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Reference:



Gibson. S. (2018). Familiar nightmare: The Harrowing world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. *Screen Education*, 89, pp. 36-43.



Familiar Nightmares

THE HARROWING WORLD
OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

A portrait of a dystopian world not entirely removed from our own, this disturbing, compelling television series has brought Margaret Atwood's classic feminist novel to new audiences. As **SUZIE GIBSON** argues, the series serves as an allegory for the gender oppression not only inherent in repressive theocracies, but also lurking under the surface in the liberal West.

The 2017 television adaptation of Margaret Atwood's dystopian 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been widely acknowledged as a success. The first ever program produced by a streaming service to win an Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series,¹ it features high-quality production values and an impressive ensemble of actors. The viewer's experience of *The Handmaid's Tale* is largely channelled through likeable chief protagonist Offred, played by Elisabeth Moss, whose fragmented thoughts and memories gradually unveil a nightmare world where the United States' once-liberal democracy has been overthrown by a punitive theocratic regime. Through Offred's perspective, we access a deeply regimented sphere in which puritanical religious beliefs are enforceable through armed guards and a secret police force called the Eyes.

As *The Handmaid's Tale* unravels over ten episodes, viewers are increasingly confronted with the many injustices perpetrated by the new Republic of Gilead, including women's biological slavery. The function of the 'Handmaid' is to reproduce, thus guaranteeing the regime's future. She is a childbearing vessel valued only for her uterus. To describe this new world order as sexist would be an understatement, but it would nevertheless be simplistic to assume that it is simply a tale of men oppressing women. Here, to an extent, women participate in their own subjugation. This is highlighted in scenes in which older women identified as 'Aunts' aggressively indoctrinate young fertile women. We also come to learn that the highest-ranking 'Wife' in the republic,



Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski), was instrumental in the development of Gilead's constitution.

While the exploitation of women by both men and women in the series is utterly devastating, it nonetheless delivers riveting drama. Yet, beyond such drama, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a timely cautionary message concerning the dangers of pernicious real-world regimes rising from the ashes of failed democracies. It also encourages one to reflect upon advancements made in the area of human rights, and upon how easy it would be for a puritanical theocracy to repeal our many freedoms, especially women's bodily autonomy.

WORLDWIDE POLITICAL EXTREMISM

Right now, across the world, populist far-right movements are gaining momentum because of widescale unemployment, poverty and disenchantment with liberal values that have failed to deliver equal opportunity. Significantly, the leaders of these movements rarely come from impoverished backgrounds; on the contrary, they are often members of an elite class.² The associated populist demonisation of minorities, such as immigrants and refugees, echoes the tactics of despotic leaders past and present, whose rise to power has been enabled by inciting collective fear and hatred. Provoking mass anger and animosity empowered Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime in convincing a dispirited, recession-hit 1930s Germany that it needed to reclaim its sovereignty by cleansing its society of undesirables – Jews, Romani and gay people.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, marginalised groups and individuals are either publicly exterminated or exiled to the toxic 'Colonies', where they will die of radioactive poisoning. The process of social cleansing involves eradicating the perceived scourges of 'unwomen' and 'unmen' – lesbians, gay men, feminists and doctors who perform abortions – while preserving heterosexual men and fertile women.

This harrowing dystopia is in part the result of a collective disillusionment with the democratic values that have seemingly led to worldwide infertility, sexual disease and environmental pollution. Before the frightening purge of minorities begins, all members of the United States Congress are gunned down and the reigning president is assassinated; the murdered politicians are replaced by a group of select men who blame the world's disasters on capitalistic excess and the temptations of the flesh, and instead advocate puritanical religious values and material deprivation.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts terrifying despotism, its backstory nonetheless prompts us to question a way of life wherein First World countries still indulge in irresponsible consumerism despite its associated environmental degradation. In some senses, Gilead is a utopia: its commitment to clean-energy alternatives and focus on producing fresh, organically produced



PREVIOUS SPREAD: Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) threatens Offred (Elisabeth Moss) THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Moira (Samira Wiley); Offred; Handmaids arrive for the Salvaging; Offred

food sheds light upon the real-world pitfalls of late capitalism. *The Handmaid's Tale* thus encourages one to ponder the conflicting moral values of a society that can cruelly oppress women and other minorities while at the same time exercising environmental responsibility. Such contradictions effectively invert the situation in our contemporary societies, in which individual freedoms are counteracted by big-business liberties that enable the planet to be ruthlessly exploited.

The Handmaid's Tale is compulsive viewing for a number of reasons, not least for its frightening account of a world wherein women's bodies are exploited and politicised in a dehumanising manner. This drama is deeply provocative in its depiction of the

'Ofglen' – signify their lack of individuality, identifying them by the households within which their biological bondage is endured. Offred, for instance, is 'of' the household of Commander Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes); as long as she is stationed at his house, she must be known only by this name. When it is time for her to move, she will either adopt another patriarch's first name, or, if she fails to conceive a child, live under the threat of death or exile.

The difference between Offred's past and present can be traced through her name change – she was originally known as June. The alteration might seem trivial were it not a marker of her transition from living under an egalitarian government to being held

***The Handmaid's Tale* thus encourages one to ponder the conflicting moral values of a society that can cruelly oppress women and other minorities while at the same time exercising environmental responsibility.**

savagery of extreme political and religious movements that use the reproductive power of women to ensure their future existence. In the tightly bordered community of Gilead, children – the future of any culture – are especially important.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

One of the first signs of a totalitarian system of government is the suppression or denial of individual identity. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, enforced homogeneity is imposed upon the fertile Handmaids, whose generic names – 'Offred', 'Ofwarren',

prisoner by a tyrannical theocracy. Importantly, this new name signifies her submissive position within the social order of the Republic of Gilead. No longer a person but a biological 'offering', Offred's humanity is reduced to her reproductive potential.³ The disturbing idea that a woman's value is measured solely by her ability to procreate is not science fiction: throughout the ages, various societies have embraced this as a core belief. The architects of the Republic of Gilead know only too well that the offspring of the ruling elite are likely to carry forward their ideological and religious beliefs.

Historically, the dehumanising tactic of denying people their rightful names has been used by punitive regimes;





THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Handmaids learn about the Ceremony; Commander Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes)



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Ofwarren (Madeline Brewer), Ofsamuel (Jenessa Grant), Oferic (Bahia Watson) and Offred; Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski) with Fred



SYSTEMATIC DEHUMANISATION

Another method of eroding people's individuality is to revoke personal liberties. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the new regime begins its process of gender discrimination by rescinding women's right to a bank account. In a key scene foreshadowing this development, June and her friend Moira (Samira Wiley) enter a coffee shop. The scene appears unremarkable until June tries to pay for her purchase using her bank card, which is declined. The young man at the counter first refuses to re-scan her card, and then more adamantly repeats his refusal and lashes out, calling June and Moira 'sluts'. Shocked by the outburst, the two friends nonetheless seem to think it is a one-off event – perhaps just a case of one man being angry – but they soon discover that all bank cards marked with the initial 'f' for female have been cancelled. As the new regime cements its power, every woman's bank account is invalidated and the funds are transferred to their husbands' coffers. Rendering women financially dependent is another step towards their loss of humanity and freedom; in First World nations today,

eradicating individuality is a very effective means of controlling people and populations. For example, under slavery in the United States, African-Americans were denied their real

In Western countries, it was not until the nineteenth century that women were allowed to inherit property, and it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that restrictions on women in the US owning credit cards or keeping their jobs after becoming pregnant came to an end.

names by white landowners. And Nazi Germany systematically eradicated the individuality of Jewish people, first by labelling them with yellow stars, then later by tattooing numbers on their arms. Even in modern-day Australia, there have been reports of asylum seekers being officially identified only through their boat numbers.⁴

for instance, denying women financial independence is recognised as a form of domestic violence in the context of intimate relationships, because it enables one partner to exercise control over another.⁵

Distressed and dismayed by her forced financial dependence, June returns to her workplace. There, her anguished boss, under

duress from armed guards, is compelled to fire her and every other woman employed there.

As the new regime gathers momentum, its chief concern is to control every aspect of female life, especially bodily freedom. Redefined as a gendered, inferior class, Gilead's women are systematically stripped of a number of further crucial freedoms: the right to own property, to read, to have bodily autonomy. While, in the context of the fictional narrative, this is a frightening development, it is neither anomalous nor unprecedented. In Western countries, it was not until the nineteenth century that women were allowed to inherit property, and it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that restrictions on women in the US owning credit cards or keeping their jobs after becoming pregnant came to an end.⁶ Furthermore, it was not until the 1980s that it finally became illegal in the UK to refuse service to women in pubs.⁷ In progressive democracies, it is easy to forget that countless activists fought for so many of these liberties now taken for granted.

Another potential method of suppressing a person's individuality is by forcing them to wear a uniform. Clothed in a modest carmine habit that includes a white cornette-like veil, Offred becomes part of a red 'army' of fertile Handmaids who are forced to endure rape every month by the male head of the household in which they are stationed. In the Republic of Gilead, all women are forced to wear colour-coded outfits to visually identify their domestic role and class standing. The hue of red is for the Handmaids; blue is for the high-ranking Wives, married to government officials; military khaki is for the infertile, indoctrinating Aunts; and a dull green is reserved for the domestic help (known as 'Marthas'). As well as stripping individuals of their identity, this colour categorisation also operates as an effective means of surveillance.

Armed guards, who watch over everyone, preserve Gilead's regimented society – as do the high-ranking civilian Wives, who prevent Handmaids from developing personal friendships and love bonds. Such comprehensive surveillance fosters a highly fearful and paranoid environment. Denying people an emotional life erodes trust, a familiar tactic used by totalitarian regimes

seeking to stifle collective action – something displayed so powerfully in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Again, such oppressive, autocratic societies are hardly unprecedented: extreme right and left political movements throughout history – such as Nazism and Stalinist communism – have followed these very dictates. Moreover, even today, various fanatical governments, cults and religious movements still try to minutely determine people's behaviour, and, in particular, subjugate women.

In religious Gilead, another effective means of quelling the masses is to publicly execute those who have either directly challenged the regime or whose previous activities contravened its new laws. This includes men who have committed the 'gender treachery' of same-sex desire, as well as political activists. Such 'traitors' are murdered and strung up, their corpses left to rot in full view. These violent public displays of capital punishment remind survivors of the violent consequences of rebellion. In contemporary Saudi Arabia, the brutality of capital punishment has likewise been exhibited; it has been recently reported, for instance, that a woman was executed on a public street there.⁸





ABOVE: Offred with Nick (Max Minghella)

A further degradation suffered by Handmaids is that they are blamed for their own rapes. Victims of sexual assault are subjected to a ritual of cleansing, with fellow Handmaids instrumental in their public humiliation. One of the Aunts presiding over a shaming session asks, 'But whose fault is it?', to which the only permissible response is, 'Her fault, her fault, her fault.' Not only are these public humiliations designed to debase individual Handmaids, but they are also orchestrations of collective abuse. The power of the regime is in part contingent on the public exhibition of its values, no matter how violent and unjust. Once more, the idea of blaming women for their own sexual assault is not a purely fictional injustice. Recently, a female judge in the UK implied that a victim of rape was somehow culpable because she was inebriated at the time of her assault.⁹ While this example of victim-blaming is not necessarily dehumanising, it nonetheless reveals an enduring gender bias against women within the legal system. Moreover, in certain modern nations it is also still possible for women to be stoned to death for committing adultery, or for refusing to participate in arranged marriages, or even for being raped. In countries like Tunisia¹⁰ and India,¹¹ women may still be held accountable for their own sexual assaults.¹²

FERTILITY AS A RESOURCE

The dystopian future-world of *The Handmaid's Tale* is devastating in part because it is so recognisable. As well as functioning as a cautionary tale about the dangers of religious and political extremism, the narrative is a powerful meditation upon real-world governmental authority and the exploitation of women.¹³ Not unlike Nazi Germany, where programs to breed a master race were initiated,¹⁴ Handmaids operate as birthing vessels through which the Republic of Gilead is populated and sustained. In this terrifying realm, Aunts cruelly brainwash fertile young women; in this, they resemble Benito Mussolini's fascist female guards, who were instrumental in harnessing women's reproductive power.¹⁵

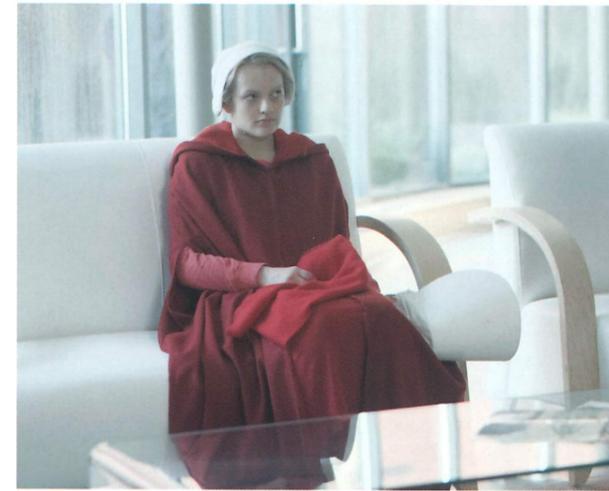
With infertility a worldwide problem, procreation guarantees Gilead's future and provides the republic with a crucial trading advantage. The Handmaid is not just instrumental to Gilead's population growth: she is also its chief resource and bartering tool, through which the men of the political system forge trade agreements with other countries. Yet, the fact of being such a precious commodity is not enough to engender any kind of respect; on the contrary, Handmaids are dehumanised as biological slaves. Given that children are the republic's chief

source of wealth, it is not surprising that, in Gilead, abortion incurs the most brutal punishment: death. Doctors who once worked at abortion clinics are publicly hanged, their bodies left rotting on Gilead's high wall. While this might seem unimaginable, even in a progressive First World democracy such as Australia, women's bodily freedom is still yet to be fully realised: in Queensland and New South Wales, abortion is still on the books as a criminal offence;¹⁶ in the latter case, those who undergo the procedure or assist 'could face 10 years imprisonment'.¹⁷

In what is perhaps the most unforgettable scene in the television adaptation, Offred risks her life by confiding in the female Mexican ambassador about the ugly truth of her oppression. In a desperate bid to escape from her domestic prison, she vividly describes to this government official from another country the series of degradations that she and other Handmaids have suffered. Sympathetic yet unwilling to help, the politician admits that she cannot liberate her because of her own country's dire lack of children; the precious commodity of fertility is so coveted that it trumps human rights. We are reminded here that, when undertaking trade agreements with despotic regimes, democratic countries around the world today choose material gain over people's lives.¹⁸ For example, despite Saudi Arabia's human-rights violations – especially, its cruelty towards women – it is one of the world's most sought-after trading partners because of its rich oil reserves.¹⁹ Again, the parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the real world are startling and disturbing.

PARALLELING REAL-WORLD INJUSTICES

The Handmaid's Tale does not represent some remote, foreign world, but rather gives us pause to reflect upon past and contemporary religious movements and political systems defined by suppression, especially with regard to their punitive control of women. It is a television show that provides us with a comprehensive account of how to successfully dominate individuals and populations through a systematic process of dehumanisation. Although set in a dystopian future, what is so unsettling about this meticulously adapted drama is that the authoritarian sphere it depicts has so many historical precedents and contemporary parallels. *The Handmaid's Tale* does not represent some alien world – rather, it provides forceful insight into our dark humanity, and the horrors of real-world subjugation.



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