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ENG 102 – 55

Critical Response Essay

**What Makes Offred a Feminist Protagonist?**

The show is based on the best-selling novel by M. Atwood, and portrays a totalitarian male-dominant society titled Gilead (Hulu), which is established to bring humans back to the path of righteousness. Since this society faces the issue of infertility and has very low birth rates, it has to resort to institutionalized forced surrogacy. So, in show’s dystopian future, women are dehumanized and forced to live as ‘two-legged wombs’ (Atwood, 1985) under a male-dominant dictatorship.

The show’s protagonist, Offred, who also happens to be the show’s narrator, is one of these last few fertile women, forcefully made handmaids (surrogates) and exposed to countless horrors of that society. Furthermore, since her daughter has been taken away by the authorities(Hulu), she has to make sound choices to ensure her survival and to eventually find her daughter. Yet, although the protagonist being oppressed and dehumanized at an institutional level may be considered anti-feminist by many, in truth, it is actually the exact opposite. Since the show portrays Gilead and its biased laws from Offred’s perspective and never employs a third-person standpoint, an in-depth analysis of Offred’s character and her development as the show proceeds, reveals that though implicitly, Offred does convey feminist sentiments and enforces the concept of gender equality.

During the first four episodes of the show, Offred is portrayed as an objectified, vulnerable and helpless woman, clueless about the future and about how should she maneuver through atrocities of her new life. She, along with other handmaids, as Stein (1991) states, is portrayed as a slave with no freedom of speech, actions or choice and is objectified by the Gilead society just because of her “viable ovaries” (Sethi, 2017). Initially, Offred is a compliant character who instead of being rebellious to the change like Moira (another handmade), goes with the flow and like a damsel in distress, waits for some miracle to rescue her. This element of the Gilead society depicts apparently how anti-feminist the portrayal of Offred and the other handmaids in the show is. But soon, as the show proceeds and the basic theme and ideals of the Gilead society have been established, the tables start to turn and Offred emerges as a powerful character who, through her soliloquy and desires, emphasizes that she is as much of a human as everyone else.

As the show proceeds, Offred emerges as a short-ranged, yet powerful voice of righteousness against the regime and conveys a message of woman power and freedom. Owing to her experiences with fellow handmaids and characters like Nick, Offred realizes that some still don’t fully support Gilead ideologies and that there is some hope left. Furthermore, knowing that a secret project called ‘Mayday’ supports her sentiments against the new totalitarian society, she becomes more brave and starts taking risks by pursuing her choices and is “awake to the world” (Mulkerrins, 2017), while still playing along the Gilead rules. This portrays how positively does Offred change based on her experiences in Gilead and based on the fact that she doesn’t break-down under the torments of the society, it may be inferred that Offred is a feminist character portraying women power. Furthermore, Offred indirectly also shuns the idea of male superiority by successfully manipulating the commander and discovering a soft-side to his personality. Consequently, by the end of season, Offred is an opportunists character, confident enough to know her rights and has hope of a better future which, as per Hook’s (2015, p.116) ideas, conveys a sentiment of feminism and women empowerment too.

Conclusively, Offred, though indirectly, is a feminist character that radiates women empowerment and is against misogyny. Although she seems to be a suppressed character at first, Offred emerges to be a potent woman, who supports the right and is fearless of the wrong, which is a remarkable way to present women power.

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