



Patriarchal Society and Women's Oppression in Margret Atwood's the Handmaids Tale: A Feminist Study

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Abstract:

In this study, feminism theory is used to analyze the text. According to the investigation, the handmaids were mistreated by the Masculine in three different ways. First, Masculine seizes their possessions, wealth, and employment; second, once they lose their authority, Masculine seizes control of their bodies and exploits them; and third, Masculine restricts their actions in order to keep them in domestic duties. These methods are put into practice on the system using the tools of economics, sociology, and psychology as well as religion.

Keywords: Patriarchal society, Feminism, Women's oppression, Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood .

1.1 Introduction

“Margaret Atwood's story is a dystopian nightmare” in which women are denied their fundamental freedom and subjugated down to the level of their biology and sexuality. By studying the primary causes that lead to gender inequality, oppression, and injustice, “this study gives a starting point from which to present The Handmaid's Tale in terms of gender inequality”, oppression, and injustice to which women are subjected. These issues must be addressed.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study examines the role of religion and its impact on women's lives, as well as how the clergy and their sham treatment of women oppress women. The research study focuses on demonstrating the violence and oppression that the ruling political class inflicts on women, analyzing and researching women's mistreatment and deprivation of liberty, as well as how women were treated as commodities to be bought and sold, putting them under strict supervision and limiting their autonomy.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1.What factors contribute to the gender divide, both between men and women and within women?
2. How woman's lifestyle influenced is by society, customs, and social traditions in "Handmaids Tale"?
- 3.Why were women oppressed and treated unfairly in the past compared to today in Handmaids Tale?

1.4 Methodology

According to its research type, this study is descriptive-analytical, and the library technique was used to get its data. The study uses qualitative methods in order to investigate the



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feminist theory in Margret Atwood's the Handmaids Tale to clarify the women's oppression and masculine society in this selected novel.

1.5 Theory of Feminism

According to Serli (2017), "feminist emerged in the early 20th century, driven by Virginia Woolf in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929)." Feminists, or the women who fight for "women's rights as a social class," as the word feminism means in its etymological root form, femme (woman). The goal is to strike a balance between feminist and gender interrelationships. In a broader sense, it is the feminist movement of women who oppose all that the prevailing culture marginalizes, subordinates, and demeans, both in politics and the economy, as well as in social life generally.

According to Halová (2016), "feminism" is defined by the Cambridge online dictionary as "the conviction that women should be allowed to have the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be regarded in the same way" or "the set of activities striving to reach this condition." Several different meanings can be attributed to the term "feminism" when referring to the movement for women's rights. However, "feminism" and "feminist" were not commonly employed in public discourse until the 1970s.

Feminism is a political and sociological movement that seeks to eliminate gender inequality. Women's rights have been a hot topic in the UK since at least the early 1850s, when the first feminists began to speak out against injustice and the first suffragettes appeared. Since then, many women have devoted their careers to advancing gender equality. The feminist framework also provides a structure for defining issues and asking related questions. Inequality is defined as "the need to establish uneven incentives to encourage the most capable people to perform the most essential activities in society efficiently" (Connelly & Barriteau, 2000), according to the book *Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Development*.

Another phrase from the same book that adds to inequality is "gender and racial pay gaps," which describes the strategy of delivering unequal incentives to keep a weaker working class divided.

According to Ghorfatl and Medini (2015), feminism has been defined and discussed from multiple perspectives. Some of them utilize it to discuss historical political movements in Europe and the United States. To others, it represents the idea that women are forced to endure a life of subjugation in which they are denied basic civil liberties and are treated as second-class citizens. "Feminism is important for women since there are oppressed women in the world" (Faris, 2013).

There is a long history of the term "feminism," which refers to issues faced by women in societies ruled by men, i.e. their power, laws, desires, and directives. "...women have traditionally been dehumanized by a male-dominated society, which they term patriarchy; and that has always been better to be a guy..." (Faris, 2013).

It can be helpful to differentiate between feminist concepts or beliefs and feminist political movements because there hasn't always been a strong political movement against women's subordination. However, there has always been interest in and theory about justice for women even when there wasn't much political activism. Although awful segregation and tremendous injustice existed, women were still allowed to stand out and voice their worries, sentiments, and desires. Additionally, women were able to spread awareness of it throughout the globe, turning it into a



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symbol of equality and instilling in everyone the notion that men and women are entitled to the same social rights and treatment in all spheres of life.

In accordance with Atiqah (2010) reveals that one of ways women have battled discrimination is through feminism. Feminism is a women's movement that "calls for complete equality between men and women in all aspects of life", including politics, economics, society, and culture. The term "feminism" refers to a set of coordinated efforts aimed at advancing the status of women. If women were equal to men, it implies they have the ability to declare themselves as what is owned by males for so long, recognized as the independence of women. In other terms, feminist is a women's movement to attain independence or free of soul. Female historians are continually emphasizing the sheer volume and diversity of information that remains to be uncovered.

Feminist political activists frequently address issues related to the rights of women, including access to safe, legal abortions, "availability of contraception and high-quality prenatal care, protection from violence in domestic partnerships, sexual harassment, street harassment, and rape", as well as the rights to maternity leave and equal pay. Feminism promotes gender equality that takes into account sex differences. It encourages sex solidarity in an effort to advance individual liberty. While this represents the diversity of women, it implies that they are aware of their interconnectedness. Despite calling for the abolition of predetermined gender norms, it fundamentally necessitates gendered awareness. The idea of feminism holds that men and women are naturally of equal merit. Social movements are required to achieve equality between men and women because most societies favor males as a group, with the realization that gender inextricably entangles with other social structures.

1.6 Types of Feminism

1.6.1 The First Wave of Feminism

According to Malinowska (2020), the first wave of feminism spread from the Americas and Europe to Egypt, Iran, India, and other parts of the Middle East and Asia between the years 1800 and 1900. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of Women* and John Stuart Mill's *The Suffragettes* ignited the first wave of feminism and social activity in the West. The "New Woman" ideal, which pushed back against the constraints of a society dominated by men, was the driving force behind the first wave. In the first wave, social groups protested the limited rights of women in areas such as the employment, education, reproduction, property ownership, and marriage. The International Woman Suffrage Alliance was established as the leading group in the struggle for women's suffrage (1904). First-wave feminists' writing, speeches, and rallies in public showed that they were confident in the protest's visibility and organization. At the turn of the century, the press was the most important means of communicating news and ideas to the public. The Seneca Falls Declaration of 1848 sparked the abolitionist movement in the 1840s, and the *Lily* (the first U.S. newspaper owned and published by women) was founded as its counterpart in Europe, the *French Le Voix des Femmes* (The Voice of Women).

1.6.2 The Second Wave of Feminism

Since Feminist activism was first documented by Bouchiba (2018) as having its origins in the 1960s, we can safely assume that this definition is accurate. It sought to empower women to exercise their own agency and participate more actively in politics in order to advance women's rights. The movement also advocated for economic parity and the right of women to make their own



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reproductive decisions. As Goodwin and M. Jasoer point out, the Second Wave Feminism was not without its flaws in its early stages because it included women of color and women from working-class backgrounds.

Rampton (2015) declared that during the 1960s and '90s, a second wave of immigration came through the United States. The anti-war and civil rights movements, as well as the developing self-awareness of many minority groups throughout the world, all had a role in the development of this wave. There was a second wave of radicals emerging from the New Left. Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution was a major goal of the movement in this era, and the movement's energy was devoted to ensuring social equality regardless of sex.

Anti-Miss America demonstrations in Atlantic City in 1968 and 1969 are cited as the genesis of this era. "It was a humiliating "cattle parade" that reduced women to simple objects of beauty, ruled by a patriarchy that attempted to keep them at home or in low-paying employment." It was ridiculed by feminists. The Red Stockings were a radical New York group that trashed stereotypically feminine items including high heels, makeup, and false eyelashes during their counter pageant. In the middle of other social movements like Black Power or campaigns to end the Vietnam War, the second wave of feminism was easy to overlook, as stated by the author.

According to Rampton (2015), feminists at the time responded by forming women-only organizations and awareness-raising clubs. Feminist periodicals like "The Sisterhood Is Powerful" and "The Bitchin' BITCH Manifesto" fought for their rightful place in the spotlight. The second wave, which was increasingly theoretical and built on a merging of neo Marxism and psychoanalytic theory, began to connect women's enslavement to broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's position as wife and mother. It was clear that there were two separate ideas at play when discussing sexuality and gender: the biological and the social.

After white, middle-class, Western-gendered women drove the first wave of feminism, the second wave was driven by women of color and developing nations, as stated in Women's fight is class struggle. Feminists coined phrases like "the personal are political" and "identity politics" to highlight the interconnected nature of racial, economic, and gender inequalities. They launched an all-out offensive to eliminate sexism from all spheres of society, from kids' cartoons to the Oval Office.

"The rise of women-only establishments and the conviction that women working together produce a certain dynamic that is not possible in mixed-group settings, which would ultimately work for the development of the entire world, were two strains of this complex and diverse "wave." Some believed that women were more compassionate, collaborative, inclusive, peaceful, nurturing, democratic, and holistic in their approach to problem-solving than men, either as a result of their long history of "subjugation" or owing to biology. The term "ecofeminism" was created to express the idea that women were natural environmentalists because of their biological ties to the earth and lunar cycles (Rampton, 2015)".

1.6.3 The Third Wave of Feminism

Yahya et al, (2021) Non-stereotypical and underprivileged women from the developing countries of the world were included in the third wave of feminism, which was distinct from the prior waves. This change from binary politics to acceptance of difference is part of the third



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wave of feminism's goal of improving women's options in the socio-economic arena while recognizing variety, individual autonomy and inclusiveness. In addition to the age divide, contemporary technology allowed women to argue their feminist views in a more expansive way than their ancestors could have done before them. Real women's struggles at work and socioeconomic independence were put into emphasis in the third wave of feminist activism. Some of these third-wave feminist movements were formed by the proliferation of research and the emergence of feminist activism.

1.6.4 Fourth Generation Feminists

Due to Rampton (2015), the figure of the fourth wave of feminism is still enthralling. Women's rights and equality were briefly mentioned in an interview with me recently by an Elle Publication writer, who wondered if the second and third waves of feminist theory had "failed or dialled down" due to the social and economic gains being mostly flashy but lacking substance, and whether or not women had begun to prioritize their careers and the atomic self over their equality.

As a response, I argued that the second wave of feminism was successful in its own right and that it produced more than just glitter. Despite common belief, the second wave of feminism was successful in achieving many of its goals, such as the advancement of women to higher positions in academia, business, and politics, the wider availability of the pill, the greater expression and acceptance of female sexuality, and the establishment of a thriving academic field dedicated to feminism, gender, and sexuality studies.

For this reason, it is more likely that the movement's success than any ineffectiveness on the part of these many parts explains the seeming "dialing down" of the second wave. Feminism's seeming silence in the 1990s was a response to many women's concerns being fulfilled, following a successful pushback attempt by conservative press and media against the label "feminism" and its perceived link with male bashing and radicalism.

1.7 Data Analysis

1.7.1 The Role of Men in The Handmaid's Tale

The Commander considers himself a scientist and has participated in what seems to be precursory Masculine research. Since he established Masculine, an authoritarian society where citizens always fear becoming entangled in property without the inherent right to do so, he is responsible for the entire community. Yet, it seems that his melancholy and want for camaraderie make him no less a prisoner of Masculine than anyone else. But in a scene that could have been lifted from a Holocaust documentary, the mistress of a brutal death camp guard spoke out in defense of her beloved. Amazingly, making human beings is a breeze. The Commander, like the Nazi guard, is a monster despite his potential for kindness and compassion because of his complicity in the construction of Masculine and his indifference to the agony he caused for women. Under the right conditions, just about anyone can be likable.

1.7.2 The Role of Women in The Handmaid's Tale

The book's main character, Offred, is also its narrator; she provides a first-person account of the events she describes. Like most people, she settled into a satisfying profession, married a man who doted on her, and had a child. She lost her job with no prior notice or explanation, had her assets frozen, and was denied entry to her home. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that she had grown estranged from both her daughter and husband. Due to her high



market value, she was "distributed" to Commander Fred and Serena Joy in order to bear a child for them in exchange for slavery.

She is seen as a tool, a "two-legged womb," rather than as a person or a woman in Masculine. Because they are the Commander's property and must accept whoever he chooses as their husband, the handmaids have only one way to establish their identity. They are restricted to staying home and reproducing for the sake of their leader. They can't even be given a name of their own. A common slave name, Offred, combines the meanings of "of Fred" (signifying her position as the slaves' leader) and "of" (describing her role as a concubine). In order to keep tabs on one another, handmaids are never allowed to work independently and must complete all tasks alongside their husbands. It's clear that they're the ones experiencing negative consequences.

1.7.3 The Gender Issues in Contemporary Society

In interviews, Margaret Atwood has maintained that the events depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* are inspired by history or the present day, despite the novel's classification as science fiction. Everywhere we look, we see evidence of the prevalence of gender inequity. For instance, due to institutionalized bias in favor of male candidates in the workplace, it is notably more difficult for female job-seekers to break into a specific field at the moment. When ladies reach the age of 25, it is not uncommon for their families to put pressure on them to get married, and most boys are also expected to buy a new house when they get married. Many men also think it's tougher for them to express their emotions because "guys do not easily shed tears." However, there is a recurring critique of feminist movements. Some have called this trend puritanical, while others see it as a reversion to Victorian values, in which males were told to avoid sexually provocative behavior and language around "fragile" women. But the current system is really puritanical in nature. It could be that men are freer to express themselves than women are. Unfortunately, the existing system makes it difficult, if not impossible, for women to ask for what we want and to experience the pleasure that we deserve.

1.7.4 Motherhood

According to Kerber, mothers were discussed "almost as if they were a fourth arm of government, a device that assured social control in the gentlest conceivable manner" (1980). This is cited by Kaplan (1992), who argues that women's participation in politics was strictly limited to the home. The biological difference between men and women, with men producing sperm and fertilizing the egg carried by women, is also highly valued in today's culture. Therefore, these societal assumptions give rise to the sexual origins of gender that establish men's dominance and women's submission (Krishnaraj, 2017).

Margaret Atwood's feminist science fiction novel *The Handmaid's Tale* discusses these aspects of male dominance over women in relation to sexuality. It imagines what the world may be like if ideological, scientific, and religious fundamentalists remained in power. According to the story, women have no say in their own lives and must follow the lead of male authorities like the Commander and his wife. To better protect women, the Republic of Masculine divides them up based on their biological and social standing. Because of the expectations placed on women based on their perceived gender, these women are expected to dress a certain way and follow a certain schedule. The aunts promote these traditions since they are important for teaching the handmaids. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see what lengths societies and governments would go to in order to



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regulate their inhabitants' behavior in a dystopian future. The essay also delves into the severe consequences of gender inequality and the threats of religious fundamentalism.

The handmaids' only subjective standing, valued only up until childbirth, is determined by their ability to reproduce. Offred is not allowed to engage in any private, sexual, intimate, or independent activities, leaving her with only two options: corporeal existence or reproduction. She lives a life that is both oppressive and free, caught between her past and present.

"Offred asserts",

"I'm happier than I was before. It's something to do, for one thing".

"Something to fill the night, at night, instead of sitting alone in my room". "It is something else to think about".

"I don't love the Commander or anything like it",

"but he is of interest to me, he occupies space",

"he is more than a shadow" (Atwood, 1996, p.168).

The reproductive realm of the handmaids, who are thrown into the home environment conducive to reproduction, guarantees social reproduction by upholding the preexisting social norms while also ensuring the continuation of the

Genealogy of the sexes (Bagchi, 2017). The handmaids, especially Offred, express their fear of becoming pregnant and mothers because they are the only ones who carry "viable ovaries." Offred's strong desire for pregnancy hides the fantasy that forcibly making someone get pregnant has a significant negative impact on one's capacity to take control of one's life and can endanger one's well-being, as J. Brooks Bouson (2001) writes in his essay *The Misogyny of Patriarchal Culture in The Handmaid's Tale*.

Women in low-income situations in India are understandably anxious about becoming mothers because they lack the resources and social support necessary to prepare for the role. Whether the pregnancy was planned or unplanned, all of the parenting responsibilities fall on the shoulders of the mother. Maithreyi Krishnaraj claims that just 10% of Indian women actually obtain prenatal treatment. In both the "ceremony" and its immediate aftermath, the handmaids perform physical labor for no immediate compensation. Motherhood does not confer ownership of the child, even though the child is the "result" of the mother's efforts. What we're witnessing, says Krishnaraj, is "the tragedy of motherhood." Based on research (Krishnaraj, 2017).

Offred's mother, an example of independence and kindness; Moira, a symbol of fierce rebellion; and Offred herself, whose failed attempt at parenthood serves as a cautionary tale. Each of the novel's female protagonists approaches being a woman in her own unique way. Masculine promotes the idea that women should aspire to fulfill stereotypical male and female roles. The article's focus on gender roles serves to highlight the pervasiveness of male superiority in both Western and Indian society.

In the point of the story where Janine gives birth to her kid, the intricate web of power and mortality is revealed. If the child is born healthy, the mother will thrive; otherwise, she will perish. This novel's plot exemplifies India's preference for male offspring. A woman's independence is enhanced when she bears sons. Bagchi underlines in *Interrogating Motherhood* that a woman's status as a mother is determined by the mother of her sons. The book describes the precarious position mothers find themselves in, somewhere between the extremes of power a Masculine exploits women's bodies for



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childbirth while substantially minimizing exploitation of their bodies by regulating modest clothes, as noted by Mitra Mirzayee in her article "Female Identity in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood." There is a shift in perspective, where they are no longer persons but resources (Mirzayee, 2019, p. 119).

While the men regularly disparage the women in *Masculine*, the ladies also treat one another horribly. In the narrative, which is filled with connected events, there are several designated women oppressors, including the Wives, Aunts, and Marthas. These women assume leadership roles to keep one another in check, whether out of resentment, entitlement, or adherence to the Bible's view of male superiority. "They uphold male demands despite the rigorous control of patriarchal oppression and the collateral damage that patriarchal oppression causes to women" (Privett, 2007, p. 265).

Offred's story serves as an example of how attaching gendered standards to the body and intellect reinforces the oppression of women. According to Bagchi (2017), motherhood is linked to affective and emotional experiences as well as interpersonal ties that are crucial to women's experiences in their day-to-day lived realities. Offred's previous brief motherhood and the denied motherhood that results from the forceful sexual act deny her the opportunity to feel the fundamental emotion of womanhood.

"The end of motherhood appears dangerously as a real biological possibility in *The Handmaid's Tale* because infertility has become the norm, and the end of the social convention of heteronormative motherhood looms as a terrifying future for patriarchal systems", according to Fleming (2018), who also addresses current issues with motherhood.

Future possibilities are hinted at by the way that environmental deterioration has reduced women's bodies to becoming only sources of reproduction and repopulation. Even though mothers have amazing strength that men will never be able to match, the story emphasizes and furthers the physical subjugation of women. *The Handmaid's Tale* also explains how gender and social conventions bind women physically and mentally.

In India, numerous feminist organisations have met with fierce opposition from the dominant patriarchal structures of family and society, particularly in the fight for legal action against women's oppression. Gender-based patriarchal institutions and religious teachings reinforce stereotypes that women are inferior to males (Gangoli, 2007, pp. 1&5). If norms that are skewed against men are generally accepted, women's rights may be at jeopardy. While the preceding section concentrated on arguments within the feminist community regarding the gendered experience of motherhood in Offred's life, this section investigates how social standards and ideologies support institutional gender expectations. When it comes to social norms, women primarily conform to marriage and motherhood. Bagchi argues that both historic and contemporary representations of the family, marriage, and motherhood reinforce patriarchal domination of women by embedding gender ideals in them (Bagchi, 2017).



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Marriage and parenting are challenging in many ways, psychologically and physically, and it is essential to confront the embedded gender norms in these frameworks in order to solve these issues. Women make efforts to maintain their social and personal conformity to their assigned role, to build their sense of identity, and to avoid violence. Women who break these stereotypes are more likely to experience domestic abuse (Gangoli, 2007, p. 2).

1.8 Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's story is a dystopian nightmare in which women are enslaved to the point of biology and sexuality, and their basic independence is denied. By studying the primary causes that lead to gender inequality, oppression, and injustice, this study gives a starting point from which to present *The Handmaid's Tale* in terms of gender inequality, oppression, and injustice to which women are subjected. These issues must be addressed.

Margaret Atwood is regarded as one of Canada's most gifted writers today. She was prominent in Canadian politics as well as the feminist movement. Her work focuses primarily on social and political themes. Relationships between men and women, as well as basic human rights. We notice that the author's primary concern is gender. In her stories, she portrays women who are constantly looking for their lost identities in a patriarchal society.

Women's oppression and injustice are recurring issues throughout her novels, and it can be seen plainly in her writings. It exposes the exploitation and oppression of women, particularly the female body, since it questions women's low place in society. In her works, she exposes the anguish of her female characters who are restricted to their female duties. Furthermore, the fundamental focus of *The Handmaid's Tale* analysis is gender. Women in Masculine culture are deprived of their individual freedom and are ordered to serve the state in many ways and functions, as we see in the novel. In Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are fully under the power of a patriarchal society's male members; the novel depicts a patriarchal society.

Investigating the role of society and its impact on women's lives, particularly in societies that deprive women of the most fundamental rights and responsibilities. One of the goals of the study was to show the importance of women in the continuation of life, as they, like men, play an important role in it. Despite men's dominance and tyranny over women, they are unable to live without them. Examining the gender divide between men and women, as well as between women themselves, in terms of socioeconomic classes and how they are treated in terms of production and service.

Overall, the name "feminism" should never be used in a pejorative manner, and males should be granted the same liberties as women, fulfilling the original promise of feminism that "freedom for one is freedom for all." Feminism is a set of movements that emphasizes equality above gender discrimination by defining, developing, and protecting equal political, economic, and social rights and opportunities for women. We shouldn't be intimidated by the term "feminist". People can create a more well-rounded society with moral plurality and constrained human appetites. It's time for a new day, a new locker room culture, and it is time to consider everyone's needs, wants, and pleasures, just like Natalie Portman said. It's time to acknowledge that each and every one of us deserves protection and respect.

Speculative fiction aims to represent many ways of existence through a variety of situations that emphasize humanity's issues and the striking similarities that characterize today's



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social challenges. The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood explains how patriarchal dictatorship controls women's identities and how socially constructed gender norms of motherhood and womanhood affect the lives of masculine women. The novel identifies the issues women encounter in the actual world as a result of patriarchal structures. For instance, in India, the social and religious institutions' expectations for childbearing prevent women from using their autonomy. Additionally, according to Bagchi, "the complicated interplay between autonomy and the partnership with ruling hegemony develops broad movements" (Bagchi, 2017, p. 1). Although the majority of women comply with the system, the May Day organization, which works to oppose the totalitarian rule by assisting women in escaping Masculine, offers hope for emancipation.

The novel elucidates how male superiority damages women's fertility. Offred represents both passivity and defiance, as she does her duties as a Handmaid but also engages in secret relationships with both Nick and the Commander, both of whom she views as oppressors. Offred's life serves as a case study in the consequences of intimidation and the importance of standing up to it. The perils of women's participation in maintaining patriarchal institutions are highlighted by Atwood's depiction of patriarchy based on biological destiny and religious norms, and the radical feminist view is pushed as a means of reconciling competing discourses of feminism.

The novel also investigates the ambiguity of female existence and emphasizes the role of marriage and motherhood as a manufactured system that oppresses women through biological and social norms. The story makes references to issues women may experience in the future with regard to their reproductive rights in the setting of India. The Handmaid's Tale reveals how women contribute to maintaining male domination from the perspective of an Indian radical feminist. Patriarchal motivations of violence and oppression in the Masculine are guaranteed by the Aunts' dominance over the Handmaids. Because of this, The Handmaid's Tale emphasizes how to spot totalitarian systems and fight them, as well as how to reject oppressive institutions despite suffering personal consequences.

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