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The Political Relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract:

The critically acclaimed novel 'The Handmaid's Tale', written by the incredible Canadian storyteller, Margaret Atwood in 1985, looks into the dystopian world of the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States of America. In this horrifying totalitarian theocratic Christian regime, the State's power is in the hands of only a privileged few who have subjugated the rest. It follows the journey of Offred, the narrator of this story, who has lost her family, her economic means, her freedom, her sense of individuality, even her name and most importantly, the right to control her own body. The story encompasses navigating through a brutal and unjust system, preserving one's individuality in the hope of this system's equally brutal end and presenting sheer feminine strength and resilience. Atwood calls this a story of the genre of speculative fiction. She even included only those plotlines whose horrifying nature was present in the actual society too. Unfortunately, very little has changed, and the relevance of 'The Handmaid's Tale' is present in the current society nearly thirty-six years later. This research paper's main idea and focus will be to analyse the events of this brilliant work and compare them with the world's political events today. It aims to understand the valuable warning by the author against complacency, during shifting political scenarios, in the story. A warning that we must heed now more than ever.

Keywords: Right-wing-populism, feminism, social hierarchy, climate change.

Introduction

The political scenario and the people's sentiments about politics have become more complicated and polarised than ever before. Therefore, this is a time that may yield a significant shift in global politics. Previously, though people were widely influenced by political events, the current era of the rise of social media, the internet and additional injections of false news into these institutions has created a more hateful, polarised and harmful than the previous eras in politics, both on a national and international front.

Populist uprisings across various parts of the world signify this shift. The rise of extreme nationalism to the point of xenophobia is highly concerning. There have also been disturbing developments threatening women's reproductive rights, among other rights, worldwide. The environment is further immensely suffering due to the inaction of global leaders that will lead us to a frightening future. All of these are developments that have been previously warned by the author, Margaret Atwood, in this work. These warnings, unfortunately, carry a lot more relevance now than ever before.

The story follows the events after the fictional Second Civil War in the United States of America (USA). This war was fought between extreme religious zealots and the weakening American government. The catalyst to this war was the severe lack of successful births and widespread infertility caused by chemicals from industrialisation and widespread environmental pollution. It was a war defined by reactionary philosophy that demanded a return to traditional values of religion that brings conservative principles towards the helm of affairs. 'The Sons of Jacob', a radical Christian group, won the war. The Republic of Gilead, a far-right-wing authoritarian Christian regime, was born in the ashes of the USA.

A vital feature of a right-wing regime is a strict and complex order of hierarchy, and it will be more clearly analysed further. However, it is imperative to mention that women are more subjugated than ever in this country. They are forbidden from reading, handling money, owning property or doing anything beyond their assigned role in this hierarchy.

The Handmaids in this dystopian society are ranked low in the hierarchy. They are the remaining fertile women and are resources of the State for childbirth. They are presented to higher-ranking commanders and their wives and undergo statutory rape regularly to yield children. This horror is justified by the State perversely using the biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah. Handmaids have committed some biblical sins like adultery, homosexuality or abortion and have to pay for it with this fate.

Offred, the narrator and a handmaid, gets her name from her Commander (Of- Fred). Her name from before is forbidden now. The State bestows her to the Waterford household. She has lost control of her body due to her position in this society. The authoritarian nature of this State inadvertently even controls her speech and thoughts. It also has separated her from her family. The novel follows the slow transformation of Offred, who, at first glance, does not formulate to be a compelling protagonist. Offred transforms from someone who is just attempting to survive to becoming a part of the resistance. She finally acquires liberation on

the inside of her mind and becomes prepared to participate in the resistance revolution instead of just hoping for one (Hansot).

The other main characters of the story represent the various facets of human nature on the right side of the political spectrum. They include Commander Fred Waterford, who is at the top of the hierarchy and benefits from its horrifying nature and effects. His wife is Serena Joy Waterford, who was previously an integral part of the creation of Gilead as an activist for conservative Christian values and has now lost her prevalence due to the subjugation of women and the achievement of her efforts. Their driver Nick finds himself lower in this chain and is also rendered miserable due to the grave submission by the State.

The true genius of the novel is the storytelling. It slowly reveals the status quo and unleashes the horrors within. Atwood is incredible in her use of language, which at times is entirely poetic to convey the deep emotions of the narration. She uses elements of nature to drive a particularly emotional moment in a poignantly poetic manner. Uncovering these symbols through the poetic usage of nature gave a complete picture of this masterpiece of a literary work (Hooker).

An idea of significance is the story's attempt to convey the importance of feminism as a collective movement and not an individual aspiration. Hidden in the words of the book is also a warning against complacency amidst shifting political scenarios. Thus, it formulates to be an essential read, especially in today's polarising times.

This research article attempts to analyse key similarities between the dystopic political world of 'The Handmaid's Tale' and the world today. In doing, the author hopes to show the relevance in the messaging and warnings that Margaret Atwood has put forth in her very significant work, that is, this book.

Research Questions and Methodology

1. In what ways do the plotlines from 'The Handmaid's Tale' reflect reality?
2. What global political events represent the book's continued political relevance?
3. What warnings and messages does Margaret Atwood convey through the book?

The methodology processes this research will utilise are qualitative, analytical and non-empirical in primary nature. Non-empirical research entails a constant review of other research papers, journal articles and newspaper articles. A critical research method compares recent global news headlines to the events of 'The Handmaid's Tale' and establishes the book's

relevance concerning these headlines. The story and its plotlines of relevance, warnings, messaging, and values are what this researcher will explain through this research paper.

Results and Discussion

Summary

The researcher first presents the summary of 'The Handmaid's Tale' to reiterate the book's main events. Offred, her previous name unknown, was caught by Gilead on route to escape to Canada with her family. Her daughter is separated and given another family while she presumes her husband is dead. She is later sent to the Waterford household, formulating Commander Fred Waterford and Serena Joy Waterford's wife to yield a child as a handmaid. The attempts at copulation with the Commander fail due to his presumed impotence. Serena Waterford suggests that Offred copulate with the driver, Nick, to escape the fate that follows if she cannot have a child. This event leads to a romantic relationship developing between Nick and Offred. Her fellow handmaid, Ofglen, reveals that she has connections to an underground resistance force, Mayday. Offred contemplates joining Mayday when she realises that she may be pregnant. She shares this news with Nick. However, Ofglen then disappears, presumably due to the actions of the State. Offred, too, is faced with capture by the guards in black cars that Gilead has sent, but Nick tells her that they are members of Mayday and will take her to safety. Despite being uncertain and afraid of what can happen if she gets into the car, Offred still chooses to do so, thus finally signifying the liberation of her mind.

Global Political Events: Right-wing populism

The researcher will now analyse the book's political events and their comparison to the events in global history. The beginnings of the conversion of the USA to The Republic of Gilead started with a conservative Christian right-wing populist uprising led by the group Sons of Jacob. The objective of this populist group was to build a country governed by traditional fundamentalist Christian values. The uprising was categorically a right-wing populist movement. It embodied many features like focusing on the culture and defending the traditional and conservative values of the majority of the people.

Most importantly, it is a movement of ordinary people. This rise of right-wing populism is apparent in the modern world today. The massive electoral victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. elections and the two-time win of the Bhartiya Janata Party and Narendra Modi in India in 2014 and 2019 are the two most evident examples (Gandesh).

Moreover, there are similar developments in the European countries of Hungary, Austria, and Poland, with anti-immigrant sentiments emerging rapidly (Gandesha).

Hungary has been experiencing a slow slide toward authoritarianism over the past decade (Becker). Under its President, Viktor Orban, Hungary is witnessing anti-LGBT, anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiments and a complete curb on the freedom of the press and media. All of these are signs of a dangerous future because they attack the fundamental concepts at the helm of which democracy is structured. Democracy entails practicing the principles of equality and liberty. However, present-day Hungarian government is curtailing these principles.

Similarly, the rise of the Freedom Party in Austria has led to similar anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiments (Hafez, Heinisch and Miklin) amongst the dominant majority. Poland, too, has made a stunning turn towards right-wing tendencies and sentiments following the win of the Law and Justice Party in 2017 (Moskwa and Jefferson). It has also become one of the only European countries with anti-abortion laws (Filtenborg and Weichert). These are only a few examples of right-wing populism in Europe, but the possibility remains like the dangerous dawn on the horizon of the continent.

Moreover, Gilead is a theocratic state where the church and the State are combined institutions, with the State embodying all the values of the church. Gilead, as previously mentioned, uses scripture in a fundamentalist manner. Establishing a theocratic state is also highly worrisome as it further marginalises religious minorities and those who do not fit into a theocracy's model of citizenship.

Hence, this clear display of partiality towards certain people while persecuting the rest is a dangerous notion to propagate as it goes against the far more universal and democratic values of equality and liberty. However, many countries worldwide are seeing the rise of theocratic sentiments in their governance and have increasingly blurred lines of division between religious institutions and State.

Margaret Atwood fears this rise of populist sentiments. In the books she writes, "Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some." This quote means that any populist revolution can start with noble beginnings but it also equally possible for the results to be anything but noble.

She conveys in the book that the beginning may seem simple and not worrisome but, if left to continue, can have drastic implications on the democratic fabric of the country. Offred laments her complacency during the beginning of this uprising from time to time. Hence, the lesson that we must heed here is how the beginnings of the right-wing populist movement may seem ordinary but, when left unchecked and unquestioned, can and most probably will have detrimental effects such as the terrifying dystopic nature of Gilead.

Presence of a Rigid Social Hierarchy across Countries

A significant feature of The Republic of Gilead is a rigid social and economic hierarchy. It is now prudent to discuss this hierarchy in Gilead. Men are considered superior to women. That is an essential factor. Nevertheless, there is a complex division within the scope of Gileadean men and women. At the top of the hierarchy are the Commanders who perform the governance functions. Their spouses formulate the Wives. These women are to dress in virginal blue dresses, symbolising their purity. They perform functions like managing the household, gardening, knitting and painting. The wives are usually infertile and are to gain children through handmaids. Gilead has stringent law enforcement called Guardians and Eyes, the secret police. Aunts are to train and manage the handmaids. They are the only women in Gilead to have what is now the privilege of being able to read. Then are lower-ranking men assigned functions to Commanders, such as gardening or driving. Marthas rank next. They handle domestic work for the Commanders' house. They dress in monotone colours that merge into the background. The position of handmaids comes after this, whose functions the researcher has previously elaborated. They are dressed in red to keep them in the eye's view and symbolise their function of being a womb. Apart from this, there are the Unwomen who have performed some Biblical sin and have refused to atone for it by becoming a handmaid or are not capable of having children. They have to dig out toxic radioactive waste in places called The Colonies until their death. This fate awaits Offred if she is incapable of having children. Thus was the complex hierarchy in Gilead.

This hierarchy is almost satirical, albeit terrifying, instead of humorous, pointing out the absolute yet extremely present rigid hierarchy in right-wing governments. Nazi Germany and Mussolini's fascist Italy give evidence of a similar hierarchy during the second world war (Knox). A similar reign of hierarchy and white supremacy seems to reappear during Trump's presidency, often termed Neo-Nazism (Lee, 2018), which has now settled even in Europe. Social and economic hierarchies are concepts known all too well even in the Indian political

landscape with the rise of Hindu nationalistic sentiments, the consistent caste system (Gandeha), unsecular religious sentiments and the perpetual presence of sexism.

A social hierarchy is a concept often justified as it claims to formulate efficiency in the division of labour. However, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is specified that this hierarchy is inhuman and demeaning. It pits women against each other in a place where they cannot support and help each other. It completely disregards the concepts of equality and liberty that are very important to any democracy that most right-wing regimes claim to be. In Gilead, it appears like everyone is equally oppressed at first glance, but the readers later understand that power concentrates at the top among the Commanders. Similarly, in most hierarchies, power trickles only towards the top while rendering everyone else in a limbo of power imbalance and an illusion of equality. Thus, the continued existence of a demeaning social hierarchy in so many countries of the world is mirrored in the book, hence adding to its continued relevance.

The global movement against Reproductive Rights and Violence against Women

The reason for the birth of The Republic of Gilead and the right-wing populist uprising was the widespread epidemic of infertility due to environmental pollution. In the story, Gilead saw a massive decline in the number of births. This grave set of instances led to extreme religious paranoia towards the reproductive rights of women. The lack of births was also the catalysing factor to the aforementioned Second Civil War in the summary, which, at its end, created Gilead. After its establishment, women are distinguished and even defined because of their reproductive function.

The treatment of the handmaids is despicable by all standards, as they are raped in the effort to have children. This treatment is reflected in society today with ever-increasing crimes against women, be it sexual assault or various forms of domestic abuse. One in three women in the world has undergone sexual assault or intimate partner violence, such as marital rape. That is approximately 35% of women who have experienced violence, and this is just the data present with hidden figures missing (Htun and Jensenius). We need to resolve these systemic problems collectively because they continue to perpetuate needless gender-based violence worldwide.

Offred, in her speech states, “My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.”

Gilead has brought her own sense of self down from a human being to an object, meant only capable of reproductive functions. It is incorrect to pigeonhole any human being to their supposed duties rather than letting them embrace their liberty. However, the current political scenarios worldwide have begun to treat women like how Gilead treats its handmaids as will be elaborated.

Handmaids have no choice over their bodies, no bodily autonomy and no reproductive rights. Again, this is a truth so, unfortunately, reflected in global politics. In September 2021 itself, Texas passed the Texas Heartbeat Act, which severely limits women's rights to gain a legal abortion after six weeks of pregnancy (Irvine). The case (*Roe v. Wade*) that guaranteed abortion as a constitutional right, around fifty years ago, has even been overruled in the present-day USA in June 2022. This precedent will lead to women in half the country's states not having access to safe and legal abortions. On January 27 2021, Poland declared abortion under normal circumstances illegal (Filtenborg and Weichert). Many countries in Latin America, too, have laws strongly opposing reproductive rights. Most countries in the region have declared abortions illegal with no exceptions, and some countries only legalise it to save the mother's life, and very few countries have legalised it up to twelve to fourteen weeks, like Argentina, Cuba and Uruguay, among others. The continent continues to have draconian anti-abortion laws in place, and the fight against them persists (Yáñez).

These concerning developments in this regard worldwide are precisely what was warned against by Atwood by limiting the bodily autonomy of handmaids. Hence, the fight for freedom to make reproductive choices is relevant in the book and the current and real political landscape. The driving point of *The Handmaid's Tale* is to point out how harmful and dangerous it is to the ideals of liberty and freedom and the lives of women if women's reproductive rights are taken away by the State (Richards). The book endeavours to drive the point that only in women's reproductive freedom is everyone else's freedom and liberation. It is vital to secure these rights, and it is important to protest the State's authoritarian actions to reach this limit and so severely limit women.

Consistent global environmental degradation and Climate Change

In most of her works, Atwood is a staunch environmentalist and has explained the need to stop the inaction and fight against climate change and pollution. She has warned us about the possible and very detrimental effects of environmental pollution in this work. This, as previously elaborated, is the reason for the plague of infertility that had swept the country.

However, this is an issue that is still combated against, even today. The situation has become direr in the present time. There is still a continued need to spread awareness about climate change as people live in denial. The people aware of climate change choose to remain complacent about the worsening environment. Rather than developing a unanimous attitude against climate change, the problem has become a political issue that seeks to divide the world further than unite people against this inevitable enemy to the future of our existence (Armstrong, Krasny and Schuldt). World leaders continue to provide inaction on the issue at hand. In the “United Nations Climate Change Conference, 2021”, India and China refused to phase out coal usage for economic reasons, completely disregarding the environment’s needs (Abnett and Piper). Thus, Atwood’s warning, unfortunately, still carries relevance.

Message for collective action against systemic injustices and feminism

Throughout the book, the reader can sense the sheer force of feminine willpower. In the face of all adversaries, systemic injustices and constant sexual assault, Offred refuses to give in to her misery, and she decides to live for her daughter if she is ever able to reunite with her. However, she cannot create real change on her own and needs the support of other handmaids to survive, while each of the handmaids also requires similar support from one another. This is the value of a collective response rather than a narrative of individual success. These are the ideals of third-wave feminism (Armbruster). Collective action is the need of the hour to fight against systemic injustices; hence, feminism is now a collective movement. This is also reflected in the book by the actions of Mayday, which predominantly is a collective group that hopes for empowerment and liberation. Atwood wills women to support one another in this world which is not built keeping them in mind.

The rise of consciousness towards grave injustice through patriarchy amongst women is another prominent feature of third-wave feminism (Armbruster). Offred, too, experiences it and goes through an entire character arc from complacency to her situation to attempts at revolting. She regrets not having a political conscience during the rise of Gilead and the militia of the Sons of Jacob. However, the novel does give her redemption in this aspect by making her possibly join the political organisation for resistance, the Mayday.

The book even advocates female friendships, even in times of extreme hardship, as that can be the one solace in such times. This is reflected in the short-lived and strained yet hopeful friendship between Offred and Ofglen. These positive lessons are reflected today, with women supporting one another during the ‘Me Too’ movement. The ‘Me Too’ movement advocates

for healing and survivorship of the survivors of sexual assault, a large part of this process includes the support of other women who may have had similar experiences (Langone).

Atwood also attempts to drive the point that women are so much more than their biological function of the ability to have children. The handmaids and even the wives are given no role in the Gileadean society except childbirth and childcare, respectively. This notion that women are only capable of being mothers and caregivers is outdated but somehow still prevalent due to the conservative movements that demand women to be just that, caregivers instead of leaders. It is common knowledge by now that women can rise and attain success in any field, much less just in the arena of raising children.

Warnings against complacency towards troubling political events

Atwood writes, “Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it.” Such is the nature of complacency. One actively chooses to turn a blind eye to injustice and this action can have catastrophic results, as seen in the creation of Gilead.

The warning against political complacency is constant in this book. At this juncture of the global political landscape, we need to take a stance. Dante Alighieri said, “The darkest places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.” We need to be alert and aware, now more than ever, of injustice happening in all of the ways elaborated through the course of this research paper. It is essential to understand that a country’s democratic fabric is fragile, and countries can lose their democratic statures effortlessly if met with no conscience resistance.

Offred, in her narration, laments, “Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it.” She acknowledges her own fallacies, as well as others, their joint complacency that led to such a dystopic world.

The slide into authoritarianism or autocracy is not abrupt but requires meticulous actions of slowly stripping away constitutionalism, the rights and liberties afforded by it, and the democratic features in a country. Thus, it is essential for a people in a democracy not to be complacent and alert and aware of worrisome political changes in their country. The citizens of Gilead were unfortunate enough to sleep through the storm of political turmoil and wake up in the ruins of their destroyed democracy. We cannot afford to repeat their fictional mistakes. Thus, the book written in 1984 finds its messaging and warnings relevant today.

Finally, Gilead is as terrible as Offred and Atwood describe it to be, because of the lack of kindness and empathy. The last lesson to be learnt here is that we need to treat all individuals with kindness, respect and equality and not bend to unjust obligations. It is important to be hopeful in this world like Offred was, even in Gilead. It is necessary to be kind to everybody, despite our differences, in this world today when its people need kindness more now than ever before. This is the true messaging of Margaret Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale', one that must carry relevance even today and in perpetuity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the picture that Atwood so delicately painted back in 1985 with the elaborate messages and symbology is still relevant today. We live in a world riddled with changing political scenarios, polarised opinions and intolerance of others' opinions. In such a political scenario, it is simple for the world to slip into political turmoil and finally fall into the chasms of draconian authoritarianism if we are not careful. This turmoil and the general public's complacency with it is what led to the Second Civil War in the story that led to the formation of Gilead.

It is also imperative to reiterate that all the storylines Atwood has incorporated in the book have happened sometime in human history. It is a standard notion that history does repeat in the present if we cannot correct our mistakes from before. That is how Atwood's 'The Handmaid's Tale' provides a framework for navigating the present world. She provides what seems like a chilling dystopic world that is haunting in every way. At first glance, it appears to the reader that this world can only happen far in the future, but when reviewed closely, they notice that 'The Handmaid's Tale' is about the present, not a distant future.

Plotlines revolving around the emergence of right-wing populism, rigid social hierarchies, violence against women, losing reproductive rights, and increasing environmental degradation are really observable phenomena. Atwood wills her audience to take a stand against these injustices and warns them of a future if we fail to do so. That is how the book stays relevant to date.

The book is not only about the threats that face us. It is also about how we can win against these threats if we choose to protect our rights collectively, remain hopeful, and be kind to one another. It advocates for women to support each other and help each other rebuild this world without the systemic injustices it currently suffers from, that hinder its inherently present beauty. These messages are all hopeful and necessary to believe in the present time.

The Handmaid's Tale is an inspiring story of resilience that can exist even in the darkest of places. It is a story about believing that even the time of great pain will eventually pass if we attempt to escape from it and not remain insouciant to the increasing pain. It is a story that encourages us to disavow complacency amidst the rising movements that aim to take our rights and liberties away from us. It is a story whose messages we must all heed.

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