feel safe and protected. By giving herself to a man willingly, she undermined all the attempts to regain the balance between sexes. As long as she is willing to be used by men, she will not escape Gilead and its perverted system of values.

Similar repression of sexual desire is present in Orwell’s *1984*. Orwell created a nightmarish society in which sex is perceived as means of procreation. The Inner Party encourages its young members to join the Junior Anti-Sex League, which propagates chastity. The regime’s teachings about sex are meant to create a frustrated society whose only outlet is

hatred. The main protagonist, Winston Smith, admits that he hated his colleague because "she was young and pretty and sexless, because he wanted to go to bed with her and would never do so" (Orwell 20). His frustration is then channeled into hatred towards the regime's current enemy. Eventually, Smith involves in a forbidden sexual relationship with his young colleague Julia. She understands the regime's sexual puritanism – it is the Party's way of controlling its citizens:

When you make love you're using up energy; and afterwards you feel happy and don't give a damn for anything. They can't bear you to feel like that. They want you to be bursting with energy all the time. All this marching up and down and cheering and waving flags is simply sex gone sour. If you're happy inside yourself, why should you get excited about Big Brother and the Three-Year Plans and the Two Minutes Hate and all the rest of their bloody rot? (Orwell 167)

Winston recalls his married life with his wife Katherine. She was completely under the influence of the regime's propaganda and viewed sex as her duty to the Party. Winston thought about sex with her as "the frigid little ceremony" (Orwell 166). Katherine's only intention was to conceive. She has been entirely brainwashed into believing that the only purpose of sex is reproduction.

To escape the memories of his frigid wife, and to spite the Inner Party, Winston visits a prostitute. Later on, he enjoys sex with young Julia. They both see their relationship as the rebellion against the regime. However, in the end, the Inner Party manages to erase Smith's love and lust for Julia. The Inner Party's victory over Smith's basic physical needs and desires proves the regime's strength.

### 3. Misogynistic Society as a Result of the Religious Fundamentalism

The Republic of Gilead is a totalitarian theocracy founded on the teachings of the religious extremists: a movement called The Sons of Jacob. The details of their rise in the fictional world of Atwood's novel remain unclear. However, it is evident that they have come to power in a violent manner – killing the president and the entire Congress.

The establishers of the Gileadan regime are similar in their ideology to Christian fundamentalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The term fundamentalism was originally used to describe a conservative group of Protestants in the United States. The fundamentalists of that time were "militantly opposed to modernizing the Christian faith, and militantly opposed to cultural changes endorsed by modernism" (Emerson and Hartman 132). This initial group of fundamentalists has been ridiculed by the rest of the modernized society. However, they have reemerged in the 1970s, spreading their teachings across the United States. Emerson and Hartman argue that "from a modern, secular viewpoint, fundamentalists are reactionaries, radicals attempting to grab power and throw societies back into the dark ages of oppression, patriarchy, and intolerance" (131). This definition of fundamentalists can be applied to Atwood's novel. The Republic of Gilead bears semblance to the dark ages; its female citizens live under the oppressive patriarchal government.

Fundamentalists have strict rules concerning the male and female roles in the family and the overall society. Women are assigned the traditional roles of the housekeepers and mothers. On the other hand, in the fundamentalist social hierarchy, men are given the role of leaders. This is clearly the case in Atwood's novel as well. The women are reduced to the roles of child-bearers, housekeepers and wives. On the other hand, men are given the authority over the rest of the society.

Additionally, fundamentalists are strongly opposed to any form of homosexual behavior. In their opinion, any type of behavior that endangers the traditional values is to be banished. Similarly, in the Republic of Gilead, men caught in any form of homosexual act are found guilty of the gender treachery and executed. Offred ponders over two male bodies hanging on the notorious Wall: "Caught together, they must have been, but where? A barracks, a shower? It's hard to say" (Atwood 43). Homosexuality represents a direct threat to Gileadan traditional values.

Since two men cannot produce offspring that type of sexual relationship is condemned. However, the Gileadan authorities allow the Jezebels to indulge in lesbian sexual relationships. This indicates that the prostitutes are of no official concern to the government. They are simply used for recreational purposes. What they do in their free time is irrelevant as long as they perform their duties.

In terms of violence, religious extremists are notorious for using the force in order to "see religion restored to its position at the center of public consciousness" (Emerson and Hartman 137). In the Republic of Gilead, the official government uses violence in order to maintain its position at the top of the social hierarchy. The violent manner in which the regime established its dominance suggests that the changes would not have been accepted otherwise. The citizens fought against the oppressive new regime; however, "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" (Atwood 180).

Emerson and Hartman list nine characteristics of fundamentalists groups: reactivity to the marginalization of religion, selectivity, dualistic worldview, absolutism and inerrancy, millennialism and messianism, elect membership, sharp boundaries, authoritarian organization, and behavioral requirements (134). Atwood's novel displays most of the above mentioned characteristics.

The most prominent fundamentalist feature present in Atwood's novel is selectivity. The regime manipulates the facts in order to retain its stability. The most obvious example is when the Handmaids listen to the tape recording of the Bible. Offred notices how some parts of the Bible have been altered; however, she cannot prove that since reading is forbidden:

They played it from a tape, so not even an Aunt would be guilty of the sin of reading. The voice was a man's. *Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent.* I knew they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too, but there was no way of checking. (Atwood 89)

Originally, the Beatitudes do not include the line stating that blessed are the silent. This part has been added by the regime to teach the Handmaids that they must remain submissive. The silence may also refer to the fact that women are granted no right to read or write. They have been deprived of virtually all means of communication or obtaining information.



Another characteristic of fundamentalists groups explored in Atwood's novel is the dualistic worldview. According to Emerson and Hartman, the dualistic worldview presumes that "reality is clearly divided into the good and the evil, light and darkness, righteousness and unrighteousness" (134). This juxtaposition of the good and the evil is evident in the regime's attitude towards those who are perceived as the enemies of the Republic of Gilead. The regime and its leaders, the Commanders, are seen as virtuous and good. Those who disobey the regime's imposed rules are seen as evil. This notion is retroactive, since the official government punishes people who have disobeyed the regime's regulations in the past. For example, the doctors who have performed abortions in the former United States are being executed, although they have done nothing illegal at the time.

Inerrancy is the next important fundamentalist feature present in Atwood's novel. The official government wants its citizens to believe that everything written in the Bible is true, and that they should act accordingly. For example, the Handmaids are not given any anesthetics to alleviate their pain during labor because the Bible says that one must suffer in order to bear children: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children" (Atwood 114). The entire totalitarian regime is based on the biblical story of Rachel – Jacob's wife – who envied her sister because she could not bear children. Rachel says to Jacob: "Give me children, or I shall die" (Gen. 30.1). When Jacob implies that it is not his fault that she cannot have children, Rachel suggests that he sleeps with her handmaid: "Here is my slave-girl, Bilhah. Sleep with her and let her give birth on my knees; through her, then, I too shall have children" (Gen. 30.3). Gileadan government uses Bible in order to reinforce their beliefs. They want the Handmaids to believe that the childbearing is their sacred purpose. However, the regime's understanding of the Bible is literal, for the Handmaids will truly die if they fail to produce offspring.

Another fundamentalist feature, chosen membership, presumes that the leaders of such regimes are "called, selected out, set apart for their mission to defend the religious tradition" (Emerson and Hartman 134). In the Republic of Gilead, the Commanders are the selected minority intent on defending the regime from all the wrongdoers: the scientists, doctors, homosexuals or feminist radicals. The Handmaids are, in a way, chosen too. Their viable ovaries mark them as the future child bearers.

The totalitarian regime clearly sets the boundaries between those who obey the regime's imposed rules, and those who do not. The regime's followers are praised and rewarded. For example, the low-ranking Guardians can hope to become Angels, but only if they follow certain rules. On the other hand, those who disobey the regime or fail to fulfil its strict requirements are punished. The reader learns that no one is exempt from the punishment – not even Wives. Offred remembers one particular Salvaging – or the public execution – when a Wife was executed. There are three things a Wife can be salvaged for: murdering a Handmaid, especially if the Handmaid is pregnant; adultery, and attempted escape. However, the regime's strict rules do not apply to the Commanders. Their position at the top of the social hierarchy allows them to avoid following the regime's austere regulations.

Lastly, a totalitarian theocracy depicted in Atwood's novel is similar to fundamentalist ideology in terms of behavioral requirements. In both ideologies, "rules about appropriate speech, dress, sexuality, drinking, eating, family formation, children, entertainment pursuits, and other behaviors are common" (Emerson and Hartman 134). It is obvious from the way Gileadan citizens dress, act and speak that they are required to fulfil stern behavioral requirements. In such a society, all aspects of human life are controlled; there is no personal freedom.

#### 4. Language: Means of Oppression and Act of Rebellion

The use of language as a means of oppression is common in most dystopian novels. The authors of such novels understand the importance of words, whether they are written or spoken. A dystopian discourse is often limited and oppressive. It denies its speakers the ability to express their emotions and desires in a proper way. Without this essential freedom of speech, the citizens of such societies are reshaped and redefined in order to fit regime's ideology.

In Atwood's novel, the government uses language in order to create submissive citizens. By speaking in a certain manner, the citizens become uniform. They lose their individuality, but more importantly they lose the ability to form rebellious thoughts which could provoke them to fight against the regime. This oppressive use of language is particularly evident in the Handmaids' discourse. They are required to use certain fixed phrases and expressions. Offred describes the accepted greeting between two Handmaids in a following way: "'Blessed be the fruit', she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. 'May the Lord open', I answer, the accepted response" (Atwood 19). This prescribed exchange between two women is quite limiting. Through language, the Handmaids are taught the importance of fertility. The fruit refers to a child – the product of the Handmaid's sacred purpose. Even the accepted farewell sounds like a warning; it reminds the Handmaids that they are constantly "Under His Eye" (Atwood 45). They must never forget that they are being watched. However, the Eye does not refer to God only. It is a reminder that the government is watching their every move with the help of the all-seeing Eye of the intricate espionage system.

Even the Gileadan vocabulary is limiting and oppressive. The citizens of the Republic of Gilead are valued only in terms of their title. If, for example, a woman is marked as Econowife, she can never hope to become anything else. Women in general cannot advance to a higher position. If the Handmaids fail to produce offspring, they are degraded to the role of the Unwomen. The expressions such as the Econowife, Unwoman, or Unbaby express the government's attitude towards those people. They are dehumanized and disrespected.

However, Offred's narrative can sometimes be seen as the act of rebellion. Language becomes her tool for liberation. As Hogsette notices, "Offred gradually recognizes that she can manipulate language in order to create her own subjectivity, a subjectivity that can enable her to

act as a subversive agent against the oppressive reality created by the Republic of Gilead" (265). The Handmaids realize the importance of words. They are aware of the fact that they have been marked as a national property by being given a new name. For this particular reason, the Handmaids at the Red Center quietly exchange their real names "from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (Atwood 4). Remembering their true names allows them to remember their true identities.

Offred recognizes that she has been silenced by the regime. Therefore, she records her own story. Hogsette emphasizes the importance of Offred's narrative: "Writing, or in her case speaking out, validates an individual's existence; it proves the writer-speaker was, at some point, or still may be, alive" (269). Through her narrative, Offred reinvents herself. She sends a clear message to the regime: that she is still alive and cannot be silenced.

Offred violates the regime's laws by playing Scrabble with the Commander. She states that "to play Scrabble . . . as if we were an old married couple, or two children, seemed kinky in the extreme, a violation in its own way" (Atwood 155). Offred grows more confident as she regains control over her words. She realizes that she has forgotten a great number of words although she has not spent a lifetime in the Republic of Gilead. That shows the amount of power the regime has over its citizens.

The power of words is evident in the way the underground resistance movement recognizes and recruits its new members. The password for determining who is willing to fight the regime is a simple word: mayday. Since the word itself is commonly used as an emergency signal, it can be recognized as the resistance's cry for help. The Handmaids and their sympathizers want to abolish the current regime. The power of their movement lies in a single word. However, if used around the wrong people, that word can be lethal. When Offred meets her new companion, she uses the word mayday in order to check whether she is the member of the resistance too. However, although the new Handmaid is familiar with the meaning of the expressions, she implies that she is not part of the movement: "You ought to make an effort . . . to clear your mind of such . . . echoes" (Atwood 284). Her carefully chosen words serve as a warning.

A similar notion of using language to establish control over the entire society is present in Orwell's *1984*. The Inner Party created a new language – Newspeak – which is meant to reinforce the regime's dominance. Newspeak is based on a simple principle: limiting and

simplifying the vocabulary and grammar, and banishing all the words which could possibly lead to heretical thinking. Newspeak vocabulary “was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods” (Orwell 377). Although Newspeak itself is based on the English language, contemporary speakers would hardly be able to understand it. It is divided into three distinct classes: the A vocabulary, the B vocabulary, and the C vocabulary. Each category refers to a different aspect: the individual’s personal life, various compounds with subtilized meanings, or vocabulary consisting of scientific and technical words. The Inner Party manages to control its citizens by reducing their basic freedom – the freedom of speech. The regime presumes that if the individuals’ vocabulary is limited, their thoughts would be limited as well. The principle of limiting one’s vocabulary in order to reduce heretical thinking is evident in the following example:

The word FREE still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as ‘This dog is free from lice’ or ‘This field is free from weeds’. It could not be used in its old sense of ‘politically free’ or ‘intellectually free’ since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless.

Quite apart from the suppression of definitely heretical words, reduction of vocabulary was regarded as an end in itself, and no word that could be dispensed with was allowed to survive. (Orwell 377)

It is evident from the above mentioned example that the Inner Party wants to create submissive citizens who will never disobey the regime’s requirements simply because they are not able to formulate rebellious thoughts.

## Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel set in the Republic of Gilead. The Gileadan regime is an oppressive totalitarian theocracy based on the religious fundamentalism. The society depicted in Atwood's novel is dominated by men. Women are deprived of their basic rights; they must obey the regime and its stern rules.

One of the most prominent dystopian features present in the Republic of Gilead is its discriminatory social hierarchy. Women are placed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy and valued only in terms of their viable ovaries. The Handmaids, or the women with functioning ovaries, are used as sexual slaves in order to produce offspring for the Commanders and their Wives. They are regarded as the Commanders' personal property and treated accordingly.

Although Atwood's work can be regarded as a feminist dystopia, its main protagonist, Offred, is essentially anti-feminist. She is compliant and passive and relies on men to save her. Therefore, her forbidden sexual affair with Nick should not be interpreted as an act of rebellion, but as an act of compliance.

Atwood borrowed some of the characteristics of fundamentalist groups in order to create a plausible dystopia. This is particularly evident in the regime's literal understanding of the Bible. The Handmaids are led to believe that their purpose is sacred; therefore, they do nothing to abolish the misogynistic regime.

Lastly, the regime deprives its citizens of their individuality by encouraging them to speak in a certain manner. The Handmaids' discourse is notably restrictive. This enables the regime to control and limit the exchange of information. However, Offred's narrative represents her open rebellion against the Gileadan tyranny.

To conclude, *The Handmaid's Tale* has several prominent dystopian features: from the discriminatory social hierarchy to the oppressive use of language. As in most dystopian novels, the Gileadan regime uses various techniques in order to eliminate rebellious thoughts or actions. These techniques include brainwashing, inflicting fear, and repressing any form of political and personal freedom. Therefore, Atwood's novel is essentially dystopian.

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