

Religion and Theocracy in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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Summary:

Merging religion with state power in theocratic society, particularly in relation to gender and class oppression, results in ominous socio-political consequences. Driven by this idea, this paper attempted to render a critical reading of Atwood's dystopian novel, "The Handmaid's Tale", as religion and theocracy play central roles in shaping the oppressive regime of Gilead. The primary aim of the study is to examine how Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" critiques the exploitation of religion as a means of enforcing totalitarian control and suppressing gender, and to examine the novel's depiction of political and social dynamics within a theocratic society. The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in literary criticism and Marxist criticism to examine the portrayal of religion and theocracy in the narrative text. The findings of this study asserted that Atwood revealed the dangers of theocratic rule and challenges readers to consider how religious and political discourses can intersect to sustain systems of oppression. The final conclusion of this study is that religion is used to maintain totalitarian control and enforce gender-based subjugation within a theocratic society inside the narrative text under study. The significance of the current study lies in exposing the socio-political consequences of merging religion with state power, particularly in relation to gender and class oppression in theocratic society in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale". It is hoped that this study contributes to extending the base of knowledge and enriches specifically the literature in this novel, and generally the field of dystopian English novels.

INTRODUCTION

The value of literature is based on the hypothesis that literary works and art must be served in struggling against the system of vice and corruption as an effective means. Thus, dystopian literature emerged as a new genre of literature. It is a narrative genre that is used by modern novelists to unmask the dark aspects of people's lives caused by evil powers and oppressors (Abbas, 2025). The modern novel in English literature became more realistic, immediate, and widely read than those of earlier periods because, rather than depending solely on imagination, it grappled with major events that influenced the world and Literature (Abbas, 2021). In Atwood's dystopian novel, "The Handmaid's Tale", religion and theocracy play central roles in shaping the oppressive regime of Gilead. The governance in Gilead is totalitarian and theocratic, "where the inhuman political ideologies have been exercised by this totalitarian regime, which cause physical, mental and psychological torment of the individuals and the society, in order to retain power" (ABBAS, 2021, p.44). The novel depicts a theocratic society where the government is grounded in a radical interpretation of the Bible, and religious doctrines justify the total control of women's bodies and lives. The regime uses religious rhetoric to legitimize its actions, particularly the institutionalized enslavement of women as "Handmaids" who are forced to bear children for the ruling class. The novel presents the protagonist, and ostensible narrator, Offred, experiencing her daily existence under the regime of a bourgeois theocracy governed by religious fundamentalists. Sociologically, Atwood's narrative text proves useful for analyzing themes through the lens of Marxist theory. However, the world depicted in "The Handmaid's Tale" is a dystopian nightmare which subjugates the proletariats. On Offred's studying the system of the Gilead, she questions the dominant hegemony of the Gileadan leaders. This leads to conclude that she belongs to the proletariat. By exposing the lies of the Gilead and the hypocrisy of its leaders, the novel removes the veil from the cleverly

disguised bourgeoisie. Offred reveals the control exercised by the bourgeois religious authorities who have confined her and the other handmaids. This narrative text could be analysed through Marxist analysis. The society portrayed in "The Handmaid's Tale" is built upon the principles of the ruling bourgeois class in American culture, who possess complete control over the means of production. Society of Gilead is obviously split into two social classes: upper class (the bourgeoisie), and lower class (the proletariat). It is the handmaids who represent the proletariat (Roozbeh, 2018).

The problem of this study has been formulated by considering the political and social situation due to the theocratic regime where religion is employed to legitimize totalitarian control and gender-based subjugation in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale". Based on this problem, the main objective of the study is to explore how Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" critiques the use of religion as a tool for totalitarian governance and gender oppression, and to examine the novel's depiction of political and social dynamics within a theocratic society. In order to address the research problem and objective of the study, a research question emerges to guide this study, which is: How does "The Handmaid's Tale" portray the use of religion to justify totalitarian control and enforce gender-based subjugation within a theocratic society? By conducting critical analysis of the selected novel of Margaret Atwood's The "Handmaid's Tale", the current paper attempts to provide a deep understanding of the use of religion to maintain totalitarian control and enforce gender-based subjugation within a theocratic society inside the narrative text of the novel under study. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in literary criticism and Marxist criticism to examine the portrayal of religion and theocracy in "The Handmaid's Tale". As an entry to the analysis, it will be appropriate to briefly highlight the concepts of Religion, Theocracy, Policy, Patriarchy, Bible, and Reproduction that this study deals

with. This will be a platform that serves the analysis and paves the way for reaching the desired results of this study. The findings of this study assert that Atwood reveals the dangers of theocratic rule and challenges readers to consider how religious and political discourses can intersect to sustain systems of oppression. The findings also provide a clear insight of how "The Handmaid's Tale" critiques the manipulation of religion as a tool of ideological domination practised by theocratic rule. The final conclusion of this study is that religion is used to maintain totalitarian control and enforce gender-based subjugation within a theocratic society inside the narrative text under study. The significance of the current study lies in exposing the socio-political consequences of merging religion with state power, particularly in relation to gender and class oppression in theocratic society in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale". It is hoped that this study contributes to extending the base of knowledge and enriches specifically the literature in this novel, and generally the field of dystopian English novels.

MARGARET ATWOOD: THOUGHT AND ORIENTATIONS

Margaret Atwood, a prolific Canadian writer born in Ottawa in 1939, has gained international recognition for her literary contributions across a wide range of genres, including fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and children's literature. Atwood earned her Bachelor of Arts in English from Victoria College at the University of Toronto in 1961, and went on to study for a master's degree at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She has also received several honorary degrees, with Harvard University being one of the institutions that awarded her this recognition (Deboranti & Wedati, 2020). Atwood's works often reflect her deep engagement with themes such as gender, power, environmentalism, and social justice, and her ideological leanings can be traced through these themes.

Atwood's writing exhibits strong feminist views, particularly in her exploration of female characters and their agency in oppressive environments. Her most famous

work, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), is a dystopian novel that critiques patriarchal structures by imagining a future society where women's rights are severely restricted. Atwood's portrayal of the subjugation of women in this novel and other works reveals her concerns about the potential erosion of women's rights in contemporary society, particularly in relation to reproductive freedom (Atwood, 1985). Her feminist ideology is not solely concerned with victimhood, however; Atwood's characters often challenge or subvert these systems, asserting autonomy and resilience in oppressive settings (Moore, 2005).

Moreover, Atwood's works convey an overarching concern for environmental issues, especially climate change and ecological degradation. In her *Madd Addam* trilogy (2003–2013), Atwood examines the consequences of environmental destruction, genetic manipulation, and corporate greed, presenting a vision of a future that serves as a cautionary tale about humanity's disregard for the planet. Her environmental ideology, rooted in ecological awareness, aligns her with contemporary ecological movements, which advocate for sustainable living and the preservation of natural resources (Atwood, 2009; Barry, 2015).

Atwood's political and ideological views are also marked by her critique of power structures. She often uses satire to highlight the ways in which political, social, and economic systems can exploit vulnerable populations. Atwood's involvement in activism further reflects her commitment to progressive causes, particularly her support for women's rights, Indigenous rights, and the fight against climate change. In addition to her literary achievements, Atwood's work in the public sphere as an advocate for these issues showcases her alignment with a broad, left-leaning political ideology that prioritizes equality, social justice, and environmental sustainability (Atwood, 2015; Rupp, 2018).

In summary, Margaret Atwood's ideological leanings are deeply influenced by her feminist perspectives, environmental concerns, and political critique of power

structures. Through her expansive body of work, she not only captures the nuances of human experience but also engages with critical social issues, contributing to ongoing conversations about gender, the environment, and politics.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE: AN OVERVIEW AND SYNOPSIS

In "The Handmaid's Tale", religion and theocracy are central to the oppressive regime of Gilead, where a radical interpretation of the Bible justifies the control of women's bodies and lives. The regime distorts religious values, using them to enforce patriarchal practices, such as the enslavement of women as "Handmaids" to bear children for the ruling class. This manipulation of religious authority serves as a critique of how faith can be used to legitimize social inequality and oppression, particularly against women (Atwood, 1985). Critics praise the novel for its chilling portrayal of a society where autonomy, surveillance, and control are tied to religious extremism and authoritarianism. Atwood's writing serves as a feminist critique of patriarchal systems, cautioning against the risks of political passivity and the gradual loss of freedoms, particularly those related to women's reproductive rights. Through Gilead's theocratic regime, the novel underscores the dehumanization of individuals and the risks of combining religion with political power (Staels, 1995)

Offred, the novel's protagonist and storyteller, lives as a Handmaid in Gilead, a rigidly theocratic dictatorship that replaced the former United States. Belonging to the class of fertile women, she is forced to conceive children for affluent but infertile couples. Her current posting is with Commander Fred Waterford—one of Gilead's original architects—and his wife, Serena Joy, a former gospel singer who treats the Handmaids in her home with cold cruelty. In Gilead, a Handmaid's identity is tied to the Commander she serves; they adopt names beginning with "Of," hence Offred. Although she recalls her true name, she never speaks it aloud. Each month, Offred undergoes a ceremonial act of intercourse with the Commander, while Serena grips her hands. Her existence is strictly confined—her movements are monitored, her

bedroom door never fully shuts, and she leaves the house only to shop, all under the constant watch of the “Eyes,” Gilead’s secret police. Through her narration, she alternates between present experiences and memories of the past, gradually revealing how the regime came to power.

Before Gilead’s rise, Offred had an affair with Luke, who left his first wife to marry her, and together they had a daughter. She was raised by her mother, a committed feminist, and was close to Moira, her outspoken college friend who valued independence but was later forced into prostitution under the new regime. Gilead emerged during a period of societal decay marked by rampant pornography, prostitution, and violence toward women, alongside dangerously low birth rates caused by pollution and toxic chemicals. The regime’s founders seized this opportunity, assassinating government leaders and claiming temporary authority. Once in control, they stripped women of basic rights, forbidding them to work or own property. When Offred and her family tried to escape to Canada, they were caught and separated, and she has not seen her husband or daughter since (Atwood, 1985).

After being captured, Offred’s marriage to Luke was invalidated because his previous divorce made it illegal under Gilead’s laws. She was taken to the Red Center, where women were trained to adopt the principles of the new regime. The Aunts, a group of women loyal to the regime, were responsible for training the Handmaids to obey and accept their reproductive roles. Aunt Lydia, one of the leading figures at the Red Center, oversaw this process, insisting that Gilead’s system provided women with greater security and respect than the old society. During this period, Moira also arrived but managed to escape, leaving Offred uncertain of what became of her.

Once assigned to the Commander’s household, Offred’s life settled into a rigid routine: she shopped with her walking partner, Ofglen—later revealed as a member

of the secret Mayday resistance—passed by the Wall lined with the corpses of executed rebels, underwent regular medical examinations, and participated in the Ceremony, a ritual in which the Commander had intercourse with her as Serena Joy watched. Her routine shifted when a doctor privately offered to impregnate her, implying the Commander might be sterile; she refused out of fear. Soon afterward, the Commander began inviting her to clandestine meetings where they played Scrabble, looked at forbidden magazines, and he requested kisses. During one of her outings, Ofglen revealed her involvement with Mayday, and Offred's perception of the Ceremony changed once she began to see the Commander as a person. In their secret conversations, he attempted to justify Gilead's oppressive laws as necessary for societal survival (Atwood, 1985).

When Offred still does not conceive, Serena Joy proposes that she sleep with Nick and pass any resulting pregnancy off as the Commander's. As an incentive, Serena offers her a photograph of her daughter, revealing that she has always known the child's whereabouts. That night, the Commander secretly brings Offred to Jezebel's, a private club where Commanders meet with prostitutes. There, she encounters Moira, who had been captured after her escape and chose life at Jezebel's over exile in the Colonies. Offred never sees Moira again after this meeting. The Commander later takes Offred to a hotel, where they have sex, and she pretends to enjoy the encounter. When she returns, Serena arranges for Offred to meet with Nick, a Guardian who works as the Commander's driver and gardener. This arrangement grows into a secret affair, and Offred becomes emotionally attached to Nick, gradually disengaging from her collaboration with Ofglen and the Mayday resistance.

Eventually, Serena discovers Offred's illicit trip to Jezebel's and threatens her with consequences. Soon after, a van belonging to the Eyes arrives at the house. Nick tells her it is actually Mayday coming to rescue her. Offred leaves with the men,

uncertain whether she is being freed or arrested. The novel closes with an epilogue set in 2195, where Professor Pieixoto delivers a lecture on Gilead. He explains that Offred's account was preserved on cassette tapes and speculates that Nick may have aided her escape, though her ultimate fate is never confirmed (Atwood, 1985).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is appropriate to briefly highlight the concepts of Religion, Theocracy, Policy, Patriarchy, Bible, and Reproduction that this study deals with to be an entry to this section in this paper. This will be a platform that serves the analysis and paves the way for reaching the desired results of this study.

Religion: In "The Handmaid's Tale", religion is used as a tool of oppression. The regime of Gilead is based on a distorted interpretation of Christian scripture. Religious language, rituals, and symbols are employed to justify the subjugation of women and the extreme control over their bodies and lives..... "The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it" (Atwood, 1985, p. 99). This illustrates how religious texts are manipulated and withheld to limit knowledge and enforce obedience.

Theocracy: A theocracy is a form of governance where authority is held by religious figures who claim to act on behalf of a divine power. In Gilead, laws and social norms are dictated by a theocratic regime that claims divine authority. There is no separation between church and state, and dissent is punished severely..... "The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you"(Atwood, 1985, p. 23). This quote reflects the internalization of religious authority promoted by the regime.

Policy: Policy in Gilead is built upon extreme religious doctrine and serves to enforce strict societal roles. Policies determine how women are categorized (e.g., Handmaids, Wives, Marthas) and control every aspect of life, including dress, movement, and reproduction..... "Better never means better for everyone... It always

means worse, for some" (Atwood, 1985, p. 211). This highlights how Gilead's policies prioritize control and hierarchy over fairness or equality.

Patriarchy: The social order in Gilead is built upon the principles of "Patriarchy". Men hold all political, religious, and social power, while women are reduced to roles based on fertility and obedience. The system is designed to benefit men and limit women's autonomy..... "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (Atwood, 1985, p. 57). This quote captures how women's voices are erased in a patriarchal regime.

Bible: In Gilead, "The Bible" is interpreted in a selective and manipulative manner. Only certain passages—primarily those that support the regime's policies—are read and quoted. For example, the story of Rachel and Bilhah is used to justify the use of Handmaids for reproduction..... "Give me children, or else I die. [...] Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Atwood, 1985, p. 88). This biblical justification is central to Gilead's system of forced reproduction.

Reproduction: In Gilead, "Reproduction" is regarded as the most important role a woman can fulfill. Fertile women are forced into the role of Handmaids and expected to produce children for elite families. Reproduction is state-controlled, and women are treated as vessels rather than individuals..... "We are for breeding purposes: we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything we do is for the good of others" (Atwood, 1985, p. 146). This highlights how women's reproductive capabilities are commodified.

Literary Criticism, or traditional literary analysis, is employed to investigate how Atwood constructs Gilead's religious and political systems through narrative techniques, imagery, and character perspectives. The Republic of Gilead constructs a state apparatus deeply rooted in selectively interpreted and decontextualized

biblical doctrine, using religious rhetoric to suppress dissent, erase female agency, and institutionalize patriarchal dominance. Despite invoking sacred texts, the regime distorts Christian principles to serve political and ideological ends. This raises important questions about the intersection of religion and political authority, and how theological constructs can be appropriated to sustain repressive state power. This theocratic paradigm and the implications help for understanding the potential misuse of religion in political systems.

In "The Handmaid's Tale", Margaret Atwood (1998) constructs the dystopian regime of the Republic of Gilead as a theocratic state that systematically appropriates religious doctrine to enforce authoritarian rule. Central to Gilead's ideological foundation is its selective and decontextualized use of biblical scripture. The regime invokes passages such as Genesis 30:1–3—where Rachel offers her handmaid to Jacob to bear children on her behalf—as divine justification for the forced surrogacy system that strips women of their autonomy (Atwood, 1998). However, Atwood's narrative reveals that Gilead's leaders deliberately misinterpret and manipulate such texts to legitimize patriarchal dominance and suppress dissent.

This misuse of scripture reflects what scholars describe as "scriptural authoritarianism", in which religious texts are co-opted by political powers not for spiritual guidance but for social control (Knutsen, 2007). Gilead's religious rhetoric masks its underlying goal: the consolidation of male power through the institutionalization of gender hierarchy. Women are classified into rigid roles—Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, Aunts—each defined by their relation to male authority and reproductive capacity. As Offred asserts, "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1998, p. 136). The sacred language employed here underscores the sacrilegious distortion of Christian symbols to serve totalitarian ends. Despite Gilead's frequent invocation of God and scripture, the regime lacks genuine spiritual values such as compassion, humility, or

love. As Fiorenza (1995) argues, feminist biblical interpretation reveals how patriarchal institutions often misuse scripture to justify oppression, even though the texts themselves may hold liberatory potential. Atwood appears to draw on such critiques to show how religion, when politicized, can become an instrument of domination rather than moral guidance.

This raises important questions about the intersection of religion and authoritarianism. Gilead functions as a cautionary tale that dramatizes the potential for theological constructs to be co-opted into systems of political control. The regime's power depends on its ability to obscure brutality under the veil of divine will, making resistance appear not only illegal but sinful. Moss notes that Gilead's ideological apparatus relies heavily on "ritualized language and performative piety", which suppresses independent thought and promotes obedience (Moss (2008, p.168). Atwood's depiction of Gilead encourages a deeper examination of how religious language is employed in actual authoritarian regimes. The novel's dystopian landscape reflects contemporary concerns about the political misuse of theology, offering a compelling lens through which to examine the entanglement of religion and state power.

Traditional literary analysis explores Atwood's use of narrative, imagery, symbolism, and character development. It reveals how religious discourse is embedded in the text and how Atwood uses language to reveal the contradictions between religious rhetoric and political oppression. For instance, close textual analysis examines the significance of biblical allusions, ritual language (e.g., "Blessed be the fruit"), and the renaming of women to signify **ownership** (e.g., "Offred" meaning "Of Fred") as literary strategies that reveal the loss of identity and autonomy. Additionally, the novel's first-person narration is a key to understanding Offred's psychological struggle to maintain her identity in a system that denies her

subjectivity. Her fragmented memories and reflective tone serve as a counter-narrative to Gilead's dominant discourse.

The main conflict in "The Handmaid's Tale" centers on Offred's struggle to maintain her identity under Gilead's brutal regime. This conflict unfolds across three timelines. In the present, she tries to see herself as a person despite being reduced to a reproductive tool by the Commander and his Wife. In flashbacks to the Red Center, she resists the psychological control of the Aunts, who train Handmaids to accept their loss of autonomy. In memories of her past life with her mother, Moira, and Luke, she reflects on how the struggle between male control and female independence existed even before Gilead. Offred remains largely passive throughout the novel. She takes small chances to assert herself—speaking with Moira, meeting the Commander in secret—but never openly rebels. Her quiet resistance contrasts with others: her mother, who joined feminist protests; Moira, who escaped the Red Center; and Ofglen, who was part of the Mayday resistance. Offred's defiance is subtle—holding onto her memories and bearing witness to her reality. The novel suggests that even this small form of resistance is meaningful and reflects the limits faced by many living under oppression.

In "The Handmaid's Tale", religion and theocracy play central roles in shaping the oppressive regime of Gilead. The novel depicts a theocratic society where the government is grounded in a radical interpretation of the Bible, and religious doctrines justify the total control of women's bodies and lives. The regime uses religious rhetoric to legitimize its actions, particularly the institutionalized enslavement of women as "Handmaids" who are forced to bear children for the ruling class. Theocratic rule in The Handmaid's Tale is portrayed as a distortion of religious values, where the Bible is selectively quoted to reinforce patriarchal and authoritarian practices. Women are denied access to education, employment, and personal autonomy, under the guise of religious virtue. The regime's leaders claim

that they are restoring divine order, yet their interpretation of the scriptures is conveniently aligned with their desire for power and control. This theocratic framework serves as a critique of how religion can be manipulated to justify social and political inequality. Atwood critiques the use of religious authority to suppress women's rights, drawing a parallel to real-world examples where religion has been wielded to enforce gender roles and oppression. The novel's exploration of religion also highlights the tension between personal faith and institutionalized dogma. Characters like Offred, the protagonist, engage with religious ideas in complex ways—sometimes as a form of resistance, other times as a survival mechanism. In the world of Gilead, faith is weaponized, and those who deviate from the prescribed religious norms are punished, further reinforcing the authoritarian state.

Overall, "The Handmaid's Tale" underscores the dangers of combining religion with political power, showing how it can become a tool for control and the erosion of individual rights. Through its depiction of a theocratic regime, it explores the dehumanization that occurs when people are reduced to mere tools for procreation. Its significance lies in how it resonates with ongoing struggles for gender equality and freedom. "The Handmaid's Tale" is often seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of complacency in the face of growing political and social oppression. It has remained relevant across generations, especially in times of political unrest or threats to civil liberties.

Drawing on Marxist literary theory, this study exposes shows how Gilead functions as a class-based society masked by religious ideology. Handmaids, Marthas, and Econowives are positioned within a rigid hierarchy that benefits the ruling elite (e.g., Commanders and Wives), while religious doctrine is used to justify their labor and subjugation. In this context, religion serves the role Marx identified as the "opium of the people" (Marx, 1844), delivering a deceptive sense of purpose that obscures the underlying exploitation and loss of power. By using a Marxist critical

lens, the study interrogates the ways in which religion in Gilead functions as an ideological tool to maintain class and gender.

From a Marxist perspective, "The Handmaid's Tale" can be understood as a critique of capitalist class oppression transposed into a theocratic regime that masks economic exploitation under religious ideology. Margaret Atwood, in Republic of Gilead, presents a class-stratified society in which economic power and reproductive labor are tightly controlled by the ruling elite. The regime constructs a rigid hierarchy that mirrors capitalist modes of production, where individuals are reduced to their utility, particularly reproductive capacity in the case of Handmaids.

In Marxist terms, the Handmaids function as an exploited labor class—stripped of autonomy, denied ownership of their bodies, and forced to reproduce for the ruling elite, similar to the way the proletariat generates surplus value for the bourgeoisie. Their work—biological reproduction—is commodified, though disguised as a divine duty. As Federici (2004) argues in *Caliban and the Witch*, the control of female reproductive labor has historically been central to the formation of capitalist systems. Gilead institutionalizes this logic: the Handmaids' reproductive labor is systematically alienated from them and transferred to the Commanders' households.

The ideological superstructure in Gilead, dominated by a blend of religious dogma and state propaganda, serves to legitimize and naturalize this exploitation. Marx and Engels (1846/1970) contend in "The German Ideology" that the dominant ideas within any society reflect the interests and perspectives of the ruling class. In Gilead, biblical language becomes the ruling ideology, used to justify social stratification and mask material inequalities. The regime claims divine authority, but it maintains itself through surveillance, coercion, and material deprivation—mechanisms typical of capitalist states preserving elite dominance. This "unmasks

the games played by the political powers to annihilate human awareness" (Abbas, & Sandaran, 2019).

Social classes are rigidly maintained. The Commanders and their Wives occupy the ruling class; Handmaids and Marthas serve as the working class, differentiated by type of labor (reproductive vs. domestic), and the Unwomen represent the discarded surplus population—those who are no longer economically useful. As Offred reflects, "We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (Atwood, 1998, p. 96), emphasizing the reduction of women to laboring bodies whose value is extracted by those in power.

In "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood (1985), the dystopian society of Gilead is structured around strict gender roles, especially for women. Three key categories of women—Marthas, Econowives, and Handmaids—represent distinct social roles, each defined by the woman's fertility, age, and social status. These classifications are rooted in Gilead's theocratic interpretation of the Bible and are used to maintain rigid control over women:

Marthas are infertile women tasked with domestic duties such as cooking, cleaning, and housekeeping. They typically serve in the homes of elite Commanders. The term "Martha" comes from the biblical figure known for her service in the household (Luke 10:38–42), aligning with their submissive, service-based role.... "Rita is a Martha. She works hard, cleaning, cooking. She's not supposed to speak to me except when it's absolutely necessary" (Atwood, 1985, p. 8). Marthas are dressed in green uniforms that represent their servitude and are typically older women deemed no longer capable of reproduction.

Econowives are married to lower-ranking men who do not have the privilege of being assigned Handmaids. They are expected to fulfill all female roles in the household, including wife, mother, cook, and cleaner..... "The Econowives do everything; if they can" (Atwood, 1985, p. 25). Econowives wear striped dresses that

combine red, blue, and green—colors associated with the roles of Handmaids (red), Wives (blue), and Marthas (green)—highlighting the multiple burdens they carry without status or support.

Handmaids are fertile women assigned to elite households for the sole purpose of reproduction. They are forced to bear children for Commanders and their Wives, based on a literal interpretation of the biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah (Genesis 30:1–3). Handmaids are stripped of autonomy and reduced to their reproductive function..... "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1985, p. 136). Handmaids wear red cloaks and white bonnets, symbolizing both fertility and sexual control. Their lives are highly regulated, and failure to produce a child can result in exile or punishment. These three roles—Marthas, Econowives, and Handmaids—reveal the deep stratification and oppression of women in Gilead. Each category is defined not by individual choice, but by state-assigned utility, reflecting Atwood's critique of patriarchal control and the dangers of religious extremism.

Gilead also employs what Marx termed "false consciousness"—a condition in which the oppressed internalize the dominant ideology and fail to recognize their exploitation (Marx & Engels, 1970). Characters like Aunt Lydia perpetuate Gilead's beliefs among women, serving as ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) that reinforce compliance and mask systemic inequalities as moral or divine necessity. Ultimately, "The Handmaid's Tale" dramatizes how totalitarian regimes can utilize religion and reproductive control as ideological tools to sustain a class-based system of exploitation. Atwood's novel warns against the intersection of capitalist commodification and patriarchal control, particularly how both systems discipline and exploit women's bodies to maintain elite rule.

To deepen this Marxist analysis, the study supports the analysis with following two key concepts:

Louis Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs):

ISA stands for Ideological State Apparatus, a concept developed by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser in his 1971 essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". According to Althusser, ISAs—such as religion, education, media, and the family—are institutions that disseminate ideology and serve to reproduce the conditions of capitalist production. In "The Handmaid's Tale", the theocratic state of Gilead uses religion as a primary ISA. The regime does not rely solely on violence (Repressive State Apparatuses) but on ideological control, especially through institutions like the Red Center, where women are indoctrinated into submission under the guise of religious instruction. The Aunts, functioning as agents of the ISA, enforce obedience not through force, but through religious rhetoric, guilt, and psychological conditioning. This aligns with Althusser's claim that "ideology interpellates individuals as subjects" (Althusser, 1971, p. 174)—that is, citizens come to accept their roles not as forced upon them, but as 'natural' or divinely ordained.

Antonio Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony:

Abbas explained that; "According to Van Dijk, dominance is understood as a form of social power abuse, as a legal or moral illegitimate exercise of control over others in one's own interests that often results in social inequality" (Abass & et al, 2021, p. 24). Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony argues that ruling classes maintain dominance not through direct coercion, but by securing the consent of the oppressed via cultural institutions and ideological leadership (Gramsci, 1971). In Gilead, religious doctrine has been normalized to the point where many citizens—particularly women—internalize their oppression as moral duty or divine will. The regime's success in establishing hegemonic control is evident in Offred's frequent

moments of doubt and complicity, even as she privately resists. The novel explores how hegemony is sustained through ritual, surveillance, and internalized beliefs, and how small acts of dissent, like remembering the past or engaging in forbidden relationships, become meaningful acts of resistance within a hegemonically controlled society.

By combining literary criticism and Marxist criticism, this study attempts to offer a nuanced analysis of how Atwood exposes the socio-political consequences of merging religion with state power in theocratic society, particularly in relation to gender and class oppression.

Merging religion with state power in a theocratic society often results in systemic gender and class oppression. Religious laws typically enforce patriarchal norms, limiting women's rights in areas such as education, employment, legal testimony, and bodily autonomy. Additionally, these systems often legitimize socio-economic hierarchies, favoring elites aligned with religious authority and marginalizing lower classes (Moghadam, 2003). Theocratic governance can thus institutionalize inequality under the guise of divine legitimacy. Separating religion from politics is crucial to uphold democratic values, protect individual freedoms, and ensure equal rights regardless of faith. It prevents the domination of one religious group over others and reduces the risk of discriminatory laws based on religious doctrines (Sen, 2005). Secular governance fosters pluralism and safeguards human rights, especially in diverse societies.

CONCLUSION

The final conclusion of this study is that religion is used to maintain totalitarian control and enforce gender-based subjugation within a theocratic society inside the narrative text of the novel under study. By combining literary criticism and Marxist criticism, this study attempted to offer a nuanced analysis of how Atwood exposes the socio-political consequences of merging religion with state power in theocratic

society, particularly in relation to gender and class oppression in her novel, "The Handmaid's Tale". The findings of this study assert that Atwood reveals the dangers of theocratic rule and challenges readers to consider how religious and political discourses can intersect to sustain systems of oppression. The findings also provide a clear insight of how "The Handmaid's Tale" critiques the manipulation of religion as a tool of ideological domination practised by theocratic rule. "The Handmaid's Tale" offers a bleak portrayal of totalitarian theocratic society inside the narrative text under study, where the deep stratification and oppression of women in Gilead. Class divisions are strictly enforced. The Commanders and their Wives occupy the ruling class; Handmaids and Marthas serve as the working class, differentiated by type of labor (reproductive vs. domestic), and the Unwomen represent the discarded surplus population—those who are no longer economically useful. Atwood's novel warns against the intersection of capitalist commodification and patriarchal control, particularly how both systems discipline and exploit women's bodies to maintain elite rule. Eventually, it becomes clear that merging religion with state power in a theocratic society often results in systemic gender and class oppression. Religious laws typically enforce patriarchal norms, limiting women's rights in areas such as education, employment, legal testimony, and bodily autonomy. Additionally, these systems often legitimize socio-economic hierarchies, favoring elites aligned with religious authority and marginalizing lower classes. Theocratic governance can thus institutionalize inequality under the guise of divine legitimacy.

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الدين والثيوقراطية في رواية "حكاية الجارية" لمارجريت آن تود
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الكلمات المفتاحية: الدين، الثيوقراطية، السياسة

الملخص:

يؤدي دمج الدين مع سلطة الدولة في المجتمع الثيوقراطي، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالقمع على أساس نوع الجنس والطبقة، إلى عواقب اجتماعية وسياسية وخيمة. انطلاقاً من هذه الفكرة، حاولت هذه الورقة البحثية تقديم قراءة نقدية لرواية آن تودود الديستوبية "حكاية الجارية"، حيث يلعب الدين والثيوقراطية دوراً محورياً في تشكيل نظام جلعاد القمعي داخل الرواية. الهدف الرئيسي لهذه الدراسة هو التحقيق في كيفية نقد رواية مارغريت آن تودود "حكاية الجارية" لاستغلال الدين كوسيلة لفرض السيطرة الشمولية وما ينبع عنها من ظلم وقمع قائم على أساس التمييز وفق نوع الجنس والطبقة الاجتماعية، ودراسة تصوير الرواية للديناميكيات السياسية والاجتماعية للمجتمع الثيوقراطي داخل هذا النص السري. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجية نوعية تفسيرية تستند إلى النقد الأدبي والنقد الماركسي لدراسة تأثير الدين والثيوقراطية على المجتمع داخل النص السري. أكدت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن نص آن تودود السري كشف عن مخاطر الحكم الثيوقراطي، وصور كيفية تقاطع الخطابين الديني والسياسي للحفاظ على أنظمة القمع. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن الدين في نظام جلعاد يُستغل (من خلال التحرير واسعة التفسير) للحفاظ على سيطرة شمولية لنظام جلعاد وفرض إخضاع قائم على النوع الاجتماعي والطبقة في المجتمع الثيوقراطي في النص السري قيد الدراسة. تكمن أهمية الدراسة الحالية في كشف العواقب الاجتماعية والسياسية لدمج الدين مع سلطة الدولة، وما ينبع عنه من قمع على أساس النوع الاجتماعي والطبقي) في المجتمع الثيوقراطي في رواية "حكاية الجارية" لمارغريت آن تودود. ويُؤمل أن تُسهم هذه الدراسة في توسيع قاعدة المعرفة وإثراء أدبيات هذه الرواية تحديداً، ومجال الروايات الإنجليزية الديستوبية بشكل عام.