Society Beware! – That is the not so subtle warning embedded in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. This science fiction novel deals with a world of extremes, a world patterned after our own, with all of society's flaws leading to a totalitarian regime in which the rights of the individual are overturned for the so-called good of the people. Here we have one group of men, calling themselves The Sons of Jacob, deciding that they know what is best for all those who live in the Republic of Gilead. This group of men believe that force is an acceptable way of ensuring that their beliefs become the beliefs of all people via the 'use of military and secret police, manipulation through organized use of media, rewriting of history, re-education and terror' (Klare 1995, p. 129). Presenting these happenings as a futuristic and fictional account of what befall one society thus serves to disguise a truth that many readers would find unpalatable in a more straightforward novel, that what occurs within the pages of this book could easily take place in the same society in which the reader lives. Atwood highlights the fact that what led to the takeover by The Sons of Jacob are the very same issues that are being played out in the political and social arenas of the real world, ones of 'self-discovery, self-expression, self-construction, gender discrimination, political oppression, and patriarchal domination' (Hogsett 1997, p. 262).

Atwood, using first person narrative, creates a nightmarish vision of one woman's struggle to survive when all her rights are taken away, even the right of hope, when 'a culture's sexual unease is expressed through rigid social arrangements' in which 'punitive conventions reduce women to the bare functionality of their flesh' (Cooper 1997, p. 89). Offred is a Handmaid, one of the few women who are fertile and therefore capable of reproduction. As such she is considered to be a national resource in a time when the population growth has severely declined. The Sons of Jacob have decreed that such women should be utilized for the good of all, rather than have their fertility wasted if they choose not to have children. In the beginning of the novel Offred reflects on the old adage 'Waste not want not', highlighting the way a Handmaid is seen as a product and not a person, she continues with 'I am not being wasted. Why do I want?' (Atwood 1996, p. 17). For Handmaid's are not allowed to have desires, they are instead expected to feel happiness through fulfilling their duty when taken from their homes to serve as breeders for influential men whose wives are unable to bear children. In this manner, 'biology-as-destiny informs the representation of the body as a highly contested site of entrapment' (Cooper 1997, p. 89). Threatened with death, by rope or radiation, her husband killed, their only child taken from her and given to another to raise, Offred has no choice but to leave behind her sense of self and become a vessel for the seed of the Commander whose name she is forced to take as her own.

Stifled in a world where even the freedom of suicide is taken from her, the Handmaid must adapt to the harshness of her existence if she is to retain her sanity and her life, while at the same time surviving the machinations of those around her. This adaptation is surprisingly easy for Offred, than for many of those around her, a fact which surprises her. She remarks that 'it has taken so little time to change our minds', drawing attention to the way in which the threat of violence can aid the process of cultural indoctrination, for the learned behaviour becomes second nature (Atwood 1996, p. 38). To ensure that the people remain under control, fraternization between the newly created classes of Atwood's dystopia is condemned. Because of this, Offred's danger is increased when the Commander she is assigned to chooses to subvert the law, yet the Handmaid is unable to refuse the man who holds power over her. Likewise, there is no safe way for Offred to refuse when the Commander's Wife, who suspects her husband to be sterile, organises for the household's Guardian, Nick, to take on the job of impregnating the Handmaid. Both plans are fraught with peril for the Handmaid, yet within them she finds freedom of a kind and begins to break away from the indoctrination she has received.

While the plot of this novel might not, on its own account, be seen as anything that extraordinary, throughout its pages there is a steady comment on the nature of the society that came before it, a society divided on the same issues that plague the one in which we, the readers, currently exist. There is a growing concern in Australian politics that each successive generation is declining in numbers. In an attempt to encourage more population growth, the Howard Government has offered substantial bonuses for each baby born since 1st July, 2004, as well as increased family allowance payments and the amount of support available to working mothers. All of these inducements, along with many others, are designed to boost the declining population growth figures. While it is an accepted fact that it takes two to make a baby, many in our society, as with the one which preceeded the formation of the Republic of Gilead, lay the blame for the declining population at the feet of those women who put off, or decide against, having children, as well as those who choose to abort an unwanted pregnancy. It is feasible to consider that if declining fertility was added into the equation our government might consider taking more extreme measures to ensure Australia's survival.

As unthinkable as it may seem to many people now, there may come a time when having a baby is no longer a choice for a fertile woman, but a requirement, as occurs in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Pamela Cooper states that Offred, and the other fertile women who become prisoners of their biologically determined destiny, are 'colonized to fulfil the demographic ambitions of the Sons of Jacob', and that 'the reproductive apparatus of the Handmaid becomes an extension of the totalitarian apparatus of the state' (1997,
The novel tells of feminist groups who believed that there was a danger to be fought against. The novel tells of feminist groups who campaigned for a 'women's culture', calling for the banning of pornography and organising marches for women to 'take back the night', events which take place with regularity in the modern world. It is this wish for a 'women's culture' that, in part, leads Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor to state that 'The Handmaid's Tale is pervaded by irony at every level' (2003, p. 83). It is a case of 'be careful what you wish for' and Lawlor refers to the section in the novel where Offred, in a moment of reflection about her mother, states almost the same thing. Her mother had been part of the movement for a women's culture, but what she ended up with bore a little resemblance to what she had been calling for. In this way we can see that movements have a life of their own once the moment of conception is past, as even the Commander discovered when he comes to the realisation that he is 'robbed of his choices in the process of robbing others of theirs' (Feuer 1997, p. 83).

While the idea that any one group could stage a complete takeover is frightening enough, even more so is the role women are relegated to in a 'futuristic society in which a brutal patriarchal regime deprives women of power and subjectivity', serving as a chilling reminder that it is a man's world and that Western society revolves around 'pre-Christian notions of absolute patriarchal authority' (Cooper 1995, p. 49). In modern societies, individuals are supposed to be equal, but the reality of it is that 'historically, many societies have rested upon a belief in the innate superiority of males, who therefore legitimately dominate females' (Macionis and Plummer 2002, p. 292).

So, it is not so far fetched that a group of males would take similar action to The Sons of Jacob, who justified their 'beliefs and practices with biblical authority' (Coad 2001, p. 54). Using a quote from Genesis to legitimise usurping the rights of all women, the Commanders ensure that they are in control of reproduction, assuming a divine right to progeny, with one line in the novel stating that as far as the Republic of Gilead is concerned there is 'no such thing as a sterile man any more … only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law' (Atwood 1996, p. 71). So if a man does not have a child, it is automatically determined that the woman is at fault. However, male children are sought after as heirs, with girls being trained from birth to remain subservient. Handmaids are told that their female offspring will be fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law' (Dymond 2003, p. 181).

The Sons of Jacob initiated their takeover because they felt that this was the only way to save their society. They believed that not only did they know what is best for the people, but that they also had the right to enforce compliance to a system, which violated the civil rights of each and every individual. But they were not the only ones who believed that there was a danger to be fought against. The novel tells of feminist groups who have been part of the movement for a women's culture, but what she ended up with bore a little resemblance to what she had been calling for. In this way we can see that movements have a life of their own once the moment of conception is past, as even the Commander discovered when he comes to the realisation that he is 'robbed of his choices in the process of robbing others of theirs' (Feuer 1997, p. 83).

All the citizens of The Republic of Gilead have lost the right to choose how they wish to live their lives and what manner of person they will be. The Commander that Offred has been assigned to tell her, 'we thought we could do better', but that 'better never means better for everyone… It always means worse, for some' (Atwood p. 222), giving the impression that he believes that more people are better off, so the changes have been justified and those that are worse off should accept their lot in life for the good of the people. Operating in a manner that is for the good of the people also means that roles are determined by gender, and in the case of women, fertility, as The Sons of Jacob adhere to 'the notion that gender distinctions denote some fundamental and crucial difference between human beings' (Feuer 1997, p. 83). Men are masculine and women are feminine, that is all there is to it as far as The Sons of Jacob are concerned, and they are not the only ones who subscribe to essentialist notions of gender. Society teaches its constituents what it means to be male or female through cultural practices and while we live in a more accepting world than Offred, there is a very real possibility that one or more groups believe that men and women should follow strictly defined rules governing their behaviour. If one of those groups were to use violent means to gain acceptance of their views, the results for any society could be catastrophic. Indeed, in the history of the world there have been many instances where one religious group has determined that they had the right to use force to compel others to follow their lead, so it is not inconceivable that a group bent on biological determinism would not take the same steps.

What Margaret Atwood has set out to do in The Handmaid's Tale was not to create a light and entertaining read. Instead she has constructed a written warning for those with the eyes to see that at heart 'we are our own enemies' and that we, like Offred, have been living our lives 'oblivious to the signs of the coming catastrophe'
What has happened in The Republic of Gilead could occur in the real world for “Atwood’s nightmare is possible when to be a master, it is sufficient to be a man, and when women are two-legged wombs, slaves of their reproductive organs” (Coad 2001, p. 54). After reading this novel, each person should open their eyes and their minds and look at themselves and the world in which they live, for while what happened in The Handmaid’s Tale may be fiction, it could so easily become fact. Atwood has astutely portrayed a truth that reverberates within the reader’s soul. When it comes to fanaticism no society is safe, especially not our own.

Reference List

Coad D 2001, Literature and Psychology, “Hymen’s lips and masks: The veil in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale”, V. 47, I. ½.


