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# Sociological Representation of Religion and its Impact on Women's Treatment in The Handmaid's Tale and A Thousand Splendid Suns

With reference to wider reading, explore and compare Margaret Atwood and Khaled Hosseini's sociological representation of religion and its impact on women's treatment in The Handmaid's Tale and A Thousand Splendid Suns.

In both texts, A Thousand Splendid Suns and The Handmaid's Tale, both writers explore the exploitation and mistreatment of women for the benefit of 'the class structure of a society...in a struggle for economic, political and social advantage', as stated by Karl Marx[footnoteRef:2]. However, the underlying force behind the oppression of women is the sociological representation of religion which is used as a power tool to control women's place in society. For instance, women in both texts are can be specifically regarded as the base of a superstructure in society, creating the means of production, which is children. [2: Abrams. H. M, Harpham G, (2005), 8th edition, A Glossary Of Literary Terms, Page 155]

Thus, it is no surprise that both authors focus on the disturbing and consequential aspects of religion, illustrating the control religion has over humankind which ultimately leads to women being perceived as inferior. It is this idea that religious scriptures are twisted and turned to suit a purpose for society or men that draws my attention to the disempowerment of women; both authors give us a chilling account of the lives of women in two different countries (America and Afghanistan) across three decades. On a personal level as a young, modern Muslim woman, independent religious perspective is a tool that empowers, but the idea of religion used as a form of control or as means of production in society is fundamental to this essay. It is not within the scope of this essay to make specific references to wider reading related to biblical or Islamic scriptures.

According to the feminist critic, Driver, traditional patriarchy has evolved because of religion. For example, she argues that "religious writings in praise of women as virgins or wife of mother continues to appear" with "God as father, incarnation as male, masculine type of authority[footnoteRef:3] pointing out the criticism of religion as the basis of patriarchal power in our society[footnoteRef:4]. This interpretation can be linked to Atwood and Hosseini's presentation of women in subordinate roles with religion being the primary reason behind their poor treatment. Equal rights do not exist and women are trained to become housewives or child bearers in both texts. [3: Driver, A. (1976). Religion. 2nd ed. The University of Chicago.] [4: Driver, A. (1976). Religion. 2nd ed. The University of Chicago.]

Atwood powerfully highlights how religion sociologically plays a big part in the way that women are treated if they are unable to bear children because Gilead is strictly reliant on the bible, specifically Genesis. The epigraph very early on explores the idea of women almost becoming worthless or desperate in society as seen in: "Give me children, or else I shall die" Right from the start the strong references to fertility enables the reader to appreciate that bearing children is rare and precious in Gilead. This is suggested through the Martha's private conversations on "unofficial news" (Page 21) in Chapter 2, "Stabbed her with a knitting needle, right in the belly.

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Jealousy, it must have been, eating her up” (Page 21). On the exterior the Wives appear to be calm and silent about the fact that they are infertile, yet on the interior we can detect that they are resentful of their own situation and jealous of the Handmaid’s, leading readers to the horrifying realisation of the power struggle between the women.

Religious ideologies in both texts fit Abrams and Harpham’s reference to Engels and Marx theories of how “An ideology, is in complex ways the product of the position and interest of a particular class.” [footnoteRef:5] This is particularly relevant to *A Thousand Splendid Suns* because the antagonist, Rasheed, forcefully demands his wives to wear the Burqa in order to retain male power over the women. Unsurprisingly, the belief that “a woman’s face is her husband’s business only” (Page 69) was perhaps a common belief held by the men in Afghanistan because of the religious patriarchy being most prominent between the 70’s and 80’s because of the Soviet War, leading women perceived as properties and their rights of choice and freedom taken away. Similarly, Gilead is a totalitarian state controlled by men who adopt fundamentalist Christian values. Some readers may link Gilead’s reliance to the bible to the Evangelical Movement which was most prominent during the 80’s, when Atwood was writing *The Handmaid’s Tale*, when a group of Protestant Christians wished to “proclaim the gospel to every creature, a command toward a movement of evangelizing the world” [footnoteRef:6]. [5: Abrams. H. M, Harpham G, (2005), 8th edition, *A Glossary Of Literary Terms*, Page 155] [6: Jambrek, S. (2018). *The Great Commission in the Context of the Evangelical Churches of Croatia in the Second Part of the Twentieth Century*. [online] Academia.edu. Available at: [http://www.academia.edu/23276240/The\\_Great\\_Commission\\_in\\_the\\_Context\\_of\\_the\\_Evangelical\\_Churches\\_of\\_Croatia\\_in\\_the\\_Second\\_Part\\_of\\_the\\_Twentieth\\_Century](http://www.academia.edu/23276240/The_Great_Commission_in_the_Context_of_the_Evangelical_Churches_of_Croatia_in_the_Second_Part_of_the_Twentieth_Century) [Accessed 27 Jan. 2019].]

Firstly, both authors use symbolism in the descriptive detail of the women’s clothing which is also heavily associated with religious ideologies of acceptance or conformity. This is portrayed by the loose clothing which is a symbolic tool to strip women of their sexual freedom, as following a strictly conservative dress code preserved their modesty. For example, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood demonstrates the controversial fictional critique of Christian supremacy [footnoteRef:7] via the motif of clothes. Offred’s narrative description of the “ankle-length, full” (Page 18) skirt which is “gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts” (Page 18) highlights the dehumanising restriction of sexual freedom through the hard line religious beliefs on the freedom of expression and sexual choices [footnoteRef:8]. Sadly, this suggests simply categorises them based on their reproductive status in society. [7: Park, E. (2018). *God, Guys and Guns*. A review of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. [online] National Secular Society. Available at: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2018/06/god-guys-and-guns-a-review-of-the-handmaids-tale-by-margaret-atwood> [Accessed 13 Nov. 2018].] [8: Park, E. (2018). *God, Guys and Guns*. A review of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. [online] National Secular Society. Available at: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2018/06/god-guys-and-guns-a-review-of-the-handmaids-tale-by-margaret-atwood> [Accessed 13 Nov. 2018].]

On the other hand, Hosseini’s significant descriptive detail of the burqa powerfully symbolises Mariam’s disgust, not only at the attire, but at the start of the “imposing and immovable” (Page 69) control Rasheed is starting have over her. For example, emphasis on how it “felt tight on her [Mariam] skull” (Page 72) may metaphorically present the forcing of the burqa as the start of Rasheed dominating over Mariam’s mind. However, Mariam presents slight rebellion towards the “suffocating” (Page 72) outfit as she clearly states that “The loss of peripheral vision was

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unnerving” (Page 72). These references are perhaps a metaphor for the way that Mariam now views the world or society under Rasheed’s control, highlighting her vulnerability and loss of independence.

Both writers depict women engrained in a system that brainwashes them into becoming hypocritical and judgemental of other women. Atwood intentionally adopts a disjointed structure to include first person flashbacks which are Offred’s memories, emphasising the distortion between illusion, reality and memory. Offred’s memories are triggered to give the reader a snippet of her previous identity before religion or the government controlled her life. Offred does not even realise how oppressing her outfit truly is when she expresses her repulsive attitude towards the Japanese tourists at the beginning of the novel. She describes them as “undressed” (Page 38) even though she “used to dress like that” in a “Westernized” (Page 38) fashion herself. By this point, the reader is reminded that the once independent Offred has adopted Gileadean society’s religious definition of simplicity and modesty which is reflected in her appearance as well as her thinking. However, Offred views herself at a “political advantage” [footnoteRef:9] because of her symbolic “red” dress which signifies fertility and a level of status. The reader is likely to connect her attire, which Offred gorily references as “blood”, in connection to the blood of the sacrificial lamb in the bible which is ironically similar to a moral sacrifice as women are disregarded as human beings and kept safe purely for their reproductive ability. However, later in the novel when the Commander takes her to an underground brothel and encourages her to take off her red gown, Atwood reveals the hypocrisy of the system and religious values as she wears a costume “so glittering and so theatrical” (Page 242) that it is “a sneer to the Aunts” (Page 242). It is fair to say that the regime retrained women’s minds to fulfil their religious obligations of providing their body for the benefit of men through reproduction and sexual pleasure. [9: Abrams. H. M, Harpham G, (2005), 8th edition, A Glossary Of Literary Terms, Page 155]

Likewise, Hosseini corresponds this brainwashing to Mariam’s fascination to “modern” women with “makeup on their faces and nothing on their heads” (Page 74) suggesting modesty is the most important factor in cultural acceptance and their belief in what is deemed right or wrong in the way women dress. Hosseini adopts a third person narrative structure to suggest how Mariam distinctively separates herself from those who choose not to conform to the religious code of dress imposed by men; in a way this is her way of being at a “social advantage” [footnoteRef:10] amongst the men and women in her town, unlike Offred. Whilst, both protagonists unconsciously turn on women, Hosseini illustrates that Muslim women in Afghanistan are almost born to judge and be judged by others. This is seen in her self-consciousness acceptance of the burqa because it conceals and prevents judgement: “Inside it, she was an observer, buffered from the scrutinizing eyes of strangers. She no longer worried that people knew, with a single glance, all the shameful secrets of her past” (Page 73). This links to Mariam’s memories of her mother who often referred to her as “Harami” (Page 1), meaning an act forbidden from Allah because of her dishonourable birth. In a way, she embraces the burqa because she would no longer be an outcast in society. [10: Abrams. H. M, Harpham G, (2005), 8th edition, A Glossary Of Literary Terms, Page 155]

Critics Abrams and Harpham’s view religion as a “hidden function of legitimizing and maintaining the position, power, and economic interests of the ruling class” [footnoteRef:11] which is specifically applicable to the double standards practised by men in both novels. Strikingly, both authors challenge patriarchy by exposing men’s double standard who in the name of religion take control. For example, In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood names a secret

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brothel “Jezebels” (Page 262) which is significant because this is the place where the Commander secretly takes Offred. This is also significant because Jezebel was a woman in the Bible who was portrayed as a “murderer, prostitute and enemy of God”[footnoteRef:12]. Offred describes herself as a “travesty” (Page 266), illustrating the success of the regime that makes women question their appearance instead of questioning the men (‘ruling class’) who impose religious rules yet break them in a corrupt, secretive and sordid underworlds away from the public eye. From these references, it is apparent Offred has become so accustomed to her Handmaid outfit that her past has become strange to her, even her “nakedness is already strange” (Page 72). [11: Abrams. H. M, Harpham G, (2005), 8th edition, A Glossary Of Literary Terms, Page 156] [12: Gaines, J. (2018). How Bad Was Jezebel? - Biblical Archaeology Society. [online] Biblical Archaeology Society. Available at: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/how-bad-was-jezebel/> [Accessed 28 Jan. 2019].]

Likewise, Hosseini reveals the hypocritical nature of some men who, although enforce their wives to preserve their modesty by wearing the burqa, lust for women’s bodies as seen when Mariam’s discovers Rasheed’s pornographic magazine. “he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men’s wives and sisters?” (Page 82). This emphasises Rasheed’s lack of respect for other women and also emphasises that he views his wives as his property.

In the same way as the Gileadean men, the corruption of men, who act as the “ruling class”[footnoteRef:13] in Afghanistan, essentially interpret religion as a power tool enabling them to create a patriarchal country, benefiting men. This is because “the Mujahidin rejected the reforms instituted by the communist government and equated a return of women to their traditional roles to a return to the nation’s Islamic Identity. A restricted role for women became part of their Islamic ideology and Afghan nationalism”.[footnoteRef:14] Therefore, Rasheed’s warning: “there isn’t a court in this godforsaken country that will hold me accountable for what I will do” exemplifies how religion acts as a hidden function to legitimize control, enabling Rasheed to take control of his wives by stressing the inequality in the justice system. His use of the adjective ‘godforsaken’ may be perceived by the readers as blasphemy, highlighting that his religious beliefs are a mere façade because he is willing to twist, curse and resort to violence, knowing that he is protected by the law, meaning there will be no repercussions for his double standards or violent actions. Disturbingly, the character of Rasheed further parallels the Taliban’s sexist, misogynistic and restrictive views about a woman’s place in society as he imposes similar harsh punishments. For example, Rasheed warns Mariam: “one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled” (Page 69) just before he places a Burqa on her in the early stages of their marriage. The brutal reference to “blood is spilled” foreshadows violence and bloodshed later in novel as he violently attacks both Laila and Mariam and is then later slain himself by his wife. [13: Abrams. H. M, Harpham G, (2005), 8th edition, A Glossary Of Literary Terms, Page 155] [14: Benard C, Jones G. S, Oliker O, Thurston Quantic. C, Stearns K. B and Cordell K. (2008). Women and Nation-Building. RAND Corporation.]

The hidden function of religion is also made apparent through the social positioning of women in Gilead. Atwood positions the women into their roles in terms of their usefulness according to Gilead’s needs of reproduction. Christian ideology is manipulated to force social change and brainwash useful women who can help the state to multiply their population and give elite families heirs to their thrones such as the Commander and his Wife.

Both writers reveal how religion can be used as a misguided weapon to justify punishment and

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mistreatment of women. For example, Afghani people are threatened with death and brutal beatings if they disobey the Taliban if they fail to accept patriarchal political control. A clear example of this is through Laila's disobedience and refusal and non-conformist attitude to set Taliban rules by walking alone without a male family member in order to visit her daughter despite knowing she would be subjected to "whips and slaps" (Page 313) by the Taliban. The reader admires Laila's maternal instincts and strength to go against the regime, despite the brutal consequences.

Atwood's depiction of women fighting for a voice in a world where men's definition of religion controls them is fundamental to feminists who emphasise "women's struggle for liberation without challenging its male-dominated concepts"[footnoteRef:15]. The female characters are unable to challenge 'male dominated concepts' in *The Handmaid's Tale* because of the severe consequences. The punishment for those declared as 'Unwomen' (infertile women), or those that defy laws like doctors who are labelled as criminals due to their work in abortions which is classified as illegal in Gilead, have the threat of being shipped to the "Colonies" (Page 20) or executed which further enforces the power of fear controlling people into submitting to religion dominated by men. Additionally, Offred's internal monologue reveals her psychological struggle to retain her ability to think and feel for herself which will eventually be taken away from her by the men who brainwash. At the beginning, Offred refuses to accept her new residence: "not my room, I refuse to say mine"(Page 18) because she rejects this as her new life and permanent home when she still has beautiful memories of the past. However, Atwood shows how the women begin to lose their fight with the patriarchal society, as seen when Offred predictably "called it mine" (Page 59). [15: Driver, A. (1976). *Religion*. 2nd ed. The University of Chicago.]

According to critics, some religious rules are simply 'tribal and traditional customs'[footnoteRef:16] that have been manipulated to socially construct women's lives for the benefit of the higher class. Both Atwood and Hosseini powerfully demonstrate this through the presentation of theocracy, which was first a Greek word which means the "rule by God or some God(s)"[footnoteRef:17]. In both texts, the "divine rule through human agent"[footnoteRef:18] is typically men, seen through the Commanders and the Taliban, whereas "stereotypes of women as sexually passive, obedient, and fulfilled only in motherhood"[footnoteRef:19]. This is evident in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s female characters have their bank accounts cancelled, leading to financial dependency on men and forced residence at home to produce children which is Driver's valid argument above. Additionally, the men appoint themselves as religious characters execute their political beliefs. Atwood's significant scene of the Ceremonies, where the Bible is read out every night, questions the religion presented as Offred "knew they made that up...but there was no way of checking" (Page 100), as well as the Salvagings, executions for crimes, where they were "drugged" (Page 287) which were manipulated to be portrayed about religious breaches however instead were considered to actually be political killings. This plays on the idea of man playing God by using religion to justify and control life and death. [16: Benard C, Jones G. S, Olikier O, Thurston Quantic. C, Stearns K. B and Cordell K. (2008). *Women and Nation-Building*. RAND Corporation.] [17: Waskey, A. (n.d.). National Social Science Association. [online] Nssa.us. Available at: <https://www.nssa.us/journals/2007-28-1/2007-28-1-16.htm> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2019].] [18: Waskey, A. (n.d.). National Social Science Association. [online] Nssa.us. Available at: <https://www.nssa.us/journals/2007-28-1/2007-28-1-16.htm> [Accessed 3 Feb. 2019].] [19: Driver, A. (1976). *Religion*. 2nd ed. The University of Chicago.]

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Similarly, Hosseini uses women's rights in order to highlight the severity of theocracy. For example, the protagonist, Mariam, is in awe of the "different breed" (Page 74) of women. The use of the word breed highlights how women were viewed in categories, disturbingly similar to animals breeding for reproduction. This deliberate wording dictates how the lack of women's rights in a theocracy allows women to be judged as simple child-bearing vessels and mothers, not educated women able to have jobs regardless whether they wear modern clothing or makeup. It is clear from this that women turn against other women for the sake of the Taliban's influence on religion and what they consider to be the correct way to speak, act and wear.

In conclusion, both authors develop the sociological representation of religion and its impact on women's treatment through the constant exploitation of religion being placed as a façade for men to gain power over the women in both novels, as proven by Marxist and Feminist critics. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead forced religion upon women by powerful figures where "there wasn't an enemy you could put your finger on", as stated by the character of Offred at the beginning. Similarly, Hosseini states that in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* although Afghanistan previously were "lacking a common enemy, had found the enemy in each other" (Page 169). *A Thousand Splendid Suns* creates a more personal connection to me as a reader. The novel itself is historically accurate of the Soviet War as Hosseini based the novel during the 1970's-2003. This is significant as Hosseini himself fled Afghanistan in the 70's and returned back in 2003, where he heard the "vivid and heart-breaking"[footnoteRef:20] stories of the women and although difficult to write about he "began to view these two women, not as Afghan women but rather just people and focused on their humanity rather than their femininity"[footnoteRef:21]. As a result, he was able to confidently write the novel and even wrote "to the women in Afghanistan" in the dedication. [20: Sachs, A. (2008). Q&A:Khaled Hosseini - TIME. [online] TIME.com. Available at: <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1864617,00.html> [Accessed 14 Nov. 2018].] [21: Sachs, A. (2008). Q&A:Khaled Hosseini - TIME. [online] TIME.com. Available at: <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1864617,00.html> [Accessed 14 Nov. 2018].]

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