The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood is a dystopic novel that establishes a future America as a totalitarian state where men are dictators and women become their puppets. America has turned upside down, no longer a democratic state, but with a government that strongly enforces patriarchal laws; this is Gilead. The spread of a mutated strand of syphilis ends in the spread of infertility and rapid decline of reproduction.

This catastrophe is manipulated by a coup by a group called ‘Sons of Jacob’ who twist social structure to benefit the males in authority, reclaiming past male dominance. Women have no power and no money. Fertile women are re-educated in special centres to become handmaids for commanders whose wives cannot bear children. Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, follows the recount of Offred, a handmaid, one of the many women who suffer after the fall of liberal America. Being fertile means having the predetermined role of handmaid, the womb of the commander, the surrogate mother for his wife and nothing more than a ‘womb with legs’ (Atwood, 1996, p.146).

In a mathematical equation, women are only the worth of their ability to populate, failure to do this means becoming an ‘unwoman’. The Handmaid’s Tale certainly can be seen as a cautionary tale if certain attitudes are carried to extremes. However, it is also important to note its resemblance to the extremes of the past, seen in gender roles, romance structure, and politics.

The ‘nightmare’ quality of the novel is that America, the superpower, the ideological home of the free may become a ‘victim’, subject to its own methods of bringing the nations it wages war against under subjection. Feuer states, “…..the fundamentalist conservatives who create Gilead by overthrowing American democracy use as a guide a CIA pamphlet on destabilizing foreign governments produced by that very democracy” (Feuer,1997). This reflects the idea that America can or will become its own worst enemy, it embodies the paranoia of a government conspiracy and the distrust of a government that has maybe too much control. After years of being the world watch dog of freedom, people’s fear may be that the leaders are becoming too powerful and following personal agendas. As Klarer states:

The Handmaid’s Tale is clearly in the traditional American dystopias with their well known themes of totalitarian control, use of military and secret police, manipulation through organized use of media, re-writing of history, re-education and terror(Klarer, 1995).

Gilead also has a strong resemblance to Nazi Germany. During the Second World War, Germany experienced a similar kind of regime when Hitler established his dictatorship and the ideology of the Pure Aryan Race:

He believed that a reawakened racially united German, led by men of iron will, would carve out a vast European empire and would deal a decadent liberal civilization its death blow (Perry, 2001, p. 566).

In a similar way America ideology could be seen as the iron will to straighten out anything that is not democratic. While in Gilead, anything and anyone not part of the regime’s fundamental religious system is ostracised or controlled.

One of the commanders in The Handmaid’s Tale and Hitler share some interesting qualities:

This commander ascends the steps to the podium, which is draped with a red cloth embroidered with a large white winged eye. He gazes over the room, andour soft voices die. He doesn’t even have to raise his hands (Atwood, 1996, p 230).

This is similar to Hitler, who made passionate speeches with the red Nazi flag hanging behind him. In Gilead, literature, reading, and writing are made illegal: magazines, books, and other contraband are burnt. This bears great resemblance to, “In May 1933, professors and students proudly burned books considered a threat to Nazi ideology.” (Perry, 2001, p 571). Hitler created a world of “uniforms, salutes, emblems, flags and other symbols imbued party members with a sense of solidarity and camaraderie. At mass meetings, Hitler was a spellbinder who gave stunning performances.” (Perry, 2001, p 565).

In The Handmaid’s Tale, all commanders, angels, and guardians are dressed in their own uniforms while the women are issued with habit-like attire. Each group of people are identified and classified by the colour of their attire. White is symbolic of innocence and purity, worn by children and women before they marry or become handmaids. Red symbolises blood, the source of life and fertile women, and is worn by the handmaids. In comparison, if white is the absence of colour and black is the fullness of colour, then the black worn by men symbolises the dominance over all the other groups. Performances are all a part of propaganda, whether newspapers, television or any other form of communication. The Handmaid’s Tale reflects the notion of propaganda where channels of communication are controlled by another power for their own purposes. This can also be seen as a part of the fear of conspiracy. Atwood, cited by Feuer states that:

‘…it’s obvious now that everything passes through a filter. Doesn’t mean it’s not true in some sense. It just
Another aspect similar to the Nazi regime is the similarity between concentration camps and Gilead’s colonies where the ‘unwomen’ were sent; and the similarity of the re-education centres to Nazi schools and Hitler youth. Whether Nazi Germany or Gilead, these are examples of extremists who claim to have the complete truth and enforce it on others, making it the issue of true freedom. Every dictator needs his scapegoat, for Hitler it was the Jews and those who helped them, for Gilead, it is the ‘unwomen’, and through a religious front, their actions are justified. Part of the totalitarian state is control over people and technology allows this to be done through surveillance.

In a sense, The Handmaid’s Tale can be likened to George Orwell’s 1984. Feuer describes the novel as ‘a feminist 1984.’ (Feuer, 1997). The Gilead government symbol of an eye with wings can be compared with the eye of ‘Big Brother’. As Feuer asserts, “Handmaids part with the phrase ‘Under his eye’, just as Oceanians knew that Big Brother was watching.” Lack of privacy and constant surveillance are common features ...” (Feuer, 1997). The technology that is currently widely used for security, video surveillance, and entertainment, such as “Big Brother”, a television show where contestants are under constant surveillance, could easily be used to control and manipulate the masses.

Looking back at America’s founding fathers it can be seen that a similar rigid religious uniformed society had already existed. American Puritanism is reflected in The Handmaid’s Tale, and can be seen as a religious extreme of the past. This can be seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter (1986), and Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (1992). Such literature focuses on the Puritan Society, which is always concerned about the emergence of witchcraft in their community. During the era these novels were set, it was not seen as right for a woman to be able to read, and many innocent people were hanged. The people in Putarian Society used religion to justify these hanging, and religion controlled many aspects of their lives, they even went as far as a dress code for women, extremely modest dress with no bright colours. Like the Puritans the people of Gilead hang the ‘sinner’ who break the law of the state.

The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched...They look arranged. They look like showbiz. It must have been Aunt Lydia who put the blue one in the middle (Atwood,1996, p.289).

Also seen in the novel is the American ideology of being all that is right and true, and free. The American dream can be identified in the escape of Offred, as she beats the system. Perhaps she is the contemporary Cinderella, accompanied by her evil stepsisters (the Aunts), and Stepmother (the commander’s wife), but instead of being taken to the ball she is taken to the brothel by the evil king then rescued by her knight (the commanders driver, Nick), who is a double agent. However, Offred’s story is far from a fairytale, as Feuer states, “…The Handmaid’s Tale gives us the descent to a nightmare underworld.” (Feuer, 1997).

It is evident that the totalitarian state has no room for love or emotions, its only concern is progress and perhaps the personal gain of its leaders, and women become only pawns on a chessboard. However, the novel could also be seen as love prevailing over all. “Love is not the point.” states Aunt Lydia (Atwood, 1996, p.285). However, love is the important, though secret, lifeline for Offred. Along with her memories, love is the only thing she has left that they cannot take away, it is an important part of the survival of her identity. Love is a main point throughout the novel. Although her family are no longer with her, it is the memory of them that maintains Offred’s sanity. Offred’s past identity has been erased by the new social structure, however it remains in her mind, to reclaim or keep it she secretly breaks the law.

While in the red centre being re-educated as a handmaid, Offred notices, “ M. loves G., 1972. This carving ...has the pathos of all vanished civilizations. It’s like a handprint on stone. Whoever made that was once alive.” (Atwood, 1996, p.123). This symbolism can be seen to represent that although power, money, and material things can be taken away, love always remains. It is something carved that cannot be erased, something that the officials can hinder but one of the qualities that can not be burnt or pillaged. It is Offred’s ability to love that helps her maintain her identity and saves her from becoming a shadow of a person. It is possible that this could be an ideology, but it becomes Offred’s faith, and in a way it could be said that in the end love saves her. “Trust me,” he says; which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee. But I snatch it, this offer. It’s all I’m left with.” (Atwood, 1996, p306). She responds to the compassion and human decency of his words.

Issues of gender are strongly embedded in the novel, as seen in the patriarchal hierarchy that is in place. America seems to have slid backward to the time when women’s most important purpose was to reproduce. As Coad states...
women need to be hidden, masked and veiled (Coad, 2001).

One of the issues that the feminist movement advocated was for women to be able to choose their own destiny, especially with regard to child bearing and contraception, which led to greater freedoms from the roles of housewife and mother. In Gilead, women have lost the freedoms that the feminist movement fought for and have returned to an era where their value is equal to their ability to bear children, but they are told that they have freedom. In the novel, America becomes in a sense a type of Islamic state, what it was once an enemy of, an example of this similarity is seen in the habit-like dress women are required to wear. It can be likened in this regard to Sylvia Plath’s, The Bell Jar (1999), wherein is displayed the internal battle/conflict of what women want and what society will let them do. What men have and do, and what women are allowed become separate issues. The underlying cover up is the government brothel, exclusive to the commanders. Their front is a huge religious act, however under the surface rather than serving the people or the state they help themselves to power, riches, and women. The old concept of male dominance is clearly continued for those in positions of authority.

The ideology of patriarchy and male superiority in the novel suggests that the purpose of women is to serve the needs of men, and women are to be owned by men. The wife, the handmaid, the housekeepers, and the prostitutes are all expected to fulfil the man’s needs in some way. Men are seen as almighty, all-powerful, without fault and go unquestioned, although men who break the law are punished as well. This concept is established in the novel where it is illegal to call a man sterile, however if a woman is unfertile she is sent to the colonies and declared an ‘unwoman’. As a woman in Gilead, it is not who you are, it is what you can do for the state, if you cannot do anything for society, you are considered worthless. The novel is a recount, it is not until the last chapter that the reader discovers this, where the tapes made by Offred are being analysed by historians. As in many modern/post modern novels, the presence of the author is constantly made known when the reader is reminded that they are reading a story, this can be seen in passages such as Ofred’s comment, “I don’t want to be telling this story.” (Atwood, 1996, p.237)

A dystopic novel, Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, can definitely be seen as a cautionary tale. As we can see from past totalitarian regimes such as Hitler’s Nazi Germany, the only benefits are for the high-ranking officials and dictators, those who are in control and make the rules. On the other hand, those like Offred, the handmaid, those with no political status are expected to walk in line or be damned. Through the totalitarian world established in the novel, the American ideology of freedom and the power of the individual is put to the test.

Even so, love takes an important role in Offred’s identity, prevailing over all political structures; it is love that saves her. Perhaps the message is that if we do not pay attention to the extreme attitudes around us, or learn from the events and situations caused by extreme attitudes of the past, these undesirable consequences could come to plague us in the future.

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