

RETELLING OF MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* IN MODERN TIMES

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic and environmental activist. She is the winner of many prestigious awards and has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, winning once.

Margaret Atwood's famous dystopian feminist novel, written in 1985 was always ahead of its time. Set in an imaginary land called Gilead¹, the book is about a dystopian future where pollution, lifestyle and nuclear contamination have led to infertility. A theonomic² military dictatorship regime has taken over the country and the belief is that now only God can save them. Atwood points out that the extreme nature of Gilead is a result of the conservative and feminist viewpoint espoused during the time she wrote the novel.

KEYWORDS: *Canadian Poet, Novelist, Dictatorship*

INTRODUCTION

The commanders of this regime are expected to produce off-springs that can form a new society. The wives of most of these commanders are infertile, thus they need handmaids to help them bear a child. The reference to the term 'handmaids' is also a Biblical one. In Genesis 30:1 of the King James Bible ' And when Rachel saw she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister (leah) and said unto Jacob, give me children, else I die. She said behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her and she gave him Bilhah, her handmaid and Jacob went in unto her. This is the quote that is read out by the commander before the act of procreation takes place. All the handmaids are considered to be sinners during their pre-Gilead times and this role of being handmaids is seen as a kind of repentance. (For example, Offred had an affair with a married man, Moira was a lesbian, of glen was also a lesbian and Janine wore skimpy clothes which according to the 'eyes of God', caused her to get raped).

The book consists of different strata of society; the commanders and their wives who are expected to procreate children who will be the future of Gilead, the perfect utopian society, the fertile women, who are taken away from their families to be handmaids to these commanders, Aunts – elder women in charge of handmaids, Marthas- infertile lower ranked women who do household chores and The Eyes of God, the secret police of Gilead.

One feels an alarming amount of disparity between the setting of the show, the story, and the dialogues. At the time the novel was written, it was probably possible to look at the work as a piece of science fiction, as it spoke

¹ Gilead in the Bible is an area east of Jordan River. The Bible talks of 'the balm of Gilead; which has healing and soothing powers.

² Theonomy is a form of dominion theology which states that Bible law is applicable to Civil Law, i.e. Bible law is the standard by which laws of the nation should conform.

about a near future, where this state of dystopia could exist.

The show, *The Handmaid's Tale* released in 2017 sets the fictitious state of Gilead against the backdrop of the 21st century. The juxtaposing of the 1950's rules with the modern times makes it difficult to blend the story with the setting. The show, like the book, focuses on the life of Offred, a handmaid to Fred, an infertile commander of Gilead. The difference between the novel and show lies in the fact that Offred of the series is a 21st-century woman who has experienced the liberties and choices given to the modern woman. Hence she is seen muttering under her breath, swears when she gets the chance and makes choices.

The women of Gilead are not allowed to read, write nor participate in any active decisions. One must remember that the book was written in 1984, a time when women's rights were not enjoyed as it is today. It was the period of the second wave feminist activity which dealt with issues such as sexuality, family, workplace, reproductive rights and official legal inequalities. It also drew attention to marital rape issues. In Hulu's show, the portrayed dystopian future or the land of Gilead is actually the 21st century where women's rights are thoroughly enjoyed (the show mentions Uber and the famous dating site, Tinder to prove to the audience of its 21st-century setting.) The tv series shows how women, who were earlier writers, journalists, and working women are now forced to wear uniforms and strictly adhere to their homes as good house wives. The commander's wife, Serena Joy, who had a crucial role in designing the

Two themes that are not relevant in Atwood's book are addressed in the show- homosexuality and racism. The show is more tolerant towards the black that the book is. In the book, when the state of Gilead was formed, the blacks were removed from society just like how Nazis removed the jews. The book describes Gilead as a society without people of color. The Republic calls African Americans 'the children of ham ', and relocate them to Midwest. Again a reference to the Bible, Ham was the son of Noah and father of Canaan. Curse of Ham refers to the curse on Canaan imposed by Noah because Ham had sinned. Because Ham was the father of black people and because his descendants were cursed to be slaves because of his sin against Noah, some interpret that Africans are meant to be slaves. Hence, in the book, there are no colored characters. In the show, there are many black characters, like June's husband and best friend Moira and her daughter, who is biracial. Thus the commanders in the TV series are ready to procreate with colored handmaids and the biblical reference of the curse of Ham bears no relevance. Produced in 2016, the director felt it would be a racist show, had it excluded black people from the cast.

Homosexuality and gay marriages weren't legal during the time of the book and were still a taboo. The first legal same sex-marriage in the US occurred on May 17, 2004. Hence when Moira comes out as a lesbian to Offred, she is shocked at the revelation and finds it difficult to accept it. The theme of homosexuality is dealt with more subtly in the show and it is shown to be accepted pre-Gilead times. The show shows Of glen, the partner of Offred to have been married to a woman before the existence of Gilead. Moira too is shown to be a lesbian and her sexuality is well accepted by Offred. The state of Gilead, which is the economic in nature, does not accept homosexuality and punishes the degenerates if such acts were discovered.

In the book, Offred's mother, a radical feminist plays an important role. She serves as a mouthpiece for feminism. Offred's mother marched for abortion rights, banning of pornography and other women's issues before the institution of the new regime. The show however, doesn't show her as a character though she is mentioned once. In the book, it was probably important to show to the readers that Offered was brought up with feminist thoughts at a time when

second-wave feminism was at its peak. Since the show was set in recent times, it was probably a redundant factor that needed emphasis as women today are already empowered.

Another interesting point to note in this anachronistic approach is the use of language. While they use phrases from the bible such as 'praise be', 'may the god open', and 'blessed be', which is quite archaic for the 21st century, Offred uses slangs and curses like 'bitch', when narrating the story and instances.

Thus, we can see that while maintaining the essence of the novel, and keeping the theme of objectification of women and homosexuality intact, the show has managed to make relevant changes in order to mark it as a retelling in the modern times.

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