



## Feminist Dystopian Consciousness in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*



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### Abstract

Margaret Atwood's famous dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was written in 1985 during the emergence of the opposition to the feminist movement. The struggle that occurred between both parties of the women's rights issue excited Atwood, as an active advocate of this movement, to write this novel to alert women of what the female gender may mislay if the feminist movement were defeated. She has attempted to warn her readers through the life of Offred; a handmaid who expresses her dystopian feminist consciousness by taking the role of a storyteller and being the narrator and controller of her own story. The core aim of this article would be to focus on how Offred combines her feminist consciousness, memories, and language as liberty instruments to detect her way towards freedom? How can this consciousness be the seed which grows into the sapling of self-expression she cultivates and nourishes through the novel?

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### 1. Introduction

Set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the novel portrays a dictatorial religious government that has obliged a certain category of fruitful women to give birth to babies for elite childless couples. These "handmaids", who are excluded from their rights are devaluated to state property. Through the voice of Offred, a handmaid who blends memories of her life before the revolt with her insurgent actions within the new regime, Atwood has formed a frightening future based on factual events by depicting the patriarchal world that mirrors the New Right ideology in the American culture of that time that supports some traditional stereotypes which discriminate women, because its goals may help the abolishment of the feminist movement of the 70s and 80s. So, Atwood wants to warn us of the dystopian society that could be an outcome of the typical human feebleness of neglecting to impart from our mistakes and becoming adjusted to anything. It is relevant to mention first the concept of dystopia as described by M.H. Abrams. The term 'dystopia' (bad place)... "has recently come to be applied to works of fiction, including science, which represents a

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very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination"<sup>1</sup> (218).

## 2. Research Methods

The present study uses a qualitative method. It is applied a descriptive analysis. The elaboration and explanation are to paraphrase based on the data that consisted of the novel entitled Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

## 3. Results and Analysis

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's tale*, which is a typical feminist dystopian novel, describes a bleak future vision and funnel of women driving down to the lessening of their picture to child- delivering machine in a tyrannical, theocratic state where a woman's value is weighted by her capacity to have children as vast parts of the population have been become barren because of nuclear and chemical pollution. The hazardously low natality prompted an edgy government making another framework in which the main idea is that a woman is not a true woman unless she can have children. Thus the few fertile women are transformed into 'Handmaids' who are to produce babies to their Commander and his wife through sexual surrogacy. Linda W. Wagner Martin views the novel as the prediction of "the horrors of cultures so frightened by normal sexuality that it codified and prescribed all such procreation, and created hierarchies of life and death around it. It is a brutal horrifying culture"<sup>2</sup> (39). Gilead's dealings with women are based on a cramped, fundamentalist translation of the Bible, implying that women are the ownership of their husband, father, or head of family unit. They are not permitted to do anything that would give them any strength autonomous of this system. They are not permitted to vote, hold a work, read, write, drink alcohol, have friends, make inquiries, or be interested with their look at all and thus all cosmetic products and normal clothing are prohibited. Also they have been thinned to "containers", "two-legged wombs", and "ambulatory chalices", having no significance or pertinence apart from their reproductive abilities. They are excluded even from their names; for example the name of the protagonist is Offred which is a slave name that describes her function: she is "of Fred", i.e. she belongs to her Commander, Fred. It is implied that her birth name is June. The women in training to be handmaids whisper names across their beds at night. The names are "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June". Offred says, "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden"<sup>3</sup>(37). Jessie Givner says: "Indeed, the desire of the Gilead regime to remove name is as strong as the desire to remove faces. Just as the rules of Gilead try to eliminate mirrors, reflection of faces, so they attempt to erase names"<sup>4</sup>(58). So we can say that the lack of a real name contributes heavily to the loss of identity and strips them of an essential means of identification and instead turns them into one of the crowd. So, the novel portrays the social alienation of women and their reduction into static, submissive gender role of wives, wombs, workers, prostitutes and the confiscation of their human rights such as the rights to education, works, ownership, citizenship and even one's own name and speech. As Howell says, "Atwood's feminist concerns are plain here, but they too are her concerns for basic human rights"<sup>5</sup> (128).

Offred, the protagonist, expresses her dystopian feminist consciousness by taking the role of a storyteller and being the narrator and controller of her own story. Her feminist consciousness of the world around her and her capacity to translate different implications also provides her with the inspiration to investigate stories and settings that skip what she is presented with. She clarifies this by this citation, "It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing in any case is forbidden" (34). Klarer says in *Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's tale*: "Women from all classes of society... are excluded from any kind of written discourse. These measures aim at giving the male leadership all the advantages of a highly developed text- processing culture and of using these advantages purposefully against the women who are condemned to morality"<sup>6</sup> (131).

<sup>1</sup> Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Bangalore: A Prism Books Pvt. Ltd, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Linda W. Wagner Martin Johnson, Brian. "Language, power and Responsibility in *The Handmaid's Tale*: Toward a Distance of Literary Gossip." *Canadian Literature*, BC, Canada (Can L) 148 Spring 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Virago Press, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Givner, Jessie. "Names and Signatures in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Canadian Literature* 133 Summer, 1992; p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Howells, Coral Ann. *Margaret Atwood*. London: Macmillan Private Limited, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Klarer, Mario. "Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood's *the Handmaid's Tale*." *Mosaic*. 28no.4 1995, p. 131.

By inventing a substitute road to express her consciousness through storytelling in her mind, Offred figures out how to challenge a society that tries to quiet women and control their every stir or gesture. Moreover, she goes on to state, "[i]f it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending" (44). Here, readers can notice that although Offred is an apparently disabled woman whose knowledge and skills are disowned by her society, she has the ability to allow readers to go spontaneously into her stream of consciousness throughout the novel, it really was written like it was extracted from someone's mind because it makes the readers grasp in details how the world around them feels. As it is a dystopian literature and takes the audience out of the world they know which is loaded with new principles and social values. The clear detail of the ceremony should not amaze us because of the way that Offred describes everything in awesome detail yet still the way she depicts the ceremony demonstrates that it is disgusted and completely distasteful. "The commander fucks, with a regular two four marching stroke, on and on like a tap dripping. He is preoccupied". "I untangle myself from her body stand up; the juice of the Commander runs down my legs". Thus Offred describes the authoritarian power structures and its patriarchal language, which is a repertoire of male discourse, in a subversive tone. Sharon Wilson comments that it is through Offred's tale, Atwood presents "a timeless vision of sexual (gender) politics in a fallen world"<sup>7</sup> (95). Because *The Handmaid's tale* is told mainly through this technique, the reader knows that Offred's experiences and her reactions to them are in fact true, however unbelievable they may be. So, we can say that the power of storytelling provides her with a chance to select how to reveal her story, what to ignore, and how to end it, despite this feminist consciousness and intellectual power, Offred decides to keep her stories of her encounters and the identity she has formed as a result of them merely to herself and her audience. For instance, when conversing with the Commander, she portrays her emotions by saying, "if I talk to him I'll say something wrong, give something away. I can feel it coming, a betrayal to myself. I don't want him to know too much" (213). This shows that Offred is conscious that the simplest communication with another person can expose her at risk, as well as deny her of her inner storytelling power, and consequently, her method for revolting. By gathering some flashbacks from Offred old life the result is that the reader perceives Offred more, before what would now be considered as a normal life. "I remember the rules that were never spelt out but that every woman knew: don't open the door to strangers, even if he says he's police" (p. 24).

The protagonist Offred experiences outrageous torment, pain, sexual and psychological violence and complete mortification by the commander who keeps her for her fertility; the most elaborate ideas of sexual violence and rape seen throughout the novel are in the celebrations of the Ceremony, when people engaging in sexual relations not within a loving relationship between a handmaid, Commander and wife but is actually a celebrated form of rape; because Offred's sexuality is omitted. She does not have any emotion or feeling while her Commander was doing his duty i.e. 'national' duty of Gilead. The vagina, is the only part with which the Commander works with because it is the major site that helms to the womb. Her other body parts stay wrapped. While doing this mechanical obligation, the Commander does not unclothe her since her other body parts are seen as worthless. The Commander's only task is transmitting the semen into the surrogate womb. So, the handmaids are first kidnapped and obliged to become sex slaves by the Aunts, they are then physically held down by the wives during sex and they are finally penetrated by the undesirable commanders. This act is not consensual by any means and should have been abominated as a nasty crime but it is instead greeted as a religious, social and evolutionary necessity. Here, Atwood portrays the conflicting relationship between sexuality and power and describes how power imposes its law to sex. According to Michel Foucault's in *Power & Knowledge*: "To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition. Its objective: that sex renounces itself. Its instrument: the threat of a punishment that is nothing other than the suppression of sex. Renounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear and your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification"<sup>8</sup> (84).

In spite of the fact that Offred turns out to be a handmaid, a child bearer, she never loses consciousness of her pre-Gilead self, despite all Gilead's efforts of brainwashing. "I compose myself", she says. "My self is now a thing I must compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present now is a made thing, not something born" (66). Offred's external behaviors are not convenient with her real self; she realizes this but she must play the role to survive. In the past, she never looked good in red, listened at closed doors, or liked small talk, but she finds herself doing all these things as a part of Gilead's society (9-11). She sees herself as "some fairy-tale figure" (9), a caricature of womanhood. Gilead's harsh persecution is of Offred's self-expression, her external semblances of her internal self. Though she must compose herself, Offred never loses the consciousness that it is a composed self, not a real self but a fighting illumination. This consciousness is the seed which grows into the sapling of self-expression she cultivates and nourishes through the novel. Moreover, this can be clearly seen through the conservation of her

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, Sharon Rose. *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. P.294.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault's. *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews & other writings*. Edited by Collin Gordon. 1972-1977.

memories and flashbacks of a life that was torn, that is to say, instead of actively looking for a better future, Offred chooses to defy the social lineaments of Gilead by facing them by her memories of the past and by her feminist consciousness through her persistent effort of combining the things she sees in Gilead with her past life. For example, she always tries to recall what the stores and places such as the college had looked like before the change of Gilead during her excursions. Although it is very exhausting for her to see such harsh transformations, this grants her a type of strong relationship with her past world. She says, "I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation" (69). Although Gilead has tried to enucleate any semblance of the "corrupt" past, they neglected to see that they can't delete the recollections of the human heart. Offred may hint at surrendering, but her old self consciousness won't go out without a struggle. She has memories of a life that was stolen from her; she can recollect years before, when she had a husband and a child, when she had a job, money and access to knowledge. These things struggle her view of Gilead and push her towards fighting to regain them. Her revelation originates from knowing she is alive and the goal that she must survive for is to see a new day. Here, Offred indicates that she prefers to challenge Gilead without crossing her comfort spot, which is life as a handmaid in Gilead. So, she adopts the option of experiencing the joy of riddance in her mind, by permanently revisiting her past life with Luke. Living through her past knowledge and memories in Gilead helps Offred "dress up" and camouflage herself in her original identity. It enables her to tentatively forget her situation as a handmaid. Hence, Offred's memory and her ability to remember her past while living in Gilead is a type of innately rebelling and fleeing her reality. She reveals to readers that she "enjoy[s] the power; the power of a dog bone, passive but there", showing that she prefers rebelling against Gilead in a way that does not outwardly interfere or resist the social constraints, or put her life at risk (25). She explains how a handmaid, interested by her sanity and survival, might defy in her own, restricted and private way. So, she judiciously challenges the oppression by utilizing her mind, memory, fantasies and story-telling abilities so as to defy the system that tears out women from their voices, Atwood publicizes Offred's consciousness, and as readers, through the novel, we come to know about her story. As a result, Offred's mental reading and storytelling is converted into a public code of resistance, using the power to affect the audience and possibly even inspire a social transformation.

Offred constructed a mysterious love, expectation, and craving to see her daughter and spouse in the future. So she must survive for their sake because she needs to ratify that they are still alive. Her fantasies and reality become coiled and this makes her struggle for her sanity and this can be seen in the action of stealing, as a way of rebelling against the fences that are placed around her. At first, Offred steals butter, because by putting it on her face like moisturizer, it helps her to believe that "we will someday get out", Once Offred is safely alone in her bedroom, she takes out the butter from her shoe and applies it as lotion for her skin because lotion and cosmetics products are illicit to the handmaids. Offred cannot sleep, so she decides to steal something. She sneaks downstairs and decides to take a daffodil from one of Serena Joy's arrangements. They are considered symbols of beauty or fertility that can bloom and grow at a time when few women can, by stealing a daffodil, Offred wants to squeeze it under her mattress and leave it for the next handmaid to find as a mute revolt against her lack of freedom. In our society, thievery is forbidden and is chastised by law and it is likely that Offred would have felt the same way in her life before Gilead. However, because Offred is under the injustice persecution of Gilead, stealing is not a sign of her being an immoral person, but simply an expression of her desire to break free.

Also, space which Offred pretends as her reign is her consciousness and her memories: "There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time" (47). Although Offred in this excerpt points out her room, not even this isolated spot provides her with total privacy. Even the Commander snoops around this private space, she lives in dread of the eyes and of being seen through secret surveillance tools and much of the novel portrays her retreating into her own fantasies. She fights to conserve her definitions of herself net in a society where she is forced upon. Her mind strolls in the joy of her past or to the few, daring expectations of the future. She is interested with word games and fantasies in order to confront the boredom and endeavors of brainwashing she is subjected to in the Red Centre through seeing the terrible society she was being saved from, by watching films of atrocities such as rapes disfigurements and actual murders of women. So she fights to retain herself, her own personality, her soul without anybody who can be wholly believed (at least after Moira escapes).

Although the women have no fundamental human rights, they have considerably more strength than one would expect. Though Offred seems to be a powerless, sex slave controlled by the government, she subtly utilizes her sexuality to pick up force and control over her placement at the commander's home, the commander himself and power over herself. Offred juggles with her sexuality in a dexterous way, conscious from the beginning of how much power she has simply because she is a woman. Offred learns that handmaids murder themselves with a specific end goal to keep up some final sense of power over their bodies and choices, and in fact, the possibility of suicide is

dependable in the back of her mind. Through her relationship to the Commander, Offred obtains great strength, however, she is hesitant to test its breaking points. Ultimately she finds out that her powers over him were futile because he will do nothing to protect her from the outrage of his wife.

Despite the act of reading is prohibited to women in Gilead, Offred permanently “reads” and questions the things, people and circumstances she experiences all through the story. In the beginning of the novel, she says, “I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed”. This cynical critique of Gilead’s persecution demonstrates that the act of thinking about the meanings of things, especially by women, is also something that disagrees with the Gileadean doctrine and can be chastised by death. However Offred always employs her consciousness through using her memories as a critical foil, taking a note of things and examining the implications of different words and objects as a means of distraction from her reality that can help her to survive. For example, she thinks of the word chair and its numerous meanings, from a method of execution to the French word for flesh. Bouson says that: “Through her dialogic wordplay and focus on words, Offred not only registers her resistance to the official speech and totalizing discourse of the state, she also signals her desperate desire to retain some sense of control”<sup>9</sup>(149). This control that she struggles to retain is the power to tear her individual self away from the phallogocentric discourse and remain herself in spite of the efforts of Gileadean authorities to control her. When she and the Commander play Scrabble, she employs the search for words to divert herself from her dread and embarrassment. So we can notice that throughout the novel, readers witness a plenty of various worlds as she leaps back and forth from her past life to her actual reality in Gilead. This enables readers to go through the same experience and feelings as Offred as they tentatively get-away from the cruel realities of her actual life by burrowing into the past. This mental reading of things not only reminds her of who she was, or might be again, but also enables her to split far from the imprisonment of her life. Thus, this inborn act of reading and interpretation furnishes Offred with a type of freedom and fleeing from the material bonds she experiences in Gilead. Essentially, she rejects to accept what she is told or appeared by other people throughout her life. Rather, she is continually attempting “read between the lines” and find some hidden meanings of what different characters are stating, doing and thinking of things they could possibly be thinking. One episode that epitomizes this ‘reading’ procedure is when she thinks of the possibility of Ofglen being “a spy, a plant, set to trap [her]” (194). This apparently unnoticeable act is very critical on the grounds that it demonstrates that Offred has the ability to question everything and not accept things as they appear to be. Offred herself says, “Context is all”, implying that the contexts behind things have a life of their own, in which she finds an escape from her reality (166). We can say that although Offred does not physically read a book or written text during her position as a handmaid in Gilead, she defies this limitation by innately “reading” the things around her in her mind. She reviews experiences and memories of the past as a sort of “text” through which she critically attacks the present, while also critiquing forms of expression during the pre-Gileadean time. By sleuthing into the meanings of people and situations and not accepting or judging them by their appearances.

We can notice that early in the novel before she has become “Offred,” she is isolated from work and mislays control of her finances during her try to flee across the Canadian boundary. The failure of her family's fleeing makes her uncertain about the safety and integrity of her family members, who may still survive in the society of Gilead. After becoming a handmaid and mistress of Commander Fred, she misses her mission to give a baby. So Serena Joy suggests to her that, in view of her husband's failure to get Offred pregnant, Nick might try; Serena Joy has no problem asking the narrator to betray the Commander and break the law by having sex with Nick so she has a better chance of becoming pregnant. Agreeing with the insist of Serena Joy, Offred starts an illegitimate relationship with Nick, the family chauffeur. Since Offred as a person has been mistreated in Gilead for so long, she seizes the opportunity to have a small segment of her ancient life back and starts to hazard her own life proceeding in her relationship with Nick. Offred takes a lot of adventures to stick to her relationship with him; she shows the power of sexual acts. The regime can force as many penalties as it wants; it can force women to watch other women be hung; it can tantalize and oppress, however regardless of what it does, normal women like Offred will continue to risk everything for acts of sexuality excited by the chance of love. Offred’s stream of consciousness starts to demonstrate to the reader the great significance that Nick takes throughout her life, permitting the reader to share with Offred all her feelings. Due to having no freedom for nearly three years, Offred’s contemplations begin to become confused and she believes “. . . that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick . . . ” In this time in the novel, Offred is given the chance to participate in the resistance group Mayday and she would rather have the dangerous relationship with Nick than have a chance of freedom which Nick could be part of.

<sup>9</sup> Bouson, J. Brooks. *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in The Novels of Margaret Atwood*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1993.

At Nick's incitement, Offred escapes with double agents posing as the secret police. Evidence indicates that she departed the Boston area through the Underground Female road, settled in a Quaker way station in Bangor, Maine, and taped a narrative about her story in Gilead. Like other defectors, Offred may have migrated to Canada or England, perhaps to live in alienation. After that, who knows? She could have gained freedom or been recaptured and executed.

Offred combines her feminist consciousness, memories and language as liberty instruments to detect her way towards freedom. She flees on the Underground Female road to narrate her story to the world. She smashes the silence and spouts into the universe of discourse and freedom, hence recording herself into history, because Offred always glances back at her life before Gilead and thinks about those strugglers like her mother (an active feminist) who participated in the making of their society. Offred's mother is considered as a speaker for a various form of feminism. Offred's mother defended abortion rights, the prohibition of pornography and a lot of other women's matters before the foundation of the new regime. When she was young, Offred was humiliated by her mother's actions; she was the type of woman who didn't see herself a feminist: she scared feminism would distance her from men; she did not admire it when her mother disputed with Luck. Now Offred is convinced that feminism only helps women to reach their natural seclusion from men. Also he thinks about Moira, her best friend from the time before Gilead, an openly insurgent and heroic character. In the Center Moira is a voice of logic, dialectics and action. The narrator confesses that "Moira was always more logical than [she was]" (28). Moira's guides Janine into reason. Actually, she might be the only person who escapes the Center effectively. Despite the fact that she's ruthlessly beaten after the first fleeing try, this only excites her craving to get back out. She pulls a latrine apart and employs a bit of it as an arm. At that point she feigns her way along the roads of Gilead dressed like the foe. Moira succeed to flee from the Red Centre and becomes an icon of revelation and hope for the handmaids for resistance against Gilead. Offred wants "gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack"

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's tale* is interested by human feebleness and its results. Through the imaginary frightening world Atwood creates, she achieves her goal of warning us about how different human feebleness in our actual life can prompt ghastly results, for instance, women such as Offred, who are endured terrible malignity and mistreatment under the Gileadan regime, soon obey the roles in society that have been doled out to them, both allowing and tolerating tyranny against and among themselves and other members of society. For example, Offred never niggled to realize the amount of freedoms she really had, "I can remember where the buildings are...we used to be able to walk freely there, when it was a university. We aren't allowed inside the buildings anymore". This citation defies our admittance of our actual situation, another example is when Offred and Ofglen make an obligatory round to the Wall (where the carcass of betrayer of the regime are shown), Offred recalls something that she was learnt in the red center during her re-education to become a handmaid, said Aunt Lydia, "is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary". Offred is shocked at the first glance of the distorted bodies however, she prefers to ignore it and face it with an emotional 'blankness'. It seems that torment and agony become normal in Gilead because it tries to make people overlook what a normal world could be like. So, Atwood glimpses that if we don't react against our existing's freedom, Offred's case could be a fact for us in the future. If we don't come to a halt for ourselves and stretch our beliefs now we could forfeit our honor, dignity and identities and set ourselves up to become dolls of a regime like this in the future. Offred remembers her mother saying that it is "truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations". In *Second Words*, Atwood writes: "I feel that in order to change society, you have to have a fairly general consciousness of what is wrong or at least that something is wrong- among the members of the society; call it 'consciousness-raising' if you like; and an examination of the effects of the situation on the heads of those in the society. . . . In other words: to fight the Monster, you have to know that there is a Monster, and what it is like both in its external and internalized manifestations"<sup>10</sup>. (Rigney 125)

#### 4. Conclusion

Atwood's creation of the dreadful world of Gilead warns the reader about the risks of a world with little or no freedom because it is Offred's dystopian stream of consciousness that shows the reader how people change when their basic human rights are reluctantly stripped.

In the novel, many female characters interact in various ways with the wrongful nature of Gilead, some showing acts of rebellion more than others. Offred revolts in a prudent way that can only be recognized by the audience of her

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<sup>10</sup> Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Atwood as Critic; Critics on Atwood*. Women Writers: Margaret Atwood. Totowa: Barnes and Noble Books, 1987.

tale. She revolts through her mind and thoughts, in a way and extent that does not gamble her integrity. Specifically, she fulfills this by taking the role of the storyteller in her mind, mentally “reading” the world around her, and fleeing her verity via memories. Although Offred flopped to clearly revolt against the social structure of Gilead, she intelligently challenges its bonds via means of her inner conscious. Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s tale*, she stated, “The thing to remember is that there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid’s tale* except the time and place. All the things I have written about have...been done before, more than once.”

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*Statement of authorship*

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

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