

The New Gilead Society in the city of “Gilead” Depicted in the Novel “*The Handmaid’s Tale*” by Margaret Atwood

Assist. Prof. Dr. Emine Sonal

Girne American University
The Faculty of Humanities
Head of English Language and Literature Department
Girne / North Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

The novel written by Margaret Atwood titled, “The Handmaid's Tale” is a literary text about a community located in the city of “Gilead”, a fictional place where a group of totalitarian, conservative and religious extremists take over control of the country. They abolished the existing democratic and egalitarian society. It is a dystopic male-controlled society set in the year 2195 where women are expected to perform the role of the Handmaid and are signed up for duties as surrogate mothers to become breeding tools for the “republic of Gilead”. People in Gilead, especially women, are categorized and separated according to the roles and activities that they must perform. This paper analyses how the Handmaids are subordinated in their settings based on Gileadean law and the demands of the Commanders within the community. Emphasis is placed on the importance of setting and the impact it has on the novel.

KEYWORDS: setting, Gileadean law, handmaids, dystopic, surrogate mothers, oppression.

INTRODUCTION

Atwood successfully depicts a future dystopia and creates a totalitarian theocratic city by using “space” in a specific way in her novel. The “space” that the characters inhabit is narrow, barren and desolate. It helps the reader realize the futuristic society in the fictional city of Gilead. The word “Gilead” is a biblical name taken from Genesis (31.21) that refers to the “mountainous region east of Jordan” (Easton's Bible Dictionary). This novel was first published in 1985 and is set in the “near future,” as a 22nd century version of the United States. Most of the novel's events are set in the present-day city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, specifically in the Harvard area, where the author received her Master's degree in English from Radcliffe College in 1962. Later, she continued her studies for a postgraduate degree at Harvard University. The “space” she occupies in her novel is a well-known setting to her. It is suggested that the buildings that have been occupied by the government are possibly the main buildings at Harvard University where she was studying literature on the American Puritans” (Atwood and Oates, 2017: 9).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the society of Gilead is ruled by a social system in which men have power and control over women. Gilead is governed by the Commanders¹ who advocate the new Christian government's extreme policies and a neo-puritan ideology that dominates all aspects of people's lives. In Gilead, institutions are founded according to the constitution of Bible and put under the control of the Commanders. Patriarchy manifests itself throughout the novel in terms of the social, political, and ideological points of view of the characters.

The Commanders of the Republic of Gilead insist that inappropriate use of advanced technology and industry has negatively affected the fertility of human beings. The common assumption is that excessive toxic chemicals, pollution and nuclear radiation have meant that three in four women are sterile. Offred, the protagonist of the novel is also the narrator who is a 35 year old woman, states the following:

The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up, and meanwhile they creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells. (Atwood 1985, 143)

¹ In *The Handmaid's Tale*, there is a pecking order among the women in Gilead's patriarchal system. All the names for people and for place throughout the novel are capitalized by the author, Margaret Atwood such as “Wives”, “Marthas”, “Aunts”, “Handmaids”, “Econowives”, “Unwomen”, “Commander” and “Colonies”. Hence, these names are capitalized in this study.

***Corresponding Author:** Assist. Prof. Dr. Emine Sonal, Girne American University, The Faculty of Humanities, Head of English Language and Literature Department, Girne / North Cyprus. eminesonal@hotmail.com
Mobile Phone: 0 548 826 1032 (Work) (392) 650 2000 / 1461 (ext.) (Fax) (392) 650 2061

Throughout the novel, she reveals the details of her previous life and she explains that she had a happy life with her husband and daughter. She was one of the few remaining healthy and fertile young woman, she was taken away by the guards of the totalitarian theocratic state at the checkpoint when she was trying to escape to Canada with her family. Being a postmodern novel, *Offred*, the Handmaid, whose real name is not given, is narrating the events in non-chronological order in Stream of Consciousness and technique. Early in the story the reader is informed that she was kept in a gymnasium with other women, who were also young and fertile. Through her narration, the reader experiences the nightmare like world of Gilead and learns the women’s desire to return to their traditional norms, values, and gender roles.

In the Republic of Gilead, women are categorized according to their reproductive capacity. Hogsette (1997) in his article, *Margaret Atwood’s Rhetorical Epilogue in the Handmaid’s Tale*, states that the Republic of Gilead defines the Handmaids in terms of the “condition of their ovaries” and as “objectified livestock” that have the “purpose of repopulating North America”. Gökçen (2014, 42) in her article points out that Offred’s function in this society is, “reduced to the reproductive capacity of her body” and emphasizes that “any deviation from this is punishable by no less than death” (p.42).

Offred was assigned to become the official breeder of a high-rank Commander named Fred whose wife had become sterile. Not only Offred, but other Handmaids were considered as being of value if their ovaries were capable of producing a fetus. The name ‘Offred’ itself is a possessive derivational prefix of the term ‘Of Fred’ which means she belongs to Fred, the Commander. This example alone exposes the atrocities that take place in the house of the Commander and the society of Gilead in general. Offred’s life is unbearable; she has restricted freedom, stays in an isolated room, and is being watched by the “Eyes” who are the Gilead secret police. For Offred, her room with a single bed is just a place to sleep in as the following quote highlights:

There is suppose[d] to be nothing entertaining about us, no room is permitted for the flowering of secret lusts; no special favors are to be wheedled, by them or us, there are to be no footholds for love. We are two-legged wombs, that’s allsacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (Atwood 1985, 176)

Humphrey, in his book titled, *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation* quotes Foucault’s view on atrocity which reflects the plight of Offred as given below:

Historically Foucault identifies atrocity as a mechanism used to display the absolute power of the sovereign. The spectacle of the ‘tortured body’ was a dramatically staged and tightly scripted event based on the triadic structure of ruler—ruled—victim. Atrocity—causing pain and suffering in the victim—was made a spectacle as a ritual of state power. Public torture demonstrated the sovereign’s privilege and prerogative to absolute power over life and death. Atrocity, expressed in the excess of violence against the victim’s body, demonstrated the sovereign’s embodiment of the law and violence. He was both the law and above the law. (1977: 2-3)

The Bible and its teachings are used to control the people in Gilead, Offred’s life of captivity and the Commander’s regime is justified through its biblical scriptures. She manages to survive with help from her past life and memories related to her daughter, her husband Luke, her mother and her best friend Moira from the college. These are the memories that keep her alive in this depressing and gloomy atmosphere and the hope that one day Gilidean law and its oppressive rules will end and she can return to a peaceful time.

The Space (Setting) in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Henri Lefebvre, a French philosopher, sociologist and the space theorist who is best known for his work, “The Production of Space” states the following by quoting Marx and Engels:

...the concept of production ... has two senses, one very broad, the other restrictive and precise. In its broad sense, humans as social beings are said to produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world. There is nothing, in history or in society, which does not have to be achieved and produced. (1991:68)

Based on the quotation above, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the reader is first introduced to the “Rachel and Leah Re-education Center,” which in reality is the Red Center as called by Handmaids “because there was so much red” (125). The center used to be a school gymnasium before the Gilead society formed; but now the center is used for the indoctrination of Handmaids and a place where they learn their roles within the new system. Aunt Lydia

and Aunt Elizabeth are wardens working at the Red Center. They help the Commanders control the women and make sure they are obedient and silent. Here, the Handmaids are not permitted to talk to each other so they create their own unique form of sign language.

An important “space” for Offred is her room in the Commander’s house where she serves as a Handmaid. She gives the details of her surroundings as follows:

A chair, a table, a lamp. Above, on the white ceiling, a relief ornament in the shape of a wreath, and in the center of it a blank space, plastered over, like the place in a face where the eye has been taken out. There must have been a chandelier, once. They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to [...]. (Atwood 1985, 9)

Offred’s room does not even have a mirror and anything that is considered as being a means for suicide is removed by the Commanders. “On the wall above the chair a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolor” (10). Gileadean authorities leave no items in the room that are considered as being nonessential for the Handmaids. For example, there is no dress hanger, no needle, no shelves, no side board, no body lotion and no comb. Offred finds it very difficult to get used to her new room:

The door of the room-not my room, I refuse to say *my*-is not locked. In fact it doesn’t shut properly. I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the center, dusty pink. Like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way. (Atwood 1985, 11)

Humphrey furthermore states that “the modern state puts control on individual life at the centre of their sovereign power” (2002:3). In Gilead, power has reached into the very grain of individuals, touched their bodies and has inserted itself into their actions, attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday life. It becomes an oppressive agent yet also a creative force. In the Commander’s house, there is no privacy for Offred because the door of her room cannot be locked using a key and always remains half open. When she is in her room she is easily seen by the Marthas (the female guardians) from the corridor and the entrance of the kitchen. Yet, Offred manages to develop the idea that her room is her private space and accepts that she must obey the Gileadean order: “My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine” (66). Offred, in her former life, was an independent woman earning money of her own and able to access knowledge through reading books, magazines and journals.

In the novel, all the women dress according to their status in that society. For example, the Commanders’ wives have a blue colored dress, the Martha’s have a green dress while the Handmaid’s have a red one. Each Handmaid must wear a restrictive white winged cap that prevents them from properly looking left or right. The idea that their bodies should be fully covered stems from the desire of the Commanders to commodify them according to their requirements:

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen.” (Atwood 1985, 11)

Grocery shopping once a day with Ofglen, another Handmaid, is the only outside space Offred is permitted. When Offred and Ofglen walk to the food markets, there are no words written on the windows and even the traffic signs are presented in the form of pictures because women are not allowed to read any more. Offred notes that there are barriers, floodlights, pillboxes and men with machine guns on both sides of the road. The installment of barricades prevents free movement to other places and the presence of guards and Eyes are a constant threat for Offred and all Handmaids. Offred and Ofglen go through a checkpoint where two guards check their identity. In the following quotation, Offred gives the reader clues about her captivity in Gilead:

We reach the first barrier, which is like the barriers blocking off roadworks, or dug-up sewers: a wooden crisscross painted in yellow and black stripes, a red hexagon which means Stop. Near the gateway there are some lanterns, not lit because it isn’t night. Above us, I know, there are floodlights, attached to the telephone poles, for use in emergencies, and there are men with machine guns in the pillboxes on either side of the road. I don’t see the floodlights and the pillboxes, because of the wings around my face. (Atwood 1985, 26-27)

The city wall in Gilead is a physical barrier that restricts free movement from one place to another. Offred gives details about the wall in the following quotation:

The Wall is hundreds of years old too; or over a hundred, at least. Like the sidewalks, it’s red brick, and must once have been plain but handsome. Now the gates have sentries and there are ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top. No one goes through those gates willingly. The precautions are for those trying to get out, though to make it even as far as the Wall, from the inside, past the electronic alarm system, would be next to impossible. (Atwood 1985, 43)

It is interesting to note that the wall in the text represents a barrier for the people in Gilead just as the Berlin Wall divided Germany from 1961 to 1989 and which became known as the “death strip.” The wall in the text has many functions as described by Offred:

Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have been a Men’s Salvaging early this morning. I didn’t hear the bells. Perhaps I’ve become used to them. We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn’t matter if we look. We’re supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they’ll be there for days, until there’s a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them. What they are hanging from is hooks. The hooks have been set into the brickwork of the Wall, for this purpose. Not all of them are occupied. The hooks look like appliances for the armless. Or steel question marks, upside-down and sideways. (Atwood 1985, 43)

The abortionists, rebels and protestors represent the victims of Gileadean society. Those who disobey Gileadean law are hanged on the wall to frighten and terrorize any disloyal people. The “Men’s Salvaging” is the name of public executions that take place in the main square of the city in the novel. Lefebvre, in his work, *The Space of Production* states that “Any object may be extracted from everyday practice and suffer a displacement which will transform it by transferring it into monumental space.” (1991:225)

Women are kept under control both physically and spatially, which means that their actions are subject to surveillance where citizens are also forced to spy on each other. The constant gaze acts as a disciplinary and normalizing force that instills control. Without surveillance there would be no controlling mechanism. Foucault (1977) calls this ‘normalizing individuation,’ where subjects are kept in institutions in such a way that they too become a resource of power whose conduct is patterned and supervised. The women share the fear of the outside world with each other and live in a dehumanized state. Gilead has the identical atmosphere of a prison as indicated by Foucault:

The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation; it is, by its very nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs. (304)

The quotation given above reflects the carceral forms of the Gileadean Republic. In the society, the Aunts have been forced to become loyal supporters of the Commanders because they are not young and fertile. As Callaway (2008) states, “the male- dominated power structure relies on women to regulate one another and enforce social standards” (10). Atwood in an interview with Danita J. Dodson explains that “In Gilead control comes amongst the women themselves” (1997:103). In an ironical manner Aunt Lydia in the Red Centre reminds all Handmaids about freedom:

There is more than one kind of freedom, Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it. (Atwood 1985, 33)

The most frequently mentioned “space” in the novel is the Commander’s living room where he reads the Bible and performs official ceremonies. Offred is summoned for sex with the Commander once a month which has become an impersonal and wordless ritual since she was assigned to him as a Handmaid. Humphrey in his book, suggests that “Pain is the bodily feeling produced by violence; political power is the source of

violence, and suffering is the legacy of violence remaining as a memory in individual bodies” (2002:1). Offred comments on the details about her painful and agonizing experiences as a victim in the Commander’s house:

My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. . . . [The Commander] is preoccupied, like a man humming to himself in the shower without knowing he's humming; like a man who has other things on his mind. It's as if he's somewhere else, waiting for himself to come, drumming his fingers on the table while he waits. (Atwood 1985, 121-122)

Vassalo, in her article *Embodied Memory* states that, for the victim, pain is difficult to communicate and the traumatic experience is not easily recovered wholly (2008:190). Offred is unable to speak out effectively and reflect upon her agony and anger except when waiting for her destiny to reveal itself in her small and dark room.

The “Underground Frailroad” and “the Colonies” are frequently stated but do not exist as actual settings but are indirectly implied as “spaces” within the novel. The “Underground Frailroad” also refers to the conflict between those who struggle for freedom and those who prevent it. “Underground Frailroad” is an invented phrase that symbolically represents the Underground Railroad of Harriet Tubman’s great effort during the civil war as an American abolitionist and humanitarian. She rescued hundreds of fugitive slaves through the Underground Railroad which was a vast network that helped them escape to the North and to Canada in the first half of the 19th century” (Outline of U.S. History, 2011:91). The Underground Frailroad in the novel represents escape from Gilead whereby women attempt to overthrow Gilead through the resistance network. The resistance network is a small group of men and women who secretly plan to escape Gilead by whatever means necessary. Hilde Steals notes that “Gilead’s victims can find refuge only in a secret Female Underground Road that leads from New England to Canada”. She says that, “the underground is also a hiding place in the margins of the society from which subversives attempt to disrupt the power of the regime above ground” (Steals 1995:455).

The “Colonies” are a place where the women [Unwomen] whose ovaries are no longer viable, are sent. They are taken away from the city to cleanse the toxic dumps until they die of radiation poisoning. Handmaids who do not want to bear children for the Commanders and are not fertile are obliged to work as prostitutes or they are sent to the dreaded Colonies to clean up radiation spills like Offred’s mother. Offred’s best friend Moira says that she saw Offred’s mother at the Red Center in a film they showed them about women working in the Colonies: “There was a close-up, it was her all right. She was wrapped up in one of those gray things but I know it was her” (Atwood 1985, 327). The following is the inner thoughts of Offred about Moira, the most dynamic female character in the novel who fights against male oppression:

Here is what I’d like to tell. I’d like to tell a story about how Moira escaped, for good this time. Or if I couldn’t tell that, I’d like to say she blew up Jezebel’s, with fifty Commanders inside it. I’d like her to end with something daring and spectacular, some outrage, something that would befit her. But as far as I know that didn’t happen. I don’t know how she ended, or even if she did, because I never saw her again. (Atwood 1985, 325)

The word Jezebel that is used in the novel refers to a secret whorehouse where the Commanders are entertained in the evenings. It also refers to the women who work at the Jezebel club and the sterilized prostitutes who serve the Commanders of high status.

Furthermore, Malak, (1987) in his article, “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” and the Dystopian Tradition” points out that “the state of Gilead prescribes a pattern of life based on conformity, censorship, corruption, fear and terror” (9-10). Atwood uses considerable skill in her literary work deliberately using limited “space” for its setting to maximize the impact on the reader. In the text, at the Red Center, the Handmaids are indoctrinated, humiliated and terrified by the Aunts as this quote reveals: “Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thorns from their belts” (4).

CONCLUSION

Atwood’s novel can be analyzed using the three stages outlined by Lefebvre. He introduces distinctive terms such as, “spatial practice,” “representations of space,” and “spaces of representation” to differentiate between the social and spatial practice of spaces which in turn contribute to the production of space according to their attributes. For Lefebvre, space is viewed in three ways: “as perceived, conceived and lived” which are never simple or stable. This Lefebvrian schema sees a unity between physical, mental and social space” (qtd. in Elden, 2001: 815).

The wall described in the novel restricts freedom of movement and generates fear in the Handmaids as they approach it. Physically, the wall is not only spatial geometry but also influences behavior where Handmaids are reminded of their reduced freedoms. It is the same social practice of traversing the wall “as a kind of neutral setting in which life transpires” (Molotch, 1993:888).

Stuart Elden, Professor of Political Theory and Geography, explains that physical space refers to “physical form” that is generated and used (2001:815). The physical space in novel centers around the Commander’s house with its cellar and attic, Offred’s small room, the doctor’s office, the shop, the Jezebel, and the Colonies. These places become a cohesive composition of forms that have symbolic meanings and represent a routine of life where every individual is forced to confront their reality. Elden, on the other hand, points out that space refers to “the space of knowledge and logic” (2001:815) which corresponds with the conceived or proposed space tied to the relation of production that helps reader to visualize the novel in terms of the signs, maps, codes, colors, etc. “Space” can be “produced and modified over time through its use” (2001:816) and can be lived and experienced as part of the social world. Beaugarand (2011) also concludes that “space is made a product of action [and] space takes on a material existence” (474). In relation to those space theories, the concept of “space” depicted in Atwood’s novel can be interpreted in the following ways:

- Perceived Space is the Jezebel for Handmaids who disobey the Gileadean rule and Colonies is the “space” where Unwomen are sent to clean toxic agents as a punishment
- Conceived Space is the Underground Frailroad where the victims of Gilead society can achieve ultimate freedom
- Lived Space is the Commander’s house, Red Center and Offred’s room, representing both spatial practice and space representation

It is accepted by scholars that “space” as setting, in other words, imaginative location in any literary work has significant meaning. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the production of space reflects the creative and artistic ability of the author. The Handmaids in the novel are horrified at the government’s reproduction policies. Their life is controlled, fragmented, dull, alienated and they are dehumanized because of the prohibition of reading, writing and speaking. They are victims of the regime where they gradually lose their identity and their personality is diminished to make them obedient to Gilead. Throughout the novel, the reader is reminded of the restricted “space” in which the Handmaids must live to be in accordance with Gileadean law. This results in feelings of extreme isolation, suffocation and segregation from the other members of society in Gilead.

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