

The Manifestation of Inner-Gender Oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as

Results From Intentional Patriarchal Power Structures

Aliyah Browning

Dr. Jennifer Matissof & Dr. Michelle Reale

Arcadia University

Abstract:

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has long been studied for its cautionary warnings about sexist ideologies that exist between men and women; seldom has it been so closely analyzed for instances of inner gender oppression. Inner-gender oppression, which this thesis seeks to define and highlight through the novel's context, offers artificial forms of power to those in oppressed classes, enough to attract women themselves to participate in the indoctrination and policing of their own sex. This essay highlights the ways in which Atwood's dystopian society parallels sexist beliefs held by societies past and present.

“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum,” Margaret Atwood's famous faux Latin slogan that resonates with her readers to this day. While it is not a direct translation, the phrase is loosely known to mean “don't let the bastards grind you down,” a message that comes to symbolize hope and resilience in Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, a 1985 publication which features an enslavement and abuse of women that hasn't been sanctioned since the Old Testament. With the looming promise of an ecological disaster that threatens humanity's very existence, Atwood creates a society that tokenizes a woman's ability to reproduce while simultaneously upholding historic beliefs about women's inherent inferiority. However, men aren't the only group guilty of maintaining sexist values in the novel, and it is revealed that sometimes, the bastards that Atwood speaks of are victims too.

A widely renowned work of fiction, Atwood's novel features a near-future form of what is currently the New England region of the United States known as Gilead. Gilead has drawn attention from individuals in the Science Fiction (SF) field who have studied it as a manifestation of Atwood's own observations about the world at large. This new regime is characterized by its extreme, right-wing, Christian fundamentalism, that restores a patriarchal form of society which limits the rights of Women and restores “the sanctity of the home,” forcing women back into positions of subservience (Ketterer 210). With radiation and sexually transmitted infections causing a world-wide fertility crisis, Gilead found it necessary to divide women into specific categories of service, with the five most prominent being: Wives, Aunts, Marthas, Handmaids, and unwomen, listed in the order that Gilead prioritizes them. There are also women known as Econowives and Jezebel's, but for the sake of the themes discussed in this essay, we will focus on the classes previously listed because they are the most developed. The wives of commanders (the esteemed men in the society) are responsible for the moral and social welfare of their

household, while Marthas do all of the cooking and cleaning. Aunts enforce the will of Gilead by raising and training handmaids, whose sole purpose is to reproduce for the wives and commanders who have been unable to have children. Unwomen are the lowest class of women; they have been deemed useless by the government (either because of infertility or treason) and are spending what's left of their life shoveling toxic waste. And while each of these women serve different functions within the society, they are equally restricted in their freedoms outside of their performed duties.

Many critics have speculated that Atwood bases this class design on modern American society, showing how inequalities between women are often capitalized on. Separating women and defining them by different names helps to create dissent between different groups of women, who are prioritized and privileged according to their own feminine value. Wives provide social capital, Aunts provide obedience, handmaids provide children, and unwomen provide free labor—each performs a duty for the society that others cannot. Society, however, is built for the prosperity of men. Patriarchal by design, men are solely responsible for law making and have forbidden women to read or write and excluded them from any government dealings. But this kind of sex-based exclusions has roots in history. In the United States alone, a woman wouldn't graduate with a bachelor's degree until 1840, and women were still considered property under the law until the Married Women's Property Act of 1848 truly separated the legal identity of women from that of their husbands and fathers (Workers World). Prevented from owning property or pursuing an education, women were historically dependent economically on men and forced to rely on sexist systems for livelihood (Workers World 2019). In an interview conducted in 1983, Atwood admits that “every writer writes out of his or her own backyard”(Brans & Atwood 304), and that is especially true of *The Handmaid's Tale*, published two years later, that

speculates how a return to the same sexist practices that previously existed across the globe, and especially in the United States, would have to be enforced in a modern society.

The inventiveness of Atwood's novel, if only the transmission of historical values into a modern world, have led many to characterize Atwood's novel as a work of science fiction. However, Atwood herself distinguishes *The Handmaids Tale* from the conventional modes of science fiction in favor of defining it as 'speculative fiction.' The difference between the two lies in the opinion that science fiction relies on the conventions of fantasy (i.e invented galaxies, supernatural beings, and magic), whereas speculative fiction uses only real-world elements to build a new society. For Atwood, Gilead has a great possibility of becoming the world we live in, which has caused her to push back against the criticism that defines her work as science fiction (Mancuso). She does not, however, deny that Gilead is a Dystopian society. Dystopias are one commonly regarded instrument of science fiction genres that allows writers to identify "dangerous tendencies in contemporary society and intensifies them in [an] imagined future in order to forewarn of the perils latent in the present and to encourage readers to think and act to prevent possible... future[s]"(Stillman 1). One critic, David Ketterer, notes that "the lack of freedom, the constant surveillance, the routine, the failed escape attempts... and the underground movement"(211) are all features of Atwood's novel that are congruent with other fictional dystopian societies.

The plausibility of a future Gilead is grounded in the familiarity of certain components in the dystopia; one such familiarity being the mistreatment of women. In Gilead, women are sexually, emotionally, and physically abused at the benefit of the patriarchal society. Although it is predominantly men who are responsible for putting the laws into place that subjugate all women, women also participate in their own oppression by indoctrinating members of their own

gender into subservient roles. While it is crucial to acknowledge Gilead's patriarchal design and the intentional ways women are socially, politically, and physically oppressed by men in Gilead, major scholarship around this novel fails to recognize how Gilead's class system restores existing forms of oppression against women of lower socio-political classes that are often perpetuated by women themselves. Atwood uses *The Handmaid's Tale* to maintain that the foundations of Gilead are already pervasive in our modern societies which value women for their superficial ability to reproduce but believe that a woman's place is in the household.

Many Critics have acknowledged the religious implications that present themselves throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* and the subsequent suggestion that religious texts are oppressive constituents that are the source of many sexist beliefs about women. One Critic, Dorota Filipeczak, is particularly purposeful in exploration of Gilead's Biblical roots, which are based almost entirely on section 30:1-13 of Genesis, which tells the story of Jacob and his wives (171-174). Jacob is married to a pair of sisters, Rachel and Leah. Leah is able to give Jacob children unlike her sister, and in a fit of jealousy, Rachel turns to an unorthodox method of reproduction, now referred to as surrogacy. She asks Jacob to "Behold, my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; that she may bear upon my knees, and I also may obtain children by her," and, "she gave him Bilhah her handmaid to wife: and Jacob went in unto her"(King James Bible 30:1-12), resulting in Bilhah bearing two children for Rachel, who claims the children as her and Jacob's own, naming them Dan and Naphtali. What's most notable about this section is that Bilhah, the woman serving as a vessel for Rachel's children, is silent in this narrative, and it is unclear whether or not she consents to this arrangement and is a willing surrogate. However, Bilhah's silence may suggest to some readers that she complies with the request that is made of her without complaint.

Bilhah's silent compliance, Rachel's obsession with bearing children, and Leah's faithful fulfillment of the feminine gender role become the prototype for women in Gilead, who are expected to fulfil their responsibilities for the betterment of the entire society. By reducing this religious tale to only a single interpretation, Gilead is able to build a narrative that women have been happily serving men since biblical times. If God were willing to give Bilhah a child for Rachel and Jacob, then the practice of surrogacy must be sanctioned by religious principles, and because Gilead claims that religion is the foundation of their new society, they are able to mask the oppression of women as a return to more pious practices. It is not coincidental that the home of handmaids is named the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center (Atwood 96). Run by the Aunts, these centers are predominantly responsible for converting women into compliant handmaids, willing to accept their duty to Gilead. Where women have been led astray from their original purpose in modern times, this center seeks to re-instill Rachel and Leah's legacy of piousness that rewards women for their devotion and desire to serve men. This suggests that the Red Center, as the handmaids refer to it, ascribes to pedagogies deeply concerned with attitudes of submissiveness and docility. With Bilhah as their idol, they are taught to believe that though Bilhah is also forced into this role, she is honored for serving both Rachel and Jacob by producing a child for them to further their family name. The Red Center, much like the Bible, purposely silences Bilhah who, without a voice, is unable to protest against the wishes of Rachel, allowing Gilead to frame the commanders impending acts of rape as honorable, as it leans into the single interpretation that Gilead has offered of Genesis.

This religious illusion that best illustrates the oppressive tendencies of the biblical patriarchy is the "Ceremony," a euphemism which Gilead has employed to describe the organized and accepted rape of handmaids, though Atwood herself does not use the term in the

text. In Atwood's novel, we experience the Ceremony through the main female protagonist, Offred's, perspective. She is a handmaid for a wealthy and important Commander, who we know as Fred Waterford. The Ceremony begins with the Commanders reading Genesis 30:1-13, the story previously described. At the conclusion of the passage, the commander, the wife, and the handmaid move into the wife's bedroom to perform the Ceremony, which Offred describes as the following:

“I lie on my back, fully clothed except for the healthy white cotton underwear... Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy [the wife] is arranged, outspread. Her legs apart, I lied between them. My head on her stomach... her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed. My arms are raised; she holds my hands... This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh... My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the commander is fucking”(Atwood 94)

Offred's experience in the Ceremony seems like a more detailed description of the same experience that Bilhah endures in Genesis, as she acts as the surrogate carrier of the commander's child on behalf of the wife.

It is no wonder that this novel has led many to recognize that “the Bible [is] an accomplice in the patriarchal strategy of marginalizing and victimizing women” (Filipczak182). It is necessary, then, for Gilead to ascribe a certain level of honor to the duty of a handmaid, just as God has done to Bilhah, in order to disguise sexual assault and rape within the society and prevent resistance. One way Gilead seeks to further this is by coining the term “biological destiny” which frames a woman's ability to reproduce as a necessity, meaning that in order to fully be defined as women, they must produce children at some point. The story of Genesis sets forth this interpretation by portraying women only as mothers, wives, and servants rather than

complex individuals who have a purpose outside of serving men. Atwood's Gilead silences women the same way that they were silenced in the Bible, meaning that the Patriarchy of Gilead is just a reconstruction of the oppressive Biblical patriarchy that preceded it. While the biblical version softens the implications of Rachel's demands, Atwood exposes the reality of forcing a woman into surrogacy.

In Offred's experience of the Ceremony, there are clear imbalances of power that are solidified by the placement of both the act and the individuals that point to underlying tones in Gilead's structures. The commander is positioned over top of both the Handmaid and the Wife, as he stands on his two feet straight up with his hands on his hips. Unlike the women, who are laid in a position of vulnerability, the men are towering over the women with full mobility and access, a position that allows them to look down on the handmaids, symbolizing their dominance. The placement of the commander "over" the women and the passivity of the women's actions during these Ceremonies frames the men as the person who is committing the action and the women who are having the action done unto them, again reminding women of their powerlessness within the society.

During this monthly event, there is a clear manifestation of the handmaid's dual inferiority where they are oppressed both by men because they are women and by certain groups of women because they possess a lower social status. The Ceremony takes place in the bedroom of the wife, Offred referring to it as the wives' "territory"(Atwood 86), a word meaning that the wives, Serena Joy, in this specific case, are supposed to have ownership and control over what happens in these specific areas. While the structure of Gilead is such that a woman could never exercise control over a man, in these spaces the Wives are able to exercise complete control over the handmaid, as they are like prey who have stumbled into the "territory" of their predators.

This control is reflected in the way the handmaid's are spread like carcasses across the bed, back and legs down but outspread, eyes focused on the ceiling above, a position that allows full access to their body, leaving handmaid's completely vulnerable to the will of those who are over them.

The wife sits above the handmaid in an upright position, a firm grip on their hands. If a handmaid looks up, they would be able to see the Wife's face as they sit above them, an indication that wives have more autonomy over their own bodies and power over the handmaids in this instance; however, there is intentional contact between only the Wife and Handmaid.

While it is necessary for a commander to penetrate, and therefore touch, the handmaid during the Ceremony, it appears to be a creative design that wives would hold down the hands of the handmaid.

Offred's explanation that the holding of hands is meant to symbolize the unity of the Wife and the Handmaid may be true in a sense that their gender causes them to both be victims of the Patriarchy's oppressive laws, but the pressure of the Wife pushing down on the Handmaid's hands is a built in reminder that a Handmaid is serving the maternal needs of the Wives as well. If there is a handmaid present in a commander's household, it's because his wife was barren and the two were unable to have children. If the handmaid becomes pregnant after the ceremony, it is the wife who will eventually get to raise and name the child, so she benefits from partaking in this act of organized rape. The detached, robotic way the Ceremony is described emulates the duty driven tone of the original Biblical event which it was modeled after- that is, Bilhah (the handmaids) had a duty to serve Rachel, (the wife) and together they had to fulfill their marital duties to Jacob (the commander) by producing a child. The wives willingness to participate in the degradation of handmaids is a manifestation of inner-gender oppression, a concept that I use to describe the phenomenon that causes members of an already oppressed class

to further oppress others within the class in order to create unequal power dynamics that favor one group over another. In this case, although both wives and handmaids are considered powerless in relation to the commander, the wives possess certain degrees of power over handmaids when only in relation to each other. Gilead seems to have built in opportunities for this kind of dissent among the oppressed class to organically reveal itself in an attempt to model historic forms of patriarchal systems.

Although all women are considered subservient in the context of the novel, it has been previously stated that certain groups of women possess significantly more influence and regard than others, a fact that seems intentionally designed by Gilead. Using the ceremony as an example, wives are given authority over handmaids, seemingly as a representation of their first-class status. We can assume that wives are honored for their commitment to Gilead's laws and practices. While it is never outright stated that wives are valued for their domestic compliance, there are no instances of unrest in the novel among wives, suggesting that they observe the rules and expectations of Gilead faithfully. The wives' example of compliance is necessary for the longevity of Gilead since it is imperative that all women accept their roles in order to prevent anarchy, civil war, and disobedience. Their importance comes with a certain level of freedom in the novel, as Offred often observes Serena joy enjoying cigarettes and music in the novel, both which have been outlawed for women, showing that wives experience a certain degree more of leniency than other classes of women.

The varying degrees of respect and freedom for women within the dystopian society ultimately contributes to a sense of envy between the classes of women, especially between wives and handmaids. Offred is unable to regard Serena Joy without hatred, both as a result of her participation in the handmaid's rape and the reward of getting to parent the child that would

result in that rape. Eventually, Offred reveals that “Partly I was jealous of her... You can only be jealous of someone who has something you think you ought to have yourself. Nevertheless I was jealous”(Atwood 161). Offred’s hatred is warranted in that she is physically being abused at the hands of another woman who forces her into unwanted intercourse at her own benefit. But it is also complicated in that it seems to also stem from a discontent in her assigned class. Offred is constantly violated and assaulted because she is a fertile woman, a characteristic she had no control over. She is not afforded the same leniency as the wives; she is always threatened by the reality that anyone can strike her if she misbehaves because a handmaid's cooperation in society is an integral part of the society's goal of increasing the birth rate in the United States. Compared to the wives, who are able to raise families and are protected from the sexual violence that handmaids are subjected to, Offred’s quality of life is low.

However, despite Offred and the other handmaids being subjected to violence and contempt, the handmaids are vital to the society as a whole. Handmaids are the only group of women who are guaranteed to have viable ovaries, meaning that they have the ability to reproduce. In a society that proposes women return back to their historically domestic roles in order to prevent extinction, Gilead needs women who can have babies and populate the country. In the same way the wives are responsible for the social and political longevity of the country, handmaids are physically responsible for the continuation of Gilead’s people, which allots them a certain level of importance. Although they are not treated with the respect of someone who is necessary, there is an understanding that without handmaids, Gilead would not be possible. The handmaid’s “position of honor”(Atwood 13), as described by the Aunts, is envied by the wives, who are physically unable to fulfill this need for their country, as shown by the necessity of the handmaid’s presence in their home.

Thus, the handmaids are subjected to lives of sexual violence at the hands of both men and women who seek to profit from them. Handmaids are taught to fear the wives early in their indoctrination, as Offred vividly recalls Aunt Lydia's reminder at the Rachel and Leah center that "It's not the husbands you have to watch out for... it's the Wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course they will resent you. It is only natural"(Atwood 46). If the wives' resentment is natural, it is because it comes from a place of envy. This was the intentionality to which this paper has been referring- Gilead managed to create a system where women simultaneously need each other but are bred to dislike and envy another.

Distracted by their inner-gender disputes and struggles, it becomes easier for the patriarchy to systematically reduce the independence of the female sex as a whole. By allowing certain groups of women more freedom than others, the patriarchy turns the hate and envy of women in lower socio-economic positions to the women in positions of artificial power rather than the men who organized the power structure itself. Both women are victims of Gilead's patriarchy which was designed to belittle women, but the built in power dynamics of Gilead maintain a certain complacency by allowing inner-gender oppression to make certain groups of women feel like they have power over another class. This is a comfort to women in Gilead because it creates the illusion that they are not as deeply subjected to oppressive laws as other women are.

The Aunts are a particular fascinating design of Gilead. Modeled after nuns, Aunts are those who have subscribed to Gilead's sexist beliefs about a woman's inferiority and who are sanctioned to commit acts of violence against women in the interest of maintaining order. Aunts are responsible for the indoctrination of handmaids by teaching the religious propaganda of Gilead, such as the belief that serving as a handmaid to a commander is an act of honor. The Aunts seek to foster cooperation and complicity among handmaids and are responsible for

preventing uprisings among the separate facets of women in the belief that they are creating a utopian society that actually protects women from forms of violence. Part of what makes Gilead a dystopian society is that it is a result of “utopian dreams”(Stillman 15). Aunt Lydia, however brutally she acts in the novel, seems to have good intentions by training handmaids so harshly. “There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from”(Atwood 24). The idea is that while women in the novel may not have the freedom to choose their own partners, express their true sexual orientation, or decide whether or not they want to have children, they no longer run the risk of experiencing rejection, loneliness, purposelessness. The Aunt’s true belief is that Gilead has abuilt a society that also protects women from experience violent forms of sexual assault as well, but that belief does not consider the ceremony as a form of rape. Nonetheless, Aunt Lydia suggests in this statement that perhaps the Aunts believe they are doing a service for the women forced to be handmaids. Rather than being beaten into submission by men, at least they have the opportunity to be trained and taught to accept the task they are expected to perform.

However, despite these possible good intentions, it is too often in the novel that the Aunt’s rely on violence to instill collective fear in the handmaid. The Aunts wear “electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts”(Atwood 4) that are intended to be used as weapons to punish handmaids who misbehave. The cattle prods come to symbolize the constant threat of violence faced by the handmaids, though the Aunts have invented far more creative means of inflicting punishment on handamids. One example that seems to have a profound effect on Offred is a memory of her close friend Moira, who faked an illness in an attempt to escape the Rachel and Leah center. When the aunts discovered her plot

“They took her into the room that used to be the Science Lab. It was a room where [no handmaid] ever went willingly. Afterwards she could not walk for a week, her feet would not fit into her shoes, they were too swollen. It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent”(Atwood 91)

In this instance, Moira is punished for her attempted escape from the Red Center, revealing that if not all of the handmaids, at least some that are being held against their will by Gilead's government. Using an electric shock to the feet, which are known to have the most nerve endings in the body, can be more correctly identified as torture, especially because of the possibility of these punishments resulting in permanent physical disfiguration. Offred's tone is unemotional; there is no indication that she is surprised by the Aunts choice of punishment for Moira, suggesting that torture is a common occurrence in handmaid centers.

In the previous example of Moira's feet being shocked, the focus was on Offred's unemotional and detached tone; however, there is still a lingering sense of fear that Offred experiences as a result of Moira's pain. When Offred returns to the memory of Moira's punishment, she recalls “the way they looked after they'd brought her back... They looked like drowned feet, swollen and boneless”(Atwood 91). The grotesque description of Moira's feet, “like lungs”(Atwood 91) being the specific comparison Offred makes, suggests that Offred has experienced a level of uneasiness, probably due to the realization that these forms of torture are sanctioned by Gilead's officials. Essentially, handmaid's are property of the government, and as property they have no autonomy over their bodies or the ability to protect themselves from the physical and mental abuses meant to indoctrinate them.

While the physical torture experienced by the handmaid's effects their sense of safety and comfort within Gilead's society, the Aunt's rely more heavily on forms of physiological torment to maintain cooperation and collective fear among handmaids. While physical punishment is used to make singular examples of the potential consequences for violations, it would be difficult to punish every misdemeanor made by rebellious women, so the Aunt's rely on grandeur examples to send messages. Aunt Lydia reminds the handmaids that, "for our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential"(Atwood 91), leading Offred to conclude that handmaids "are containers, it's only the in-sides of [their] bodies that are important"(Atwood 96). Because the handmaids are treated as objects and reminded as much during their indoctrination process, they are taught to believe that they could be brutally maimed or disfigured anytime they violate their restrictions, creating a collective fear in the women who are in subservient positions. If handmaids are afraid to have their feet shocked, their hands burned, or their faces maimed, they are more likely to follow the rules laid forth by Gilead and perform their duty without complaint.

Atwood herself largely answers any speculations about the motivation of the Aunts within the 'Historical Notes' section of the novel, where she provides insights on Gilead's creation and proves that Offred's experiences were not singular. This section of the novel makes it clear that the Republic of Gilead eventually fell and no longer exists because of the flawed power structure that sought to enforce rigid gender norms for only certain groups of people. This chapter is a transcript of a speech delivered at a Gileadean Studies Symposium, which is analyzing Offred's memoir as another primary document from the time period. While this section covers a large variety of Gilead's components, it pays close attention to women's experiences under the oppressive regime, including the perspective of those who served as

Aunts. The Gilead historian speaking at the conference, Professor James Pieixoto, explains the Aunt's inclination to indoctrinate and oppress another class of women as follows:

“In this connection a few comments upon the crack female control agency known as the "Aunts" is perhaps in order. Judd according to the Limpkin material was of the opinion from the outset that the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves. For this there were many historical precedents; in fact, no empire imposed by force or otherwise has ever been without this feature: control of the indigenous by members of their own group. In the case of Gilead, there were many women willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called "traditional values," or for the benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting.”(Atwood 308).

This is, perhaps, the most important insight offered by Atwood concerning her inspiration for the class divide in Gilead. In a society that is patriarchal at its core, meaning women are meant to abide by the male interpretation of how femininity should be performed, it is suggested that women are willing to compromise their own sense of identity (being the shared experience of the female sex, especially under a new oppressive regime) in order to obtain any semblance of autonomy. It could be argued that the Aunt's chose a lesser of evils- rather than be subjected to organized rape or be sent to the colonies because they were infertile, they chose to uphold and champion sexist values (or inflict inner-gender oppression) in order to protect themselves. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to villainize these women who are subject to the same fear as the handmaids that they abuse.

The 'Historical Notes' Section, which frames Gilead and Offred's experiences, uses a pseudo-documentary convention to invite readers to accept that the events that have taken place

in the narrative as historically accurate by providing evidence to their validity (Grace 482). By proving Offred's experiences actually occurred, Atwood further proves the plausibility of a Gileadean-esque society in our society's future. This section helps affirm Atwood's belief that Gilead is an extrapolation of trends already present in our daily lives. Upon the release of the novel, many critics viewed this as a cautionary tale that lacked familiarity for readers, especially one critic by the name of Mary McCarthy, who published a review in the New York Times that claimed Gilead was a "women's world," that was only policed by men. She believed that Gilead truly values the duties that women were able to perform, and while she recognized the need the society exhibited for women, she seems to ignore the way that women are forced into fulfilling that need. Claiming that there were no overt indicators that the values prominent in Gilead existed in their own modern world, McCarthy dismissed the book's suggestion that there was a looming threat against women's autonomy.

In light of recent political developments, time has actually favored Atwood's interpretation of the future more kindly than McCarthy suggested. Legislation is beginning to sweep the United States banning women access to safe abortions and restricting access to reproductive healthcare, slowly chipping away at any comfort women were afforded after the Roe V. Wade Supreme court ruling in 1973 that initially protected women who wished to have an abortion. While this is not outwardly alarming development for some, there are certainly parallels between the world we are experiencing today and the world that Atwood has built- the ability for predominantly male lawmakers and legislators to make decisions regarding a woman's body and reproductive needs, for one. In the novel, a fertile woman is forced to become pregnant and bear a child regardless of her own wishes. Similarly, laws that restrict a woman's ability to abort an unwanted pregnancy forces women into having children regardless of their financial,

emotional, or physical ability to do so. I don't pretend that similarities in government policies suggests that Gilead is imminent, but it would also be unwise to dismiss the danger that threatens the sanctity of a woman's body.

The question that must be considered in regards to Gilead's existence is one of advantage: who benefits from the power structures established in the novel? Men may be the easiest and most obvious response, but I would challenge that initial conclusion. The truth is, anyone who is given even a scrap of authority in an oppressive regime is benefiting in some way from the exploited class. Wives, Aunts, and Commanders all benefit from the existence of the handmaids, though not equally. That's why the threat of Gileadean society is far more familiar than many would care to admit- it has always existed in some form. From historical forms of patriarchal societies to future ones, our modern society exists on some spectrum already, enabled by the deceitful nature of power dynamics between existing classes. The structure of Gilead provides even the undesirables with artificial forms of power to pacify them, disguising the scope of the true oppressive beliefs that disenfranchise them and prevent the entirety of the oppressed group from uniting to fight their oppressor. Let us not be deceived by the presence of sexist values in our own societies, because wherever the seeds of sexism exist, so too does the threat of an oppressed existence for women.

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