

Feminist Dystopia or Cautionary Tale? Unpacking America's Reflection in *The Handmaid's Tale* Movie Series Season I

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Abstract

This article explores *The Handmaid's Tale* Season I as both a feminist dystopia and a cautionary tale, offering critical insights into contemporary issues of gender inequality, ideological control, and the politicization of women's bodies. Set in the theocratic regime of Gilead, the series highlights the systemic subjugation of women and the dangers of authoritarian governance masked by religious rhetoric. The study uses a qualitative method to examine visual and narrative elements from ten purposively selected episodes, chosen for their strong thematic relevance to gendered oppression. Library research complements this analysis by providing supporting feminist theory and socio-political context. Three central themes are addressed: the politics of bodily autonomy and state control, the enforcement of patriarchal power structures, and the fusion of religion and governance as a tool of subjugation. These themes reveal strong parallels between the fictional society of Gilead and ongoing struggles in the United States, such as the rollback of reproductive rights and rising political conservatism. By examining these connections, the article not only warns against the normalization of oppression but also encourages critical awareness and public engagement. Ultimately, the series serves as a cultural mirror that can inspire societal reflection, advocacy, and concrete progress toward gender equality and human rights.

Keywords: bodily autonomy, patriarchal control, religion, *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's subjugation

INTRODUCTION

In a society where women's rights are increasingly under jeopardy, the premiere of dystopian series of *The Handmaid's Tale* are hailed as a masterful adaption dystopian piece. Aired at 2017, the timing was more coincidental; where a growing wave of political activism in America is intensifying, especially around women's rights and reproductive justice. The disturbing portrayal of a totalitarian society of Gilead, where women are subjugated under theocratic laws and regime, *The Handmaid's Tale* is resonant with America's reproductive rights turmoil

and the debate over religions intersection. Hence, the story which once regarded as a feminist dystopia delves into a real symbol of America's resistance in tackling alarming contemporary discourses on feminism.

Took set in near-future time, a theocratic Gilead regime has overthrown the United States government. The central of *The Handmaid's Tale* story is the environmental crisis of polluted and toxic environment, which caused infertility towards women, seen as a consequence of people's sins. Therefore, Gilead formed a new nation which built under Biblical law to justify women's subjugation in

terms of taking control of their reproductive rights and brutal oppression towards them.

Moylan (2000) shared the framework of dystopian which is an imaginary negative space that is worse than the given society (p.128). Meaning that dystopia is a so-called place, or in this case is a nation, where all the aspects are in a downturn: oppression, inequality, environmental crisis, and lack of human rights. Dystopian works according to Moylan (2000) "characterized by the anti-government discourse of the market and militias or the political activism of identity political full of violent and unjust societies" (p.145). This dystopia framework aligns with *The Handmaid's Tale* where the dystopian nation of Gilead filled with social collapses are the central to Gilead's establishment, in terms of totalitarian regime that enforces extreme patriarchal control. Moreover, it also serves as a portrayal of how women are seen as a second sex, where their rights are easily stripped away.

The real-world parallels from *The Handmaid's Tale* are actually has long adapted since the history of the Puritans. The first settlers were coming to America to purify themselves from the Catholic church, and seeking a new shelter to develop their beliefs. During their pursuit, religion is becoming the predominant aspect which dictates every aspect of life. "They use the biblical topos of the heavenly city to evoke the exceptionality of the Puritans as a model for others" (Paul, 2014, p.152). Similarly different, the regime of Gilead is also adapting biblical teachings into their life, however, it is in the form of distorted interpretation of biblical law in the Old Testament. The leaders are choosing selective biblical references as a tool to

extremely subjugate women. Both concepts are the same, as they are putting extreme punishment to citizens, especially women, who are not fully committed to their beliefs and laws. As stated by Westerkamp (1993) that their society was patriarchal not only in the broad sense of men dominating women but also within a carefully designed prescriptive model historically specific to that community in the century (p.573).

The portrayals of women in society frequently are being ascribed to oppression, discrimination, and non-equal things. Throughout history, one consistent example which still relevant over the years is societal set of gender roles. "Women are expected to devote their lives to caring for their children, whereas men are expected to be breadwinners" (Lappegard et al., 2021, p.4). In other words, women are burdened to bear a child in order to be accepted as a "fully woman". However, the lack of necessities and inappropriate surroundings from the society are putting women on edge. For instance, the limited access to the healthcare, or the society's pressure towards women in having a child, and even the limit access to education of abortion is giving women dual pressure.

The irony of gender roles in current society is affecting the birth-rates, reflected in the contemporary America. The *Handmaid's Tale* portrays how the strict-theocratic regime is circulating around women's infertility. They still hold the belief that women have to be able to bear a child for their husband, hence, they make the handmaids as a breeding-stock for the Gilead's commanders, in order to give birth to children. In other words, women in *The Handmaid's Tale* do not have neither a right nor a say over their body autonomies.

At present, the United States is struggling with low fertility rates and shrinking populations. “The general fertility rate in the United States decreased by 3% from 2022, reaching a historic low. This marks the second consecutive year of decline, from 2014 to 2020, the rate consistently decreased by 2% annually” (National Center for Health Statistics, 2024, para.1). The factors are predominantly because of the economic factors and limited health access for women in hospital care. Other than that, climate change and nature crisis may directly affect women’s fertility. A widespread infertility in *The Handmaid’s Tale* reflects United States’ in tackling the problem. However, the series focuses on how the government is taking away women’s rights in having children, by controlled their reproductive rights.

The Handmaid’s Tale has been served as a depiction of a future, where women’s rights and their bodily autonomies are being controlled under a theocratic regime. However, is it possible that it can be more than a dystopian tale? As several growing concerns in the United States over issues, such as abortions restrictions, gender inequality, and authoritarian politic are rising among the society. Therefore, this research frames the discussion through one research question: what parallels can be drawn between the societal structures of Gilead in the series and current feminist discourses in the United States?

With the rollback of reproductive rights and growing conservative movements in the United States, the feminist dystopian works of *The Handmaid’s Tale* feels tangible with America today. For instance, the recent *Dobbs*

v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision, which effectively overturned *Roe v. Wade*, has reignited debates over bodily autonomy and governmental control. The series of Gilead story in *the Handmaid’s Tale* where women’s rights are stripped away under the guise of morality and religion, a theme that echoes in the current American discourse over abortion, contraception, and women’s healthcare. This research will explore how *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves as a cautionary tale that speaks directly to these real-world cases, offering a stark warning about the dangers of political regression in the fight for gender equality.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs both qualitative research and library research as distinct yet complementary approaches. The qualitative research focuses on gathering non-numerical data to gain insights into people’s experiences, behaviors, and beliefs. As stated by Oranga & Matere (2023), “Qualitative studies gather non-numerical data on how people live, think and respond to different situations, undertaken to get insights into people’s experiences, behaviour, beliefs, attitudes and motivation” (p.2).

In this study, qualitative research is applied to analyze the visual and narrative elements of *The Handmaid’s Tale* series, particularly in the first season. Ten episodes were selected as primary sources, focusing on scenes and dialogues that directly reflect themes of gender inequality, patriarchal domination, and ideological control. The scenes were transcribed and supported by relevant screenshots to enhance the visual understanding of the analysis. In parallel, library research was used to support the

analysis with secondary data. Sources include journal articles, scholarly books, and digital publications that are relevant to feminist theory, dystopian literature, and sociopolitical commentary. These secondary sources help provide theoretical and contextual grounding for the study's interpretation of the series.

This research uses purposive sampling to identify and analyze ten episodes that best represent the study's core focus on gender inequality. Purposive sampling was selected because it allows the researcher to intentionally choose data that are rich in information and relevant to the topic. The chosen episodes contain strong illustrations of recurring themes such as bodily autonomy, systemic oppression, and the fusion of religion with state power. This approach ensures that each episode contributes meaningfully to the study's goal of drawing parallels between the fictional world of Gilead and real-world feminist discourse in the United States.

Based on the objective of the study, which is to find the correlation and parallels of societal issues of gender inequality from *The Handmaid's Tale* series, and the real discourse of United States, the researcher embedded post-nationalist approach in analyzing the data. Rowe (1998), stated that, the new American Studies tries to work genuinely as a comparatist discipline which gives ground for gendered and sexual hierarchies, as multicultural realities of social life and economic opportunity in any of the Americas (Rowe, 1998, p.14). Therefore, the post-nationalist approach will help this study to broaden the analysis which becomes a global issue that can alter the political and gendered power structures, by examining

cross-border interactions, diasporic experiences, and transnational identities that challenge traditional boundaries and offer new frameworks for understanding social change and resistance.

Under the lens of Feminism theory, the topic will be extracted into discussions, as it focuses on the ways in which the series challenges gender inequalities and stereotypes, highlighting the oppression and expectations placed on women mainly by patriarchal hierarchies. The term "feminism" according to Kent, can be explained as a movement to "fight for gender equality" and "the rights that women can have" to replace the word "womanism" (Kent, 2022, p.9). This definition emphasizes feminism's global influence, evolving goals, and its role in addressing intersecting forms of oppression.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Politics of Gender and Control

The core discussion of this section is on how women's bodily autonomy and rights are being stripped away in the series. Through systemic hierarchy of Gilead, women do not hold the ground of their privilege in terms of reproductive health, contraception, and abortion. This problem is not merely a "fiction", but lately it is becoming more familiar in reflecting contemporary narration around reproductive rights and control over women's bodies.

Bodily Autonomy Rights Violation as the Resemblance of Roe v. Wade Overturn

The resemblance between the series and the reality lays on how women are usually seen and objectified only based on their traditional values, in which they are able to

reproduce an heir for their family. As explained by McDaniel (1988) that society's expectation offered to women is their reproductive role, include their ability in motherhood; child bearing and child care (p.1). While women today in the United States have more freedom, but the expectation about motherhood persists. The expectation starts to build up and becomes more idealized to women balancing between their motherhood and professional responsibilities. Kimport employed the fact, "In the United States, responsibility for pregnancy in heterosexual relationships disproportionately falls on women" (2018, p.1). However, it is an ironic fact that most of society are not knowing whether or not having a child is what women want, or about side effects they have to endure during motherhood. Hence, the expectation persists, and seems like women do not have the choice to decline the rhetoric in society. The ironic of politics in gender and control are proven in the movie series of *The Handmaid's Tale* season 1.



Figure 1. Eps. 1 (00:16:10): The handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Centre.

Aunt Lydia: "As birthrates fell, they made things worse. Birth control pills, morning after pills, murdering babies."

In this scene, before the girls are assigned to be a handmaid, they are in the Rachel and Leah Centre, to be given lesson by Aunt Lydia on how to be a good and proper handmaid.

However, she overturned information and manipulate them by saying that women are blessed because of their reproduction ability and they have no choice to accept it. Therefore, it considers as a sin for women to choose another option, such as taking birth control pills, saying that they are not grateful for God's blessing by preventing pregnancy. Handmaids do not have any bodily autonomy rights, and no one is supporting the idea of women's choices in reproduction. The government of Gilead is the center of this law, where they are fully taking control over women's bodies because they only see them as an object for childbearing.

The bodily autonomy of the Handmaids is also taken because the Gilead government put the blame on women for the infertility crisis and low birth-rates. Logically speaking, it can be because of the pollution and toxic environment in the Gilead post-war, not because of the other options that women choose related to pregnancy and motherhood. It is proven that all domestic issues related to motherhood are fully thrown into women.



Figure 2. Eps. 4 (00:12:05): The handmaids are given the information about the ceremony.

Aunt Lydia: "Once a month, on a fertile day. The handmaid shall lie between the legs of the commander's wife. The two of you will become one flesh, one flower waiting to be seeded."

In order to overcome the fertility crisis, Gilead government create a mandatory law for all families in Gilead have to obey. The so-called “ceremony” is a terrific ritual which represents violation of women’s bodily autonomy. It is a mandatory event where handmaids are required to have non-consensual sexual intercourse with the commander of the leader of the household, while the commander’s wife is present during the event. This required event aims to fulfill religious duty and ensure procreation in the middle of fertility crisis.

The ceremony is dehumanizing and traumatic for handmaids as there is no consent for the sexual intercourse. Handmaids are only seen as a vessel for reproduction. They can only obey and be submissive because they will face sanction and punishment if they try to decline the ceremony.

Handmaids, who are fertile women, are assigned to bear a child for the households. The coercive task highlights that their pregnancies are not coming from their personal desire and consensual choices, fair to say that the ceremony in Gilead is a systemic rape towards the handmaids. Their emotional and psychological being are being disregarded by the government which left no choice for the handmaids to block the terrible task. The justification of systemic rape under the guise of religious and societal duty symbolizes the violation of handmaids’ bodily autonomy, which also can be seen from the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States.

The overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States Supreme Court on 2022 marked the shift of reproductive rights for women in America. As stated by Coen-Sanchez et al.

(2022) that the government builds up power to regulate abortion to individual states.

“The US Supreme Court’s majority decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* on June 24th, 2022, has taken away the constitutional right to seek abortion; a decision that will have harmful and inequitable repercussions on the reproductive health of Many Americans” (Coen-Sanchez, et al., 2022, p.1).

Similar with the event on *The Handmaid’s Tale* series, that the state is fully taking control over women’s decision over their bodies, without the exceptions for rape, incest, and maternal health. The decision puts women on the second-class which undermines their authority over their bodies, in terms of forcing them carrying unwanted pregnancies or undergo difficult health issues during pregnancy. The parallels between the United States and *The Handmaid’s Tale* lay on how bodily autonomy rights are state-controlled and may affect women’s equality. It shows how reproduction coercion, either through forced childbearing and restricted access to abortion, exacerbates social inequality. Through the *Handmaid’s Tale*, the audiences can see a reflection how easy it is for bodily autonomy to be politicized, without thinking on protecting women’s freedom over their bodies, including reproduction.

Oppression in Patriarchal State

Society has been dealing with women’s oppression for centuries. As in today, the issue is predominantly happened in some places, even though there are already efforts that were made to overcome this issue. Without any concrete solution, women have to experience oppression in several fields in life, such as in

the work field, marriage, government, and even family. Oppression may lead to bigger impacts, for instance; exploitation, violence, marginalization, and also lack power. Society still sticks their traditional rhetoric related to traditional values, leading to stereotypes which women has to endure, such as when women are dictated to be a domestic worker, better stay at home to manage their household chores, as portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The Ongoing Struggle Against Gender Inequality

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are portrayed as a second-class group, proven in the chosen leaders of Gilead are all men. The state enforces strict patriarchal control, and delegate women into roles which only defined by reproductive purpose and their ability to serve men. Duties for all the roles; handmaids, aunts, Marthas, and even commanders' wife are purposely to serve men and the state. Most of them are deprived from their personal identities, even losing their names to be changed into new name that connected with the leader of the household. The biggest gender inequality in Gilead is seen on how women cannot do any works, except for domestic works. Education, property ownership, and free expression are stripped away from all women in Gilead.



Figure 3. Eps. 3 (00:05:34): Women workers are being fired from workplaces.

June's boss: "Ladies, you should all know that I feel really sorry about this. I don't have a choice. I have to let you all go."

Before being captured as a handmaid, June worked as a editor in a company, but somehow Gilead establishes a law that women cannot work and own a property, and June is being fired from her workplace and receive zero pay-wages. The state's extreme gender inequality in forbid women to work, purposely to strip their independence and power, ensuring their full willingness to obey men and state of Gilead. Prior to Gilead's establishment, women are free to choose their career as they held jobs, managed finances, but their rights are evoked under Gilead's theocratic laws.



Figure 4. Eps. 6 (00:31:46): Commanders are talking about their wives should focus on traditional roles.

Commander Fred: "She is frustrated as she has been involved in this from very beginning."

Commander Putnam: "Well, this is our fault. We gave the more than they could handle. They put so much focus on academic pursuits and professional ambition, we let them forget their real purpose."

Not only handmaids who are being stripped down from their freedom,

commanders' wives are also have limited freedom due to their belief on how women should stick to their traditional values. Before the establishment of Gilead, most of the wives are helping their husband to draft and establish regulation under Gilead, yet their efforts are easily disregard after Gilead establishment, under the justification that only men belong to lead and push their hard work. The prohibition against women working forces them to be dependent on men and the state. They have no access on education or financial management, meaning that they have to support themselves and gain upon the state. The Gilead's law makes sure that women cannot regain their autonomy and freedom. They manipulate women's ban on workforces so that they can focus on domestic matters; reproduction and servitude.

Statistically speaking, the United States is still issued with the gender inequality issue of gender inequality, despite of advancing women's rights and opportunities. Several sectors; education, employment, healthcare, and political representation are continued to marginalize women. Many of them are also experiencing gender pay gap in the workforce, where they earn less than men for the same work. Mitchell stated that "In 2024, for example, women still earn around 84 cents for every dollar a man earns for the same job on average in the US" (2024, para.1). This may happen because of the workforce discrimination, such as biases in hiring or promotion, or motherhood penalty which can limit their long-term earnings and careers. Although many women rights movements have opened several advocacies for this issue, but women are still encountering systemic struggles and gaps related to justice and

support, not only in the workforce, but also in the health and reproductive access. Thus, the United States and Gilead have systemic issues in addressing gender equality in the middle of patriarchal control.

A Fusion of Religion and State

The Legacy of Female Oppression

A religious root in America has been served since Puritanism or when first settlers arrived in America. They sought a reformation for their belief, in order to purify their church in America. Therefore, they believe that the Bible is the supreme authority for their faith and conduct. Their daily lives are mainly dictated by the Bible, as they emphasized direct engagement with the scripture, where the society are encouraged to read and interpret the Bible.

Puritans' society were governed by religious principles, where civil laws are often being disregarded. They focused on sermons and services, such as bible readings and prayer in each household, as they see family as the "little church", where man in household seen as the church leader. However, Puritans are also seen as a rigid and intolerance society for women because several women's subjugations happened which deeply rooted in religious doctrine, cultural norms, and patriarchal hierarchies. They rely on The Bible to define gender roles, which women are seen as the second sex, and force to subordination on men's leadership. Therefore, identities for women in Puritan are always tied to their roles in household; as a wife and a mother. Kerber stated that "Not only did the Puritan woman need to read the Bible for herself but also by the end of the seventeenth century, she was encouraged to take substantial responsibility for the religious

education of her children” (1983, p.167). The religious justification over women resulted in a strict control over women’s behavior, including inhuman punishment for them who defied societal norms, such as public shaming, forced marriage, or execution.

The Handmaid’s Tale and Puritans’ society share the same struggle of religious extremism and patriarchal control, hence the weaponize religion in both societies resulting in justified control and subjugation over women in terms of obedience, modesty, and reproductive duty. In order to reinstate control over women, both societies are using fear, shame, and public punishment.



Figure 5. Eps. 1 (00:16:51): Women at Rachel and Leah center learning about fertility.

Aunt Lydia: “Fertility is a gift directly from God. He left you intact for a biblical purpose. Like Bilhah served Rachel. You girls will serve the leaders of the faithful and their barren wives. You will bear children for them.”

It can be seen that Gilead is established under the guise of religion. However, under the religious rhetoric, they are able to entitle women only as reproductive tools, which stripped their personal identity. They distort biblical scriptures, in order to gain power over women’s bodies and create moral foundation to the forced impregnation of handmaids. Women are forced to believe that their ability to bear children is a sacred duty, not only a blessing. It is an ironic situation because the pregnancy itself neither a blessing nor a happy

moment, but it can be considered as a curse, as they have to endure abuses, subjugations, and manipulations, justified to align with regime’s purpose in demand population growth. While Gilead is justifying pregnancy as a divine blessing, but they dispose biblical scripture about compassion and free will. The way religion can be twisted in Gilead, the propaganda of fertility blessing can be seen as a weaponize tools to maintain power and control from the patriarchal hierarchy as it is not considered as a spiritual power, but only control power domination.



Figure 6. Eps. 1 (00:25:24): Women experience public shame as punishment.

Janine: “The boys kept coming down into the basement, for hours. It felt like, two maybe three at a time. I know most of them, from school. I just couldn’t believe they were doing it.”

Aunt Lydia: “And why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?”

Handmaids: “Teach her a lesson!”

Taking the roots from Puritans, women in Gilead are also experiencing public shame as a punishment. They are degraded in front of others to reinforce their subordinate and obedience. Started since the Rachel and Leah center, or the first academy for women before becoming a handmaid, where they are forced to share their bad experiences, such as cases of sexual assault, in front of other women. However, Aunt Lydia as the leader of the

handmaids keeps blaming and shame them, even though they are not the wrong parties. This victim-blaming reinforces the idea that women are inherently sinful and deserve suffering, thus Gilead is pressing women to endure childbearing to make up for their sins. Cases of adultery and attempting escape are led to execution. The victims are often tortured or hung while the other people watch the execution. Public shame in *The Handmaid's Tale* functions as a guilt-tripping move for the regime maintain their power domination, resulted in emotional and psychological abuse for women.

The impacts of public shaming as a punishment keep reminding women in Gilead that their sense of self and identity are eroding, as they are constantly reminded that their bodies are not their own, it caused a dissociation and emotional numbness for them. Public shame internalizes guilt, leading to a loss of self-worth, where women start to blame themselves for their suffering, for instance, when they experienced sexual assault, people in Gilead are blaming women for tempting men and women are always in the wrong side. Not only in public shaming as a punishment, but when it comes to persecution as a major punishment, they have to participate in watching the execution. Women are forced to watch or help the regime in executing someone, purposing to create an environment where victims are fully in violence, leading to emotional conflict and internalized shame. It leaves women traumatized and helpless on their daily lives. It reinforces women's subjugation by turning collective grief into individual shame.

CONCLUSION

The first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a striking critique of societal structures rooted in oppression, gender politics, patriarchal control, and the dangerous fusion between religion and state. It portrays how power, when left unchecked, can be used to suppress women's autonomy and dismantle basic human rights. As a dystopian narrative, the series functions not only as a reflection of contemporary anxieties but also as a clear illustration of the fragility of rights and freedoms, particularly for women. The depiction of Gilead where women are reduced to reproductive tools and stripped of identity mirrors ongoing struggles with gender-based discrimination, legal setbacks on reproductive rights, and the misuse of religious authority.

More importantly, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a powerful cultural call to action. By visualizing a worst-case outcome of political and social regression, it urges viewers to remain alert and actively engage in preserving democratic values and gender equality. The series encourages public discourse, raises awareness on policy and bodily autonomy, and inspires activism, especially among younger generations through social media and education. As a result, it serves not only as a cautionary tale but as a catalyst for real change motivating society to resist oppression, advocate for justice, and strive toward a more equitable and rights-based future.

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