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

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**QUESTIONS DISCUSSED:**

1.Is there a sufficient number of female 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 equally important members of the contemporary society with 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?

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

*Introduction*

A person’s perspective and mindset relies on their exposure to the world and the knowledge they accumulate 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 shaping people’s perspective of the world around. Therefore, 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 (1994, p.32) describes, the visual media tends to portray women as submissive, subordinated and dependent on men and sexualizes them with absurd body stereotypes. Similarly, the media often objectifies women as mindless beings with trivial aims in life: highly incompetent when compared with men. Interestingly, this observation, is not entirely true and although the media occasionally does cross the limits by adopting anti-feminine 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 pointless concepts like male superiority over females and women objectification by actually portraying the issues of a dystopic world built on them, and for this very reason, I will analyze this show in my research paper.

The show is based on the best-selling novel by Margaret Atwood, and portrays a totalitarian male-dominant society titled Gilead (Hulu), established to bring humans back to the path of righteousness. To counter infertility, Gilead resorts to institutionalized forced surrogacy, resulting in women being 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 and is forcefully made a handmaid (surrogate) and exposed to countless horrors of that society. Throughout the show’s length, Offred is severely objectified, occasionally tortured and above all, is dehumanized. 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, the show perfectly portrays a gender biased world from a woman’s perspective, and implicitly conveys emotions of sympathy and feminism to its audience.

Throughout the research paper, my own idea 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; will be used to draw parallels between the show, our contemporary society and the society we need to achieve for the collective good. Today, As C. N. Adichie (2013) describes, the society perceives men as the ruling authorities while it is always women who are bound by stereotypes and outdated cultural laws. Since childhood, women are distanced from the concept of independence and self-fulfillment which leaves them subordinated and subject to male superiority. Similarly, it is also a sad fact that the contemporary society bounds women by “glass ceilings”, preventing them from living their dreams and getting equal opportunities to succeed. I believe adding such stereotypes and boundaries to people’s lives is an act of dehumanization and hence, my idea of feminism is strictly against all such shackles and chains and promotes ultimate freedom for everyone.

Although at a surface-level, *The Handmaid’s Tale* appears to be sexist and anti-feminist, upon a deep analysis keeping my feminist conception as the viewpoint, 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 how they compare to the tortures of our own contemporary society and implicitly conveys sentiments against women oppression and objectification.

*Highlighted Causes of Women Oppression*

Throughout the show, different causes of women oppression are portrayed in their true sense, which makes the audience sympathize with victims and conveys strong emotions against the oppressors. As Moss (as cited in Mulkerrins, 2017, n.p.) states, the show was meant to highlight relevant plaguing issues like trafficking, genital mutilation, rape, slavery and forced surrogacy and focus on how they affect women. As Mulkerrins (2017) states these issues 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.

The show portrays Gilead, a society where rape, or as the society calls it, “the ceremony” (S1, E1), is ethical, where surrogacy is institutionalized as a way to combat infertility; where country-level deals are established for handmaid trafficking (S1, E6) and where women are enslaved as “Breeding Stock” (S1, E1), to provide the audience with a rare, first-person perspective on the issues that are largely not spoken about. This portrayal of the crude reality although may be considered anti-feminist by many, implicitly does introduce the audience to these major causes of women oppression that generally are left under the radar. On the other hand, *The Handmaids Tale* also sheds light on common acts of belittlement that almost all females face at some point in life (Hooks, 2015, p.53), yet are generally neglected as insignificant. For instance, the show presents the wives of commanders as domesticated souls who, regardless of their qualifications or capabilities, are considered inferior to their male counterparts and denied any involvement in major decisions and as portrayed in Episode 6 (Miller, 2017, s1), are not even allowed to enter the offices of their husbands. This implicitly puts forward the idea that although not every female goes through similar tortures as the handmaids, it is disturbingly common for them to be looked down on.

This theme in the show is also very relevant to the current times because most of the activities like rape, slavery and forced surrogacy “have already come true. It’s just that women [..] didn’t notice until they started to be called ‘hosts’ too” (Glosswitch, 2017, n.p.). Additionally, today, just like in Gilead, many cultures manipulate scriptures and belittle women under the name of religion. Hence, 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.

*The Narrator’s Perspective: Offred’s Hatred for Gilead*

*The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays handmaids 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 of women may 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 continues mocking each and every ethically-wrong ideal of Gilead through her soliloquy. 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 narrates hatred for Gilead (S1, E3); when she feels ill and the doctor examines just her reproductive organs for issues, Offred gets surprised on the scale of objectification (S1, E4) and when the commander takes her to his secret parties at “Jezebels”, she narrates the level of hypocrisy in that man-made society (S1, E8). In contrast to the anti-feminine visuals of the show, all these moments of thought allow Offred to tell the audience how cruel the Gilead society is 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.

Additionally, 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. Upon close analysis, the ideals portrayed by the Gilead are very similar to the atrocities that women in our contemporary society have to go through in their lives. So, although many have turned a blind eye to it, women are dehumanized, stereotyped 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. Similarly, since handmaids are supposed to be speechless objects, “Offred's storytelling also violates the rules of Gilead” (Stein, 2007, n.p.) and this act of hers, although is a rebellion against the anti-feminine laws of Gilead, more importantly is a message for female population to demand their rights and not allow any unjustified laws to suppress them. Hence, it is apparent that by utilizing elements such as Offred’s soliloquy, *The Handmaid’s Tale* does portray the problems associated with gender stereotyping, women oppression and dehumanization 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. The show portrays men as the sole authorities ruling over Gilead and from powerful positions like a commander’s, to ranks in the “Guardian” army, all positions of power are held by men; while women are reserved for much faded, domesticated and rather objectified roles like the “Marthas”, “Handmaids” and the “Wives” which conveys Gilead’s perception of women as inferior to men. Taking the Conflict Theory into account, this portrayal implicitly implies how thoroughly that male-dominant society (Gilead) tries to rule out all possible chances of rebellion by the female population, to ensure no obstructions in their practices, which, is an act of women dehumanization.

Gilead’s consideration of males as intellectually and physically superior to females is very similar to what our own society implicitly practices. Today, although a woman’s position has been uplifted, they are still 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). In *The Handmaids Tale,* male domination is portrayed as the norm too yet, 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 over women at all. Through things as subtle as winning a scrabble game against the commander (S1, E4) to actually manipulating the commander into her interests like visiting the “Jezebels” (S1, E8), Offred constantly shows how baseless the idea of male dominance is and sheds light on the reality that women are actually equal, or in some cases, better than men in a variety of fields. Additionally, Offred’s best friend, Moira (also a handmaid), demonstrates unparalleled independence and bravery throughout the show, leading to her freedom. Moira’s valor further advocates the fact that women are equally capable as men and that they shouldn’t be looked down upon.

The show also brings into light the consequences of having male dominant decision making bodies, which inevitably results in women getting oppressed and dehumanized. In *the Handmaid’s Tale,* the commanders are depicted making one-sided decisions for Gilead, such as using fertile women as “concubines” (S1, E9) without considering the female populations perspective on the idea. This, although promotes male superiority, also highlights the grave consequences it entails for the female gender and warns the female audience of their rights getting denied, if they let the contemporary society promote male superiority. 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.

*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. Since the moment she finds a note etched in her wardrobe telling her not to let Gilead “grind her down” (Miller, 2017, ep.4, s.1), Offred decides to not let fear obstruct her path to freedom and as Moss states (as cited in Mulkerrins, 2017, n.p.), is awake to the real world.

Gaining her confidence from small acts of rebellion, Offred realizes that in such hard times, how important it is for her to stand up against the Gilead realm, believe in herself and follow what she thinks is right. Beginning with supporting the cause of a secret female rights movement called “Mayday” (Miller, 2017, ep.5, s.1), Offred starts manipulating the circumstances and finding ways to save her daughter and escape Gilead. Soon after, when Aunt Lydia orders all handmaids to stone Janine (a fellow handmaid) to death and fearless of the consequences, Offred fails to comply, inspiring other handmaids to disobey too (Miller, 2017, ep.10, s.1). These acts demonstrate that sensing the need of time, Offred turns out to be a brave female who knows how to get what is hers. On the other hand, Offred is not the only female character in the show that demonstrates power and strives to break shackles. In episode 7 (Miller, 2017, s.1), Zoe, an ex-army doctor, is shown fleeing Gilead and helping others achieve freedom too. Her brave and decisive personality depicts the exact opposite of what the world perceives a woman to be: a damsel in distress, and hence shows that how important it is for females to stand for their rights.

Such portrayal of Offred and other strong women conveys a vivid message to females of our current society to believe in themselves and “to speak up and […] own feminism” (Mulkerrins, 2017, n.p). *The Handmaid’s Tale* teaches women facing oppression not to demean themselves and strive for their freedom and acknowledgement, demanding them to win their rightful place beside men. Hence, by portraying the oppressed women, including Offred, succeeding against the Gilead regime owing to their bravery and confidence, the show suggests women all around the world to take inspiration, realize their worth and stand up against the patriarchy and oppression.

*Conclusions and Recommendations*

Summing up the ideas presented in this research paper, albeit *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays women in a very dehumanized manner, implicitly is a feminist show as it shuns anti-feminine concepts like female objectification, oppression and male superiority by portraying an actual dystopian society built on these ideals. Yet still, there are scenes that blur the shows position as a feminist show and could’ve been improved. For instance, Offred should not have been portrayed as having consensual intercourse with Nick, a supporter of Gilead (Miller, 2017, ep.5, s.1); and Aunt Lydia, the merciless in-charge of handmaids should not have been a woman as it demonstrates contrasting beliefs among the female population. Yet, I believe, due to its unique depiction of oppression from the victim’s perspective, the show is a perfect example of media franchises that influence the general audience to strive against injustice. In my opinion, the visual media needs to integrate more instances of content that focuses on realistic issues and instead of portraying women in an anti-feminine manner, portrays an equal and uplifted position of women. This way, the media will effectively utilize its prowess to promote the concept of complete gender equality, drifting our contemporary society away from becoming the next Gilead and hence, will strive for the betterment of humanity.

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