

**HANDMAID AS THE OBJECT OF SEXISM IN GILEAD SOCIETY: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE***

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**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tindakan seksisme dalam novel Margaret Atwood *The Handmaid's Tale* melalui karakter budak perempuan. Fokus tujuannya adalah untuk menemukan bagaimana budak-budak perempuan telah menjadi objek dari seksisme dalam masyarakat Gilead. Untuk menganalisis, penelitian ini menggunakan teori Kate Millet tentang politik seksual. Analisis ini menyatakan bahwa ada tiga cara Gilead menindas budak-budak perempuan. Pertama dengan mengambil alih kekayaan, uang dan pekerjaan mereka. Yang kedua setelah mereka kehilangan kekuasaan mereka, Gilead mengambil kendali atas tubuh mereka serta mengeksploitasinya, dan akhirnya membatasi aktivitas mereka sehingga mereka hanya dapat berperan dalam lingkungan domestiknya sebagai perempuan. Cara ini diimplementasikan pada sistem, dengan menggunakan pendekatan agama, sosiologis dan psikologis dan ekonomi sebagai alatnya. Setiap karakter budak perempuan menunjukkan perlawanan atas penindasan. Singkatnya, seksisme mampu menindas perempuan dalam banyak hal ideologi dan dapat diinternalisasikan serta dilembagakan melalui berbagai aspek kehidupan dan ditetapkan sebagai sistem yang mengatur kehidupan perempuan secara umum.

**Kata Kunci:** *sexism, sexual politics, feminism, women oppression, dan gender.*

**Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the operation of sexism in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* through the handmaid's characters. The focus of the objective is to find how handmaid has become the object of sexism in Gilead society. In order to analyze the text, this study uses Kate Millet's theory on sexual politics. The analysis finds out that there are three ways Gilead oppressed the handmaids. Firstly by taking over their properties, money and occupations, and secondly after they lose their power, Gilead takes control over their bodies and exploiting it, and finally is limiting their activities so they can be kept on domestic roles. These ways are implemented on system, by using religion, sociological and psychological approach and economic as the vehicle. Every handmaid character shows resistance upon the oppression. To sum up, sexism is able to oppress women in many ways the ideology can be internalized and institutionalized through many aspects of life and set as a system that governs women's life a general.

**Keywords:** *sexism, sexual politics, feminism, women oppression, and gender.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The difference between men and women has been a debatable issue for centuries. Problems aroused not only about the difference, but also in defining equality between men and women. Men and women are different in many ways but also have so many similarities in some other ways. Adam and Eve as the oldest form of men and women relationship has been interpreted in numerous versions where most of them placed women as 'the teaser' or as anything with a position lower than Adam.

The basic difference men and women have comes from the biological difference; in reproduction, men's role is seen as an 'active agent' while women's uterus is traditionally perceived as 'passive'. In a wider aspect, men are seen as 'strong' and 'active' while women are 'weak' and 'passive'. This leads to a concept that women are weaker than men, therefore it is normal to be located in a lower position.

In a further level, it creates a binary opposition. If men is associated with strong, dominating, active and

protector – women is defined as the opposite. They are associated with weak, dominated, passive and needs protection. Men are also associated with subject while women are the object, be it in sexual context or in gaze. What is important about men and women differentiation, at most situations, women tend to be oppressed and gain less benefit than men do. Women are to work in domestic areas because they are seen as incapable, such as being a housewife, nursing the children and other traditional gender role. Women who reject this traditional role are classified as deviant or they are allowed to work like men, but gain lower wages and more underestimation.

The reaction as a result of marginalization of women over male is known as feminism movement. Theoretically, feminism criticizes on 'the asymmetry of gender relations' (Culler 64). There are a lot of kinds of feminism, but basically feminism begins as the reaction toward an idea which is called sexism. Sexism comes from patriarchal ideology. Firstly, patriarchal ideology is a belief that promotes "women are innately inferior to men" (Tyson 85). It based on the idea that "physical size, shape body and chemistry" make men more superior than women. As a result, women are seen as the 'other' or the 'second' – women are oppressed and underestimated in social life. Women are believed as less capable than men and cannot do "men's job". Women are assigned to traditional gender role that generally puts women 'behind' men.

Feminists argue that the difference in men and women's role are not something natural; it is a social construction or cultural programming (Tyson 86). Men are not born masculine. Both men and women are taught, educated and programmed to be masculine or feminine. This is the reason why feminists divided 'sex' and 'gender'. Sex refers to biological characteristics (male and female) and gender refers to the role, which are men and women. The point is, sexism is not a natural. It is a social construction. If women are oppressed, it is not because their natural characteristic – it is because we missed to see an important point in the position of men and women. Sexism makes us believe that women are weak, less qualified and inferior.

The example of the subordination of women can be seen in many examples. There are many companies that pay men higher than those women employees. Not only in social lives, media and literature also portrays women as inferior. Simone de Beauvoir rejected sexism in her book "The Second Sex". She commented on how women are defined. Mostly, women are defined from its relation to men, usually as the

opposite. Besides, she also criticizes that women's body are seen as a "hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it, even Aristotle defines 'The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' (Beauvoir 7). Women's ability to give birth from is seen as a character that downgrades them, not empowering. Furthermore, women are the object and men are the subject.

In a further aspect, women are also described as the Other or the 'second sex' after men. Men's perspectives and experiences are the standard and universal, while women's are the 'Other'. The problem is, patriarchy and sexism have ruled for a very long time and socially constructed that most of us, and both men and women think that it is normal and correct. It is *normal* to see women as inferior and weak; therefore women's subordination keeps happening – sexism has been internalized in the systems.

Besides Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* also writes that women's position is a political state. She mentions that "men do not need to practice patriarchy with violence, because it is efficient without it (Millet 43) – most women do not realized when they are oppressed because they think it is normal, so it does not take a big effort and pretty easy for men to dominate women. It happens because men are "taught to be dominant. Women and men have a relationship of dominant/dominated".

In marriage, according to Millet, traditional gender role puts women in a "domestic service in exchange for financial support given by men" and their position is different because women are programmed to be submitted to men (35). In modern life, women's rights are improved but in many cases women still need men's 'permission to do things'. This is the reason why Kate Millet says that sexuality is power and deals with political. Men use their sexuality to show their performance and power. A similar idea is reflected in Margaret Atwood's novel entitled *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood talks about a handmaid named Offred, a woman that lives in a dystopian country after USA collapses and a new republic named Gilead rules. Her duty is to give birth from upper class men and if she does not succeed in giving birth she would be categorized as "unwoman". Being an unwoman means she is failed in doing her 'duty'. In this novel, women, through Offred's character is oppressed by sexism and system. By system, she has to give birth from not from marriage and her free will, but as an obligation to maintain her race's existence. If she does not succeed, she will be judged negatively not only from the system but also

from her sex – the term ‘unwoman’ implies she is not a woman if she cannot be pregnant. This means, in the Gilead society, the definition of woman from Offred’s social class is more likely as a breeder. She is called as woman if she can give birth.

Handmaids are fertile women, or those who can give birth to babies, and their main duty is almost similar to breeder. They did not come to be handmaid, most of them are drugged, brainwashed and forced to be a handmaid. They also have a strict training, must take care of their health especially their fertility. Handmaids cannot run away in any ways. They cannot escape nor commit suicide. After their training is completed, they are sent to a family, mostly the Commander’s or the Angels’ family as a present or special facility. In some way they are almost like prostitutes but giving sexual pleasure is not their main duty because they have to concentrate on giving birth to babies to be ‘given’ to the family. In this way, they are called as ‘national property’. The handmaids are not allowed to have their own willing, not allowed to read, have jobs (except being a handmaid), they have to cover their body from up to toe, they have to be totally obedient to the law otherwise they will be punished or killed. If they cannot give birth, they will be sent to the colonies and marked as the “unwoman”, the way the Gilead society calls handmaids who cannot give birth.

The *Handmaid’s Tale* is written by Margaret Atwood, a Canadian writer and won Governor-General’s Award twice, the Coles Book of the Year Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Harvard University Centennial Medal. Her first volume of poetry was published the same year that she graduated from Victoria College, University of Toronto, and five years later her second book of poetry was given one of Canada’s most coveted prizes, the governor-General’s Award. Since the 1960s she taught at various Canadian and American universities, usually through honorary guest fellowships, and she got a great consistency of work.

Throughout her writing career, critics have often categorized Atwood’s works as “feminist”, a label that she has avoided because it often applied to any work written by a woman with leading female roles. She has been one of famous spokespersons of the previously traditional of Canadian literature and composed one of the most significant and widely read books about the subject, *Survival: A Thematic guide to Canadian Literature*, indicating that gender identity is no more important in her work than national identity.

She is the author of more than thirty volumes of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction, including children’s

books and short stories. Her most recent works include the novels *Cat’s Eye* (1989), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin* (2000); the story collection *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994); and a volume poetry, *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), *Madd Addam* (2013).

Atwood’s work has been published in more than twenty-five countries. She has traveled extensively and has lived in Boston, Vancouver, Montreal, Provence, Berlin, and Edinburgh. Margaret Atwood now lives in Toronto with novelist Graeme Gibson and their daughter. The Margaret Atwood Society, whose main goal is to promote scholarly study of Atwood’s work, publishes an annual newsletter with annotated bibliography.

From the brief explanation above, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is suitable to be analyzed using feminist analysis, using sexism as the tool of analysis. This is the reason why this study chose *The Handmaid’s Tale* as the object of the study. *The Handmaid’s Tale* published in 1985, Margaret Atwood figures in literature for twenty years. Her work has been characterized as a “feminist” focus, and this novel certainly simple for understanding, the story describes a society where dehumanization of women is not just a custom but also the system. In the next chapters, the study will analyze *The Handmaid’s Tale* using feminist literary criticism, mainly about the sexism. The sexism will be focusing on Offred’s character and in order to analyze Offred’s character, the study will be using Kate Millet’s concept in sexual politics.

In accordance of background study above, that can be simplified to discuss among two problems that emerge as a significant concern toward this novel.

1. How has Handmaid become a form and object of sexism in Gilead’s society?
2. What are the effects of sexism toward the handmaids?

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study uses a library research The source of data is mainly on the novel by Margaret Atwood entitled *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1985. From the source of data, the data will be gained in the form of quotations, phrases, monologues, dialogues, and descriptions within Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* that the story describes a society where dehumanization of women is not just a custom but also the law. This data are used as a main data to run the research.

Since it does not deal with numbers and does not need table sources, statistical method is not used in this



thesis. The method of collecting data which are used in this thesis is library method. Both extensive and intensive reading are used in analyzing the problems. Intensive reading the novel is very needed to find out the answer of problems in this study. Besides the novel, other references such as journals and books are needed to help the analyzing. In analyzing the data, there are some steps to do:

1. Classifying data based on the statement of the problem. The classification uses to avoid the broad discussion. The classifications are showing the discrimination of women in pre-Gilead society which believe in sexism as their action to thread women.
2. Analyzing the fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* present an object of sexism by intensively reading the novel.
3. Analyzing the depiction fact of sexism in the cultures by closely reading the novel.
4. Analyzing that sexism is prevalent and deeply embedded in society toward women who become a handmaid by intensively reading the novel.
5. Drawing conclusions based on the analysis.

#### ANALYSIS

The analysis is going to discuss about the implementation and objectification of women in The Gilead's Society in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. The main character is called Offred, a woman of 30 or so who has been separated from her husband and her young daughter, then sent to a brainwashing center, trained to be a Handmaid. Besides Offred, there are other handmaids that will be discussed in this chapter, such as Moira, a lesbian that escaped from Red Center but finally captured and relocated to Jezebel, a prostitution center for Gilead's upper class men; Ofglen 1 who tells Offred the existence of Mayday, and Ofglen 2, the handmaid that replaces Ofglen 1, and also Janine or Ofwarren, a handmaid that was a victim of gang rape that at many times lost her temper.

It will be discussing how Handmaids become the form and the object of sexism implementation in Gilead society. The Handmaid, particularly, is approached through the character of Offred and her narrations the experiences of Moira, Ofglen 1 and 2 and Janine will be analyzed using Kate Millet's theory on sexual politics. There are three ways that the Gilead society oppress the handmaids and make them into the object of sexism. The first way is by limiting the activity and taking over their belongings (economic and social capital), secondly is taking over their bodies and finally the Gilead society can impose them to do the domestic roles.

#### Handmaids as the object of sexism

Gilead society limiting handmaid's activities and taking over their belongings. In Gilead society, most of women's activity and ownerships are restricted, especially the handmaid. Even though they are allowed to go out for a walk and shopping, they cannot move without the supervision of the government. Their freedom is very limited.

The first way Gilead society limits the handmaid's movement is the handmaids are not allowed to read. They are not allowed to watch or read the news. Education and economics are very closely related, the Gilead women, in this case is the handmaids, are meant to be low educated. According to Miller,

if knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women (Millet 42).

The Gilead society understands that literacy means power, which is very important for women's emancipation. Reading is one of the main skills to learn new things and get knowledge, and knowledge is power and the Gilead society does not want the women to be powerful, therefore they monopolize knowledge only for men.

You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone. (Atwood 22)

All shops signs have been replaced with images because the Gilead society tries to make women, including the handmaids, illiterate. This can mean that the Gilead is afraid of women's literacy and also a sign that women's brain is not suitable for literacy. There no longer any magazines or books allowed. The handmaid's rooms are empty, only with bed, so most of the time they are idle and this leads them to be depressed and mentally unhealthy. Even courses are given by playing tapes,

They played it from a tape, so not even an Aunt would be guilty of the sin of reading. The voice was a man's. (Atwood 77).

The Gilead society expects them to forget how to read, therefore they will never learn, they cannot communicate each other or corresponding, cannot put their ideas into writings and keeps them making a community, do movements and keeps them being weak.

Offred is longing for reading, and it is evidenced when Commander asks her to play scrabble with him. She enjoys her ability to read and to derive words from letters.

We play two games. Larynx, I spell. Valance. Quince. Zygote. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eye blink of it. Limp, I spell.

Gorge. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (Atwood 122-123)

Deep down inside, both Offred and the Commander understand that women are not meant for restricted from reading, and when it is restricted it can be very entertaining. She even enjoys the feelings to spell, like biting a piece of freedom and even "hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters". Literacy makes Offred feel like she is really near to freedom, to power, to live outside the Gilead society.

The second way the Gilead society limits the handmaid's movement is by not allowing them to have money. In the beginning of the Gilead's reign, they freeze all of the women's bank account and cut them off from their jobs.

"They've frozen them", she said. Mine too. The collective's too. Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We're cut off. But I've got over two thousand dollars in the bank, I said, as if my own account was the only one that mattered. Women can't hold property anymore, she said. It's a new law. (Atwood 159)

Besides education, money means power and without money and education women are powerless. After they lose their money and jobs, they begin to lose their power. Offred and Moira are talking about their bank accounts and how they were fired from their jobs. After Gilead rules, the handmaids are only allowed to bring tokens, for shopping for the household, not for their own purposes. Doing the shopping can be counted as a daily job, but they are not paid for this.

They have nothing to be traded except their bodies, "Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some tradeoff, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy." (Atwood 2).

Kate Millet states:

Since education and economy are so closely related in the advanced nations, it is significant that the general level and style of higher education for women, particularly in their many remaining segregated institutions, is closer to that of Renaissance humanism than to the skills of mid-twentieth-century scientific and technological society. Traditionally patriarchy permitted occasional minimal literacy to women while higher education was closed to them. While modern patriarchies have, fairly recently, opened all educational levels to women, the kind and quality of education is not the same for each sex. (Millet 41)

The only capital they have is their body, and as mentioned in the first part of analysis, the handmaid's body has become a tool that belongs to Gilead, which means they now have nothing but their own mind. The

combination of prohibiting the handmaids to get proper education and money is very powerful to keep them weak and obedient.

Gilead creates a 'discourse' saying that reading is a sinful activity for women. With any objectives, this restriction makes men become more powerful than women because men are the only party that literate, have access to reading materials and other socio-cultural items and activities. The power of Gilead is produced through discourses (mostly from religious belief) and because they are powerful, they can produce reality. In Foucault's term it is called the "regime of truth", or "the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true" (Foucault, quoted in Storey 129). By saying that reading – as well as getting higher education is a sinful activity, the Gilead men achieve a continual power over women.

What Foucault calls 'regimes of truth' do not have to be 'true'; they have only to be thought of as 'true' and acting on as if 'true'. If ideas are believed, they establish and legitimate particular regimes of truth. The discourse created by Gilead is based on sexism and it works to put women under men's power in every aspect of their lives.

#### **Handmaid's body as a tool of Gilead society**

In the first section we will discuss about body. Body or biological difference is the basic aspect that underlies sexism because sexism believes that this difference is the reason why women naturally have to be dominated by men. Body is the most important asset that a handmaid has. They have to be healthy because they are required to do the 'national duty' which is giving birth to white race babies. Therefore, they may not do anything unhealthy such as smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol. They are treated as national property because of their functions and importance. Handmaids are also become a prize or reward for men and their households, and after they finish giving birth to the family, they will moved to another family. They are so valuable that it is mentioned:

The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive (Atwood 79).

The handmaids should wear red clothes that covered their body from being seen. Red, the handmaids' clothes, may be associated with blood as the medium to maintain life – and connect this to their duty to give birth for families. As mentioned in the book:

Everything except my wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings are

too prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood 4)

Their body's curves are not to be exposed because they are a national property that cannot be 'enjoyed' both physically and virtually by men that have no importance. Furthermore, the handmaids' are under strict supervision and their freedom is very limited.

In Gilead society, women are seen as body with social roles and they can be replaced by other bodies with similar function when no longer useful for Gilead. To able to give birth, the handmaids have to have sex with the men as the head of the family they live with. They cannot choose the man. In the family in our society, women can choose their husband. In sex without marriage, even many women can choose their sex partner, but it does not happen in Gilead. The handmaids are only used as an object in coitus. Coitus, as mentioned earlier, is "a model of sexual politics" (Millet 23). They cannot choose which man that will be the father of their babies. They are forced to passive. Men are free to exploit them sexually.

Gilead even arranged coitus, or sexual encounter, as a part of ritual named 'Ceremony'. Offred has to take bath before the Ceremony and the whole household members attend the opening of the ceremony, including Nick, Martha and Cora, "He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneeling woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green, standing, a solitary man, thin-faced, in the background." (Atwood 74), just like Millet writes that in family, men "traditionally, patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale" (33).

The sexual encounter, or the Ceremony, consists of three people; the male as the head as of the household, the handmaid and the wife. In Offred's case they are the Commander, Offred in the middle of them and Serena Joy, the wife.

Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thigh on either side of me. (Atwood 81)

In this sexual encounter, Offred only takes part as an instrument, not as an active human with feelings or sexual desire.

My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product... 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. (Atwood 81-82)

During the sex encounter, Offred keeps thinking about something else as if she is trying to take this event as something to be forgotten because she does not enjoy this at all. She relates this event with most people imaginations with three-some.

But isn't this everyone's wet dream, two women at once? They used to say that. Exciting, they used to say. What's going on in this room, under Serena Joy's silvery canopy, is not exciting. It has nothing to do with passion or love or romance or any of those other notions we used to titillate ourselves with. It has nothing to do with sexual desire, at least for me, and certainly not for Serena. Arousal and orgasm are no longer thought necessary... This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty. (Atwood 82)

Moreover, because this is a ceremony, both Commander and Serena Joy wear clothes formally and there is no foreplay to rouse the sexual desire of the handmaid.

Why does he have to wear that stupid uniform? But would I like his white, tufted raw body any better? Kissing is forbidden between us. This makes it bearable. (Atwood 82).

The Ceremony does not permit the Commander to involve feelings.

He comes at last, with a stifled groan as of relief. Serena Joy, who has been holding her breath, expels it... [the Commander]...doesn't permit himself to sink down into us. He rests a moment, withdraws, recedes, rezippers. He nods, then turns and leaves the room, closing the door (Atwood 83).

This practice is almost similar like prostitution but it is legal and organized by the government of Gilead society. This is ironic because they are indoctrinating to be 'pure' but when they are sent to the family; they are used as sexual object of men. This is proven by Serena Joy's jealousy. Offred knows that Serena is jealous and envy at her,

She probably longed to slap my face. They can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent. But not with any implement. Only with their hands (Atwood 12)

and she also understands that she is not in a good position so Serena does not need to be envy her. Offred says,

But I envy the commander's wife her knitting. It's good to have small goals that can be easily attained. What does she envy me? (Atwood 9).

In another form of bodily objectification is found in Moira's character. Moira successfully escapes from Red Center, but finally she is placed in Jezebel as a prostitute. She does not want to be a handmaid, so because the Gilead society assumes that Moira's body still can be used, she is turned into a prostitute. The



Commander defines Jezebel as a place where men seek for variation because it is men's nature to seek for a sense of difference, by seeing or sleeping other women.

"It means you can't cheat Nature," he says. "Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan." I don't say anything, so he goes on. "Women know that instinctively. Why did they buy so many different clothes, in the old days? To trick the men into thinking they were several different women. A new one each day. (Atwood 215)

As well as other women in Jezebel, Moira is treated as prostitute. These men apparently enjoy something different from their wives or handmaids and do not care what women in Jezebels do in daytime. Most of them are bisexual or lesbians, because of their hate toward men.

According to Moira, this is better than being a handmaid, particularly because she is a lesbian and Jezebel is full of women that hate men.

So here I am. They even give you face cream. You should figure out some way of getting in here. You'd have three or four good years before your snatch wears out and they send you to the bone-yard. The food's not bad and there's drink and drugs, if you want it, and we only work nights. (Atwood 228)

Moira's statement shows that it is better to be sexually exploited but still having chances to do other things such as drinking, having sexual intercourses with women and other facilities like food and make ups, rather than being a handmaid. If handmaid forces women to sleep with men she does not like, well at least in Jezebel she is allowed to obtain a little enjoyment. Staying in Jezebel is the best between two worst options.

However, Offred feels that Moira finally loses her spirit to be free from Gilead society. Moira seems to give up and it makes Offred loses her spirit as well.

Have they really done it to her then, taken away something? What used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not? (Atwood 229)

Although Offred feels sad and a little bit disappointed, she is also happy because Moira looks better and this is better than sent to Colonies or beaten by Aunts.

Besides as a sexual object, the handmaids' role is to be a breeder. This is the reason why they have to be healthy; as Aunt Lydia said

it's only the insides of our bodies that are important (Atwood 96)

Giving birth is women's special ability; in Gilead society it is special because they can be used by the republic to maintain the white race. This special ability does not belong to a personal feeling or happiness for delivering a human to life, but only to support a system.

The handmaids lose their connection to their bodies and also the connection to their special ability as a woman.

Pregnancy is seen as a success that gives them a chance to be saved. When Offred walks to the city with Ofglen, they meet a pregnant handmaid:

One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, and escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better, our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done; we too can be saved. (Atwood 23)

This means that pregnancy is a way to be 'useful' so the handmaids can stay in the Gilead and live, not deported to the Colony with the unwomans (infertile women). The handmaids have lost emotional connections to their babies. Babies are a product of the republic of Gilead and also the golden ticket for the handmaids.

Moreover, their bodies and their children are properties of the men's households. As mentioned by Millet, in sexist society "patriarchy granted the father nearly total ownership over wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse" (Millet 33). The children of the handmaids belong to the men's family, after giving birth they have to move to another family and do the same duty.

The strict rules for the handmaids are also the example that Gilead societies have taken controls the handmaids' body. They cannot run away in any way. The Aunts are ready to direct and the Eyes are the spies. They cannot commit suicide. The handmaids' rooms are free from anything that can be used to commit suicide, such as rope, as written in the book "They've removed anything you can tie rope to" (Atwood 2). Not only is the place to tie rope, there also no glass.

I know why there is no glass, in front of the watercolor picture of blue irises and why the window opens only partly and why the glass in it is shatterproof... it's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself. (Atwood 3)

The handmaids are so valuable for the Gilead society, even if they are depressed and want to run away from the reality or want to die, the Gilead will not allow them. Gilead society treats women only as a "body with soul", instead of "body with soul and mind", probably with two reasons, it can be because sexism believes that women are not capable to think or women are not allowed to think. These premises can be interrelated.

An example we can draw about this topic is from Janine's case. Janine, or officially called Ofwarren, does not make it in giving a healthy baby. She begins to lose her temper and seems insane and depressed. No matter how long she is loyal and obedient to Gilead

society, if she cannot give a healthy baby, her sacrifices will not be counted.

In order to be saved, she makes love with the doctor because she knows that her Commander is sterile. This is a choice offered to her and she has to decide in order to save her life.

It was no good, you know," Ofglen says near the side of my head. "It was a shredder after all." She means Janine's baby, the baby that passed through Janine on its way to somewhere else. The baby Angela. It was wrong, to name her too soon. I feel an illness, in the pit of my stomach. Not an illness, an emptiness. I don't want to know what was wrong with it. "My God," I say. To go through all that, for nothing. Worse than nothing. "It's her second," Ofglen says. "Not counting her own, before. She had an eighth-month miscarriage, didn't you know?" (Atwood 192)

We watch as Janine enters the roped-off enclosure, in her veil of untouchability, of bad luck.

She sees me, she must see me, but she looks right through me. No smile of triumph this time. She turns, kneels, and all I can see now is her back and the thin bowed shoulders.

"She thinks it's her fault," Ofglen whispers. "Two in a row. For being sinful. She used a doctor, they say, it wasn't her Commander's at all. (Atwood 192)

We can see that no matter what effort Janine makes to be safe, if she cannot give baby she will be sent to Colonies. Both of those options will be blamed to Janine, because in Gilead men can do no wrong. Janine seems depressed after the incident, but Gilead does not give her time or psychological therapy. Handmaid, probably, seen as women without mind and soul, they are only bodies with roles and will be used as long as their beneficial.

The other example of body exploitation is exemplified in Ofglen 1. She is linked to Mayday, but finally she finds freedom in hanging herself. Suicide becomes a personal and a form of freedom when all aspects of living, be it thinking and doing, are dictated by the ruling power. Ofglen 1 sees this as a freedom to choose, to decide her death and to be freed from being a legal prostitute and exploited. The other way Gilead society governs the handmaid's body is by using religious doctrine. The handmaids have to wear long clothes that cover most parts of their bodies. Women's body is seen as the "source of evil". We can relate this to Adam and Eve's story. Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat the fruit of life, but he does it and sent away from heaven. When they eat the forbidden fruit, they become naked and feel shame. Many interpretations say that Adam and Eve are sent away because they are greedy and disobedient, but most interpretation involves the sexuality matter.

Kate Millet tries to give a different explanation by saying

"Adam was seduced by woman, who was seduced by a penis. 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the fruit and I did eat' is the first man's defence. Seduced by the phallic snake, Eve is convicted for Adam's participation in sex." (Millet 54)

According to Millet, seduction does not come from women's body, but men's initial or invitation. If men can manage their sexual desire, women's body will not be blamed for unwanted sexual encounters and should not be blamed either.

When Offred and Ofglen see Japanese tourist, she thinks:

It's been a long time since I've seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before. I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this. Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom. (Atwood 25)

The system seems to be successful to brainwash Offred and makes her think that dressing like those Japanese tourist is not right, because she mentions "We are fascinated but also repelled", but Offred tries to fight this when she and Ofglen go for shopping. They meet two young guardians and Offred teases them.

As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach. (Atwood 19)

Offred enjoys this powerful feeling of being able to use her body to tease men, despite of clothes that cover her body.

Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. I hope they get hard at the sight of us and have to rub themselves against the painted barriers, surreptitiously. They will suffer, later, at night, in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who stand at attention, stiffly, by a roadblock, watching our retreating shapes. (Atwood 19)



She feels that this bad condition happens because of men's domination. She lost her power freedom because of men and by teasing these male Guardians, she feels like getting his power back. At least she uses her body for something she wants, not as a national property. It is like a soft revenge for men, because now in Gilead society basically there are only two groups, men and women and what happen to Gilead's women are because of Gilead's men's domination.

### **The handmaids are located in domestic roles**

The last way the Gilead society does in implementing the sexism is by keeping the handmaids into domestic roles. Previously we have discussed about traditional gender roles. The traditional gender roles say that men are rational, strong, protective, and have to make decisions; and women are emotional (irrational) and weak (Tyson 85). Other example is men's duty is to make a living and support the family, the wives and children have to obey them because men are the leader in a family. Women, in traditional gender role, after giving birth, they also have to stay at home, nurturing the children, cooking and managing the households; have to follow the husband's direction. It is almost similar to the handmaid's role. Offred has to go shopping, delivering the baby and not allowed to do other jobs.

Men are put in superior positions because they believe that men are more logical and better leaders, while women are more emotional and weaker. The most interesting part is, before the Gilead society existed, the women have the "freedom to" (Atwood 21). This means that before the Gilead society existed, the women have reached a certain point of freedom to do something until the Gilead society takes it away from them. Their sexism is proved when women in Gilead society are taught to be feminine in order to make the men look more masculine. Gilead society re-creates an opposite. Men are masculine (strong, leaders) and women are feminine (weak, followers).

The first traditional gender role that Offred has to do is giving birth. Even though giving birth is a biological ability that only women can do, in Gilead society giving birth is turned into a "special duty". They exploit this ability and turn it into a role, because the handmaids are punished if they cannot give birth. It is not a special event to be celebrated with emotions or empathy, because by turning giving birth into a duty, these handmaids have seen pregnancy as a ticket to save their lives, a role that handmaids have to do.

One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite

ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved. (Atwood 23)

These handmaids seek for acceptance from the men about their status, or just like Millet writes:

The female is continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males as those who hold power. She may do this either through appeasement or through the exchange of her sexuality for support and status. As the history of patriarchal culture and the representations of herself within all levels of its cultural media, past and present, have a devastating effect upon her self image, she is customarily deprived of any but the most trivial sources of dignity or self-respect. In many patriarchies, language, as well as cultural tradition, reserves the human condition for the male. (Millet 54)

Millet also talks about the power of language in supporting the oppression towards women. Those who cannot give birth are labeled as 'unwoman' and the fertile handmaids are named using "Of" followed by a male name. Offred, probably comes from Commander Fred, Ofglen comes from Mr. Glen. The word "of" in the beginning of the handmaids' names shows that these handmaids belong or live as the property of men. They are not allowed to use their real name. It is a way to emphasize their weakness into the handmaids' mentality.

The second domestic role that the handmaids have to do is to become a facility in sexual encounter. In the previous discussion, we can see that in Ceremony, Offred does nothing. She only lies down and the Commander does his duty. This is a symbol of passivity. Handmaids are trained to be passive and forget their sexual desire.

According to Millet, one of the ways patriarchal oppress women is by "assigning domestic service and attendants upon female and the rest of human achievement, interest and ambition to the male" (26). Offred explains this experience to be laid passively and become the 'object' during sex:

The difference between lie and lay. Lay is always passive. Even men used to say, I'd like to get laid. Though sometimes they said, I'd like to lay her. All this is pure speculation. I don't really know what men used to say. I had only their words for it. (Atwood 32)

In traditional gender roles, women are not advised to be sexually active. They have to be submissive and dominated by men. 'Serving' men during the sex is one of the duties that traditional gender roles consist of. Besides those roles, the handmaids also have to go shopping, with their red clothes and basket, just like Red Riding Hood, they have to watch their attitudes out there otherwise they will be in danger.

By limiting the roles of the handmaids, they are placed into domestic roles. They have no opportunity to explore themselves and use their potentials. They are set back to be behind men. Kate Millet states:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or coeducational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between "masculine" and "feminine" subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower or marginal branches) to the female - and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. (Millet 42)

Without education and capital, and limited area of roles to be explored, the handmaids have become the object of sexism implementation. While they are set back, the other roles and rights only belong to men, such as pursuing ambition, literacy, employment, supervising and ruling the nation. And since patriarchy encourages an imbalance in human temperament along sex lines, both divisions of learning (science and the humanities) reflect this imbalance. The humanities, because not exclusively male, suffer in prestige: the sciences, technology, and business, because they are nearly exclusively male reflect the deformation of the "masculine" personality, e.g., a certain predatory or aggressive character. (Millet 43)

According to Millet, sexism is not based on biological logics. Sexism is always imbalance and men's oppression toward women are not expressing 'masculinity'; it is the expression of "predatory aggressive character"

People in Gilead society are taught the differences between men and women. The women are taught to be weak and weaker, so the men can become stronger and have a bigger domination. The system in Gilead society is like playing games; the men are the players and the women are the game. To win the games, the players do not learn to play better, but they set the level very low and make the game much easier to play, so they can be seen as strong and get a high score. This can happen because the sexism is built into the system and made into law and oppress the women. The Gilead society oppresses women by using sexism in the system, in this case is Offred's character as a handmaid.

## **The Effects of Sexism Towards the Handmaids**

### **1. Resistance**

Sexism affects differently to the handmaids, Offred, Moira, Ofglen and Ofwarren – however, they show resistance with their own ways. Resistance can take form in managing mind and consciousness, just like what Offred did. She tries hard to manage her mind and not to fall into unnecessary thought, and she keeps

inspiring herself with strong women or those who keeps struggling to resist.

It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. For she is unknown; or if known, she has never been mentioned to me. It pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy. When I imagine the woman who wrote them, I think of her as about my age, maybe a little younger. I turn her into Moira, Moira as she was when she was in college, in the room next to mine: quirky, jaunty, athletic, with a bicycle once, and a knapsack for hiking. Freckles, I think; irreverent, resourceful. (Atwood 47)

She looks up to Moira whenever she needs a spirit because Moira's rebellious character and constant resistance to Gilead's power make Offred believes that there are still many things can be done, there is always a possibility to get out and back to freedom.

On the other hand, Moira finally finds a better place for her. In Jezebel where she becomes a prostitute, she finds women who hate men.

"Don't worry about me," she says. She must know some of what I'm thinking. "I'm still here, you can see it's me. Anyway, look at it this way: it's not so bad, there's lots of women around. Butch paradise, you might call it." (Atwood 205)

Since Moira is a lesbian, she finds out that being in Jezebel is better than being a handmaid – at least her sexual needs can be fulfilled. That is something that cannot be obtained from being a handmaid. The facilities like hand body, drugs and drink are offered in Jezebel. This is Moira's way to refuse to be a handmaid.

Ofwarren, or Janine, tries to obey the rules because she does not want to deal with the punishment. She tries her best to have babies, even though she does not succeed, her attitude and mental breakdown are the evidence that no handmaid that portrayed in this novel obey the Gilead's rule full-heartedly.

It was no good, you know," Ofglen says near the side of my head. "It was a shredder after all." She means Janine's baby, the baby that passed through Janine on its way to somewhere else. The baby Angela. It was wrong, to name her too soon. I feel an illness, in the pit of my stomach. Not an illness, an emptiness. I don't want to know what was wrong with it. "My God," I say. To go through all that, for nothing. Worse than nothing. "It's her second," Ofglen says. "Not counting her own, before. She had an eighth-month miscarriage, didn't you know?"

We watch as Janine enters the roped-off enclosure, in her veil of untouchability, of bad luck. She sees me, she must see me, but she looks right through me. No smile of triumph this time. She turns, kneels, and all I can see now is her back and the thin bowed shoulders.

"She thinks it's her fault," Ofglen whispers. "Two in a row. For being sinful. She used a doctor, they say, it wasn't her Commander's at all. (Atwood 192)

Janine obeys the rule because she is afraid of the force, not because she thinks that the rule makes sense and applicable for women.

Ofglen 1, who hanged herself, shows her resistance by doing suicide. Besides her involvement with the Underground, it also can be inferred that Ofglen wants the Gilead society knows that the rule has ruined the very basic mind of women, to show that women are not merely body because they also have mental condition that has to be considered. Suicide is her way to show her power over her own body; her body is totally hers and whatever decision she makes is her prerogatives. Probably Ofglen thinks it is better to hang her rather than being a sexual objects and killed because of not being able to have babies.

The handmaids show that Gilead's coercive force over the women does not work very well. Arranged marriage, restrictions for women and other set of rules oppressed women – and resisting power seems to grow stronger.

## 2. Alienation

Sexism that applied in Gilead society makes women alienated in their own group. The handmaids become the object of the wives jealousy as well as the other women in the society. They are alienated from their own needs and self-perception. The only identity that the handmaids are allowed to own is they are the breeder that works for the sake of the republic. They are not personalities with free will, interests either ideals – because they are nearly seen as a product that can be exploited until they have nothing else to give.

Furthermore, the Gilead's society oppression to the handmaids has cut off women's connection to their babies. We can see that the handmaids does not seem to show any willingness to keep their babies for their own, because the Gilead's policy turned giving birth into a 'contest' and staying alive is the reward given in return. Giving birth is no longer a special ability that women have; the emotions and the relationship between mother and the babies are disappeared.

They are separated from their babies and not taking part in nurturing them. If the handmaids can be compared to Marx's model on labor, we might be able to say that the handmaids are similar to the labors, the workers or the proletarians while the Gilead men as the ruling class are the capitalist. The handmaids are the workers who work for the Gilead men but accept nothing from their hard work and not allowed to be involved in administrative or cultural activities. As a

result, they are alienated and lose their connection to their babies.

## CONCLUSION

From the findings above, we can analyze that there are three areas where the handmaids oppressed by sexism that applied by the Gilead society. The analysis finds out that there are three ways Gilead oppressed the handmaids; firstly by taking over their properties, money and occupations, and secondly after they lose their power, Gilead takes control over their bodies and exploiting it, and finally is limiting their activities so they can be kept on domestic roles. These ways are implemented on system, by using religion, sociological and psychological approach and economic as the vehicle. Every handmaid character shows resistance upon the oppression. To sum up, sexism is able to oppress women in many ways; the ideology can be internalized and institutionalized through many aspects of life and set as a system that governs women's life a general.

The first way is by taking over their properties. Women are not allowed to work, tp own money and to own other properties. These are the very basic capital to own power. Besides not allowed to own properties and occupation, they are also not allowed to read. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy makes these women lose their choice and power. This condition makes it possible for men to dominate the society and gain a sustainable power over women.

Secondly, after these women lose their power, Gilead society takes over their bodies and use them as a tool to maintain the nation's interests. Handmaids' bodies are exploited in sexual encounters, obligation to give birth to babies and very limited freedom to use their body to do activities outside being a loyal subject of men. The exploitation is done without considering their mental conditions because handmaids are depicted only as body with benefits, not body with mind and soul. As a result, the handmaids, as women, are alienated from their body and sexuality, because all of their natural traits as women are exploited by the system, not celebrated as a special characteristics that differ them from men.

Finally, after they are capitally and socially weak, exploited by bodies, they are not allowed and not capable of taking roles in other areas. Handmaids are kept in domestic roles, in traditional gender roles and not being able to pursue other roles but being a handmaid.

Without education and capital, and limited area of roles to be explored, the handmaids have become the



object of sexism implementation. While they are set back, the other roles and rights only belong to men, such as pursuing ambition, literacy, employment, supervising and ruling the nation. The handmaids become object of the implementation of sexism in Gilead society because they are oppressed through ideology, socialization, religion, biological, economy and education and also psychology.

Sexism that imposed within the society resulted in two ways towards the Handmaids. Firstly, the handmaids refuse to totally follow the rules. They show resistance, even the smallest act can be defined as a resistance. The resistance shows that the handmaids is not a hundred percent docile. The rules does not fully successful brainwashing the handmaids and turn them into a willingful object, instead, they still show their character as a human, which is having a free will. Secondly, the handmaids experience alienation. They have lost their connections to their babies and other emotional aspects in their lives, because giving birth is no longer seen as a sacred and emotional event in a woman's life. the Gilead society has turned giving birth into a productive activity, merely an act to reproduce a new human being in order to avoid extinction.

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