

# Gender inequality and the role of religion in dystopian society: The Handmaid's Tale

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2024

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:365712>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-11-24**



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Sveučilišni diplomski studij

Anglistika; smjer: nastavnički

**Klementina Šarlija**

**GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE ROLE  
OF RELIGION IN DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY:  
THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

**Diplomski rad**

Zadar, 2024.

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Gender Inequality and the Role of Religion in Dystopian Society: The Handmaid's Tale

Diplomski rad

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Zadar, 2024.

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Zadar, 25. listopada 2024.

## Table of contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction .....   | 1  |
| 2. Dystopia in Literature and Cinema .....  | 2  |
| 3. Feminism and Manifestations of Patriarchy in Dystopian Societies .....                               | 4  |
| 3.1. Feminist Science Fiction and Dystopia .....  | 4  |
| 3.2. Patriarchal Dystopia .....   | 6  |
| 4. Feminist Theories .....  | 7  |
| 4.1. Male Gaze and the Creation of the Female Gaze .....  | 7  |
| 4.2. Gender Performativity Theory .....   | 9  |
| 5. The Handmaid's Tale .....  | 11 |
| 5.1. Plot .....   | 11 |
| 5.2. The Temporal Significance of <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> : Bridging Past, Present, and Future ..... | 12 |
| 5.3. A Feminist Dystopia within a Patriarchal Society .....   | 14 |
| 5.3.1. Gender Performativity in The Handmaid's Tale .....   | 15 |
| 5.3.2. The Gaze as a Tool of Power .....  | 18 |
| 6.1. Religious Reinforcement of Gender Roles and Feminine Passivity .....                               | 22 |
| 6.1.1. Religion as an Oppressive Force .....  | 24 |
| 6.1.2. Woman as a Worshipper .....  | 25 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 6.2. Religious Significance of the Names and Ceremonies in <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> ... | 27 |
| 6.2.1. Offred and the Handmaids .....   | 28 |
| 6.2.2. The Aunts .....  | 29 |
| 6.2.3. The Ceremony .....   | 31 |
| 6.2.4. The Wedding Ceremony or Prayvaganza .....  | 34 |
| 7. Conclusion .....   | 38 |
| 8. Works Cited .....  | 40 |
| 9. Figures .....  | 44 |
| Abstract .....  | 45 |
| Sažetak .....   | 46 |

## 1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, along with the television series created by Bruce Miller, is set in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian state established after an environmental disaster. The narrative explores the experiences of women oppressed by the government's strict policies and rigid societal hierarchy. Gilead represents a patriarchal regime where women's rights are abolished, reducing them to a single purpose: to serve as reproductive vessels. Religious ideologies are distorted to justify this subjugation. In *The Handmaid's Tale* gender inequality and religion are closely intertwined, with religion and its distorted doctrines serving as instruments of power in a dystopian society.

The focus of this master's thesis is the use of biblical references and their influence on creation of a society that appears utopian but is ultimately dystopian. The primary aim is to demonstrate how religion and biblical references are used as a pretext to establish a new world order, one purportedly beneficial to the whole society but, in reality, one that causes and perpetuates gender oppression. By analyzing the social domination and the relationships between men and women that shape the lives of the female characters, this thesis represents Atwood's novel as a warning against the dangers of religious extremism and its potential to subjugate women.

Moreover, by applying feminist theories such as Laura Mulvey's "Male Gaze" and Judith Butler's "Performativity theory", this thesis will highlight how *The Handmaid's Tale* critiques contemporary social issues while also exposing the historical roots of gender oppression. This thesis will further explore the portrayal of religious norms and their impact on identity formation and the loss of autonomy within the narrative. Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* symbolizes the enduring struggle for women's rights and emphasizes the necessity for constant vigilance against forces that seek to undermine them.

## 2. Dystopia in Literature and Cinema

The dystopian narrative emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely as a result of global horrors such as state violence, war, genocide, and the degradation of human values. In other words, the social and political condition of the time provided the foundation for dystopian literature. Dystopian literature provides a criticism of the oppressive systems through bleak depictions of the future. According to Moylan (6), the genre developed from Menippean satire and 19th-century anti-utopian works but fully evolved in the early 1990s due to the intensification of capitalism and imperialism and their social influence. Therefore, dystopian literature often illustrates the fears and consequences of oppressive governments and systematic exploitation.

The dystopian genre describes places and societies that are even more dreadful than the current one, contributing to the creation of classic works such as *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, the works of H. G. Wells, and George Orwell's *1984*. Dystopian narratives typically begin within the protagonist's bleak world, without the need for travel or transformation to arrive there (Moreno Trujillo 187). However, the element of estrangement remains present, as the story centers on a character who questions and resists the dystopian society in which they live. Additionally, the narrative is structured around two opposing forces: the hegemonic regime and the resistance against it. As literary genre, dystopia exists between utopia and anti-utopia, heavily loaded with political content and set in circumstances worse for its protagonists (188).

Dystopian societies are a common theme in science fiction, appearing in both literature and film. The evolution of critical thought over time has contributed to the emergence and refinement of dystopian literature and discourse. Furthermore, to understand the concept of dystopian society, it is crucial to define the term utopia, as dystopia cannot exist without it. Utopia represents "a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy" (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). According to Fredric Jameson, an eminent theorist of postmodernism, utopia is not about fulfilling collective desires, creating a detailed vision of a better society, or making promises about the future. Instead, it involves using imagination to recognize and develop the possibilities present in the reality, transforming them into practical and liberating political actions (Jameson 42).

Suvin (2001) divides dystopia into two categories. The first one is anti-utopia which he describes as "structural inversion of eutopia, formally quite different from dystopian narrative" (385). Anti-utopia provokes or critiques a proposed eutopia, presenting itself as a perfectly



organized community but, through a critical lens, revealing itself as deceptive and flawed. At its core, anti-utopia is still dystopia. The second category of dystopia is “simple” dystopia, described as “a straightforward dystopia, that is, one which is not also an anti-utopia” (385).

Mario Vrbančić, in his book *Što nakon distopije?*, argues that postmodernism challenges traditional values such as God, history, the nature of humanity, and even reality itself, which, according to Jameson, experiences a “disappearing effect” (Vrbančić 129). Late-stage capitalism accelerates the global exchange of goods, creating a superficial world where nothing remains hidden. While modernism believed in values beyond consumerism, postmodernism erases the distinction between reality and the real. This leads to extreme emotions, which Jameson associates with schizophrenia and growing addictions. Language also loses its significance, causing a disconnection between words and their meanings (signifiers and signified). This disconnection further intensifies schizophrenic experience and destabilizes personal identity, making it difficult to link the past, present, and future into a coherent narrative. In this context, as Vrbančić (2024) states, distinguishing between dystopia and reality becomes increasingly difficult (130). The question is not just whether the dystopian future has arrived, but how one even defines reality when the concept of the real is in doubt. Moreover, this uncertainty about reality in postmodernism is heightened by rapid technological advances and ongoing debates around humanism and posthumanism. As a result, science fiction, once a tool for imagining distant futures, has become a means of understanding what is real today (132).

One of the most prominent dystopian literary works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is *1984*, written by George Orwell. The novel begins with the depiction of a cold day in April in a society governed by the oppressive Big Brother. Since *1984* was published in 1948, following the World War II, many scholars interpret *1984* as a warning against totalitarian regimes similar to those of Stalin and Hitler. Also, Orwell stated that as the totalitarian ideas spread, his aim was to explore their logical consequences (qtd. in Bloom, *Bloom's Guides: 1984*, 44). Additionally, dystopian literature frequently reflects real-world political and social conditions. Consequently, when a new dystopian work emerges, it is frequently interpreted as a reflection of the actual world situation. Thus, when Margaret Atwood published her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, portraying an extreme totalitarian regime focused on the oppression of women, many theoreticians linked it to real-world events. While *1984* critiqued totalitarian ideas in general, Atwood's novel offered a distinct focus on gender politics, offering new insights that Orwell's work did not (Aardema 5).

Furthermore, in dystopian literature, society is typically characterized by extreme authoritarianism, where individual identities are subordinated to the needs of oppressive regime. As Tuta (66) notes, the defining features of dystopias are “the creation of a culture of fear and hatred, the suppression of truth and freedom . . .”. Moreover, in dystopian societies, freedoms like speech, assembly, or press are suppressed, and extensive surveillance is used to indoctrinate the population. Also, hierarchies are strictly imposed, maintaining the oppression of lower classes (Tuta 66).

By creating patriarchal societies, dystopian authors form individual identities and establish power relations. By analyzing the dystopian narrative through Laura Mulvey’s theory of the *male gaze*, and Judith Butler’s concept of *gender performativity*, we reveal the complex power dynamics between gender, surveillance, and patriarchy. The male gaze, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters, illustrates how power dynamics within a dystopian society are intensified through the objectification of women as objects of male desire. Moreover, in many dystopian worlds, this objectification not only serves as a tool of oppression but also as an instrument through which the patriarchal system controls women’s bodies and choices. Additionally, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity emphasizes how, in dystopian societies, gender is socially constructed and controlled through prescribed and repeated behavior. In other terms, women in dystopian worlds are forced to perform prescribed roles and behaviors that reflect oppressive ideologies of their societies.

### **3. Feminism and Manifestations of Patriarchy in Dystopian Societies**

#### 3.1. Feminist Science Fiction and Dystopia

Feminist science fiction is a speculative genre that uses imaginary settings to critique patriarchal societies and emphasize the problem of marginalization of women. According to Gilarek (2015), feminist science fiction often combines utopian and dystopian elements to expose the stark contrast between the feminist vision of social equality and the reality of patriarchal oppression. Utopias depict better surroundings for women, while dystopias present societies where women are entirely subordinated. Moreover, these narratives are often set in remote or defamiliarized locations, encouraging the viewers or readers to re-examine familiar gender issues from new perspectives. Although science fiction often portrays futuristic societies, in utopian and dystopian literature the setting can be placed either in the future or the

past. Moreover, the imaginative realities presented in dystopian societies contrast with the present, allowing readers to evaluate them objectively due to the temporal distance. These factors help feminist science fiction raise awareness of societal issues and encourage societal change – a factor that can be seen as utopian (Gilarek 34).

A significant body of academic research has studied and examined female roles in fantasy and science fiction, both as characters and writers. Joanna Russ (2017) analyzes the representation of female characters in science fiction from the 1940s to the 1960s, emphasizing how women have been depicted as unrealistically mean, attractive, fragile, and passive. She argues that science fiction has largely focused on the visual representation of women rather than representing them as completely realized individuals. Moreover, Russ notes that, despite the presence of the female authors in the science fiction genre, women are often restricted to mere images within patriarchal narratives (Russ 88).

Feminist dystopia emerged as a genre in the 1960s, at the same time as second-wave feminism was rising. During this time, female writers began to criticize male dominance in their works. According to Köylüoğlu (2017), some of the most notable early feminist dystopian works include Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence* (1952) and Angela Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969). Although these scenarios are fictional, dystopian audiences are aware that they are entirely plausible and often reflect current realities rather than distant futures. These plots serve as warnings, reminding audiences that if present issues are ignored, they may lead to dystopias in the future (Köylüoğlu 9).

Feminist science fiction often draws inspiration from full-length dystopian novels. A prominent example of televised feminist science fiction is *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The series depicts a patriarchal dystopia in which male dominance dictates societal norms, and women are forced into the roles of servants or reproduction tools. Although the narrative is set in the distant future, these portrayals reflect real-life issues within the contemporary patriarchal society. Atwood's novel presents the totalitarian state of Gilead, which has converted the United States into a militaristic regime where women have no rights. Additionally, the novel critiques the rise of fundamentalist religious organizations in the 1980s, which jeopardized democracy and women's rights (Gilarek 41).

As previously mentioned, feminism has manifested itself in science fiction through the evolution of dystopian genre. Dystopias often portray post-apocalyptic imagery where societies have collapsed, focusing on political themes and featuring governments that are authoritarian and cruel. These societies are controlled by the government, which enforces strict regulations

and harsh penalties, shaping the beliefs and perceptions of the population. According to Köylüoğlu (7), feminist dystopias merge feminist principles with dystopian themes in order to create a future that unsettles women. These dystopias are governed by oppressive patriarchal values and extremely violent methods. The narratives are inspired by totalitarian regimes, emphasizing female subjugation under male dominance. In these scenarios, the government's main strategy is to silence dissent and prevent individuals from exposing injustices, leaving them feeling secluded and unprotected. Furthermore, totalitarianism can arise in any society where constitutional freedoms are suppressed. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Handmaids lose their voices as they are forbidden to read or write; they are silenced. In Gilead's totalitarian regime, words are seen as powerful tools in the hands of the individuals with different views. As a result, such individuals must be suppressed and silenced to eliminate opposition (Köylüoğlu 9).

### 3.2. Patriarchal Dystopia

Envisioning dystopia often conjures images of devastation, ruin, lawlessness, chaos, and anarchy. Even though Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is considered a dystopian novel, her distinctive writing style challenges conventional representations of dystopian societies. Rather than portraying chaos and a lack of law, Atwood depicts a society in Gilead that is rigidly structured and governed by strict legality (Bechar 42). Paradoxically, the firm rules and established authority have resulted in a government that has adopted religious fundamentalism as its core doctrine, one that disregards fundamental human rights. Furthermore, this political transformation and the imposition of religious beliefs have led to the creation of a tyrannical patriarchy. Consequently, Gilead becomes a state where women are isolated and then downgraded to the domestic sphere. Due to these elements, *The Handmaid's Tale* is often described as a feminist dystopia, as it addresses numerous issues central to feminist theories (43).

Patriarchy can be defined as a social system in which men hold power and dominance, while women are systematically disempowered. Sultana (2010) defines patriarchy as:

the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over the important institutions of society (3).

Historically, women were assigned passive roles, primarily confined to domestic responsibilities, while men assumed more prominent roles, such as soldiers or leaders. This division persisted until the Industrial Revolution, when women were gained more access to the workforce and began contributing more significantly to production. At the same time, women fought for legal, economic, and social rights within a patriarchal system, seeking to alter the gender dynamics of the society (Genc 101). In patriarchal systems, women and children are regarded as inferior, which leads to their exclusion from privileges that men enjoy simply by virtue of their gender. Additionally, many theorists, including Aristotle and Sigmund Freud, perpetuated views of male dominance. According to Sultana (2010), Freud believed that the “normal human” was male (4). Nevertheless, these theories of male dominance have been increasingly challenged as many feminist theories have emerged and gained traction.

## **4. Feminist Theories**

### **4.1. Male Gaze and the Creation of the Female Gaze**

In response to the feminist movement of the 1970s, Laura Mulvey wrote the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which was published in *Screen* magazine in 1975. In this essay, Mulvey explored the concepts of the male gaze and the female gaze and studied their relationship to cinematography. Moreover, she applied psychoanalytic approaches, particularly those of Freud and Lacan, to develop the concept of the male gaze, which became a key idea in feminist film theory. The male gaze theory suggests that the act of looking within the cinematic space is closely connected to desire, with the male viewer positioned as the active subject and the female character as the passive object of desire:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on

to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire (Mulvey in Piechucka 74).

Her essay, grounded in Freud's theory of sexuality, highlights the concept of scopophilia – a pleasure derived from looking – and further introduces its reverse: pleasure in being looked at. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud describes scopophilia as a fundamental instinct within human sexuality, associating it with viewing others as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and inquisitive gaze (Chaudhuri 34). Mulvey further identifies two problematic types of pleasurable viewing in this sense: voyeurism and narcissism. Voyeurism includes the viewer taking pleasure in watching someone from a distance and imagining themselves in the observed situation while narcissism involves the viewer deriving pleasure from self-recognition while observing another. Furthermore, it is eminent to recognize how perspectives in film reinforce traditional gender roles within the narrative. Film viewing typically includes three perspectives: the camera's view, the audience's gaze, and the character's interactions (Espinosa 9). The male gaze theory positions men as active viewers and women as passive, often sexualized, objects. Scopophilia, in this context, highlights the contrast between the male subject who observes and the female object who is observed (Mulvey 19). Although nearly fifty years have passed since the publication of her essay, Mulvey's work remains relevant to the film production today. The male gaze theory posits that media, particularly film, constructs a power hierarchy where male characters are always portrayed as dominant and female characters as subordinate. According to Mulvey (1989), women in film are not presented as autonomous subjects but are objectified to satisfy male voyeuristic desires.

Additionally, Mulvey argues that the female spectators are confined to identify with the passivity of the female characters on the screen, thereby embracing the perspective of the male protagonists and completely erasing their own subjectivity. As a result, there is no space for female agency, as all the activity in the narrative is male-driven, and women remain to solely be represented as passive objects of desire. Moreover, Mulvey's essay further underscores the

gender restrictions present in cinematic representation and their impact on identity. She also describes the patriarchal power as an inherent component of classical cinema, as it is primarily built upon patriarchal foundations (Kelly 451).

#### 4.2. Gender Performativity Theory

According to Losada Sánchez (2018), the distinction between sex and gender is a relatively recent development. Until the 1960s, the term 'gender' was primarily used for the grammatical category of a noun. However, in 1972, John Money presented the terms "sex" for the biological classification of male and female and "gender" for the differences in behaviors associated with these categories. Consequently, feminists began to characterize the biologically determined characteristics and socially constructed ones as two distinct extremes (Losada Sánchez 26). Nevertheless, essentialism postulates that differences between men and women are fixed at birth and entirely determined by biological factors, dismissing the external influences previously mentioned. Despite the criticism of biological inaccuracies in this theory, essentialism remains accepted in contemporary society. Nevertheless, many authors, such as Margaret Atwood, examine and critique essentialism in their works (26).

Since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), feminist analysis has rigorously distinguished between sex and gender. De Beauvoir explores the historical, social, and psychological construction of women as "the Other" in a male dominated world. In addition, she claims that women have been systematically oppressed and reduced to a secondary, inferior status. However, she claims that femininity is a societal construct, famously stating "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," emphasizing that gender roles are created, not inherent (De Beauvoir 15). Furthermore, Bernal Lugo (2019) similarly argues that gender is a cultural construct consisting of representations, practices, and societal norms that arise from anatomical differences between the sexes and define what is considered masculine and feminine (Bernal Lugo 217;218).

Judith Butler, a prominent gender theorist, has had a significant impact on feminist and queer theories by examining how sex, sexuality, gender, and language are interconnected. A key aspect of Butler's work is her critical examination of identity and subjectivity, particularly the processes through which individuals become subjects by adopting gendered, sexed, and racialized identities that are constructed and regulated by existing power structures. According to Butler (1990), gender studies reveal that the roles that women and men play in society are

socially constructed and that male domination is deeply embedded in societal norms and beliefs. These roles, entrenched over generations, sometimes provoke violent reactions from men seeking to 'protect' their masculinity and reassert control (Butler 22).

Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) are foundational texts in gender and queer theory. The concept of gender performativity, first introduced in *Gender Trouble*, asserts that gender is essentially a performance that generates the identity it claims to represent. Furthermore, Butler highlights that gender is an action, rather than something that exists prior to the act itself. Citing Nietzsche, she suggests that the inherent "being" behind these actions does not exist; instead, identity is entirely defined by the actions performed. In other words, Butler comes to a conclusion that the gender identity is not pre-existing but created through repeated expressions of behavior connected with it (Butler 33).

Butler's theories on sex, race, and gender reject the essentialist view that male and female categories are biologically determined. Along with other poststructuralist theorists, she argues that these identities are socially constructed and fluid. Butler also expands on de Beauvoir's famous assertion, "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," suggesting that there is no inherent link between biological sex and gender identity (Butler 12). For Butler, gender identities are determined by various social factors such as culture, class, and ethnicity. Over time, repeated actions establish gender roles like masculinity and femininity, which become entrenched in societal expectations and norms. Consequently, these norms restrict individual freedoms, as gender behaviors are controlled by societal expectations (Losada Sánchez 26).

This theory is particularly relevant when analyzing women's experiences in oppressive dystopian settings, where societal norms and patriarchal power enforce strict gender roles. According to Kirkvik (8), dystopian literature often exaggerates aspects of reality to provide a criticism of society and human nature. In the case of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Butler's concept of gender performativity is crucial to understanding the mechanisms of control within the Republic of Gilead. In the dystopian world of Gilead, gender roles are exaggerated to highlight their performative nature, emphasizing how they are constructed and enacted. Just as Butler describes how performative acts solidify gender identities, the rituals and restrictions imposed on women in Gilead serve to reinforce their status as passive objects, governed by patriarchal and theocratic power structures. In this world, the performance of gender is not just a social expectation but a requirement enforced through religious and political doctrine. Male



gaze, often justified by divine authority, transforms women into passive objects whose sole purpose is reproduction, stripping them of their individual identities.

Some questions raised in this context include: How does the male gaze, under the pretext of divine authority, reduce women to passive objects of reproduction, taking away their own identities? How does the state enforce gender performativity through religious rituals, where every action, dress, and word is a performance for male eyes? These issues will be explored in the following chapters.

## 5. The Handmaid's Tale

### 5.1. Plot

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel by Margaret Atwood that was published in 1985 and the subsequent television adaptation was created in 2017 by Bruce Miller. The narrative presents a dystopian future where gender roles are exaggerated and strictly enforced in line with Butler's theory of gender performativity. The novel is set in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime that has replaced the United States after a Civil War. This new society responds to an ecological catastrophe that has caused widespread infertility by turning women into tools for reproduction, depriving them of autonomy and identity. The fertile women, known as "Handmaids," are forced to perform their roles as child-bearers in carefully controlled rituals that strip them of their individuality. Moreover, they don't have the ability to read, travel, or even make an eye contact with men. Their uniform — a long red dress and a white bonnet — also depicts the fact that they do not have any human rights and that they are the property of the state.

The story is narrated from the perspective of a woman named Offred. Her name is never revealed in the novel, though the television adaptation names her June Osborne. The name "Offred" is a linguistic construct of "of" and "Fred," indicating her subjugation to a man named Fred. The name also suggests "Offered", reflecting her role as a functional tool for reproduction. Offred becomes a symbol of resistance to patriarchy and governmental oppression of women. Through flashbacks, she recalls her past life, which contrasts starkly with her current reality in Gilead. These recollections show her past life as a daughter of feminist activist who had a life full of freedoms that no longer exist for women. Before the rise of the theocratic state, she attended university, had close friendships, and even had a romantic relationship with a married man, who she eventually married and had a daughter with.

The novel explores the themes such as religion, control, power, and the subjugation of women under theocratic regime. *The Handmaid's Tale* critiques totalitarianism, the fragility of women's rights, and the possible outcomes of environmental catastrophe. The intersection of patriarchy, gender inequality, and religion is clearly demonstrated through various examples from the plot. The Ceremony, a ritual that occurs once a month, reinforces the handmaids' roles as vessels for reproduction and illustrates the violation of women's autonomy under the pretext of religious obligation. Moreover, at the Red Center, women are indoctrinated into their roles as Handmaids, learning behaviors and language they must use to survive in Gilead.

Religious texts and salutations are employed to justify the systematic oppression of women, offering a critique of religious fundamentalism within patriarchal society. By employing religious texts and salutations, Atwood provides a critique of religious fundamentalism within a patriarchal society that systematically oppresses women. The series adaptation, which premiered in 2017, extends this critique beyond Atwood's novel, serving as a powerful reflection on contemporary social patterns.

## 5.2. The Temporal Significance of *The Handmaid's Tale*: Bridging Past, Present, and Future

Temporal dislocation plays a significant role in *The Handmaid's Tale*, as the narrative interweaves past, present and future events. By incorporating elements from both the past and the present, Atwood constructs a world that is simultaneously familiar and alien, emphasizing the novel's relevance to contemporary society. The blending of time periods not only blurs the boundaries between them but also encourages the reader to confront the possibility that Gilead could materialize in reality at any moment. Furthermore, Atwood's future is not completely unknown; it extracts recognizable elements from history and places them in a futuristic context. As Quintas (2019) observes, this temporal transition creates a sense of unease because the depicted society seems feels plausible, grounded in elements of our own reality. Additionally, the television adaptation of the novel further strengthens this effect, as it aired during a period of heightened political and social awareness regarding women's rights, authoritarianism, and the rise of populist movements (Quintas, 2019: 9).

Atwood's novel was inspired by real events. In an interview, she explained that her writing was influenced by America's Puritan roots, a society ruled by strict religious norms and unequal gender roles. *The Handmaid's Tale* combines elements of modern patriarchal society and sexist

culture to represent a dystopia that disregards basic human rights. Moreover, the narrative highlights the sexist foundations of American society, particularly the Puritan ideals that continue to shape contemporary gender inequality and stereotypes. Atwood presents a vivid projection of what reality could become if these ideas were to dominate society. Puritans practiced their faith in every aspect of life, and their society was governed by a combination of religion, law, and gender roles (VanWormer 1-3).

Colonial Puritanism embodies the real-world model for Gilead, the radical religious society represented in *The Handmaid's Tale*. As in Atwood's novel, women in colonial Puritan society were confined to domestic responsibilities and subjected to their husband's authority. Furthermore, they were prohibited to read anything but the Bible. Women in both colonial Puritanism and Gilead lack economic autonomy and control over their lives. In Gilead, most women are infertile, and those who can still conceive are forced to become Handmaids, whose sole purpose is to bear children for upper-class men. These representations of gender inequality originate from the early foundations of the United States and have developed into contemporary stereotypes within American society. Moreover, *The Handmaid's Tale* is inspired by the unsettling socio-political events of 1985 in the United States, such as the rise of conservatism, a focus on family values, and Ronald Reagan's election. The novel also reflects the global socio-political situations of the time, such as Romania's demographic policies which included monitoring pregnant women, banning abortions, and transferring children from lower-class families to the elite in Philippines (Vrbanić 43).

Bechar (38) suggests that the post-apocalyptic world depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* series can be interpreted as an allegory for the political situation in the United States during Donald Trump's presidency. During this period, many women experienced anxiety over new executive orders and legislation, particularly Republican attempts to reduce women's reproductive rights and healthcare access. Furthermore, the dissatisfied population used social media to express their discontent by quoting lines from the book and series, such as "Under his eye" and "Blessed be the fruit" (39). Many women embraced the red and white Handmaid costumes as a form of protest against patriarchal oppression. For example, in July 2018, women dressed as Handmaids to meet Vice President Mike Pence in Philadelphia. Protests also erupted after Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation to the Supreme Court, with women chanting "We do not consent" outside the Senate and Capitol Hill. Similar imagery appeared in the United Kingdom during protests against Donald Trump's visit, where protestors wore the iconic red dresses and white bonnet. The protests, drawing from *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlight a global response to

patriarchal oppression. The Handmaid costumes serve as a powerful visual statement, highlighting the nearness of Atwood's dystopian world to our own reality (41).

### 5.3. A Feminist Dystopia within a Patriarchal Society

*The Handmaid's Tale* is often described as a dystopian novel, containing specific characteristics that invite comparison with earlier works of dystopian fiction. Although both novel and the series share similarities with George Orwell's *1984*, they differ in narrative style and their perspective on dystopia. While George Orwell's *1984* projects a static and clear depiction of a typical dystopian state, Atwood reveals Gilead's oppressive patriarchal regime gradually, through flashbacks. Moreover, Gilead's society is described more directly, centering on the protagonist's personal adventures before providing broader political picture.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* the female characters are stripped of their basic human rights and are seen in the Gileadean regime as 'walking wombs,' useful only for bearing children for the upper classes. Nevertheless, there are no imaginative characters in the novel and the narrative is no different from the events that could happen in the real world. The changes in Gilead happen slowly, making the characters aware that they are losing their rights. Consequently, while the novel may not fit the traditional mold of dystopian fiction, it serves the same literary purpose by reflecting real fears about societal regression (Bacci 155).

In Gilead's patriarchal society, a rigid hierarchy divides men and women. At the top of the hierarchy are the Eyes and Commanders, followed by Angels, Guardians and the Poor. Men, even the lowest ranking ones, are still considered superior to all women, regardless of the women's position within their own hierarchy (Gonca 109). Moreover, this patriarchal structure is reinforced through the use of women's names. Female characters are renamed based on the Commander they are obedient to. For example, the protagonist is named "Offred" to illustrate that she is the property of Fred (9).

Atwood provides limited information about the world outside of Gilead, with Ontario being the only foreign region mentioned as sanctuary. Focusing on these details, Atwood suggests more intimate analysis of the character's experiences. According to Mohr (2005), dystopian literature can be divided into two phases: classical dystopia and feminist dystopia. While Orwell's *1984* is classified as a classical dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* is identified as a feminist dystopia (Mohr 27). Notwithstanding, the feminist dystopia in *The Handmaid's Tale* is particularly shaped by the influence of religion, particularly Catholicism, as an important element of oppression in both the novel and the series.

As a feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects feminist movements. Offred's mother represents the second wave of feminism, advocating for political, economic, and personal equality in 1980s, while Offred represents later generation, which enjoys the benefits gained from the earlier movements such as access to jobs and bank accounts. Additionally, with Offred being the narrator, the audience is more likely to be emphatic in understanding the necessity of protecting and respecting women's rights. Both in the series and in the novel, several elements of feminist dystopia can be recognized. Firstly, the focus is in Offred, a single woman, and her personal experiences within a dystopian society. Furthermore, Offred acts as a medium for protest, trying to 'give voice' to all women who endure both physical and psychological suffering in the oppressive society. Köylüoğlu (2022) explains:

Totalitarian feminist dystopias portray a gloomy environment in which people's social and private lives are constantly scrutinized by an oppressive government, isolating, unhappy, interchangeable, and disposable individuals. (9)

In essence, totalitarian feminist dystopias depict a feminist critique of extreme patriarchal dominance and warn about the possible outcomes of the extreme patriarchal dominance that disempowers women to the margins of society. Unlike many feminist dystopias that point to specific oppressors, *The Handmaid's Tale* suggests that the systematic abuse will continue until the entire patriarchal system is subverted. In addition, the purpose of this genre is to alert the audience to the issues that they may fail to notice at the moment. Dystopias function as a mirror for audience as the narrative often reflects their own social realities, potentially leading to a horrible world projected in the dystopian fiction (Holladay and Classen 5). Moreover, the main idea is to remind individuals to express their concerns and respond to minor changes happening in their society, as significant societal shifts happen when people remain silent during these small alterations. *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects this by portraying a slow descent into a tyrannical government that oppresses women until it is too late to fight back.

### 5.3.1. Gender Performativity in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory emphasizes the gender performance as a means of survival within strict, normative systems. In many societies, certain rules — whether

societal, cultural or familial — dictate how individuals are allowed to express their gender, with consequences for those who do not follow those rules. As Butler states, in unsupportive environments, societies punish individuals who do not adhere to traditional gender roles (Butler 178). In dystopian novels like *The Handmaid's Tale*, this risk of punishment is emphasized. Any form of failure to conform to prescribed gender roles can result in severe consequences, not just for the protagonist, but also for those around her. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the gender performance is directly linked to survival, as characters who deviate from strict gender norms or heteronormativity are punished by being sent to labor camps or executed. Sexuality, too, becomes a tool for survival in response to the regime's brutality. For example, Offred pretends to be sexually interested in the Commander to protect herself from further consequences and punishment. Thus, survival in Gilead often depends on the ability to conform outwardly, even when internally resisting (Kirkvik 10).

The Gileadean regime promotes a rigid categorization of women into roles that center around servitude, household duties, and male authority. This structure emphasizes the performative aspect of the gender roles, reducing women to mere functions. Handmaids, for instance, are not allowed to read, write, drink alcohol, have friends, use makeup or choose their own clothes. Dehumanized and often described as “two legged wombs,” they are valued only for their reproductive capabilities. The extensive list of rules they have to obey in order to save their lives underscores the power imbalance between men and women, forcing women to participate in their own oppression. As Kirkvik (13) observes, women are forced to “*perform society's idea of gender*”.

Offred's memories take us back to a time before Gilead was established, revealing a period in U.S. history where women were making significant strides in the quest for equal rights. In her flashbacks, we see a society where traditional gender roles and stereotypes were gradually being changed. Offred was in an interracial marriage, had a successful career, and was friends with Moira, a black lesbian. In Gileadean regime, that kind of progressive environment is perceived as disruptive for ‘natural order’. Moreover, the Gileadean government's goal is to reassert their version of societal hierarchy, forcing women back into their ‘proper’ roles as dictated by religious texts. Throughout the novel, Judith Butler's concept of performativity is emphasized, with Offred being objectified based on her assigned performative role, particularly her reproductive function. As a fertile but ‘immoral’ woman under Gilead's regime, she occupies one of the lowest social ranks in her society. Moreover, her value as a woman, defined by her female body, dictates her behaviors, appearance, desires, and her position in a society.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the connection between the gender roles and performances is highlighted, leading to the creation of, as Kirkvik (2015) names it, “extreme gender”, which is rigidly forced on the Handmaids (13). Hence, Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that “one is not born a woman, but it rather becomes one” is confirmed through the narrative, as the Handmaids constantly perform feminine behaviors shaped by the expectations of the society (14). Despite internalizing these expectations, Offred is highly aware that her identity is not innate but socially imposed. In addition, she treats her body as a manufactured object, rather than a natural state. This portrayal of discomfort in one’s own body offers a critique of gender essentialism, emphasizing the negative effects of strictly imposed gender norms (32).

Another important aspect tied to the gender performativity theory in the *Handmaid's Tale* is the significance of the garments that women are required to wear. As a Handmaid, Offred wears a specific uniform that includes a long robe, a red veil, and a white bonnet (called “wings”) that covers her hair. Additionally, Atwood used the color of the clothing to further emphasize the contrast between the female desire for freedom and the modesty demanded of women. Red, symbolizing passion and sexual desire, contrasts with the modesty demanded of women. Furthermore, the red and white uniform makes Handmaids visible and recognizable while obeying the modesty demanded by Gilead’s regime and strict religious norms. Moreover, the uniform does not only make the Handmaid’s distinguishable, it also reinforces the existing hierarchy among women, as their color-based clothing is determined by their roles in the society. For example, Commanders’ Wives wear blue, Econowives wear striped blue and green dresses, Aunts wear brown, Marthas wear green, the daughters of the Commanders wear white, and the Aunts in the Red Center wear khaki dresses. Though Offred misses her freedom, she quickly adapts to her prescribed clothing. Moreover, when she sees a woman in regular clothes, she comments on her strange appearance, emphasizing how Gilead’s totalitarian state has distorted her perceptions. In particular, in chapter 5, Offred subconsciously condemns tourists in high heels and exposed hair, perceiving their makeup and clothing as overly sexual, despite having dressed similarly before Gilead. This reaction illustrates how she absorbed many of the regime’s standards, feeling guilt and shame when confronted with reminders of her former freedom.

Moreover, the rigid and unnatural dialogue in *The Handmaid's Tale* further emphasizes how speech functions as another form of gender performativity. The conversations, particularly between the Handmaids, are often scripted, supporting further control over them. They are not allowed to speak freely and must use approved phrases, as the friendships among women are

strictly prohibited. These phrases are prescribed by the government and often have biblical connotations:

‘Blessed be the fruit,’ she says to me, the accepted greeting among us.

‘May the Lord open,’ I answer, the accepted response . . .

‘The war is going well, I hear,’ she says.

‘Praise be,’ I reply. (17)

This scripted communication between Ofglen and Offred emphasizes the repetitive nature of their speech, mirroring the uniformity and conformity imposed through their clothing, making the Handmaids a part of repetitive and controlled pattern (Kirkvik 27). Offred’s and Ofglen’s behavior is intentionally performed in every aspect, from the way they walk to the way they recite the conversation. Nevertheless, it is later revealed that Ofglen has been a part of the rebel group Mayday, demonstrating that she intentionally played the role of a Handmaid, obeying to the Gilead’s rules and gender expectations, including the way she spoke, acted or dressed. The Handmaid’s clothing act as costumes and their speech as a script written by the government. This further emphasizes how both society and the women within it are forced to play assigned roles and follow Gilead’s strict gender norms in order to survive.

### 5.3.2. *The Gaze as a Tool of Power*

Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze is grounded in the idea that, in classical cinema, women are often portrayed as subjects who depend on male characters and embody male desires and motivations. Thus, women often lack agency, being represented as passive, visual objects and their identities are shaped by and for male characters. As Mulvey (16) explains, this gaze is driven by *scopophilia* — the pleasure in looking — in which men are active participants (those who look) and women are passive subjects of that gaze. Additionally, female characters embody an image that mirrors male desire rather than being independent characters with their own motivations. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey uses the term *scopophilia* to describe the pleasure of looking, where people derive satisfaction from the objectification of others through a controlling gaze. Additionally, she relates this pleasure to



voyeurism, where the act of watching becomes a source of pleasure, connecting it with cinema, which amplifies this experience (25).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood creates a world where scopophilic tendencies are strictly controlled and regulated. Gilead, being a totalitarian regime, reduces scopophilic pleasure by imposing strict rules on women's appearance, especially through the uniformity. Almost all women, based on their assigned role in society, are forced to wear special clothing. For instance, the Handmaids wear red robes and white bonnets that cover their individuality and sexual allure. Moreover, the clothing women are forced to wear in Gilead serves as a visual barrier, designed to protect women from the male gaze. Nevertheless, despite these attempts to prevent sexual objectification, the male gaze still secretly exists. Moreover, Offred and the Commander's secret meetings that occur during the night emphasize the persistence of male control over female bodies, even within a dystopian society that superficially criticizes eroticism. The narrative demonstrates how external repression cannot fully abolish the power dynamic of the male gaze.

However, the novel also illustrates how women can subvert these dynamics within their restricted agency. For example, Offred often explains how men, especially Guardians and Commanders, observe and objectify her in a subtle manner. In other words, although oppressed, Offred occasionally reclaims a form of power by controlling the male gaze. Moreover, she often manipulates this gaze by slightly altering her body language to draw attention, thereby temporarily restoring a sense of agency.

A clear example of Mulvey's male gaze theory is Offred's visit to the secret brothel, Jezbel's, with the Commander. There, all of the women are dressed provocatively to allure male spectators. These women are excessively objectified, and the Commander even allows Offred to wear makeup and a short dress. At Jezbel's, women are seen as sexual objects, existing solely to fulfill male fantasies. In addition, this ambience is an accurate reflection of Mulvey's concept of the male gaze as women are represented as erotic objects in an environment where the male desire is a dominant force. Nevertheless, while visiting the Jezbel's with the Commander, Offred becomes aware that women there are completely aware of their situation and objectification, but they use it as a strategy for survival. Therefore, they use their position to form a relationship with men which could help them to gain security or to escape. The manipulation of the male gaze is used to challenge and destroy the oppressive system, and the women in Jezbel's manage to subvert the control and gain some form of agency within an oppressive society.

Despite the novel's primary focus on the male gaze, Atwood also offers moments of a reverse gaze, where women's act of watching can be interpreted as means of power. A clear example is Serena Joy's gaze during the Ceremony. During this act between Commander and Offred, Serena Joy watches her husband and the Handmaid with a gaze full of jealousy and pain. Although an active participant of the oppressive regime, Serena uses her gaze in these situations to show a form of control over both Offred and the Commander. Here, Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is disrupted, as Serena's gaze demonstrates how women, even within repressive systems, can employ their own visual power and exercise subtle forms of agency.

Additionally, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the critique of male gaze is intentionally emphasized through the constant surveillance. The central theme of the narrative is the concept of "seeing," as Offred constantly references The Eyes and emphasizes the feeling of being observed and examined. Therefore, it can be concluded how Atwood interprets the male gaze in a patriarchal society as a tool of oppression and marginalization of women, supporting their subjugation (Espinosa 10). A clear example of the government's constant surveillance of women is Offred's visit to the doctor. The imagery in this scene is used to emphasize male-dominated medical authority in Gilead and its link to the patriarchal control. Regardless of the fact that her face is fully covered during the appointment, Offred remains to feel unprotected, as her body is completely exposed and subjected to the male gaze. Despite of being covered wherever she goes, her body is still objectified because of her gender role in the society. Furthermore, since women in Gilead are valued solely for their fertility, the doctor suggests impregnating her, and she fears to reject him due to his societal authority, which could easily manipulate her fate.

According to Gemelas (2019), *The Handmaid's Tale* series uses unconventional focusing and framing techniques to convey the female perspective. The series contains close-up shots as part of its distinctive visual language. The shallow focus is also used, enabling the viewers to closely identify with the protagonist, Offred. Moreover, this technique aligns the viewer's perspective with her facial expressions, making the viewers more emphatic with her story. Additionally, the series utilizes the female gaze to emphasize the protagonist's emotional experiences without objectifying male characters (Gemelas 18).

Another important aspect of the female gaze in *The Handmaid's Tale* is framing. As Bordwell notes, framing defines the physical characteristics of each shot, determining what the viewer sees at any given moment (qtd. in Gemelas 26). It presents the visible space within the frame while also indicating the surrounding area. Moreover, the perspective from which a scene is viewed is equally important. Shots can be captured from various angles, levels, heights, and

distances. In the series, the camera position plays a crucial role in portraying the world from Offred's perspective (Gemelas 27).

As Gemelas (2019) states: "Framing is used to alienate certain characters, or add tension to the scene through point-of-view shots" (31). The shot usually follows the protagonist's eye level, shaping the viewers perception based on the character's point of view. However, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, framing is also used to emphasize the power dynamics among the characters.



Figure1: Offred viewed from the perspective of Commander's wife to show hierarchy among women (s1, ep. 1).

In both the novel and the series, the Handmaids wear the signature bonnet with white wings in public to limit the power of the male gaze. Nevertheless, Offred uses every opportunity to look at men, which is forbidden, thereby creating a form of the female gaze. This female perspective is projected through the framing of her facial movement as a central element. In this context, by closely and almost intimately framing Offred's facial expressions, the female gaze is presented. Offred often uses her body and internal monologues to show resistance to the patriarchal order. Additionally, she uses this "forbidden gaze" to express her rebellion and challenge the power dynamics. Through actions like these, Offred declares her power and attempts to escape from the unjust reality.



Figure 2: Offred looking at Nick (s1, ep. 1).

## 6. *The Handmaid's Tale*: an Intersection of Religion and Gender Oppression

### 6.1. Religious Reinforcement of Gender Roles and Feminine Passivity

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the intersection of religious themes with the theories of the male gaze and gender performativity demonstrates how patriarchal systems are both imposed and questioned simultaneously. The theocratic society of Gilead uses religious doctrine to assert its oppressive measures, downgrading women to the status of mere reproductive vessels and abolishing their individual identities. This environment reflects the principles of the male gaze, where women represent passive objects, viewed through a lens of male authority and power. Events such as The Ceremony and *Prayvaganza* will be analyzed within the framework of the male gaze, as these events frame a religious duty but represent women as passive objects within a patriarchal society.

The Ceremony is a perfect example of the connection between religion and voyeuristic acts, with the Commander literally and metaphorically positioned above the Handmaid, and the Wife observing the act with a controlling gaze. The religious framing of the Ceremony, including the reading of the Bible, justifies the purpose of the sexual act, forcing the Handmaid into the role of a passive object for the male gaze and control. Similarly, during the *Prayvaganza*, the women are aligned and dressed merely for the satisfaction of not only the male gaze but also the gaze of everyone in the audience.

Moreover, the female characters, especially the Handmaids, are forced to perform a special form of femininity defined by the religious norms. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity manifests in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the behaviors of the women, who must obey the rules and embody their assigned roles. The intersection of religion and gender performativity theory is discussed in the following paragraphs. The identities of the female characters are shaped and dictated by the regime's interpretation of religious texts. Women's performative roles are determined by inaccurate interpretations of religious scripture. According to Butler (9), ". . . gender is culturally constructed . . . gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex." Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender is constructed by the societal norms that the state of Gilead imposes on women. Additionally, the government uses religion and selected passages from the Bible to justify and normalize the roles women perform within society.

In the following analysis, we will demonstrate how literal interpretations of the Bible and repetition of certain rituals establish gender roles that reinforce women's subjugation. Therefore, female characters take on the roles of Handmaids, Wives, Econowives, and Marthas to survive within a society that presents these roles as divinely prescribed. However, Atwood also depicts moments of resistance in the novel, as women manage to control the male gaze or confront the imposition of the rigid gender roles. By demonstrating these subtle acts of resistance, Atwood emphasizes the influence of religion on gender dynamics within a dystopian society while also illustrating the potential resilience among women under an oppressive regime.

From the beginning of the narrative, it becomes clear to the reader or viewer that women in this dystopian society are entirely stripped of autonomy in all aspects of life. The regime imposes severe limitations on them, effectively erasing their individual identities and freedoms. These restrictions are closely tied to biblical symbols, manifesting in various forms, such as the mandatory wearing of uniforms that visually signify their assigned roles within the theocratic hierarchy (Tennant 75). The imposition of uniforms is not merely symbolic but a method of reinforcing the rigid social order. Women are permitted to wear dresses assigned to their prescribed roles. Thus, by wearing a certain color, they perform a certain role within the society.

Furthermore, women are compelled to abandon their careers, further stripping them of their independence and reducing them to mere instruments of the state's ideological control (Tennant 76). Perhaps most alarmingly, a significant portion of the female population is denied the basic human right to literacy, an act that underscores the regime's intent to suppress any form of

intellectual or personal empowerment among women. This multifaceted oppression highlights extreme measures taken by the regime to maintain power, illustrating the profound consequences of totalitarianism when justified by a skewed reading of religious doctrine (77).

Overall, the following part of the analysis aims to demonstrate how Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and Judith Butler's gender performativity intertwine with Atwood's use of religious symbols and ceremonies to demonstrate the subjugation of women.

### *6.1.1. Religion as an Oppressive Force*

The idea of an ideal world before 'sinful' humans is reflected in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, which recounts the origin of humanity. This story describes a paradise, Eden, where nature is perfect, and human relations are idyllic, though it only mentions a tree of eternal life, a talking snake, and two naked humans unaware of their nudity. This account raises many unanswered questions: Why is the fruit forbidden? Why is a snake present in paradise? Despite these ambiguities, many have accepted this story as a literal historical account, including some of the greatest thinkers in history (Vrbančić 29). The literal interpretation of this story often positions Adam as the 'primary' human, creating a patriarchal narrative that values men more highly than women (30).

The biblical story of Adam and Eve can be interpreted as a representation of a pre-utopian paradise—a world of perfection before humanity's fall. However, even within this myth, women are already seen as the source of guilt and sin, marking a deeper societal issue that goes beyond biology into the roots of sex, sexuality, and identity. This origin myth has contributed to conflict and violence in later interpretations, particularly around issues of gender. Eden, intended as a state free from sexual differentiation, becomes the site of gendered guilt. The fact that sex, sexuality, and gender are inseparable from human interaction often leads to dystopian scenarios, as shown in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Vrbančić 31).

The biblical story of Adam and Eve has long been used to justify gender hierarchies, with Eve often depicted as the source of humanity's fall from grace. In Gilead, this interpretation serves as the foundation for the regime's rigid patriarchy. Just as Eve was deemed guilty for original sin, the women of Gilead are burdened with responsibility for societal decline, as reflected in their oppressive roles. This connection between religious doctrine and political control is a central theme in *The Handmaid's Tale*, where religion is distorted to justify gender

inequality. Atwood uses these myths to explore the dangerous consequences of literal religious interpretation in political systems, turning paradise into dystopia

Numerous dystopias, whether in literature or film, explore the misuse of religious themes. In fact, the Bible itself, while interpreted by many as a utopian text, also contains dystopian themes, especially in the Book of Revelation. This book introduces a world on the brink of apocalypse, illustrating the use of religious prophecy to predict catastrophe:

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what things must be with speed . . . Happy he reading, and they hearing the words of the prophecy, and keeping the things written in it, for the time is near (The Book of Revelation 1, 1;3).

Feminism as a movement has shown that Christianity does not necessarily promote patriarchy, and there are biblical arguments for gender equality (Junior 19). Margaret Atwood, aware of the Bible's use as a political tool to restrict women's freedoms, critiques these "anti-feminist" interpretations in her work. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Bible's texts are distorted and manipulated by those in power, using religious doctrine to justify the oppression of women. The audience, both readers and viewers, quickly realize that the sermons in Gilead misinterpret religious teachings to uphold an oppressive regime.

According to Tennant (50), in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood presents early demonstrations about the true nature of Gilead's regime by emphasizing the hollow use of religion for political control rather than sincere faith. For instance, in chapter 6, where Offred and Ofglen pass by a church, she reveals it has been converted to a museum, with only a picture of their "ancestors" inside. Despite claiming to be a theocracy, Gilead inhabitants do not attend church services, which signals the absence of real religious presence. Alternately, religious ceremonies like marriages, executions, or machine-generated prayers are used by the state to affirm its control. Therefore, this distortion of faith exposes how Gilead does not represent faith genuinely and uses it only to justify its oppressive regime (Tennant 51).

### *6.1.2. Woman as a Worshipper*

The State of Gilead is a state founded on religion where the regime bases its authority on religious conservatism, justifying its actions by using various biblical teachings. Additionally,

the roles and purpose of women are also established by selective interpretations of the Bible. These biblical readings are interpreted to align with patriarchal norms, with an extra set of beliefs added that were originally never part of the actual Bible (Miceli 96). These new sermons were added to the regime in order to convince women that their duties were religiously commanded in the Bible. Moreover, particular chapters from the Bible were repeated to the women every day, constantly reminding them of their assigned responsibilities. Biblical passages repetitively being recited to women indoctrinates them into their roles as Handmaids, which echoes Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. The gender performativity theory asserts that identity is shaped by repeated actions and societal expectations (Butler 43). Similarly, the Handmaids learn how to behave by being forced to constantly listen to the Biblical passages. This continuous reinforcement forms their identities, converting them into embodiments of patriarchal values.

According to Bechar (2019), the religion has historically been a tool to assert dominance over women. From the beginnings of the Christian doctrine and the Bible, women have been often seen as the original originator of sin, deriving from the story of Adam and Eve. Eve was seen as the main cause of their expulsion from the Eden. Consequently, in the regimes governed by Christian doctrine, women are seen as immoral and sexual beings whose only aim is to serve men and bare children (Bechar 48).

In addition, there are clear similarities between Christian fundamentalism and the regime in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The same as the Gilead's regime uses specific biblical texts to justify their brutal laws, the fundamentalists tend to interpret Bible passages rather literally and selectively (Bechar 49). Furthermore, they use violence and strict punishments to control the society with a pretext of religious beliefs. By way of illustration, sins, such as unlawful relationship between man and woman, abortion, the use of contraception, and homosexuality are punishable by death (50). In the same way that fundamentalists merge church and state, in Gilead, the "Sons of Jacob" reject pluralism. In *The Handmaid's Tale* Sons of Jacob are considered to be founders of Gilead. According to Tennant (12), in Genesis, God promises Abraham, his son and his grandchild (Jacob) that they will have countless children. Later, Jacob has twelve sons, who ultimately "found the twelve tribes of Israel, God's chosen people (Tennant 12)". By referring to the biblical story, Atwood emphasizes the patriarchal framework in Gilead. Moreover, the metaphor of The Sons of Jacob is a clear example of the misuse of biblical texts in Gilead, as they are described to be chosen by God, without genuinely following real religious norms. Furthermore, fundamentalists emphasize the importance of modesty of



women and often control their clothing. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a strict gender hierarchy is highlighted by color-coded, humble clothing worn by the women of Gilead. In conclusion, whether in real life or in dystopian fiction, the religious norms and expectations can serve as a tool of subjugation of women.

## 6.2. Religious Significance of the Names and Ceremonies in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Beyond shaping women's roles, Gilead uses religious symbolism to control personal identity and erase individualism. This is most evident in the naming conventions and ceremonies that strip women of their original identities, replacing them with religiously charged titles. Gilead represents a clerical regime in which biblical terminology pervades every aspect of life and is used as a tool to justify the government's extreme actions towards the citizens. In this dystopian society, patriarchy is intensified so that women do not have the right to work or possess money, reducing them solely to their reproductive functions. Moreover, there are various groups in which women are categorized based on their assigned roles in the hierarchy. Similar to the gender performativity theory elaborated by Judith Butler, each group embodies specific role dictated by Gilead's patriarchal system, emphasizing their subordination. For instance, *Wives* are childless women, married to *Commanders*; *Econowives* have multiple roles in the household and are married to middle-class men; *Marthas* are older women, responsible for housekeeping in Commanders' households; *Handmaids* are fertile women that are forcibly relocated from one household to another to bear children for the *Commanders*; and *Aunts* are women who indoctrinate the Handmaids, teaching them all the dogmas of Gilead. These state-formed identities portray how strict gender roles are used to reinforce the regime's power over women. Each of these roles represent the government's control and patriarchal order under the pretext of promotion of religious orthodoxy.

In the dystopian state of Gilead, the Handmaids were not allowed to use their personal names, which further emphasizes the variety of methods the government used to dehumanize and erase the individual freedoms. Furthermore, this chapter will undertake an analysis of the names assigned to the characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlighting the intricate connections between these names and the underlying themes of religious influence, the systematic oppression of women, and feminist theoretical frameworks.

### 6.2.1. *Offred and the Handmaids*

When Margaret Atwood had just begun to write the novel, she wanted to name it Offred. The name is composed of the male name Fred with the prefix “of”, illustrating ownership. Moreover, the name also has another significance in the context of rituals; it refers to a sacrifice. Nonetheless, Offred, and the other Handmaids, are not allowed to use their real name. In dystopia, a character’s name is related to the role they perform within that society (Tennant 2).

The series begins with a focus on the names, emphasizing their importance to personal identity and power within the boundaries of dystopian world. In Atwood’s novel there is no clear confirmation that Offred’s real name is June. Nevertheless, in the series there are clear indications. In season 2, episode 4 tries to punish Offred by threatening to take her to the Wall to see the man who tried to help her escape. When asked: “Why did God allow such terrible thing to happen?”, Offred replies: “To teach me a lesson.”, to which Aunt Lydia corrects her by saying: “To teach June a lesson.” (Tennant 99). In this scene, the clear distinction between immoral and disgraceful June and faultless Offred is made.

Also, this distinction also has biblical allusion, as biblical characters who change their names are not criticized for their old behaviors. Additionally, in the Bible, apostle Paul is initially introduced as Saul, a persecutor of Christians. After, he converts to Christianity and, by changing his name, all of his bad deeds are forgotten. Similarly, Aunt Lydia indicates that the change of names in Gilead serve as a form of salvation for its citizens. Furthermore, by taking the name Offred and forgetting June, Offred becomes pure and is offered religious salvation. Nevertheless, as the name Offred also refers to sacrifice, throughout the narrative Offred sacrifices her name, life and body for the main purpose this dystopian society expects from her – childbirth.

In addition to the new greetings the Handmaids are obliged to use, the government assigns them new names and ban their original ones. The narrative doesn’t always reveal the real names of the Handmaids and they get the new ones based on the name of their Commander. Same as the protagonist is named Offred because her Commander is Fred, Ofglen is named after Glen, and Ofwarren after Warren. These names metaphorically represent the possession of the Commanders by using “of” followed by the Commander’s name. Furthermore, the concept of handmaid has its roots in the Bible. In the Atwood’s novel, first words include the epigraph from the Genesis:

*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 Bilalah, go unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Genesis 30:1-3 in Atwood 1)*

When she visits the doctor's office, Offred repeats these lines as the doctor offers to help her get pregnant. By repeating this phrase, Atwood emphasizes the biblical role in the creation of the female characters, especially handmaids. Moreover, Gilead follows these lines faithfully. During the Ceremony, the literal representation of the epigraph is shown; the Handmaid is placed between the wife's legs, while the Commander rapes her. Moreover, the Gileadean regime justifies this practice by stating that this practice is a God-given right.

### 6.2.2. *The Aunts*

While the Handmaids are stripped of their identities, the Aunts retain their names and are granted power in Gilead's hierarchical structure. This power comes from their role as enforcers of Gilead's religious and patriarchal doctrines. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Aunts play a crucial role in the oppression of women within Gileadean regime. They are responsible for indoctrinating and supervising the Handmaids, and, while doing that, they help to sustain the patriarchal order. Moreover, the Aunts instill Gilead's doctrine and act as "guardians" of the regime's principles by impacting Handmaids' beliefs and controlling their behavior. Additionally, they are essential in the process of regulation and reproduction of the population.

Aunts have privileged status in Gilead as they educate the Handmaids on everything that is expected from them. Moreover, their elevated status is visible from the fact that they are allowed to keep their real names, such as Lydia, Helena, Sara, and Elizabeth. Moreover, they are allowed to read, write, and even preside over executions. In the female hierarchy they are at the top, taking up maternal, instructional role, focused on the sustaining the patriarchal order.

The term *Aunt* is appropriately chosen, as they are unable to bare children so they cannot be called mothers or grandmothers (López Rúa 34).

The narrative continues to use Bible as a mean of affirmation of power amongst women. Therefore, Aunts' names are all taken from the women in the Bible. By way of illustration, Aunt Elizabeth is named after biblical Elizabeth, who gave birth to John the Baptist after a long time of being infertile (Tennant 5). This biblical story further emphasizes the power of Gilead in creating the Handmaids who are able to bear a child in a time when most of the population is infertile and there is a need for children. In the Bible, Elizabeth is pregnant at the same time as Mary, the mother of Jesus, and, when they meet, Elizabeth blesses her with the words: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!" (Luke 1:42, in Tennant 6). The biblical blessing Elizabeth directs at Mary becomes the base of the Handmaids' everyday greetings in Gilead; *Blessed be the fruit*. Furthermore, in the Bible, Elizabeth is presented as "righteous before God" while the Aunts in *The Handmaid's Tale* are claimed to be spiritual leaders for the Handmaids. Nevertheless, in reality, they use their control and power to manipulate the female characters under their control (Tennant 7).

Another example of the use of biblical names in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the name of Aunt Lydia. In the Bible, Lydia is the first person in Europe to convert to Christianity. Similarly, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunts are presumably the first ones to accept the regime of Gilead as they have a major role in the society later. Aunt Lydia is one of the most intimidating characters as she vigorously uses her power to educate the Handmaids on how they should behave and to describe their role in the society. In the story, Aunt Lydia is a travesty of the biblical story as she often misquotes the Bible and uses that to show her power. For instance, in the book (chapter 12) Aunt Lydia emphasizes the importance of wearing a veil; "Hair must be long but covered. Aunt Lydia said: Saint Paul said it's either that or a close shave" (Atwood 60). In this example, Aunt Lydia inaccurately quotes a fragment from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians in the Bible: "But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-it is the same as having her head shaved (1 Corinthians 11:5, in Tennant 8)". Therefore, Aunt Lydia alters the fragments from the Bible and intentionally misuses the Scripture to legitimize her own beliefs and to ensure that the Handmaids embrace those same beliefs as they are written in the Bible, the ultimate source of authority validation.

By using biblical names, Atwood emphasizes the misinterpretation and misuse of the Bible in the process of educating the Handmaids. Moreover, as the state of Gilead is based on religious beliefs, and all of the government's policies are justified by them, Handmaids in the society

suffer because, by their readings, they only have one purpose – to bear children. Among the gender inequality, supported by the misinterpretation of the Bible, there are also many examples of the inequality amongst women. Additionally, the hierarchy is clearly evident from the selection of their names, their clothing, and their appearance on the screen. To conclude, Atwood intentionally used biblical names with metaphorical meaning to highlight the hypocrisy of the population of Gilead visible in the treatment of women and justified by the religious beliefs.

### 6.2.3. *The Ceremony*

One of the most prominent events in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the ritual of the Ceremony. The Ceremony is portrayed as a religious ritual, beginning with the Commander reading the passage from the Bible. It further highlights the male dominance within the dystopian society and objectifies the Handmaid.

The Ceremony occurs once a month when the Handmaid is ovulating. During this event, the Handmaid lies on the bed with her head between the legs of the Commander's wife, while her own legs dangle off the edge. This placement of the Handmaid is not accidental; it highlights the wife's control within the strict societal and religious rules of Gileadean regime. Furthermore, throughout the Ceremony, the wife firmly holds the Handmaid's hands, proving her power and underscoring the Handmaid's status as an object. The Commander enters the room dressed in formal attire, ignoring the Handmaid and seeing her merely as a means for reproduction rather than as an individual. His sole goal is to obey the government's order to increase the population impregnating the Handmaid.

Additionally, during the Ceremony, the misinterpretation of the Bible is evident, particularly with the biblical passage involving Jacob and his wife Rachel, which is used as a religious validation to support theocratic government's aim of regulating women's bodies and reproductive abilities. The Ceremony is not only a bodily violation, but it also represents the gender oppression endorsed by religion in Gilead. The Ceremony begins with the Commander's reading of the Genesis 30:1-3, which states:

*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 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. (Atwood 1)*

The Gileadean regime selectively uses biblical passages that emphasize the importance of women giving birth and uses them as justification for rape. Therefore, the Commander reads God's command to Adam and Eve to multiply, alongside passages describing Rachel, Leah and their handmaids, Bilalah and Zilpah (Tennant 38). Moreover, the Handmaids are valued solely for their ability to give birth and are denied any erotic and pleasurable experience. In contrast, men are not deprived of sexual satisfaction, as they are allowed to indulge in relationships with Jezebels and often cheat on their wives. Moreover, while women in Gilead are expected to remain pure and clean in every sense, men enjoy sexual freedom due to their presumed polygamous nature. Thus, during the Ceremony, through repeated behaviors and societal norms, women are forced into prescribed roles.

This ritual reinforces Judith Butler's performative aspect of gender, wherein gender is not inherent but is constructed through repeated behaviors. Similarly, in Gilead, the Ceremony is a repeated, state-authorized act that serves as an instrument for reinforcing gender roles in the most extreme form, as women's identities are completely subjected to their biological function of reproduction. During the Ceremony, the Handmaid is forced to perform the role of a reproductive object, while the Commander performs the role of the patriarch and the Wife performs the role of the enforcer of the system. Thus, this sexual act represents a form of performative gendered behavior that consolidates each participant's role in the Gileadean hierarchy. For instance, Offred is forced to accept the identity of a passive object whose only purpose is reproduction. Moreover, the lack of her own individual agency is emphasized through her position during the Ceremony – lying between the Wife's legs while the Commander rapes her. Her identity is constructed entirely through this repeated sexual act, echoing the Butler's theory of gender performativity, where identity is shaped through repeated social performances.

Moreover, religion is profoundly intertwined with the performative gender roles, especially in the Ceremony. The Gileadean regime justifies the subjugation of women's bodies through selective interpretations of biblical texts that legitimize the Ceremony. The story of Rachel and

Leah from the Old Testament, where Rachel is unable to conceive and gives her handmaid to her husband to bear children for her, is used to frame the Ceremony as a sacred responsibility for women in order to procreate. Additionally, the Commander's role as a patriarch is reinforced through the biblical readings, portraying him as "divinely chosen" and granting him religious authority. He performs the role of religious patriarch whose task is to impregnate the Handmaid and to represent the religious justification for this sexual act, which further solidifies his identity as the male authority figure. For instance, by reading the Bible before the Ceremony, the Commander is not simply reinforcing a religious practice, he is also performing the authoritarian role given to him both by the state and religion.

Furthermore, this authority is solidified through the repetition of the Ceremony itself. Offred describes the Ceremony as a cold, emotionless practice:

It seems odd that women once spent so much time and energy reading about such things, thinking about them . . . They are so obviously recreational. This nis not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty. (Atwood 90)

This passage exemplifies the performative nature of the Ceremony, with Offred being passive object enacting the role assigned to her by the state, while the Commander is "doing his duty" as a representative of religious and state authority. Both are performing roles imposed on them by theocratic state but Offred's role is one of subjugation, constructed entirely around her biological capacity.

Thus, the Ceremony is framed as a supposed fulfillment of biblical and state laws, but it is actually a repetitive performance that constructs and reinforces gender hierarchy in Gileadean society. Each time the Ceremony is performed, the Handmaid's passive, reproductive role is recreated, and Commander's authority is reaffirmed. These examples perfectly reflect Judith Butler's theory that repeated acts solidify gender identity, which is never a natural habit but always constructed (Butler 9).

Furthermore, the Ceremony is portrayed as a ritualized sexual act that serves as an instrument for procreation, while also embodying the powerful presence of the male gaze. The intersection of religious ideology and the male gaze emphasizes the objectification of women and the performative nature of gender norms. Laura Mulvey (1989) introduces the concept of the male gaze, which refers to the way women are objectified and represented as subjects of

male desire, ultimately reinforcing patriarchal power structures (15). Similarly, during the Ceremony, the Commander views Offred as a passive object whose only purpose is reproduction. Thus, the Handmaid's own desires and identity are erased, leaving her without agency. The Wife also reinforces this dynamic, confirming the idea that the Handmaid's existence is valuable only for the utility of men. The role of a Wife during this act is to reinforce the male gaze and to support societal expectation that women support their husbands' dominance. The Wife's voyeuristic pleasure derives from the power she has over the Handmaid, allowing her to enforce the patriarchal norms of Gilead while participating in the surveillance of another woman's body.

This aspect emphasizes Mulvey's theory of the gaze, where the act of looking reinforces gender hierarchies and power inequalities. Additionally, she exemplifies how women can support their own objectification and enforce the system that subjugates them. Moreover, the employment of biblical narratives frames the ritual as sacred duty, masking the exploitation and violence. This religious context further emphasizes male gaze by reinforcing the idea that the Handmaid's objectification is acceptable and necessary for the survival of the community. Overall, not only is the Handmaid viewed as a passive object by the male figure, but also by the Wife and the state. Nevertheless, Offred is aware of her objectification and understands that she must perform her role in order to survive. This intersection of the male gaze, religion, and patriarchal norms serves to normalize the objectification of women, preserving patriarchal order and gender hierarchy within society.

#### 6.2.4. *The Wedding Ceremony or Prayvaganza*

The feminist vision of love is based on mutual respect and partnership, with an emphasis on the feminist practice as the only justice social movement that promotes reciprocity. Moreover, feminists criticize any notion of love defined by aspects of patriarchal culture. Similarly, they describe "romantic love," as commonly understood, as love that often makes individuals unconscious and powerless. Moreover, feminists caution that this perception of love is often used to justify harmful behaviors, including abuse, confinement, or even murder. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, while a patriarchal interpretation of love exists, it is directed solely towards the regime, and romantic love is strictly forbidden (Hooks 132).

In the state of Gilead, the government partly shares this feminist opinion: love could only lead to problems and cause suffering. Additionally, romantic love was considered as one of the



reasons for the poor demographic situation. In their view, women who were too emotional and focused on love neglected their primary function – childbirth. Consequently, the system had to be reformed, stripping women of their rights and imposing roles designed to increase the birth rate. Thus, the government’s goal was to suppress emotions through strict punishments in order to facilitate control.

In patriarchal societies, marriage is represented as a social norm for all women. Throughout the history, daughters were sold or traded by their fathers, who held total control over their lives. In the past, women had no option to avoid marriage, as it was often a religious commitment. After marriage, the husband replaced the father and assumed authority over his wife’s life and death. In essence, the husband was the only law and judge that a wife was expected to accept (Mill 42). These recurring historical events symbolize how women are always expected to play the roles the society had imposed on them. Similarly, Judith Butler, who elaborated on the gender performativity theory, states that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler in Arruzza 34). Consequently, Gileadean society prescribes behaviors for the women that include getting married in order for them to be considered righteous.

In Gilead, marriage holds a significance similar to that in other patriarchal societies throughout the history. The wedding Ceremony presented in *The Handmaid’s Tale* perfectly highlights the biblical justification for the oppression and subjugation of women. Within this theocratic regime, daughters are prepared to become Wives through group weddings known as *Prayvaganzas*. Nevertheless, they are not expected to bear children themselves, as that responsibility falls to the Handmaids. During the wedding ceremony, the Commander reads a passage from the Bible in order to justify the mistreatment of women:

Let the women learn in silence with all subjection . . . But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety. (Atwood 217)

This passage not only legitimizes male dominance in Gilead but also portrays women as inherently deceitful, reducing them to their primary role to childbearing. Such a

misinterpretation of scripture — originally contextualized within the framework of worship rather than marriage — highlights how Gilead's leaders manipulate religious texts to maintain control. As Tennant notes, "They would also have had to ignore other passages where Paul stressed the fact that it was Adam's sin that brought death into world . . ." (41). While the novel features many strong female characters, the Bible in Gilead is wielded as a 'man-praising' book. Therefore, all of the Bible readings are misinterpreted and used to justify the values Gilead imposes on women. On the other hand, during the wedding ceremony in the series, Nick, who is a part of the group ceremony, recites a more affectionate passage, looking at Offred; "Love keeps no record of wrongs and endures all things. Love never fails" (Season 2, ep. 5).

The use of biblical passages that highlight the importance of men in a society further reinforces imposed gendered performances. The *Prayvaganzas* serve to display women's submission to patriarchal control and are acts of gendered performance that aligns with Butler's theory, where identities are constructed through constant repetition of normative rules. Moreover, the performative aspect of the wedding ceremony is made even more powerful by the public spectacle as performativity depends on witnesses in order to be legitimized. Thus, the *Prayvaganzas* function as a reaffirmation of the gendered hierarchy in Gilead, including witnesses. The state of Gilead imposes roles that women should perform by using religion as pretext: "Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" (Atwood, 217). According to Butler, structuralist theories, particularly those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, describe the institution of marriage as a form of exchange that solidifies kinship ties, with women being exchanged between patrilineal clans (Butler, 49). Furthermore, through the act of marriage, women are given as "gifts" between men, and serve as objects of exchange. In this context, women do not obtain their individual identities but rather reflect masculine identity. Thus, marriage becomes a repetitive, symbolic act that asserts male identity and power (50). Furthermore, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the mass wedding ceremonies similarly function as rituals of exchange where women are symbolically passed to reinforce Gilead's patriarchal order. Similar to structuralist vision of the bride, women in *Pravaganzas* have no individual identities of their own, rather, they serve as symbols of masculine power and are viewed as instruments for protection of social order. The wedding repeated through public ceremonies, not only establishes and strengthens patriarchal structure but it also serves as religious function by presenting these exchanges as divinely authorized, presenting the act of marriage and the subjugation of women as essential and inevitable.

Overall, *Prayvaganzas* act as a performative event and, similarly as in Butler's theory, gender and power dynamics are solidified through ritualized and repetitive acts.

Furthermore, the wedding ceremony can be analyzed by using the male gaze theory elaborated by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey's theory describes how women are positioned as passive objects of male desire and control. Similarly, during the wedding ceremony in Gilead, women parade in front of Commanders' gaze, emphasizing their status as objects and mirroring the male gaze, where a woman loses her agency and is visually controlled by men in power. During the *Prayvaganzas* the women are not only subjected to the gaze of the men, but also to the gaze of the whole society. The ceremony transforms women into visual spectacles, subject to the gaze of the Commanders and society at large. As Atwood writes:

We must look good from a distance: picturesque . . . Soothing to the eye, eyes, the  
Eyes, for that's who this show is for. We're off to the Prayvaganza, to demonstrate  
how obedient and pious we are. (Atwood 208)

This reflects the erosion of women's agency as their worth becomes defined by their visual appeal to men, embodying Mulvey's idea that women exist primarily for the pleasure of male spectators. Moreover, women's identities are contained in societal expectation of being visually appealing to men, which reinforces Mulvey's notion of the male gaze where women exist merely for the pleasure of male spectators.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that the ceremonies described throughout the narrative serve as powerful portrayal of reinforcement of the patriarchal dominance and control over female bodies within a theocratic regime. Furthermore, during the wedding ceremony, the Commander and other male figures are placed as active participants, while women are performing a role of a passive object to be gazed upon. By analyzing these events through the lens of voyeuristic pleasure, we conclude that by illustrating oppressive dynamics within Gileadean society, Atwood manages to reveal ways in which the male gaze and assigned roles, along with religion, serve as instruments to maintain power and control over women's rights.

## 7. Conclusion

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist dystopia that portrays both structural and individual oppression, drawing connections to the subjugation of women in contemporary society. The author of the novel and the director of the television adaptation effectively communicate social fears and the demand for equality between men and women through fiction. Although there are four statuses of women across different social classes in the narrative, all of them are oppressed in some form. The narrative closely reflects the current societal realities, presenting violence against women as a global structural issue rather than isolated incidents.

*The Handmaid's Tale* offers a critique of patriarchal control, demonstrating how it systematically objectifies women while presenting it as morally and socially justified. The novel and the series illustrate a powerful intersection of religion, patriarchal oppression, and feminist theories such as Judith Butler's gender performativity and Laura Mulvey's male gaze. The strict Gileadean regime uses religious doctrine to preside over women's bodies and establish their roles within a society, imposing fixed gender hierarchies. Mulvey's male gaze theory serves as a guide while analyzing the objectification of women, which are reduced to their reproductive functions, and always represented as inferior to men.

Furthermore, we analyzed the intersection of religion and Mulvey's male gaze theory in the state-imposed ceremonies. Two prominent events for the analysis were *Prayvaganzas* and *The Ceremony*. In both cases, women were represented as inferior to men and were stripped of their autonomy, being subjugated to the male gaze. Furthermore, it can be concluded that women's own identity within Gileadean society is not only threatened by the male gaze but rather by the gaze of all of its participants. By analyzing characters as Offred, Jezbel's women, and Serena Joy, this master's thesis argues that Atwood deconstructs the traditional dynamics of visual power in a patriarchal society. Offred's indirect acts of agency provoke the male gaze, while Serena Joy's controlling and reverse gaze complicates the power structures in Gilead. These elements are used to emphasize the contradiction in a regime that resides on controlling women, demonstrating how, even in the oppressive systems, resistance can disrupt the traditional male-dominated narrative.

Judith Butler's gender performativity theory expands on how these roles are reinforced through societal norms. Therefore, women in the Gileadean society were taught how to behave,

which phrases they should use, and what was forbidden for them. They were forced to obey the rules imposed on them in order to survive. Additionally, throughout the narrative, traditional interpretations of the biblical stories are misinterpreted and subverted to strengthen the theocratic control and to encourage the oppressed ones to remain silent. The biblical story of Adam and Eve serves as a prominent element in understanding the patriarchal system of Gilead, where women are considered guilty by origin and defined by their reproductive roles.

Moreover, many biblical texts and ceremonies were used in our analysis to highlight how the state imposes certain roles women should perform, representing them as divinely ordained. By emphasizing the repetition of certain phrases or events, we argue that Butler's statement that identity is shaped through repeated social performances perfectly depicts the destiny of women in Gilead. Nevertheless, Atwood highlights resistance, demonstrating how women, in subtle ways, manage to subvert these restrictions, using their own 'gaze' and bodies. The novel and the series provide a critique of not only patriarchal systems that operate under the pretext of morality and religious beliefs, but it also highlights the continuous women's struggle for autonomy and freedom, depicting a reflection of contemporary society.

Finally, this thesis argues that in Gilead, gender is not a biological fact but a constructed performance shaped and enforced by the regime's strict religious doctrines. By combining Butler's theory of performativity with Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, this thesis posits that Gilead's religious rituals, such as the Prayvaganzas and The Ceremony, serve to performatively construct gender roles while treating women as objects of exchange, reinforcing male power. Religion thus becomes the ideal tool for control, ensuring that gender roles are not only societal constructs but also perceived as divinely commanded truths. This thesis emphasizes how both visual pleasure and strict gender norms are used to sustain patriarchal dominance. The male gaze, masked as divine authority, reduces women to objects for reproduction, erasing their individual identities.

In Gilead, gender performativity is governed by rituals: every action, every item of clothing, and every utterance is a performance meant for male observation, perpetuating power dynamics and control. Women struggle to escape this constant surveillance, as their lives are ruled by patriarchal scrutiny disguised as religious duty. Ultimately, Atwood's dystopian novel masterfully uses the themes of religion, patriarchy, and gender inequality to reflect issues in contemporary society. Through the application of feminist theories, this thesis offers a critical analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, arguing that despite the systemic oppression in Gileadean society, women find subtle yet meaningful ways to assert their autonomy.

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## **9. Figures**

1. Figure1: Offred viewed from the perspective of Commander's wife to show hierarchy among women (s1, ep. 1); page 21.
2. Figure 2: Offred looking at Nick (s1, ep. 1); page 22.

## Abstract

### **GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

This thesis analyzes the themes of gender inequality under the influence of religion in a dystopian society in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as in the TV series, using feminist theories. Laura Mulvey's *male gaze* theory reveals how women become passive subjects under male control, while Judith Butler's theory of *gender performativity* emphasizes the coercive patterns of women's behavior and clothing according to social expectations. Furthermore, the aim of the paper is to highlight the importance of numerous biblical references with the aim of creating a utopian world from the perspective of gender. The men and women in the novel and TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* have seemingly ideal biblical roles in the attempted utopian state that is the embodiment of Eden. Although the action takes place in a fictional world, the problems dealt with in the novel and TV series are also present in modern society, and their analysis is applicable in the contemporary environment as well. Moreover, the thesis also analyzes the misuse of biblical references, which justify the structure of the patriarchal regime and makes women victims of a repressive system that uses religion to legitimize oppression and control.

**Key words:** The Handmaid's Tale, feminist dystopia, gender inequality, religion, oppression, biblical references, male gaze, gender performativity

## Sažetak

### **RODNA NEJEDNAKOST I ULOGA RELIGIJE U DISTOPIJSKOM DRUŠTVU: SLUŠKINJINA PRIČA**

Ovaj rad analizira teme rodne nejednakosti pod utjecajem religije u distopijskom društvu u romanu *Sluškinjina priča*, kao i u istoimenoj TV seriji, koristeći feminističke teorije. Teorija 'male gaze' Laure Mulvey otkriva kako žene postaju pasivni subjekti pod muškom kontrolom, dok teorija Judith Butler o performativnosti roda naglašava prisilne obrasce ponašanja i odijevanja žena prema društvenim očekivanjima. Nadalje, cilj je rada istaknuti važnost mnogobrojnih biblijskih referenci s ciljem stvaranja utopijskog svijeta iz perspektive rodnosti. Muškarci i žene u romanu i TV adaptaciji *Sluškinjina priča* imaju naizgled idealne biblijske uloge u pokušaju utopijske države koja je utjelovljenje Edena. Iako se radnja odvija u fiktivnom svijetu, problemi koji se obrađuju u romanu i TV seriji prisutni su i u modernom društvu te je njihova analiza primjenjiva i u suvremenom okruženju. Štoviše, analizirana je i zloupotreba biblijskih referenci, koje opravdavaju strukturu patrijarhalnog režima, čineći žene žrtvama represivnog sustava koji koristi religiju za legitimizaciju ugnjetavanja i kontrole.

**Ključne riječi:** *Sluškinjina priča*, feministička distopija, rodna nejednakost, religija, potlačenost, biblijske reference, *male gaze*, performativnost roda