

# Reproduction Rights in the Handmaid's Tale an Analysis of Science Fiction Literature as a Critique and a Reflection of the Socio-Political Climate

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**REPRODUCTION RIGHTS IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE**  
**An Analysis of Science Fiction Literature as a Critique and a Reflection of**  
**the Socio-Political Climate**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the M.A. in English Language and  
Literature and Philosophy at the University of Rijeka

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## ABSTRACT

*As the very title suggests, in this thesis I will aim to provide a brief analysis of the science fiction genre as a critique and reflection of the socio-political climate. Namely, I will base my analysis on the events mainly surrounding the notion of reproductive rights of women present in Margaret Atwood's novel titled *The Handmaid's Tale*. The choice of a novel is such because *The Handmaid's Tale* could easily be regarded as one of the most applicable political critiques and most relatable reflections of a socio-political climate regardless of the time and place in which it is analyzed or to which it is compared. This extensive account of a society plagued by restrictions where women's reproductive rights seem to be completely absent proves to be an excellent ground for exploring socio-political inequality present in various times and places regarding women, but also all the people. Aside from drawing parallels with some current events that eerily seem to correspond to the events of the novel, I will also provide an analysis on three different levels:*

- 1. An analysis of the notion of reproductive rights in a literal sense,*
- 2. Reproductive rights as an allegorical representation of the Marxist theory of (social) reproduction,*
- 3. Reproductive rights as a reflection of the 'dominant male-submissive female' dynamics and the influence of that dynamics on other societal structures, explored through the concept of Gynology*

**Key Words:** *Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, science fiction, reproductive rights, socio-political critique*

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

As the very title of the work suggests, the main aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between literature, mainly science fiction novels, and the political sphere of the society. The idea behind the piece of writing in question stemmed not only from my own affinity towards science fiction novels, but from observations of the current political situation within Croatia as well. It can, without much difficulty, be argued that, in recent years, Croatia, together with the rest of the world, has been swept into what can be referred to as a chaotic vortex of political turmoil caused by the ever ongoing polemics regarding the reproductive rights women should (or should not) be able to exercise as residents of a certain country. Both as a resident of Croatia and as a woman, I inevitably found myself drawn towards almost every piece of information addressing the issue of reproductive rights, as well as every discussion between those in favor of the woman's freedom of choice (pro-choice) and the proponents of the possible abortion ban (pro-life) that happened to appear in the media.

As the two newly formed 'fronts' waged a heated media war on each other, what soon became clandestinely clear was that, while the pro-life conservative current started to gain more and more prominence on the political scene, and its opponents in turn provided various counter arguments supporting their own stance on reproductive rights while even organizing protests in an effort to shift the dominant mode of discourse towards a more progressive one, the decision regarding what women are allowed to do with their own bodies in the context of willingly (not) carrying a pregnancy to term evolved into a political narrative greatly surpassing the sole notion of women's rights, and delved much deeper into the very core of the societal structure, thus becoming merely a reflection of the inner workings of the socio-political system which will be discussed in more thorough detail in the following chapters.

Of course, even though this piece of writing was indeed initially inspired by the state of affairs within the Republic of Croatia, the current socio-political climate of the country will not be its primary focus. The Croatian reality has, in fact, only facilitated the creation of this piece of writing by drawing attention to the existing issues regarding reproductive rights and accentuating the similarities they share with the novel currently being analyzed. To be more precise, the Croatian political climate, in this context, merely serves as a springboard prompting one to draw attention towards the treatment of women's reproductive rights around the globe, as well as pinpoint the concerns surrounding the still dire, albeit sometimes astoundingly well disguised as beneficial, position of women within the patriarchal mentality that has, to this day, remained a dominant mode of discourse amongst a great majority of world cultures. The political climate of Croatia proved to be symptomatic of a greater, global-scale epidemic marked by the overall deterioration of human rights ranging from the emergence of mild, barely noticeable cases, over those reminiscent of El Salvador's extremely harsh restrictions regarding abortion (which will be more thoroughly elaborated on in the upcoming chapter 2, section 3 titled "Reproduction Rights and *The Handmaid's Tale*"), to the terrorist regime of the radical, pseudo-Islamist Islamic state of Iraq and Syria as the most openly vicious of all (which will, as well, be discussed in more precise detail in chapter 2, section 5 titled "Offred as a Symbol of Women's Struggle against the Patriarchal Mentality and its Present Manifestations"). Such unfolding of events undoubtedly, eerily reminisces the plot of a certain novel I read years ago as an undergraduate student, which now appeared to resonate with me more than has ever been the case in the past, but back then still seemed to be nothing more than a mere exaggeration of an almost impossible chain of events – Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

To elaborate, as the years passed and as each day went by, various news articles and television reports began painting an increasingly more restrictive picture of the society all around the world. As the potential restrictions grew in number, criticism of that very society

became abundant with references of Atwood's previously mentioned, famous anti-establishmentarian work of fiction, while simultaneously even reviving its thematic through the creation of a namesake television series. It has thus become utterly impossible to remain oblivious to the very gravity of Atwood's message, as well as the ease with which any ideological enforcers (even the men within the patriarchal societies) can secure their positions within the society. The enforced ideology seems to simply, easily seep out of the political sphere of existence, into numerous other, traditionally non-political, aspects of human lives subverted to deliberate, yet unconsciously manifested politicization and ideological categorization conducted in order to render them a suitable terrain for the promotion of a certain aggregate of interests. This is the reason why it is deemed necessary to further examine the reasons that ultimately enable certain organizations or structures and allow them to achieve their desired effect. In later chapters, it is also argued that, in some cases, the ideology in power might not necessarily be what determines other relations within the society exercising said ideology, but might only prove to be the ultimate manifestation of a pre-existing dynamics between the groups present within a certain society, which is what finally allows for a bottom-up type of paradigm shift. The afore stated will be elaborated on in the final chapter of the more strictly analytical part of the thesis, titled "Offred as a Symbol of Women's Struggle Against the Patriarchal Mentality and its Present Manifestations", where, aside from exploring the similarities in the dynamics of The Republic of Gilead and The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and the reasons that stand behind those similarities, there will be provided an analysis based on the relatively newly established concept of Jineology<sup>1</sup>, a recent development in feminist thought first developed by a prominent, Turkish born, Kurdish politician whose philosophy greatly influenced the women's liberation movement in Syria in the years of ISIS occupation – Abdullah Öcalan.

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<sup>1</sup> The term is coined from the Kurdish word 'jin' meaning 'woman' and 'logos', in this context used in a sense meaning 'discourse'

In the light of the aforementioned, it can almost seem obligatory to further elaborate on the perceived connection of science fiction writings (and writers) and the political climate. Certain acknowledged works of the science fiction genre have indubitably exhibited a high degree of relatability and timelessness in the context of issues dealt with through a particular storyline. Furthermore, some works, even if written as a response and a critique of a specific socio-political environment or a particular regime of the past, experienced renewed spikes in popularity in moments marked by similar events as those for which the work seemed to provide a critique. The most recent case of such occurrence is most certainly the resurging interest in *The Handmaid's Tale* and its newly produced television counterpart that aired in 2017, as well as its resurfacing in the mainstream media as an example of an array of issues experienced in the non-fictional world. Some works, whether or not also being a critique of a sort, also may prove to be interesting because of nothing else but their inability to depict a society/world/characters not riddled by the ideological plagues of the authors whereabouts. Through a depiction of their fictional universe such works manage to achieve nothing more than provide a clearer insight into the society of their origin, together with accentuating the range of influence of the dominant ideology in the context of conditioning, or even indoctrination of its people, including the authors of said works. Aside from being a critique, *The Handmaid's Tale* may also be interpreted as merely a reflection of Atwood's time and place that translated into the vision of a future society she created. Since it could be claimed that the aforementioned occurrences can manifest through various other art forms and literature genres, and those claims would not be wrong, it is not at all redundant to devote the following section to a brief explanation regarding what makes science fiction so different than other genres of literature and what is it that makes it the best reflection of a certain political climate or a great indicator of its presence.



## 1.2 Why science fiction?

Science fiction can easily be considered an amazingly diverse genre in itself, as well as one rather difficult to define due to its very diversity. While the definition of the genre may vary in accordance with the literary work that is currently being subjected to discussion, the most common definition of science fiction provided by Merriam-Webster dictionary perceives science fiction as “fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component”. ([www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/science%20fiction](http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/science%20fiction)) Even though the aforementioned definition holds true for a great number, if not the majority, of science fiction writings, it does not completely fit the type of a science fiction novel that is *The Handmaid's Tale*. An interpretation much more suited for the novel listed above would be that provided by the American writer known by the name of Barry N. Malzberg. According to Malzberg, science fiction encompasses “(...) fiction that deals with the possible effects of an altered technology or social system on mankind in an imagined future, an altered present, or an alternative past.” (qtd. in King 135)

The crucial phrase that makes Malzberg's definition so much more relevant to the novel discussed in this thesis is none other than ‘social system’, since the science fiction genre has long been known to create new, alternate systems, or even a lack thereof, and more often than not utilize the developed concept as a means of providing criticism for the currently existing system. Unlike science fiction, other genres which do not intentionally avoid the politicization of their constituents, as well as other art forms, tend to exhibit a lesser degree of liberty in the context of providing covert critiques while still retaining an ability to clearly convey the intended message.

In order to be able to explain the importance of science fiction in the context of reproductive rights, it is first important to consider the history of the genre as a political critique.

Ever since its very beginnings, this genre of literature portraying futuristic, technologically advanced civilizations much different than our own, or simply portraying a societal system completely unfathomable from the perspective of the present time, provided a perfect canvas for fusing the artistic and the political. In the area of science fiction, the political becomes the artistic. Such symbiosis of the two concepts is achieved by building upon currently present technological advances and/or behavioral norms present within the society and using those very motifs to foster one's creative power necessary to create a completely fictional, fantastic universe, much different from our own and filled with unrealistic contraptions, outer-earthly beings and sets of worldviews or moral codes not remotely similar to the existing *modus operandi* of the current state of affairs.

However, even though the aforementioned types of writing might have often seemed to be nothing more than an inherently harmless byproduct of one's vividly active imagination, upon a more detailed inspection that assumption proves to be entirely incorrect. Through further analysis of some of such works it can become apparent, if not blatantly obvious, that the unusual social-scapes of intricately interwoven relations between groups of individuals, different institutions described in a certain work, or sets of mutually conflicting ideologies appear to be all too familiar in order to be regarded as purely fictional. For this very reason, intentionally or not, many renowned science fiction works often appear to ever so effortlessly spiral into a whirlwind of existing political turmoil. According to Aja Romano:

The practice of associating or de-associating art with specific political messages is actually a powerful political tool, one used for centuries across the political spectrum. In other words, people may try to de-politicize art, but they're often doing it in order to make political points, which just proves that art is always political.

Science fiction has been the subject of this sort of rhetoric since its inception. Mary Shelley, who invented the genre with 1818's *Frankenstein*, was accused by multiple critics upon the novel's release of committing religious impiety; still other critics pointedly dismissed its literary competence, with one adding that the fact the writer was a woman was 'the prevailing fault of the novel.' So, in the cultural context in which Shelley lived and wrote, even these cursory attempts to dismiss the work's significance were politicized, steeped in reactions to the book's subversive nature and Shelley's daring to set foot outside of her prescribed gender role. ([www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/31/14024262/star-wars-political-alt-right-backlash](http://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/31/14024262/star-wars-political-alt-right-backlash).)

Additionally, as argued by the Baltimorean essayist Tim Krieder:

Science fiction is an inherently political genre, in that any future or alternate history it imagines is a wish about How Things Should Be (even if it's reflected darkly in a warning about how they might turn out). And How Things Should Be is the central question and struggle of politics. It is also, I'd argue, an inherently liberal genre (its many conservative practitioners notwithstanding), in that it sees the status quo as contingent, a historical accident, whereas conservatism holds it to be inevitable, natural, and therefore just. The meta-premise of all science fiction is that nothing can be taken for granted. ([www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/our-greatest-political-novelist](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/our-greatest-political-novelist))

This is where the topic of reproduction rights returns to the discussion. The reason for choosing science fiction over other possible genres to explore the current (and to a lesser extent past) state of reproduction rights and the state of women's rights under patriarchy in general (which is ever so closely not only connected, but also dependent on and indicative of the former) is that they are, much like the genre itself has been treated through the decades, currently ones

of the most politicized issues regarding the female experience. Not only that, just like Shelley's Frankenstein, they are often plagued and shaped by the influence of traditional gender roles. Such conduct often manages to leave the voices of those most affected by both women's and reproduction rights violations out of the dominant discourse, thus further enabling mistreatment. Since, science fiction is also a part of literature as a broader concept, if it changes so does the entire concept of literature as a whole, due to no longer consisting of exactly the same components as it did before. Similarly, considering that reproduction rights are only a piece of a much larger puzzle of inter-connected ideological tenets (meaning that a change in the state of reproductive rights could ultimately lead to an avalanche of changes, a domino effect, in other areas of life in both positive and negative ways), at this very moment the issues surrounding those rights should under no circumstances be swept under the rug and taken for granted lest the society indeed topple directly into the unrelenting grip of oppression and an exponentially expanding span of human rights violation in numerous aspects of life.

## 2. THE HANDMAID'S TALE

### 2.1. The Author

*“Men often ask me, Why are your female characters so paranoid? It’s not paranoia. It’s recognition of their situation.”*

- Margaret Atwood, interview with the Paris Review

In case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, before diving into the exploration of the novel itself, it is important to familiarize oneself with the author, her life and career. Sometimes focusing solely on understanding the genre or a certain literary movement can prove to be enough to gain sufficient knowledge of the work in question. However, at times, the author’s place of origin, their upbringing or their preferred lifestyle may be more revealing of the purpose of a certain literary creation than any rigidly constructed system of characteristics that constitutes a genre. In that context, it can be argued that two works that fit the same general definition, and belong to the same genre, might have nothing else in common at all.

In that regard, science fiction could easily be characterized as one of the most diverse genres. Unlike some literary movements, each work of science fiction is not a socio-political critique defined by the general attitude of the genre, but a highly personalized amalgam of ideas dependent on the authors own life experiences, attitudes towards the subjects explored in their specific work and their (dis)satisfaction with certain aspects of the society of their origin that ultimately, in unison, work to create and shape the desired fictional universe.

Therefore, provided that the average reader of this thesis is not in fact completely familiar with Margaret Atwood’s biography, in order to be able to better grasp the context of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as well as fathom the degree of its universality and widespread applicability despite being a product of its place and time, it is important to devote a few

paragraphs to Margaret Atwood herself, and the socio-political climate of her country of origin shortly preceding (and during) the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale* regarding the position of women and the state of reproductive rights.

According to the data available in one of the interviews with Atwood conducted by Mary Morris from the Paris Review, Margaret Atwood, born November 18, 1939 as Margaret Eleanore Atwood hails from Ottawa, Canada. Even though her earliest encounter with literature occurred as early as the age of six, it was not until ten years later, when Atwood was sixteen, that she decided to commit herself to writing professionally and subsequently published her first literary work at the age of twenty-two – a collection of poems titled “Double Persephone”, with “Formal Garden” being the first poem in the collection. For the purpose of better illustrating the significance of this short poem, it will be presented in the following passage:

The girl with the gorgon touch  
Stretches a glad hand to each  
New piper peddling beds of roses  
Hoping to find within her reach

At last, a living wrist and arm  
Petals that will crush and fade  
But always she meets a marbled flesh  
A fixing eye, a stiffened form  
Where leaves turn spears along the glade

Behind a line of statues stands  
All with the same white oval face  
And attitude of outstretched hands

Curved in all-too-perfect grace.

(Atwood 2)

While still not exhibiting a degree of rebellious feminist thought present in Atwood's later works, the opening poem titled "Formal Garden" does an excellent job at depicting Atwood's first encounters with feminist ideas in her own literature and the power of her own creative potential in the context of exploring the position of a woman within the framework of the patriarchal mentality. In the previously presented poem "the girl with the gorgon touch" seems to represent a variant of the mythical Medusa<sup>2</sup>. The following verses elaborate that, much like Medusa herself, the girl described in Atwood's poem has the power of turning any man who may approach her into marble. However, her power is the very thing that forever makes her isolated from the rest of the world.

In a symbolic sense, both Atwood's "girl with the gorgon touch" and its Greek inspiration, Medusa, can be said to represent a woman in a male dominated society. It can be argued that the ability to turn one into marble could represent the political power of free, independent women, with the very same potential power causing a backlash when utilized. The ability could also represent a woman-specific characteristic, something exclusive to her that no man can possess – and what the man thus aims to suppress. It could even represent something as simple as the ability to play a more significant role in the rearing of the next generation of humans. The potential power is the reason that stands behind the women's still great isolation and purposely orchestrated removal from the public sphere in the context of political decision making, even regarding issues directly concerning women (such as reproduction). Only if the women do not begin to utilize their power, would it be possible to retain the existing gender dynamic in which women are still seen as subordinated to men. In the context of both patriarchal

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<sup>2</sup> In Greek mythology Medusa is a woman like creature who was punished by the gods for breaking her vows of celibacy. As punishment, her hair, that once charmed her husband, was turned into snakes and her gaze would turn into stone any person that dared look her in the eye.

and capitalist societies, preserving the existing gender dynamic can be argued to serve the purpose of protecting all other types of dynamics involving the oppressor and the oppressed (which will be explained in more detail in Chapter 2, sections 4 and 5).

As a young woman living in Canada during the late 1950s and early 1960s, it could be argued that Atwood was already aware of the dynamic described above during her early phase of literary work. It seems as though Atwood clearly understood that there are certain characteristics women exclusively possess, that at the same time allow them great power and make them more likely targets of gender-specific oppression. The ability to carry a child (which will later become one of the key concepts explored in *The Handmaid's Tale*) can easily be said to represent one of those characteristics. Even though no one can know with absolute certainty what prompted Atwood to write the poems collected in "Double Persephone" (aside from, of course, Atwood herself) it is possible that her writing was directly, or indirectly, influenced by the political turmoil of the 50s and 60s. One of the examples of the treatment of women during that time which efficiently illustrates the hypocritical and exclusive attitude towards women in Canada can be clearly illustrated by the comparison of the following: According to the Nellie McClung Foundation, in 1956 the federal government passed the Female Employees Equal Pay Act, thus creating a policy "wherein women are entitled to be paid the same wage as men for similar work. In other words, The Female Employees Equal Pay Act makes discrimination in wages on account of sex against the law." ([www.ournellie.com/womens-suffrage/canadian-history-of-womens-rights/](http://www.ournellie.com/womens-suffrage/canadian-history-of-womens-rights/)) Simultaneously, "despite [women's] increased numbers in paid employment, the labor force of the 1960s was significantly sex segregated and women's earnings remained considerably lower than men's. In many workplaces women confronted sexist discrimination and harassment. More than men, women also had to juggle the often conflicting demands of both their paid employment and domestic family and community responsibilities." (Luxton 68) According to Veronica Strong-Boag, such state of affairs



“highlighting women’s double or triple day of paid, domestic and caring labor, like that which illuminated coercive sexuality, provided the language to analyze oppression” ([www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/womens-movements-in-canada-196085/](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/womens-movements-in-canada-196085/)) among various feminist activists, and ‘regular’ women alike (Atwood included).

Margaret Atwood’s development as a writer after publishing her first collection of poetry can best be described by Atwood herself. Since her characters are predominantly female, or at least the protagonists are, she, on an occasion, explained that “[Her] women suffer because most of the women [she] talk[ed] to seem to have suffered. But you don’t hear about it because women’s suffering is seen as passive. But there are many women who, when facing an ordeal, don’t stick their heads in the oven or jump off a bridge. Instead they go out and confront their monster and triumph over it.” ([www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwood-angst.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/03/specials/atwood-angst.html)) As years passed, Atwood’s literary expression started to, much like the behavior of her characters, portray a more combative side of the author’s personality, defining her more and more as an openly feminist activist fighting and criticizing the oppressive regime expecting of women to remain in submission, suffering quietly.

After initially making her debut in poetry, Margaret Atwood continued to write a number of critically acclaimed novels all exploring different relevant socio-political issues and providing open criticism for the regime and the treatment of women. She has thus managed to even further establish herself not only as a Canadian literary icon, but a feminist one as well. *The Edible Woman*, a novel published in 1969, in which the protagonist’s relationship with food in fact represents her relationship with the opposite gender is certainly a noteworthy mention. “Only when [the protagonist] recognizes her complicity in her own victimization, when she understands that she has allowed men to ‘eat’ or destroy her and that she has also attempted to destroy them, can Marian overcome her antipathy to food, bake a huge cake that is an effigy of herself, and gobble it down.” (Hill Rigney 101)

Another work worth mentioning is, without doubt a novel titled *Surfacing*, published in 1972.

For the narrator of *Surfacing*, language has always been a problem, nameless in the novel and not given too much speech herself, she finds communication perplexing in its very nature. Early in the narrative she recalls the way her throat learned to constrict when she ‘discovered people could say words that would go into my ears meaning nothing’. Brought up speaking English near a French-speaking village in Quebec, she soon learns the terrifying possibility of sound without sense, of words without apparent referents. To be deaf and dumb without communication seems to her preferable to such incomprehension. She is similarly puzzled to discover the arbitrary distinctions language creates that ‘some words were dirty and the rest were clean’. (Ewell 186)

Observing the narrator’s attitude towards language, it is possible to argue that Atwood here explores the state of the Canadian diverse identity as well as other issues regarding the identity such as alienation or even ostracizing of one based on their national, ethnic, sexual or gender identity – another prominent theme in *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

It can be seen that each following novel Atwood published seemed to provide a harsher critique of the society and discuss a more shocking issue through the guise of sometimes surreal symbolism. However, it was not until 1985 that she finally published *The Handmaid’s Tale* – a literary work that could be regarded as her both most famous and most controversial novel representing the culmination of her feminist thought. Ever since the 60s, feminist currents in Canada advocated for the freedom of choice regarding one’s reproduction and protested the ban on abortion. Even though abortion was indeed prohibited by law, numerous doctors performed it in secrecy and were consequentially often imprisoned.

As a response to a growing pro-choice movement advocating for women's right to decide on their own willingness to (not) carry out a pregnancy, the late 70s and the early 80s witnessed a sharp rise in police repression aimed towards pro-choice activists and doctors willing to perform abortion. At the same time, there was a significant growth in numbers of the members of the opposing, pro-life current. According to Sheila Kieran, in an effort to undermine the efforts of the pro-choice movement, pro-life proponents took up running for hospital boards across the country. Despite the efforts to maintain the abortion ban and stunt the development of a more progressive, liberal society tolerant of women's wants and needs, in 1988, two years after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the abortion ban was finally lifted. Although no one but Atwood can know with absolute certainty why *The Handmaid's Tale* was written when and where it was, it is not hard to understand why the events of the late 70s and the early 80s might have, indeed, served as a direct inspiration for its plot.

As quoted in *The Handmaid's Tale* Discussion Guide, "*The Handmaid's Tale* does not depend upon hypothetical scenarios, omens, or straws in the wind, but upon documented occurrences and public pronouncements; all matters of record." (1) *The Handmaid's Tale* may in this context be said to reflect the spirit of its time and provide a harsh critique of the socio-political climate while constituting, "a prescient warning over what could be, the book chronicles a puritanical, theocratic dystopia in which a select group of fertile women — a condition which has become a rarity — are made to bear children for corporate male overlords." (<https://www.biography.com/people/margaret-atwood-9191928>)

## 2.2. Plot Overview

*“I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier, than at least more active, less hesitant, less distracted by trivia. I wish it had more shape. I wish it were about love, or about sudden realizations important to one’s life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow. (...) I’m sorry there is so much pain in this story. I’m sorry it’s in fragments, like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force. But there is nothing I can do to change it.”*

-Offred, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood 279)

*The Handmaid’s Tale* opens in first person. Upon opening the book, the reader is immediately tossed into the world of a yet unknown protagonist who. This character seems to be describing a place and various characters in poetic detail, as though the story was not in its beginnings, but somewhere in the middle of itself, where the reader is already well familiarized with the events that preceded this seemingly out of place description. The only thing the reader can determine is that, whatever and where ever this place which the protagonist happens to portray is, her whereabouts are everything but normal. Her words immediately seem to radiate an uncanny and utterly lurid aura reminiscent of that one might associate with hair-raising stories of various secluded religious cults completely detached from the workings of the outside world. Soon, the feeling of dread becomes justified as, through the eyes of the protagonist, the reader becomes more and more able to ‘connect the dots’ and make sense of the society of which this person seems to speak. It is not until chapter six of the novel that this mysterious character is revealed as a woman named Offred. In her monologue she states:

“My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does

matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. This name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past." (Atwood 94)

In fact, at this point in the story the reader can already determine with satisfactory clarity that a great number of completely ordinary things seem to be forbidden in this strange world, but what makes the story all the more shocking is the very discovery that the world, much like Offred's name, used to be much different and also exactly like – our own. The change in Offred's name is highly symbolic of a change on a much greater scale. After a society just like our own slipped into a crisis brought upon by excessive environmental pollution that ultimately resulted in the exposure to various chemicals causing a sharp decline in fertility, an organization promoting 'traditional values' took advantage of such circumstances in order to swiftly climb atop the ladder of political power. These Christian extremists, known as the Sons of Jacob, utilized this unenviable situation the society has found itself in and organized a *coup d'état* against the president and the surrounding political institutions.

After murdering the president and suspending the Constitution they ushered in an era of severe repression marketed as a greater good. While some of the newly imposed restrictions do not seem to be as harmful – such as banning contents of sexual nature or officially outlawing prostitution in the traditional sense of that word (although the Sons' views on prostitution soon prove to be rather arbitrary and hypocritical) – some seem clearly intent on orchestrating a return to the dark ages. In this newly founded society, an extremely distorted interpretation of the Bible inspires a social division of people that leaves women completely stripped of their most basic human rights. Atop of that, a death sentence surely awaits every man (and woman) who might try to rebel against the oppression or even voice the slightest concern regarding the

inner workings of this society dubbed ‘The Republic of Gilead’, after a location mentioned in the Old Testament.

The Republic of Gilead, distorted to biblical proportions, brought with it a new division of its people – or to be more precise – women in particular. Not only did the women lose the right to own any kind of property, but they were also divided into ‘castes’ based on their ability to create offspring. Infertile women became Marthas – housekeepers tasked with menial household chores and alike – and those deemed politically undesirable were often given a choice between the Colonies (a labor/concentration camp in the areas affected by radioactive pollution) and Jezebel’s (a secret brothel accessible only to high ranking officials and men of a privileged social status). The few remaining fertile women, however, were forced to become Handmaids – live, walking wombs at the infertile, socially established couples’ disposal.

Offred is one of the Handmaids assigned to the Commander Fred and his wife Serena Joy. This is where the symbolism of her name coined from the words ‘of’ and ‘Fred’ (the name of the Commander, a man she belongs to) becomes apparent. In Gilead, a woman is seen as merely an incubator for a man’s child and is considered to be nothing other but his property. If she fails to provide a child to a couple in a desired amount of time, she can simply be disposed of and replaced by another woman.

However, as I have already argued in a previously published article titled *The Handmaid’s Tale is More Relevant than Ever*, what makes the story of Offred all the more terrifying is not the sole existence of a society such as Gilead. What is truly frightening is that ‘Rome was not built in a day’ and neither was Gilead. The ease with which the Sons of Jacob took power is truly frightening. The change in the socio-cultural norms that appeared as a result of the creation of this repressive theocracy did not happen overnight. It was in fact a rather slow process. What enabled the Sons of Jacob to ultimately rise to power and alter the very core of

society was the fact that the process remained ignored until its influence grew to proportions so great any kind of resistance would prove to be futile. Offred herself points out that:

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. There were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. 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. (Atwood 66)

While there was still a chance to save the world, people consciously chose to stay out of the matters they yet perceived as something that does not necessarily affect them. “[They] lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.” (Atwood 66). The attack on reproduction rights that ensued after all the preceding issues were ignored for long enough, and active resistance was nowhere to be found while it still stood a fighting chance, is also reminiscent of the famous poem written by Martin Niemöller:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

(Niemöller)

This constitutes another highly symbolic point in *The Handmaid's Tale* that will be further discussed in the context of women's (reproduction) rights (as well as in the context of importance of resistance no matter how small) in the fifth section of the second chapter. It is, therefore, important to point out at this moment.

Albeit belated, an attempt at organizing a resistance movement against the oppression of all except for a privileged few did ultimately surface. As Offred's story progresses, the reader is introduced to an organization calling itself Mayday. Mayday seems to be an underground resistance group operating covertly in Gilead and utilizing infiltration to gather useful information. At points, Mayday even seems as an early phase of a paramilitary organization that would have ultimately orchestrated a coup and brought down Gilead. The most prominent Mayday members in Offred's surroundings are another Handmaid named Ofglen and quite possibly her lover Nick. Such indications are present at the end of the novel when, upon discovering that Offred has visited Jezebel's with the Commander, his wife Serena Joy threatens Offred with an unspecified punishment for her offences.

Soon after, a black van arrives, indicating that the Eyes of God, colloquially referred to as solely the Eyes (Gilead's secret police responsible for dealing with perceived dissidents) have arrived to carry out the expected punishment. However, before the Eyes take her, Nick tells Offred that the people in question are in fact undercover members of Mayday who are here to rescue her. Whether the story of Offred ends with her indeed being saved, or was Nick's remark meant to only comfort Offred and give her hope in her last hours, remains uncertain.



While the story of Offred ends here, the plot of the novel itself ends in the 2195, in the distant future after the fall of Gilead where “(...) the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes” (Atwood 324). This can be interpreted both as the past being dark in the context of there existing a lack of information and in a more symbolic context of it being dark in a sense of incorporating outdated, primitive socio-political norms and ideologies. The society has since been restored and women yet again granted their rights. Even though the story of Offred may not have ended happily, the novel does end in a rather positive note, indicating that resistance is never futile and that, no matter how dire a situation may seem at a given moment, nothing is ever truly lost due to the humanity’s ability to start over.

### **2.3. Reproductive rights and The Handmaid’s Tale**

*And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, give me children, or else I die. And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.*

-Genesis, 30:1-3

Now that any potential reader of this thesis paper has become sufficiently informed about the plot of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is time to commence the true analysis of the concept of reproductive rights in the novel. In this section, the notion of reproductive rights will be discussed in its literal sense and the events of *the Handmaid’s Tale* will be interpreted as they are, without dwelling too much on the symbolism. Even though the symbolism of reproduction rights surrounding the happenings of the novel is abundant, it will not be the primary focus at

the moment and will be further elaborated on in the following sections. Discussing the condition of reproduction rights within Gilead in their literal sense, while comparing and contrasting them with various non-fictional events of today, appears to be the most compelling way to portray just how important *The Handmaid Tale* is in its brilliant critique of society that – in the present day and age – almost seems to have been a forlorn warning induced by a prophetic vision.

Of course, to speak of reproductive rights, it is first necessary to define them as a concept and more precisely determine what exactly the antecedent notion constitutes. The most important thing concerning reproductive rights is that they too fall under the umbrella term of basic human rights. As such they should, without exception, be granted to each and every human regardless of various concepts such as gender, or his or her position within the society. Reproductive rights are not as difficult to fathom or define as it may seem at first glance. In fact, as the term itself indicates, it is a concept that encompasses a set of rights regarding one's free will in the context of sexual reproduction and one's autonomy over their own body and the decisions made regarding it. According to the Handbook for National Rights Institutions:

“These rights rest on the recognition of the basic rights of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.” (UNFPA 13)

What is even more necessary than defining reproduction rights, is defining what is it that constitutes their violation. Taking into account the quote above, it becomes almost blatantly obvious why the events of *The Handmaid's Tale* constitute a violation of human rights. The main protagonist of the novel, as well as all the other Handmaids are simply – not allowed any autonomy in making decisions regarding when and with whom they will have children. Even if

they try, they are not able to acquire contraceptives that might prevent pregnancies resulting from being coerced into sexual relations with their ‘owners’. Furthermore, although the notion is not as explicitly discussed as is the notion of one’s right to (not) bear children, sexual and reproductive health also represents a prominent, albeit more indirectly addressed issue, within the novel.

The Rachel and Leah Center, a place more often referred to as simply The Red Center, is an institution established within the borders of Gilead the purpose of which is to provide ‘training’ for future Handmaids. The ‘training’ in question consists mostly of indoctrination and brainwashing designed to force the Handmaids into submission. Alongside the forced ideological conditioning, The Red Center provides ‘sexual education’ for the Handmaids in the form of teaching them proper behavior during the Ceremony. The Ceremony in this radically conservative, religiously extremist society, is in fact a sort of a euphemism used to describe the act of sexual intercourse – or at least, what is considered to constitute intercourse in the Republic of Gilead. Much like the events described in the quote from Genesis 30:1-3 provided at the beginning of this section, sexual intercourse in Gilead (inspired by a twisted interpretation of the Old Testament) is not performed between the married couples themselves, but between a man and a Handmaid whose body is placed between the wife’s legs to become nothing more than a living, walking, and talking womb. It is obvious that, as far as the situation in question is considered, the woman unlucky enough to have become a Handmaid gifted with a set of working ovaries might easily perceive her situation as more a curse than a blessing. As soon as she is discovered to be able to carry a child, she is reduced to not only less of a human, but is almost not considered a proper living being in general. Her decisions, her thoughts, her opinions all take second place to her bringing children into the world.

One might ask how this is in any way related to the present state of affairs all around the world? Not even in The Handmaid’s tale did such attitude towards women spring out of

nowhere. On the contrary, the change was brought about gradually, and the conservatism of the Republic of Gilead was long brewing before it gained its full proportions. It can be argued that we live in a time that could, in the context of *The Handmaid's Tale*, be described as a period immediately before the rise of the regime of Gilead. In present times, women have found themselves under attack due to their natural (in)ability to have children. Similarly to the novel, we live in a time when a woman's ability to get pregnant outweighs anything else that makes her a human being that she is. The moment she does in fact fall pregnant, she is in turn often viewed, by both the society and the law, as a mere vessel for the developing fetus, devoid of her own voice.

The argument made in the previous paragraph can perhaps best be illustrated by using El Salvador as an example – a country known for enforcing one of the strictest abortion laws in the world. To be more exact, in El Salvador, abortion is completely criminalized. According to the Report on Violations of Women's Human Rights Due to the Complete Criminalization of Abortion the aforementioned means that the country “maintains an absolute prohibition on abortion, including under circumstances when pregnancy endangers the women's life.” (2)

The gravity of such restrictions is perfectly illustrated by a fairly recently published article by Nina Lakhani that reports on the case of a teenage girl who was unfairly sentenced to “thirty years in prison after stillbirth”. ([www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/06/el-salvador-teen-rape-victim-sentenced-30-years-prison-stillbirth](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/06/el-salvador-teen-rape-victim-sentenced-30-years-prison-stillbirth))

Even though a fact of such nature is more than enough to see exactly how restrictive the abortion law in El Salvador is, what makes matters worse is the fact that her unwanted pregnancy resulted from – rape. In 2016, Evelyn Beatriz Hernandez Cruz, then aged nineteen, gave birth in a toilet of her own home in a small village named Cuscatlán. Evelyn's pregnancy resulted from months of forced engagement in sexual intercourse with a member of a notorious gang. However, the circumstances of her pregnancy did not grant her any sympathy. She was ultimately taken to

court and charged with infanticide regardless of the fact that she had not had a conscious intention to end the infant's life.

The story of Evelyn Beatriz Hernandez Cruz, while seeming almost unrealistically extreme, is still nowhere near being the only case of such treatment of women around the globe. Women experiencing such reproductive repression appear to be treated as less than human, without their basic human rights taken into consideration when the topic of pregnancy is in question. However, if the society is to strive towards progress and not the socio-political darkness of *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender equality is one of the most important tenets it should work on manifesting. As the Handbook for National Rights Institutions states: "Put simply, gender equality is not possible if women are not able to exercise control over their bodies while substandard maternal and infant health services cost individuals, families and societies fortunes every year."

Therefore, it becomes apparent that, even though *The Handmaid's Tale* was most likely written in response to the political climate of the 80s Canada, in this fairly literal context Atwood managed to create one of the most timeless critiques of the society. Not only that, but she also gifted an ever viable 'handbook' to the world, providing the society with advice on what not to do lest we become lost in the darkness of repression.

#### **2.4. Handmaid as a Symbol of Social Reproduction**

*"And I have also seen masculine domination and the way it is imposed and suffered as the prime example of this paradoxical submission, an effect of what I call symbolic violence, a gentle violence imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling."*

-Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Bourdieu 2)

While *The Handmaid's Tale* serves the purpose of providing a literal critique of the maltreatment of women in the domain of reproductive rights, the motif of reproductive rights used in the novel could, at the same time, be interpreted in a much more symbolic sense. The quote from the French sociologist's Pierre Bourdieu's book titled *Masculine Domination* (in which he speaks of the unconscious practices embedded into the fabric of our society that unintentionally tend to enforce the notion of male domination over females), mentioned above, can prove to be useful in elaborating on the symbolism behind the reproductive rights in *The Handmaid's Tale*. What Bourdieu dubs 'symbolic violence' refers to all those seemingly innocent, yet violent acts manifested through everyday activities that are in fact indicative of a much greater issue. Those subtle, or sometimes less so, acts of violence against women are not only an issue in themselves, but are symptomatic of the presence of a dynamic necessarily involving the oppressor and the oppressed, usually associated with men and women in patriarchal societies.

The precedence universally accorded to men is affirmed in the objectivity of the social structures and the productive or reproductive activities, based on a sexual division of the labour of biological and social production and reproduction which gives the better part to men, and also in the schemes immanent in everyone's habitus. These schemes, shaped by similar conditions, and therefore objectively harmonized, function as matrices of the perceptions, thoughts and actions of all members of the society (...) (Bourdieu 51)

Taking Bourdieu's ideas into account, it is possible to argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* in fact serves as an over exaggerated example of the oppressed-oppressor dynamic prevalent in all patriarchal societies. As such, the novel portrays Atwood's own dissatisfaction with the mode of (social) reproduction within a capitalist climate.

In order to understand in what way exactly is the capitalist climate of Atwood's society, together with many other countries of the Western world, connected to the oppressor-oppressed dynamic, it is first crucial to elaborate on the concept of both gender and (social) reproduction.

Gender can be said to represent nothing more than yet another mode of societal organization designed for the purpose of maintaining order. Through implementing certain rules and adjusting ones behavior in accordance with roles defined by one's gender orientation, the society is kept in line. It is a mode of intertwining the biological differences between men and women, and the spheres of human existence otherwise completely independent of biology, thus turning biological characteristics into culturally, socially and politically significant determinants of one's relationship with other members of the community.

What is of greatest importance in the context of gender as discussed in this thesis and has long been central to many feminist theoretical debates are the "ways in which a gendered division of labor has been constructed and maintained." (Laslett 382) This is where gender meets the notion of (social) reproduction.

Social reproduction is a concept first proposed in *Das Kapital*, one of the quintessential works of the communist theory written by none other than the father of communist thought – Karl Marx. In *Das Kapital*, Marx builds upon his already existing theory of reproduction and creates an idea applicable to the broader spectrum of social contexts that will ultimately prove to be more successful in explaining the existing social dynamics of capitalist societies. Unlike the theory of reproduction alone, the theory of social reproduction surpasses the bounds of economy and translates the existence of economic relations into other variants of human interactions as well.

It can be said that production and consumption of various goods are present in every society in the world. These two processes are what, according to Marx, defines capitalism as a social system. Of course, the ones who are responsible for both the production and the

consumption of goods in capitalist societies are still predominantly humans. The humans in question possess certain means, known as the means of production, which allow them to create a consumption-ready product. However, the production cannot continue endlessly. If endless production were the case, the society would, sooner or later, inevitably exhaust all the resources (that constitute the means of production). It would, thus, after a certain amount of time run out of consumption-ready goods. Such case would launch the society into the state of scarcity that would ultimately lead to extremely harsh living conditions, if not completely disenable the continuation of what we consider a 'decent living' (or even just living) for all the members of the society. Subsequently, the lack of acceptable living conditions would lead to the collapse of the entire societal structure.

The aforementioned is the reason why "no society can go on producing, in other words no society can reproduce, unless it constantly reconverts a part of its products into means of production, or elements of fresh products." (Marx 620) In order to keep the society in a state of functioning, it is crucially important to somehow allocate the means of production. It is important to not only accumulate new inanimate means needed for the creation of a certain consumption fit product, but also maintain the human labor force in working condition by providing them with life necessities. Take a baker for example. A baker in this context represents society. The baker produces bread, if he keeps producing bread endlessly, he will eventually become so exhausted he will not be able to work further to produce more bread and will ultimately die of starvation. Therefore, he must reconvert a part of his products (aka eat bread) into means of production in order to maintain the production-consumption dynamics.

However, even though the example presented above may make matters seem rather simple, the problem arises when the means of production become exploited in a way that turns one human into nothing more than means at the mercy of another who wishes to surpass the basic reproduction (e.g. produce bread – get hungry – eat bread – feel invigorated – produce



bread again) and amass capital much greater than what is possible utilizing basic reproduction. This then turns to architecting a class system within the capitalist society consisting of the capitalist (the bourgeoisie) and the worker (the proletariat). It is only possible for one to amass capital much greater than what is possible utilizing basic reproduction through one consuming and appropriating the fruits of someone else's labour, which is exactly what happens under capitalism (e.g. the owner of the factory does not work in the factory him/herself, but still earns money despite the fact that others conduct the work in his/her stead). From the example mentioned in parentheses it can be seen that, as Eoin Higgins perfectly phrased, "simple' reproduction both were involved in is now only necessary for the workers. The workers' purpose in the capitalist mode of production is simply to create value, not to appropriate it." ([medium.com/@Catharticme/a-short-essay-simple-reproduction-in-marx-s-capital-549424febd3a](https://medium.com/@Catharticme/a-short-essay-simple-reproduction-in-marx-s-capital-549424febd3a))

The aforementioned clearly shows that the dynamics between the humans in question, the workers and the factory owner, or the worker and a capitalist in a general sense, is not that of equals. This translates into the theory of social reproduction as well. Unlike the economic concept of reproduction, social reproduction indeed does seem to be significantly simpler and much less abstract. As the term 'social' suggests, social reproduction refers less to the sole notion of production-consumption dynamics in a sort of a material sense, but focuses more on how inequalities in relations present between the capitalist and the worker translate to everyday lives of individuals. Namely, social reproduction refers to a broad aspect of human

activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis and intergenerationally. Among other things social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, the way in which the care and socialization of children are provided, the care of the infirm and elderly, and the

social organization of sexuality. Social reproduction can thus be seen to include various kinds of work – mental, manual, emotional – aimed at providing the historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation. And the organization of social reproduction refers to the varying institutions within this work is performed, the varying strategies for accomplishing this task, and varying ideologies that both shape and are shaped by them. (Laslett 382-383)

After having established what in fact constitutes both reproduction and social reproduction, it is possible to return to its connection to *The Handmaid's Tale*. Its main protagonist, Offred, is known to reside within the borders of a theocratic dictatorship known as The Republic of Gilead. Taking into account the fact that Atwood herself grew up in Canada, a capitalist country operating by the same principles in regards to production and consumption as the ones described in previous passages during the efforts to elaborate on Karl Marx's theory, it can be argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* is not only a literal critique and a forewarning of what is to come based on Atwood's witnessing the political developments of the 80s. It is also a critique of a capitalist system in itself Atwood has had a chance to experience firsthand as a resident of Canada. Of course, this critique is in no way exclusive to the Canadian society and can be applied to any capitalist mode of functioning around the world regardless of its time and place.

The previous paragraphs elaborating on reproduction under capitalism clarify the notion of a system being defined by the existence of classes – the capitalists and the workers. If one were to view The Republic of Gilead as a metaphorical, science fictional representation of the capitalist society, one would soon be able to gather that classes are present in *The Handmaid's Tale* as well. In the context of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commanders or their wives (and possibly even the Aunts, the Angels or the Eyes) could easily be seen as an embellished

representation of the capitalist 'upper class'. The Handmaids (together with Marthas, Jezebel's residents or alike), on the other hand, appear to represent an over-exaggerated picture of the working 'lower class' portrayed through simplification of the social reproduction theory. It was stated near the beginning of this chapter that, according to Marx, "no society can go on producing, in other words no society can reproduce, unless it constantly reconverts a part of its products into means of production, or elements of fresh products." (620). Since it is known that the world of *The Handmaid's Tale* resembled our own before the days of Gilead, and it has been revealed that the aforementioned society ultimately suffered a collapse of biblical proportions, the connection between those events and them being a representation of Marx's theory is undeniably apparent. The 'before' society, the one before The Sons of Jacob took power, could be said to represent a society which produced, and produced, ultimately bringing everyone within it to the very brink of existence. Here, the chemical pollution that eventually caused a 'social apocalypse' clearly represents over-production and endless consumption without any reproduction present, which eventually exhausted everything remotely considered a viable, reusable resource or mean of production causing the societal structure to collapse into itself. This collapse may be argued to have been portrayed through the fact that the majority of the population within the Republic of Gilead has been left infertile – aka unable to further reproduce.

Furthermore, as Commander Fred's Handmaid, Offred is tasked with engaging into sexual intercourse with him, in the presence of his wife Serena Joy, in order to produce offspring. This act, known as the Ceremony uncannily resembles the concept of Marxist reproduction itself. Sexual intercourse in Gilead is reduced to nothing more than an act absolutely necessary to create another human being. That being said, it becomes even easier to relate the act itself with the idea discussed. Much like in the example of the baker (produce bread – get hungry – eat bread – feel invigorated – produce bread again), the reasoning behind

the Ceremony seems to be the same, albeit more dubious in some other regards. The Commander uses Offred as a means of production in this case. By potentially inseminating her, he would create, or better yet produce, a child which would then represent a consumable good (in a sense that its existence would be in some way enjoyed by both him and Serena Joy as the assigned mother and therefore would have a use for her and the Commander). Due to the care it would receive, the child would have a chance to grow up to become a healthy and possibly fertile adult individual and could then be ‘reproduced’ as means of production (an individual capable of producing more children within Gilead). Also, the dynamics between the Commanders/his wife and a Handmaid seems to resemble closely to that of the capitalist and the worker in a sense that, even though she is the one who produces a large portion of the value (in this case children), it is the Commander and his wife who appropriate all of it without being solely responsible for its production, thus signifying the presence of a great degree of inequality in the relationship between the three.

At this point, the theory of reproduction starts to tie in with social reproduction theory as well as the concept of gender. The notion of social reproduction as a set of “activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships” (Laslett 382), can be said to serve the purpose of maintaining the society in, both a literal and an abstract sense. In order to function properly, the society must be able to offer more than basic necessities. Some of those ‘consumable goods’ that the society must provide are also ultimately responsible for yielding different cultures, political beliefs and ideologies. In addition, most of the activities associated with social reproduction are often regarded as gendered, and a great majority of important aspects of the theory is seen as a female task. To elaborate, for example, even in today’s time, women are still responsible for the majority of tasks related to emotional needs of others as well as they are still regarded as primary caregivers to a child, even though the child is not fatherless. Since care of another human being inevitably includes at least some degree of

communication between the two parties, (and communication is the most important to humans in the context of transmitting ideas) women then indirectly also become responsible for the transmittal – aka reproduction – of cultural, political or ideological beliefs to the offspring. However, on the grand scheme of things, the value they created is again appropriated. It is important to note that what is being explained here is in no way that men do not contribute to the reproduction of culture, political beliefs or ideology, or that women contribute significantly more. What is being said is that the amount of value women are responsible for creating is often not attributed to them.

In *the Handmaid's Tale*, this is portrayed through the fact that, even though a Handmaid is the one who gave birth to a child, the credit for reproducing the next generation stops being hers the moment the child is born and is in turn attributed to one of the Commanders and his wife. Even though the Commander, his wife and their social circle will have the most influence on the development of the child's future cultural, political and ideological beliefs, the fact that there would not be anyone to transfer the beliefs to if there was not for a Handmaid who gave birth in the first place, attributes the majority of the production value solely to her. What is also clear here is that, while the capitalist-worker type dynamic is present, it has become translated to the man-woman dynamic, where the woman becomes the oppressed individual whose value is taken away from her, and the man becomes the oppressor who has only partially contributed to the creation of value. Although the man did not partake in the production of value alone, he seems to be the one who appropriates it almost entirely.

Taking all of the information presented in previous paragraphs into account, it is possible to speculate that Atwood in fact did not mean for *The Handmaid's Tale* to pose a critique of the position of women regarding reproductive rights in the most literal sense. It could be derived that she only chose to use the motif of literal reproduction to convey the state of the society under capitalism and inherent inequality between men and women that occurs within it.

Whether capitalist class inequality is the cause of gender inequality in patriarchal societies, or is it vice versa, will be discussed in the following section, along with the importance of women's liberation also outlined throughout the novel.

## **2.5. Offred as a Symbol of Women's Struggle against the Patriarchal Mentality and its Present Manifestations**

*“Without gender equality, no demand for freedom and equality can be meaningful. In fact, freedom and equality cannot be realized without the achievement of gender equality. The most permanent and comprehensive component of democratization is woman's freedom. The societal system is most vulnerable because of the unresolved question of woman; woman who was first turned into property and who today is a commodity; completely, body and soul. The role the working class have once played, must now be taken over by the sisterhood of women. So, before we can analyze class, we must be able to analyze the sisterhood of women.”*

-Abdullah Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution* (Öcalan 52)

While Marxist theory presupposes that gender related inequalities concerning the existing predominant dynamic between men and women stem from the existing class relations between the capitalist and the worker that necessarily consist of one (in this case the capitalist) oppressing another (the worker), it can also be argued that the situation should in fact be examined from the opposite direction. Instead of observing the relationship between those two classes as a core cause of all other socio-political relations, some theories conclude that the core unit that determines all social existence is in fact gender. More specifically, what should be explored is the dynamics present between a man and a woman. Such theories see the inequalities present between men and women as direct causes of all other inequalities on a greater scale (such as the class inequality).

In order to better be able to elaborate on the aforementioned, it is possible to draw on one of the presently existing real-world examples that eerily resembles the happenings surrounding the creation of Gilead in Margaret Atwood's novel – The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (which will, for the sake of brevity, in some of the following passages be referred to using its abbreviation – ISIS). It is almost unbelievable that such a system ever came into existence, but what is more unbelievable is the fact that it was almost perfectly predicted in *The Handmaid's Tale*, save for some minor differences. Declared in 2014, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria soon became known as one of the most oppressive regimes that the world has ever witnessed. Throughout the past four years, the world has been faced with videos of homosexuals being murdered for their sexual orientation and accounts of mass kidnappings of 'infidel' women who would subsequently be forced into sexual slavery. Moreover, it became more than possible to notice the role of women being reduced to sheer reproduction in order to ensure the birth and the rearing of children ideologically conditioned by the principles of the Islamic State. All of the above acts were in the majority of cases conducted in the name of a severely distorted interpretation of Islam, one that is in no way compatible with the usual interpretation of the Muslim religious scripture – the Quran. While, according to a report by Ashley Cowburn, there have been “more than 31,000 pregnant women living in the so-called Islamic State being used to create the next generation of terrorists” ([www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/over-31000-women-are-currently-pregnant-within-the-so-called-islamic-state-new-report-reveals-a6916756.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/over-31000-women-are-currently-pregnant-within-the-so-called-islamic-state-new-report-reveals-a6916756.html)), there have simultaneously been reports on ISIS, such as that by Rukmini Callimachi, on the treatment of sex slaves within the borders of the Islamic State. In Callimachi's report, the reader is presented with a story of a young, sixteen year old girl from Iraq (who wished to remain anonymous for the sake of her own safety) who was forced to spend a year as a sex slave in ISIS captivity. In her story, the girl recounts how she was forced by her captor to take birth control so as to not fall pregnant by accident while in his custody: “Every

day, I had to swallow one in front of him. He gave me one box per month. When I ran out, he replaced it. When I was sold from one man to another, the box of pills came with me.”

[www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html))

However, the sixteen year old is nowhere near being the only such case held captive by ISIS. As Callimachi explains:

According to an obscure ruling in Islamic law cited by the Islamic State, a man must ensure that the woman he enslaves is free of child before having intercourse with her. Islamic State leaders have made sexual slavery as they believe it was practiced during the Prophet Muhammad’s time integral to the group’s operations, preying on the women and girls the group captured from the Yazidi religious minority almost two years ago. To keep the sex trade running, the fighters have aggressively pushed birth control on their victims so they can continue the abuse unabated while the women are passed among them.

[www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/to-maintain-supply-of-sex-slaves-isis-pushes-birth-control.html))

At this point, the similarity between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and the fictitious Republic of Gilead becomes all but unapparent. Despite the Republic of Gilead being built on an extremely distorted interpretation of Christianity and the Islamic State on a horrifically misinterpreted ideas of Islam, the dynamics present in both is exactly the same. Much like it is the case with ISIS, the Sons of Jacob as ‘the chosen ones’ saw it fit to assert dominance over women and reduce them to nothing more than either walking wombs or objects of instant sexual gratification. Furthermore, both systems exhibit a great degree of hypocrisy when it comes to the perception of said women and types of relationships considered appropriate. While on one hand both regimes advocate for a solely reproductive role of the woman, as is the case with



Handmaids in Gilead, at the same time both regimes are also marked by rampant forced prostitution of women rendered such that they cannot bear children – even though purposely inducing one’s infertility is openly considered undesirable by both the Islamic State’s proponents and the Sons of Jacob in Gilead.

After it has been established that what both of the aforementioned regimes seem to share is nothing other than brutal subjugation of women, it is important to examine how and why it occurred in the first place. Such mistreatment of women cannot fully, but only partially, be said to have occurred as a result of creating the new state, since the state as an institution cannot completely shape the collective mentality of the society. The state is not an independently existing entity that is realized in itself, but rather represents a manifested ‘collective mind’ of the society defined by the norms and ideologies majorly accepted and promoted by its members. Thus, it seems far more reasonable to believe that the creation of Gilead or the Islamic State was not the direct cause for the worsening of the position of women, but was in fact only the culmination of already present attitudes within the society. Those attitudes ultimately manifested as the establishment of a new regime under which they could be openly practiced. This claim can be supported by referring to the statement made by Offred’s mother, remembered during one of Offred’s ‘before time’ flashbacks. During a conversation with Offred and her husband Luke, upon noticing Luke cooking, Offred’s mother exclaims:

Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far? Cooking’s my hobby, Luke would say. I enjoy it. Hobby, schmobby, my mother would say. You don’t have to make excuses to me. Once upon a time you wouldn’t have been allowed to have such a hobby, they’d have called you queer. (Atwood 131)

Through her seemingly trivial statement, one can observe that Offred's mother – sharp tongued as she is – is well aware of the existence of the oppressive-oppressor gender dynamics present even in the times before the rise of Gilead. By stating that Luke would have been called queer for cooking, and queer often being used as a derogatory term for a man participating in any activities traditionally regarded as feminine, she indirectly manages to dissect the very core of gender roles. Making fun of a man or insulting him for taking part in female related activities illustrates the societies view on femininity. Femininity is something embarrassing, femaleness is equal to lesser importance and, above all, womanhood is something seen almost as a necessary evil the man has the right to suppress.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the disregard of the subtle suppression of women (for the very reason that it was considered harmless and trivial) gradually lead to more open instances of women being removed from the public sphere in an effort to 'triumph over' the perceived embarrassment that femininity represents. The exchange between Offred and Moira taking place shortly before the establishment of Gilead shows just that:

Women can't hold property anymore, she said. It's a new law. Turned on the TV today? (...) She was not stunned, the way I was. In some strange way she was gleeful, as if this was what she'd been expecting for some time and now she'd been proven right. She even looked more energetic, more determined. Luke can use your Compucount for you, she said. They'll transfer your number to him, or that's what they say. Husband or male next of kin. (Atwood 187-188)

While the gradual escalation of the events preceding the rise of Gilead are interesting to observe, so are the reactions those events inspired, maybe even more so:

There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men. But they were smaller than you might have thought. I guess people were scared. And when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire

almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. A few things were blown up, post offices, subway stations. But you couldn't even be sure who was doing it. It could have been the army, to justify the computer searches and the other ones, the door-to-doors. I didn't go on any of the marches. (Atwood 189)

Similarly to *The Handmaid's Tale*, the real life events surrounding the beginnings of what was to become known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria did not occur over night. Quite the contrary. The change was subtle. The amount of political turmoil seems to have been weighted in a way that it will ultimately allow for the establishment of the regime, yet it was not enough for the people who did not agree with the proposed ideas to disregard their fear and nip the regime in the bud. Much of the aforementioned can be argued to have possibly resulted exactly from the fact that the change in the dominant ideology started out rather gradually. The newly founded regime simply built upon the already existing and widely accepted dynamic of a woman subordinate to a man in order to further advance it until the final product resembles something that could have in no way sprung solely from the existing treatment of women within the society. However, taking into account the bigger picture, it seems that it in fact did just that (e.g. since the state of women's rights in countries in the Middle East such as Iraq, and to a lesser degree Syria, has already been such that the position of a woman was not completely equal to that of a man to a greater extent than it might have been the case in some other countries).

No one can claim with utmost certainty that such mode of thinking was consciously applied by Atwood while writing *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, the fact that Atwood managed to create a fictional system eerily similar to one that will be brought into existence more than thirty years after the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*, alludes to the possibility of Atwood being at least vaguely consciously aware of the power that the misuse of the men-woman dynamics can have on the societal structure as a whole. At least to some extent, she

must have been able to already notice such misconduct in her own surroundings (e.g. gender roles mostly categorizing the woman as a gentle caregiver and the man as a robust protector and conqueror whom are each expected to take interest in different socially determined sets of unnecessarily gendered activities). Even though the opposite would seem logical, it is quite possible that, while wanting to provide a feminist critique of society, Atwood did not in fact try to defend the idea of the relation between a man and a woman being the starting point of all other socio-political relations. It is more reasonable to argue that the existing dynamic where the state of affairs is such, simply reflects an aspect of the society she is a contributing part of. Remembering the introductory part of the thesis, it is possible to conclude that this concrete aspect of *The Handmaid's Tale* might portray nothing other than Atwood's inability to depict a society/world/characters not riddled by the ideological plagues of her whereabouts. Through a depiction of her fictional universe, her work manages to achieve nothing more than provide a clearer insight into the society of her origin. It paints a vivid picture of the range of influence of the dominant ideology in the context of conditioning, or even indoctrination of the people, including the author of the work in question (e.g. to simplify: The main issues in *The Handmaid's Tale* have all started with women and are women oriented, not because Atwood was purposely intent on providing a critique of society, but because she has, through a fictitious account, only succeeded in showing exactly how society is – which made it logical to her to assume that, if there was to be a great issue in the society of the future, it's going to affect women the most because it has so far almost always been so).

Whatever the (un)conscious reasoning behind Atwood's writing process may have been, it is undeniable that the events of the novel do correspond well to the notion of pre-existing gender inequality being the primary source of other societal inequalities that occurred after the establishment of the Republic of Gilead. The same applies to real life events surrounding the creation of ISIS, almost perfectly predicted by Atwood more than thirty years ago. Therefore,

it is possible to view Atwood's work as a reflection of the socio-political climate of her time and place (not just Canada, but the world), as well as the potential prediction of said climate's development in the future based on current knowledge.

Now is the time to, once again, steer the analysis in the direction of the philosophy according to which the notion of gender inequalities represents an indirect source of all inequalities – better known by the name of Jineology. In the paragraphs to come, further explanation will be given on the role of Jineology within the society and its relation with Offred as a symbol of women's struggle against the patriarchal mentality still prevalent in the majority of existing societies.

The main tenet of Jineology may be summed up in one single sentence: "When women find their way to freedom, all people will be free." This statement might not seem completely clear at first glance, but upon further inspection it becomes evident that the idea behind it is an easily imaginable one. According to Abdullah Öcalan, the idea that will later become known as Jineology was born after witnessing the state of the society of his own origins (the area of Kurdistan that was at the time already occupied by the Republic of Turkey) where lack of education, economic dependency, lack of freedom, honor killings and similar modes of women's subjugation ran rampant. It is important to note that despite Öcalan primarily referring to the society of his own origin, his ideas are thereby not rendered inapplicable to the rest of the world. As it was argued numerous times throughout this thesis, according to Öcalan the majority of the societies in the world "were, and in part still remain, largely patriarchal and many aspects of political power are channeled through the dominant male, while women [are] primarily subjected to housewifization<sup>3</sup> and [are] thus removed from the socio-political sphere of life." (Pavičić-Ivelja 138)

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<sup>3</sup> Housewifization is a term coined by Abdullah Öcalan that refers to the process of gradually removing women from the public sphere of existence and reducing them primarily to the roles of carers and mothers. More on this can be found in one of his most important works titled „Liberating Life: Woman's Revolution“

Alongside being patriarchal, all the societies in the world can also be dubbed class defined. The existence of classes presupposes inherent existence of inequality in a manner manifested through one class being treated inferior to the other. For example, under capitalism (as, currently, the most widespread socio-political system throughout the world) it is the capitalist to whom the worker is subjugated. However, among the workers who are already exploited and oppressed by the capitalists, there are women, as well as there are women among the capitalist class. Since it has been discussed before (e.g. in the section 2.3 of the second chapter) that there is an entire set of laws regarding reproductive rights that affects only women (due to the inability of men to naturally carry children), women of the working class are then affected both by the restraints of their class, as well the restraints imposed on them on the basis of their very womanhood. In addition, even the women belonging to the 'upper' capitalist class, while not being as confined by their class as the working class women are, still cannot bridge the gap between them and the men of the same 'rank' created by a set of woman specific obstacles consisting of rules, norms and laws. Therefore, it is quite possible to determine that even the highest ranking woman in a patriarchal society will still find herself subordinate to a man, while the lowest ranking member of the society will necessarily always be a woman. On the other hand, by that logic, the highest ranking person in the society will always be a man. In that regard, due to their gender, women cannot only be seen as a specific class, but must, in fact, be acknowledged as the most oppressed class in the entire society.

How does that concept relate to *The Handmaid's Tale*? As one reads the novel, it soon becomes obvious that the Handmaid's are the most stripped of their rights in comparison to all others in the entire Republic of Gilead. If one were to draw a parallel with the Marxist theory of (social) reproduction, in a way they are 'working class women' who create the majority of the value (in terms of child bearing) that the Commanders and their wives, in this context 'the capitalists', then appropriate. At the same time they are submitted to an extreme degree of

housewifeization, so much so that their role has been reduced to nothing more than a child bearer and a performer of tasks such as grocery shopping – often associated with caring for other members of the community. However, the example of Commander Fred’s wife Serena Joy shows that, even though her position is far better than Offred’s and can in that regard be seen as privileged, her gender still does not allow her to ever reach the degree of privilege greater or equal to that the Commander enjoys. This becomes evident through the comparison of Serena Joy’s life before and after the rise of the Republic of Gilead. Before Gilead “(...) she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home. Serena Joy didn’t do this herself, she made speeches instead, but she presented this failure of hers as a sacrifice she’s was making for the good of all” (Atwood 55)

In Gilead “she doesn’t make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn’t seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word.” (Atwood 56)

In this context, Serena Joy quite blatantly represents the free woman (since, even though she did advocate for the domestic role of a woman, she did so out of her own free will) gone through the housewifeization process where her voice is not allowed to be heard anymore and is confined to the private sphere of her husband’s home without an opportunity to assert any socio-political influence in the public sphere – which has since become an exclusively male domain.

Since it can be derived from the preceding paragraphs that women indeed represent the most oppressed class within the society, it is crucial for the creation of an equal society that the process of liberation starts from none other but them. To see why, an example correlating the society with a tower of cards will be provided.

Every story of the tower of cards represents a social class, from the least to the most privileged, while the tower represents the system under which the society operates. On the bottom of the tower there is a number of apexes followed by a layer of horizontally placed cards, followed by another layer of apexes and so on. Since every one of the classes can contain women it is possible to say that the cards themselves represent women. If only one of the cards from the top is removed, only a part of the structure topples. Therefore, even though the privileged women still experience an entire set of issues that are not experienced by privileged men (e.g. issues regarding pregnancy [or lack thereof] that are often politicized (...)) it is not enough that the change starts from them. However, if one were to take a card from the down-most story (representing the most underprivileged social class in which women experience both the lack of privilege caused by class and still tackle various gender specific issues) the entire structure collapses and leaves all the cards on the same level. Only by eliciting a bottom-up change while simultaneously addressing the gender biased issues which can often be rendered political, is it possible to pave a way for true freedom and equality within the society. (Pavičić-Ivelja 137)

In Atwood's brilliantly complex novel, Offred is ultimately implied to be the card taken from the down-most story of the tower causing the entire structure to topple. In the last passages of the novel, Offred is portrayed entering a van looking like that belonging to the Eyes but said to actually be a screen for a Mayday rescue mission. The story then jumps into the future, a future in which Gilead is long gone and the society seems to have reconstructed its values in a way far more discerning towards the concept of gender and the relations between genders. Even though Offred's faith remains uncertain, what is revealed to the reader is that her story survived and is used as a learning material for the future generations. Ensuring that her story, no matter the outcome, will not be forgotten can in itself be seen as a representation of a small act of



resistance made by the most underprivileged of all the oppressed women that, ultimately, step by step, is able to lead to an avalanche of change and cause a complete paradigm shift resulting in a thorough reconstruction of core values of a certain society or a regime.

### 3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

*“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum. Don't let the bastards grind you down.”*

-Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 196-197)

Since the theory gained prominence only long after the book has already been published, Atwood most certainly did not write *The Handmaid's Tale* with the concept of Jineology in mind (that has turned out to be the concept most developed in this thesis). However, to be able to analyze the novel through a concept as newly developed as Jineology shows the sheer extent of Atwood's genius and proves that *The Handmaid's Tale* indeed is both an amazing critique and a reflection of the socio-political climate not only of its time, but maybe even of all times. I sincerely hope that through this thesis I have managed to illuminate at least a mere fragment of the brilliance that is *The Handmaid's Tale* in regards to utilizing reproduction rights as a means of criticizing the society of its time. Moreover, this thesis has hopefully succeeded in portraying the novel's amazing ability to address an array of other issues present within the society while managing to illustrate the entire inner workings of a socio-political system by using only the notion of a woman being reduced to nothing more than a womb fit for child bearing. Such utilization of oppressed women's reproduction rights in Atwood's literary discourse allows for a powerful analogy for class dynamics, as well as gender dynamics, in all other aspects of life, be them political or non-political. It is not enough to say that Margaret Atwood was ahead of her time when, through observing the condition of her place of origin, she managed to create one of the possibly most widely applicable and relatable works of fiction existing within the science fiction genre. But, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is far more than that. It is not just ahead of its time. It is timeless. It's representation of the human condition surpasses borders and defies age. Therefore, I hope that it has become apparent through the comparison of *the Handmaid's Tale* with present-time events that still seem ever so uncannily similar and relatable to the novel, that *The Handmaid's Tale* is at the same time a

harsh criticism and the reflection of what once was, a critique of what is at the moment, a warning of what might come if resistance towards oppression fails. Most importantly, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a glimpse into the unyielding persistence of women in a struggle for equality regardless of irremovable gender based differences (e.g. the woman being the one to carry a child) that, even though expressed through subtle, almost trivial acts, can ultimately attribute to a great change resulting in a better world for all, no matter how ineffective the said struggle might seem at the moment of its commencement.

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