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Political Protest Imitating Art: *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

A decades-old story of power re-emerges, and the subjugation required to seize and maintain that power. A puritanical white patriarchy, driven by Christian fundamentalism, has seized political control in a dystopian United States. The government has enslaved all women for gestational servitude, domestic work, prostitution, or toxic waste clean-up. *The Handmaid's Tale* was written by Canadian author Margaret Atwood in 1985. The literary success of the novel prompted the production a full-length film in 1990. This essay contextualizes the third major interpretation of Atwood's story - the 2017 Hulu-produced, web-televised series – with the current political landscape in the United States. Issues surrounding the domination of women's bodies have exploded in the United States. There are renewed political battles over legalized abortion and declining access to birth control and reproductive healthcare. American women demand body autonomy and reproductive rights, while the ultra-conservative, male-dominated government and healthcare industry seeks to diminish those rights. The female outcry against gender discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape have resulted in international Women's Marches and the #metoo and #timesup movements. The telltale scarlet robe and white wings from *The Handmaid's Tale* have emerged as global symbols of women protesting patriarchal oppression. But, is the scarlet "modesty costume" the best icon for the women's right moment?

Keywords: Handmaid's Tale, Storytelling, Body Autonomy, Body Abuse, Political Protest, Christian Fundamentalism

The Story of Gilead

When imagining the theocratic Republic of Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* author, Margaret Atwood graphically incorporated examples of the oppression and abuse women have endured across the globe and throughout history. Presented in the context of a not-so-distant future, the story unfolds explaining that the U.S. government had been overthrown by Christian extremists -- the U.S. Constitution suspended, elections cancelled, members of Congress, and non-conforming men murdered. Military soldiers replaced local law enforcement and public displays of corpses serve as a constant reminder of the penalty of disobedience in this new authoritarian regime. Advanced surveillance technology, as well as human informants called "Eyes," prevent escape, limit communication, and enable the trafficking of women.

For the women of Gilead, physical enslavement began with the gradual loss of legal rights. Specifically, women lost the right to drive, own property, and secure employment, making them financially dependent on men ("*Late,*" *The Handmaid's Tale*, S1, E3). Losing

custody of their children became an everyday threat for mothers. Wives could not get contraception without their husband's written consent ("*June*," *The Handmaid's Tale*, S2, E1). As a nod to early Christianity, as well as the American slave trade, Gilead's women also lost the right to literacy, a strategy generally reserved for class or racial oppression. (Merriman 8).

A major theme throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* is the stripping of female identity. For example, the handmaids are forbidden from using their given names and are reassigned the name of their Commander. The story's protagonist and first-person narrator, renamed Offred because Fred is her Commander and she is now "of Fred." Other common handmaid names are Ofglen, Ofwarren, Ofsteven, and so forth.

Gilead's women are subject to a social ranking system based upon their role in society. With their individuality erased, the women are simply known as their role - a Handmaid, Aunt, Martha, Wife, Econowife, or Jezebel. Color-coded clothing quickly identifies the woman's position and ensures her isolation from the other groups. The color-coding also reinforces the relentless hierarchy among women. The blood-red attire of the handmaids was designed to indicate the woman's reproductive function, while simultaneously preventing her from seeing or being seen (Sahu 4). The design of the white bonnet, or "wings," intentionally diminishes the wearer's vision and hearing, increasing the feeling of vulnerability, social isolation, and anonymity (Beaumont and Holpuch np). Aunt Lydia, a matronly trainer and cruel overseer, warns the handmaids, "Modesty is invisibility... To be seen is to be penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable" ("*Offred*," *The Handmaid's Tale*, S1, E1).

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale* series, we see the women progressively lose their dignity, voice, and personal safety. The first season forbids women from reading and writing; crude illustrations replace words on product labels and signage. Orality replaced literacy. In the second season, it was common to see handmaid's wearing leather facemasks to deter speaking as a punishment. By the third season, the handmaid's in Washington D.C. have metal pins surgically implanted to keep their mouths permanently closed. We see the handmaids raped by the male elite throughout every season.

An underlying premise of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that radioactive pollution has left most of the population sterile. Because of the declining population, fertile women become a state resource and are expected to "procreate for the regime" (Williamson 263). This idea of forced procreation draws historical ties from widespread slavery associated with plantation agriculture (Merriman 8). For handmaids, this loss of reproductive autonomy and imposed gestational slavery begins with state-sanctioned, monthly ritualized rape by each handmaid's Commander. If the handmaid is uncooperative or simply does not get pregnant after several attempts, she will be declared an "unwoman" and sentenced to clean-up toxic waste until her death. If the handmaid does become pregnant, her duty is to carry the child to term, relinquish the child at birth, and quickly get pregnant again by another Commander.

While the premise of the story is quite unpalpable, the methods in which the women are physically and psychologically controlled are truly horrific. The story imparts a brutal correlation between totalitarian law infractions and graphic physical abuse of the human body. The Aunts, or handmaid trainer/supervisors, carry electric cattle prods to electrocute the handmaids for small infractions. Larger infractions may cost the handmaid a finger, an eyeball, her tongue, etc. Disfigurement, amputation, burning, whipping, drowning, and stoning to death

are the preferred torture techniques to keep the women in compliance and fear is the daily reminder.

Without due process or legal defense, people accused or discovered to be LGBTQ are automatically determined guilty of “gender treachery.” For men and non-fertile women, the sentence is death by public hanging, wearing a hood displaying a pink triangle. However, if a fertile female is found guilty of gender treachery, she is “sentenced to redemption.” In Gilead, redemption means female genital mutilation and being returned to sexual slavery (“*Late*,” *The Handmaid’s Tale*, S1, E3). Throughout the series, passages of distorted Christian scripture are used to justify the physical and psychological torture of women. Domineering phrases such as “under His eye,” “by His hand,” and “obey His word” are used to reinforce the patriarchy now controlling a once-Democratic society.

Trump’s America Tightens the Corset on Women’s Bodies

Much like the fictitious men of Gilead, the Christian-white-male Trump administration, appears determined to control the bodies of women in the United States. Primarily members of the Democratic party have called the current political climate “America’s War on Women.” The sitting United States President, Donald Trump himself has been publicly accused of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment, including non-consensual kissing or groping, by 22 women since the 1980s (Wikipedia). In 2005, Donald Trump was also recorded bragging about forcing himself on and groping women (*Access Hollywood* tape). Outraged American women have organized numerous Women’s Marches, including the international #metoo and #timesup movements to prevent misogyny from becoming completely normalized and legalized.

The public battle over abortion rights resurfaced during a televised Town Hall on March 30, 2016. Then-candidate Donald Trump told Chris Matthews of MSNBS, that there should be “some form of punishment” for women receiving abortions but not for the men who impregnated them (*Hardball with Chris Matthews*). During the final Presidential debate with Hillary Clinton in October 2016, Trump made his intentions clear that he was pro-life/anti-choice and would only be appointing anti-choice Supreme Court Justices. These hand-picked Justices could then attack the 1973 landmark case *Roe v Wade* (*Final Presidential Debate*), the Constitutional protection for a person’s right to obtain an abortion.

Since Trump has taken the U.S. presidency in 2017, he has honored his campaign promise by appointing two conservative judges to the U.S. Supreme Court, including Brett Kavanaugh, who had credible allegations of sexual assault surface during his confirmation hearings. Incidentally, long-time Supreme Court Justice, Clarence Thomas also has a credible allegation of sexual harassment in his public record.

Because of this shift in voting power at the Supreme Court, there have been numerous direct legislative attacks from conservative states. Thirty-six states have quickly introduced new legislation amending the reproductive and healthcare rights of women (Planned Parenthood). At his ongoing political rallies, the President himself continues to lie on camera about women and doctors conspiring to murder newborns (Trump political rally).

The most draconian proposed bills are coming from Republican-controlled states, specifically to get to the Supreme Court through the appeals process to challenge *Roe v Wade*. For example, Texas representative Tony Tinderholt (R), proposed (House Bill) HB-896, which would reclassify abortion as homicide, allowing a death penalty sentence for women receiving

and doctors performing the most common, early-stage abortion procedure (Stanley-Becker np). Fortunately, this proposed bill did not go forward; even anti-abortion activists in Texas were outraged at the irony of murdering citizens in the name of pro-life views.

Because the political and legislative debate over reproductive rights, abortion, and gender discrimination changes on a daily basis, this essay will briefly present three unique issues related to gender hegemony: 1) State of Missouri mandating the last abortion clinic to perform what the doctors considered “state-sanctioned sexual assault” on their patients, 2) Trump administration immigration officials illegally tracking the pregnancies of asylum-seekers to block abortions, and 3) the legalized discrimination of transgender persons by the President.

Missouri Governor Mike Parson (R) signed (House Bill) HB-126 on May 24, 2019, banning abortion after only eight-weeks of pregnancy, without the standard exceptions of rape and incest. Although the women would not be prosecuted, the doctors who performed abortions after the eight-week limit could face 5-15 years in prison, unless the mother’s life was endangered. Additional restrictions were also written into the new bill, including a requirement for parental consent, prohibiting abortion on the basis of race, sex, or in cases of Down’s Syndrome. The malpractice insurance requirement for abortion providers was also doubled (Law np).

In a state of over 6 million people, Missouri’s last abortion provider, the St. Louis Planned Parenthood facility is in danger of losing its operating license over a recent reinterpretation of existing abortion regulations. The State of Missouri recently mandated that doctors give patients a medically-unnecessary, second internal pelvic exam three days in advance of an abortion procedure, including nonsurgical abortion by medication (Thebault np). For 21 days, doctors complied with this new interpretation, perhaps afraid of jeopardizing the license renewal. According to a physician at the clinic, in order to receive an abortion in Missouri, women were effectively told to submit to a “state-sanctioned... sexual assault” (Benen np). But, Planned Parenthood of St. Louis told CBS News that they “will no longer conduct a second pelvic exam that state regulators have recently mandated ... saying the examination was unethical” (Benen np).

“I think Missouri is the perfect example of how a state can push abortion out of reach without banning it explicitly. The nation’s attention has been focused on this wave of abortion bans that have been passed in several states. But what has always been true is that states have been piling restriction upon restriction and using different ways to try to close clinic doors. And that is what could happen in Missouri if courts don’t intervene,” says Brigitte Amiri, ACLU Senior Staff Attorney (*The Rachel Maddow Show*).

Meanwhile, at the southern US border, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents illegally monitored the menstrual cycles and pregnancies of females legally seeking asylum, denying abortions even in cases of rape, and limiting reproductive healthcare (*The Rachel Maddow Show*, March 15, 2019). Anti-abortion author and activist Scott Lloyd was appointed by Donald Trump to oversee the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Under Lloyd’s direction, a 28-page spreadsheet was developed to track the pregnancies of asylum-seeking girls, including personal details such as age, last menstrual cycle, whether the pregnancy was caused by consensual sex or rape, etc. In one instance, Lloyd attempted to use a migrant girl as a way to test an “abortion reversal” method (Wright np). With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), a seventeen-year-old pregnant rape survivor successfully

sued the ORR for denying her an abortion, which had been previously approved by a Texas judge. According to ACLU lawyer Bridgette Amiri, “They were literally holding her hostage, blocking the door, preventing her from obtaining an abortion. And I do believe that was their goal, to hold her hostage until she carried this pregnancy to term against her will.” Subsequent investigations by the ACLU revealed numerous minor migrants being held in shelters, blocked from getting abortions. When Amiri questioned Lloyd on camera about denying requests for abortion, regardless of circumstance, he admitted that his agency had denied all abortion requests (*The Rachel Maddow Show*, March 15, 2019).

There have been a staggering number of cases of convicted all-gender violence, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment with little to no jail time for male perpetrators. Public outcry has demanded several conservative, male judges be recalled or disbarred for their leniency in these sexual violence cases. The LGBTQ community is also under legislative and physical attack. President Trump has banned the transgender community from openly serving in all branches of the military (Tillet, CBS News 2019).

The federal government, as well as numerous southern states have set precedent for legalized discrimination of the LGBTQ community, citing Christian views. Conservative employers can deny health insurance coverage for contraception, abortion, and gender reassignment surgery. The “Protecting Statutory Conscience Rights in Health Care” rule allows medical professionals the ability to opt out of providing medical care that violates their conscience — presumably abortion, gender reassignment surgery, and assisted suicide, even in a potential emergency. NPR reported that the rule also includes any administrative staff who participate in the completion of a procedure. (Simmons-Duffin, NPR).

American Protests

Shortly after the April 2017 premiere of *The Handmaid’s Tale* television series, handmaid-dressed protesters began appearing in U.S. Capitols, where state legislators casually proposed numerous new anti-abortion bills, restricted access to birth control, and other reproductive healthcare and information. Across the country, scarlet handmaid cloaks replaced the pink pussy hats of the previous 2017 Women’s Marches. According to Laura Bradley in *Vanity Fair*, “These dissenters in creepy cloaks and hats might not save *Roe v. Wade* – but they do provide a constant, ominous reminder to Washington D.C. that women are watching.”

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has built a following of handmaid protesters due to his anti-abortion and Christian extremism viewpoints. Specifically, Pence drew roughly 100 protesters at a Republican fundraiser in Philadelphia and a cyber-security summit in Manhattan, New York (Bradley, np).

At least twice, handmaid-dressed women have protested Brett Kavanaugh because of his voting record against legalized abortion, as well as a highly-publicized sexual assault allegation during his confirmation to the U.S. Supreme Court. Protesters returned on Kavanaugh’s first day on the bench with signs, chanting, “We do not consent!” (Bradley, np).

A group of Hollywood Handmaids, which included writers, directors, actors, and extras stood outside the Beverly Hilton at the January 2018 Golden Globes, carrying signs which read “Silent No Longer” in support of the #timesup movement (Bradley np).

International Protests

In February 2018, at a rally called “Handmaids rise for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention” Croatian women called on the government and parliament to ratify the Istanbul Convention as a framework to eradicate violence against women. The Zagreb protesters chose the symbolism of the dystopian book and popular TV show *The Handmaid's Tale*, organizers said, to “show the direction in which we are being pushed by ultraconservative interest groups which have been working for several years on the abolition of mechanisms for the protection of women's human rights” (*Total Croatia News*).

Demonstrators in Belfast and Dublin, Ireland wore the familiar scarlet robes during a campaign to overturn Ireland’s abortion ban in May 2018 (Bell np). According to protester Keishia Taylor in *The Guardian*, “The image used in *The Handmaid's Tale* cuts right to the heart of the toxic relationship between church and state. In Ireland, we used it in the context of the ban on abortion, because women had a sense that the state thinks of us like vessels and incubators” (Beaumont and Holpuch np).

Red cloaks and bonnets appeared in Buenos Aires in July 2018, as women called for abortion to be decriminalized. Upon reaching the Congress building in Argentina's capital, an activist reads a letter from Margaret Atwood herself, “Nobody likes abortion, even when safe and legal. It’s not what any woman would choose for a happy time on Saturday night. But nobody likes women bleeding to death on the bathroom floor from illegal abortions, either. What to do?” (Bell np, Rey np). Roughly 370,000 – 522,000 Argentine women undergo illegal abortions each year and complications arising from illegal abortion are a leading cause of maternal death (Rey np). Argentina’s lower house narrowly backed a bill which would legalize abortion in the Catholic nation during the first 14 weeks of pregnancy (Bell np).

Modesty Costume Becomes Generational Protest Icon

It is common for social justice and change protesters to wear graphic iconography uniting themselves and calling attention to their cause. For example, anti-war protesters have worn images of peace signs, psychedelic colors and flowers, etc. LGBTQ parades and rallies display rainbows to signify colorful diversity and tolerance. The Black Lives Matter movement features T-Shirts with a raised “resist” fist. The group Anonymous is known for wearing moustache-masks to obscure their faces. The 2017 Women’s Marches featured pink knit “pussy” hats, resembling small cat ears. The enduring potency of a demonstration depends on the visual records, eternalized by the photographers on the scene (Cohen np).

Now the scarlet cloak and oversized white bonnet of Atwood’s “modesty costume” have become an effective international symbol of women protesting patriarchal regimes, oppressive laws, and the control of women’s bodies by the state. The graphic spectacle of the striking red costume is especially effective in the context of black and navy business suits of the male-dominated courts, legislation houses, and parliaments of government. The illustrative symbol is considered a “subversive inversion of its association with the oppression of women” (Beaumont and Holpuch np). Costume designer Ane Crabtree told British *Vogue*, her references ranged from a priest she saw in Milan to Amish wardrobes. “In the end,” she said, “the poetic fluidity of the dresses meant that the handmaids looked like lifeblood moving through a grey concrete dystopian world” (Cohen np).

When discussing the costume symbolizing protest, author Margaret Atwood states in *The Guardian*, “Because it’s a visual symbol, women can use it without fear of being arrested

for causing a disturbance, as they would be for shouting in places like legislatures. No one can accuse them of being immodest: they are well covered up... In countries that prohibit birth control and reproductive health information, the state claims ownership of women's bodies through enforced childbearing. What the costume is really asking viewers is: do we want to live in a slave state?" (Beaumont and Holpuch np).

Discussing season three, on *Nightline*, Executive Producer and lead actress, Elizabeth Moss (Offred/June) said of the costumed protesters, "Those are actually the women doing the work. They're the women on the front lines, who are out there risking something. And I'm inspired by them, honestly" (*Creating the Handmaid's Tale, Nightline*). Actress Samira Wiley (Moirra) also articulated her perspective on *Good Morning America* in a joint interview with Moss, "It gives me a heightened sense of responsibility, in terms of what we are making. It is television, but at the end of the day it can illicit real change. Again, I'm really proud" (Elizabeth Moss and Samira Wiley..., *Good Morning America*).

However, the modesty costume iconography as a representation of women's rights is not without controversy. Originally intended to signal female subservience, the costume has been redeployed as a symbol of female agency and the defiance of oppression when the context changes from Gilead to contemporary society (Sutherland np). The costume has effectively become a "visual lexicon of dissent" representing both women's oppression and resistance, effectively "summing up complex political arguments into a single icon" (Cohen np). The production house Hulu is currently using the hashtag #resistsister to market the series (Sutherland np).

Writer Alina Cohen makes a valid argument regarding the modesty costume, "it represents women on the defensive, fighting to secure what they already have, instead of advocating for more." She continues, "The reasons for dressing like a handmaid span solidarity, personal empowerment, inspiration for voting, and the intersectional expansion for the feminist movement – all valuable, important motives. What the costumes don't do, however, is imagine a future in which circumstances are actually better for women. Women are so traumatized by the relentless wave of new anti-abortion legislation, that's it's difficult to look beyond protesting. We don't just deserve the reproductive rights that were in place before this year – we also deserve more clinics; more government funding for childcare and women's healthcare; more support for new families... the list goes on" (Cohen np).

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