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Research Paper – Draft 1

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**QUESTIONS DISCUSSED:**

1.Is there a sufficient number of females characters in the show representing women power?

2.Does the show implicitly/ explicitly highlight male superiority as a social issue?

3.Does the show convey sentiments against plaguing issues like forced surrogacy, rape, women oppression, gender stereotyping?

4.To what extent does the show objectify women, or alternatively, how well does the show portray females as normal human beings with the same and equally respectable emotions, desires and opinions as men?

5.Does the show reflect the contemporary society realistically? Or does is shed light on the causes of women oppression like politics and capitalism?

6.Does the show sufficiently inspire female viewers to realize their rights and strive to achieve equality by showing possible solutions to their problems?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE HANDMAID’S TALE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

*Introduction*

A person’s perspective and mindset relies on their exposure to the world and the sort of knowledge they absorb on a day-to-day basis. Although humanity has had different sources of knowledge throughout history, over the past few decades, TV has played a major role in globalizing the world and acted as a source of knowledge for a vast majority, hence, essentially formulating people’s perspective on rest of the world. Although the advent of visual media has opened a plethora of possibilities for the betterment of humanity and revolutionized the general infotainment process, many argue that it has not done justice to the female population by portraying them in a sexualized and rather, objectified manner. It has been observed that, as Wood (1992) describes, the visual media tends to portray women as submissive, subordinated and dependent on men and sexualizes them with absurd body stereotypes. Similarly, as Henry (2007) believes, media often goes on to objectify women as mindless beings with trivial aims in life: highly incompetent when compared with men. But this observation, as it seems, is not entirely true and although the media occasionally does cross the limits by adopting anti-feminist portrayal of women, there still are instances that either explicitly or implicitly, portray women power and support the stance of complete gender equality. A remarkable instance of such a TV show is *The Handmaid’s Tale* because it uniquely demolishes absurd concepts like male superiority over females and women objectification by actually portraying the horrors of a dystopic world built on them, and for this very reason, I will analyze this show.

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. Throughout the show’s length, Offred is severely objectified, occasionally tortured and above all, is dehumanized. 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, the show perfectly portrays a gender biased world from a woman’s perspective, and implicitly conveys emotions of sympathy and feminism to its audience. Apart from this, The Handmaid’s Tale also highlights plaguing issues like forced surrogacy, rape, women slavery and human trafficking and indirectly conveys sentiments against them.

The show will be analyzed based on my own conception of feminism which demands all individuals, regardless of race, gender, caste or sexual orientation to be considered equal and be provided complete freedom in life. I believe binding someone by stereotypes or not allowing them freedom of choice is an act of dehumanization and hence, my feminist conception is against this. So, throughout the paper, I will use my own idea of feminism to draw parallels or comparisons between the show, our current society, and the society we need to achieve for the collective good.

*Thesis*

Although at a surface-level, The Handmaid’s Tale appears to be sexist and anti-feminist yet upon a deep analysis, it is apparent that the show supports women empowerment and gender equality because it portrays a dystopia where gender-bias rules, highlights the atrocities faced by women in it and implicitly conveys its stark parallel to the tortures of our own society.

*The Perspective That Gilead is Portrayed From*

The show portrays Offred’s negative perspective of a society where women are domesticated and bound by rules made by men, hence conveying negative sentiments against female stereotyping and glass-ceilings for women. As clarified earlier, Gilead society portrays handmaid’s as reproductive organs and treats them as such, dehumanizing and objectifying them at every turn of their lives. Similarly, even the wives of Gilead commanders are restricted to domestic limits and not allowed to exercise freedom. Although such portrayal may be believed to have an adverse effect on the audience and be considered as promoting anti-feminine ideas, the shows approach to portrayal of Gilead proves otherwise. As Stein (2007) states, in a world like Gilead, utilization of Offred as the sole narrator allows for the show to convey a victim’s sentiments against the oppressors. This clarifies that although the show portrays extreme women objectification, utilization of Offred’s perspective as the shows viewpoint conveys contrasting thoughts to the ideologies of Gilead and highlights the shows real feminist stance.

Throughout the show, Offred, although is largely compliant and subjected to the same dehumanizing treatment as all other women, continues mocking each and every ethically-wrong ideal of Gilead as soliloquy. This small act of rebellion conveys a woman’s sentiments against the atrocities she has to face in her day-to-day life and highlights stark parallels between the show’s dystopia and our very own society. Today, although a woman’s position has been uplifted but still, they are stereotyped as inferior to men and just as in Gilead, considered incapable of administrative or managerial skills. Even if the women somehow manage to break free of their domestic bounds and join workplaces, it “does not liberate women from male domination. Indeed, there are many high-paid professional women, many rich women, who remain in relationships with men where male domination is the norm.” (Hooks, 2015, p.50). So, although the society has turned a blind eye to it, but women are dehumanized, stereotypes bound and objectified at various stages of their lives and in *The Handmaid’s Tale,* Offred acts as a voice against all such anti-feminine acts. So, it is apparent that by utilizing elements such as Offred’s soliloquy, The Handmaid’s Tale does portray the problems associated with gender stereotyping and conveys negative sentiments against it.

*Portrayal of Male Dominance as a Social Issue*

Although The Handmaid’s Tale is set in a male-dominant society, through Offred’s viewpoint, it manages to portray male superiority as an unjustified bias and the problems associated with patriarchy. Gilead’s consideration of males as intellectually and physically superior to females is very similar to what our own society implicitly practices. Be it in workplaces, homes, organizations or political bodies, male domination is the norm in a majority of the places and at some point of their lives, “all women are in some way victimized by male domination” (Hooks, 2015, p.42) which shows how grave of an issue this is for females. In *The Handmaids Tale,* male domination is portrayed as the norm too but, as stated earlier, Offred’s perspective of Gilead and its patriarchy highlights how wrong the idea of male superiority is and through her encounters, she implicitly shows that men are not perfect enough to deserve superiority at all. Through things as subtle as winning a scrabble game to actually manipulating the commanders into her interests, Offred constantly shows how baseless the idea of male dominance is and shed light on the reality that women are actually equal, or in some cases, better than men in a variety of fields.

Similarly, the show also brings into light the consequences of having male dominant decision making bodies, which inevitably results in women getting oppressed and dehumanized. As shown in *the Handmaid’s Tale,* the commanders are displayed making one-sided decisions for Gilead, without considering a woman’s perspective on the topic. This, although implicitly promotes male superiority, yet also highlights the grave consequences it entails for the female gender. So, through portrayal of Gilead from a woman’s perspective, the show actively highlights how wrong the concept of male dominance is. Hence, the show succeeds in clarifying that male superiority is unjustified and sufficiently highlights how women suffer in a patriarchal society, thus, demolishing the idea of gender inequality.

*Victim’s Perspective on Women Objectification and Dehumanization*

In Gilead, the handmaids are objectified and dehumanized which, upon portrayal from Offred’s (a victim) perspective, clarifies women’s rightful position besides men and highlights the tortures faced by them in a world much similar to ours. As Stein (2007) points out, the dystopian society although is an exaggeration, yet is very similar to the society we currently live in. In Gilead, women are not granted freedom of speech, actions and have no rights even over themselves. Rather, the shows theme society objectifies and dehumanizes women as reproductive organs and binds them by rules favoring the authorities. Upon close analysis, the ideals portrayed by the Gilead are very similar to the atrocities that women in our society have to go through in their lives and hence, can be related too. But, the show doesn’t only portray women in oppression and, as stated earlier utilizes Offred’s perspective to the fullest to highlight a contrasting voice to the Gilead regime. “Offred's storytelling violates the rules of Gilead, for handmaids are supposed to be not only speechless but invisible as well” (Stein, 2007, n.p.). This act of Offred, although is a rebellion against the anti-feminine laws of Gilead, more importantly allows for the show to highlight why gender equality is important and point out that in what ways are women oppressed and dehumanized in our society.

At several points in the show, Offred’s soliloquies convey sentiments of surprise, disbelief and largely, disagreement with Gilead. For instance, when a handmaid is hanged for indulging in a lesbian relationship, Offred sympathizes and narrates ideas of hatred for the society; when she feels ill and the doctor examines just her reproductive organs for issues, Offred gets surprised on the scale of handmaid objectification and when the commander takes her to his secret parties, she narrates the level of hypocrisy in this man-made society. In contrast to the anti-feminine visuals of the show, all these moments of though allow Offred to tell the audience how cruel the Gilead society and hence, warn the world of consequences of the direction our society is currently proceeding in and emphasizes the importance of an equal society. So, by portraying a world where women are objectified and dehumanized as ‘wombs’ and displaying the emotions of these handmaids from a victim’s perspective, The Handmaids Tale raises a voice in support of complete gender equality and shuns the idea of women objectification.

*Highlighted Causes of Women Oppression*

Throughout the show, different causes of women oppression, including forced surrogacy, rape and slavery are portrayed in their true sense, which makes the audience sympathize with victims and conveys strong emotions against them. As Moss (in Mulkerrins, 2017, n.p.) states, the show was also meant to highlight relevant plaguing issues like trafficking, genital mutilation, rape, infertility and forced surrogacy and focus on how they affect women. This orientation is very much visible in the show’s theme and as with every other idea, is shunned implicitly through Offred’s emotions and thoughts about them. As Mulkerrins (2017, n.p.) states, issues like forced surrogacy are largely alien to the general public yet are significant enough that many “baby farms” (Mulkerrins, 2017, n.p.) have been reported in the developing world which dictates how important it was for the show-makers to bring these issues to light.

So, the show utilizes Gilead, a society where rape, or the society calls it, the ceremony, is ethical; where surrogacy is institutionalized as a way to combat infertility; where country-level deals are established for handmaid trafficking and where women are enslaved, to provide the audience with a rare, first-person perspective on the issues that are largely not talked about. This approach, coupled with Offred’s narrative actively highlights what the unspoken, yet grave causes of women oppression are and conveys negative sentiments against them.

This theme in the show is also very relevant to the current times because most of the activities like forced surrogacy “have already come true. It’s just that women [..] didn’t notice until we started to be called ‘hosts’ too.” (Glosswitch, 2017). So, *The Handmaid’s Tale* takes a very necessary stance against women oppression by explicitly highlighting the causes, yet implicitly conveying the victim (Offred)’s sentiments against all such acts. So, by highlighting the oppressions faced by women, The Handmaid’s Tale uniquely brings into perspective the horrors women have to go through, which otherwise, would be impossible for an average human to experience and hence, conveys emotions of sympathy against them.

*Solutions to Uplift Women Position in the Society*

The Handmaid’s Tale, in later episodes, brings into light the power of unity, self-realization and confidence as solutions to Offred’s issues in Gilead, and since many parallels may be drawn between Gilead and our world, also suggests these solutions to gender inequality issues present today.

[to be added in final draft]

By portraying the handmaids, mainly Offred, succeeding against the Gilead regime owing to the suggested solutions, the show suggests women all around the world to take inspiration, realize their worth and stand up against the patriarchy and oppression.

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