**Feminism, and politics in The Handmaid's Tale: Jill Swale examines the social and historical context of Atwood's novel. Jill Swale**

Despite its setting in a technologically advanced society, The **Handmaid**'s **Tale**, according to Margaret Atwood, is not science fiction. She described its setting as `a slight twist on the society we have now'. After discussing American right-wing Christian fundamentalism with a friend she asked herself: `If women's place is in the home, why aren't they in it, and how do you get them back in? And: if you were going to take over the United States, what slogans would you use?' Her ideas accumulated as she collected press cuttings about pollution and the falling birth rate, and visited Afghanistan and Iran `where women are treated in the same light as they are in Gilead's society--some ways better, some ways worse'.

She completed the novel in 1985 and set it about a decade into the future, so in a sense we might be comforted that the events described have not come to pass. Yet as time slips by and the feminist ideals of the 1970s are forgotten by new generations, there is increasing danger that a patriarchal regime similar to Gilead could arise. Since the attacks on America on 11 September 2001, and the massacre in the Indian parliament later in the year, her novel has achieved a new resonance for readers in all democratic societies: `It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the President and machine gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency. They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics at the time.' Public numbness at the scale of the tragedy and a sense of insecurity because `there wasn't even an enemy you could put your finger on', make it easy for the new leaders of Gilead (based in Massachusetts) to introduce a totalitarian regime: `The road blocks began to appear and Identipasses. Everyone approved of that, since it was obvious you couldn't be too careful.'

Could it happen here?

As British readers we can identify some parallels. The introduction of identity cards, increased powers to hold suspected terrorists without trial and the censorship of inflammatory material have all been discussed by our own government since 11 September. Newspapers in Gilead are censored and closed down and people are seized by the Eyes in the street or disappear without warning, the fate of Offred's mother. In such a climate of fear and ignorance it is easy for the Gilead Commanders to introduce new laws unopposed, so that gradually most women and many men lose their human rights, supposedly as a temporary measure for the greater good. The `Historical Notes' at the end of The **Handmaid**'s **Tale** supply information about how the regime developed until eventually a society closer to our own re-emerged by the year 2195. It demonstrates that `temporary' laws introduced in the early Gilead period to alleviate the decline in the birth rate became even more stringent later. Offred is forced to become a **handmaid** and her child is adopted because Luke's second marriage is regarded as adulterous in the new Christian fundamentalist climate. According to Professor Pieixoto, `In the middle period, this policy was extended to cover all marriages not contracted within the state church'.

His talk serves to add verisimilitude to the conditions in Gilead as he mentions world problems which we know to exist now, the devastation caused by AIDS and pollution of the environment. The Western birth rate really is declining, resulting in a range of measures to offset it: infertility treatments, surrogate motherhood and disastrous attempts by the former Romanian leader Ceaucescu to ban all birth control. Recent publicity of conditions under the Taliban in Afghanistan adds to our sense that such a society as Gilead could exist. Confinement of women to the home, the compulsory wearing of burkhas, stringent regulations over men's lives too (such as length of beards) and the banning of secular music were all features of Afghan life bearing a strong resemblance to Gilead. Women were no longer allowed to work and female education was withdrawn, with the excuse that it was only a temporary situation. As Mullah Qallamuddin put it: `Women must be completely segregated from men.'

Although the Taliban did not hold power in Afghanistan until after the publication of The **Handmaid**'s **Tale**, a similar situation occurred in Iran in 1979. After the Shah was deposed and Islamic fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini took over, women had to don the veil, give up paid work and return to the home. Their street protests were suppressed and those who were unable to flee simply had to accept the new conditions. Members of other faiths such as Jews were persecuted and many left the country, as they were forced to do under the Gilead `Jewish Repatriation Scheme'.

Nothing new in Gilead

But it was not necessary for Atwood to look to central Asia for examples of fundamentalism of an alarming kind. In North America an all-male Christian sect, the Promise Keepers, has recently evolved which preaches that women should return to traditional roles and that strong families should be based on `Biblical values'. There is the `Love Can Wait' movement in which young people in mass gatherings publicly pledge themselves to chastity until marriage, and attacks on abortion clinics and the doctors who work there are fairly common. Atwood's Gilead is not as fanciful as it seems. It is an amalgam of trends which she has already observed and read about in various societies, past and present. As Pieixoto observes:

As we know from the study of history, no new system can impose itself upon

a previous one without incorporating many of the elements of the latter ...

and Gilead was no exception to this rule ... There was little that was

truly indigenous with or original to Gilead: its genius was synthesis.

Pieixoto reminds us that the freedoms experienced by women in the pre-Gilead period (the 1980s or 90s) were a mere interval between long eras of human history in which female subjugation was regarded as normal. British readers now of school age tend to take women's liberation for granted, as the teenage Offred does, but this is the very danger identified by Offred's mother and, less explicitly, by Atwood herself. It is necessary for us to examine the changing roles and status of women over a considerable period of time in order to appreciate how few rights women had in the comparatively recent past in Western societies, and how easily a backlash could remove them again. The rise of women followed a similar path in Canada, Atwood's native country, in the United States (Gilead) and in Britain. I shall focus mainly on the latter, in order to demonstrate that many of the restrictions experienced by Offred in Gilead were similar to those of ordinary British women in earlier times, and such a lifestyle is not `science fiction'.

Victorian women

During the nineteenth century middle-class women were confined to the home as wives and mothers, and they were sheltered from the corrupting knowledge of the outside world. Queen Victoria said, `Let a woman be what God intended, a helpmate for man, but with totally different duties and vocations'. Those who found this domestication tedious and protested about it were regarded as mentally disturbed `hysterics'. Men and women were treated differently under the law. In 1857 the Matrimonial Causes Act made it far easier for men to divorce their wives than vice versa. Usually men gained all the couple's property and custody of the children after a divorce and women could be denied any access at all, especially if the wife was deemed at fault in the marriage breakdown. In Gilead, Offred's lost rights to her child are justified by a similar law, although instead of Luke it is a higher-status family which gains custody. In Britain before the Married Women's Property Act in 1870, all a woman's property became that of her husband. This happens to Offred under another Gilead law. The loss of her job also has a precedent since in Britain women had to give up many professions on marriage--this law applied to teachers until 1945.

During the Victorian period middle-class women were regarded as their husbands' possessions and were often known as the `Angel in the House'. Their role was to be gentle, expressive homemakers. Offred alludes to this when, on losing her job, she decides to do more baking. Her radical feminist mother in contrast did not spend her time knitting or doing other feminine domestic activities, and as a child Offred rather resented this. Her mother's views were exceptional, and Offred had been socialised by a still patriarchal society to expect her mother to fulfil the traditional role which Betty Friedan described as `the feminine mystique'. Though Offred is not the protagonist's original name, the reader never learns her true identity. She has become a man's possession, belonging to Fred. This method of naming is simply an extension of the Victorian tendency to refer to even eminent women, such as the writer Mrs Humphry Ward, in terms of their husbands, and for slaves to take the surnames of their owners.

In Britain women campaigned in two main historical periods, often slightly behind their North American sisters. Towards the end of the nineteenth century they campaigned for equal rights over divorce, custody of children, ownership of property, rights to university education, entry into professions such as medicine, and, most famously, for the vote. Most of the activity, known as first wave feminism, died down for a while when British women over 21 gained the vote in 1928.

Second wave feminism

Women worked in greater numbers during both wars, and free nursery education was provided to enable them to do so, but withdrawn afterwards so that they would return to the home, releasing jobs for ex-servicemen. The second time this happened in 1945, women were less keen to relinquish paid work, and there were government campaigns to persuade them that it was harmful to be away from their children for long periods. John Bowlby was commissioned to publish a study suggesting that juvenile delinquency correlated with maternal deprivation.

However with postwar improvements in education, many women began to resent being confined to a domestic and passive role. In 1966 the radical National Organisation for Women was formed by Betty Friedan in the United States, and in Canada the Royal Commission's Report on Women was published in 1970. In Britain, consciousness-raising groups were organised to discuss women's frustrating domestic situations and their preferred roles in life. They identified gender stereotyping in literature and the media, and examined how upbringing perpetuated this situation. Some acknowledged that men, too, were forced into narrow roles. This international movement was known as second wave feminism.

Gradually these women became more politically active, campaigning for specific legal changes and opportunities. Liberal feminists sought equal pay for both sexes doing the same work, an end to discrimination in job recruitment and other spheres and good nursery provision. The first two were obtained by law in Britain in 1970 and 1975. All these recently gained rights have been lost again in Gilead.

Other British and American women were more militant and tended to view men as enemies. They were particularly concerned about the way female bodies were `colonised' by men--exploited in advertising, gazed at lasciviously and harassed in the street, and, far worse, women's images comprised the major part of pornography, what is known in The **Handmaid**'s **Tale** as `sexploitation'. In Atwood's pre-Gilead America, this trend has become worse with the Pornomarts and Feels on Wheels. Ironically there is some truth in what the Aunts say about women being safer and less sexually exploited in hedonistic or vicious ways in Fundamentalist Gilead, except in the nightclubs which are only known to elite men. Of course the handmaids are compulsorily sexually exploited as breeding machines instead.

Other forms of exploitation of women's bodies which radical feminists in Gilead deplore are domestic violence and sexual abuse, with good reason judging from Janine's experience of gang rape. On an old film Offred's mother is seen holding a banner with the slogan `Free the night', meaning that women should be free to walk the streets without fear of sexual attack. In pre-feminist Western societies, even within relatively happy families, men had access to women's bodies whenever they wanted, and often dictated the number of children they should have. Consultants, usually male, controlled the conditions in which women gave birth, and in Britain marital rape did not become an offence until the 1990s. Offred, even though she loves Luke, becomes aware of his power over her when she loses her job. She sees how easily this could become a threat and even holds back from lovemaking because she feels that now this has become her marital duty as his possession. She reflects on the degree to which women's lives and happiness have traditionally depended on men, and how women put huge efforts into maintaining their slim, sexually arousing appearances through fitness regimes in order to keep their man, even though it often led to exploitation. She puns, `If you worked out enough, maybe the man would too'. Women lose out either way, either by losing men if they do not conform, or losing their independence to men if they do.

Offred's mother is one of the radical feminists who took a strong stand against the exploitation of women in the 1970s, behaving in a way which others saw as extreme in order to further the cause. She burned pornography publicly as it degraded women, wore unfeminine clothes as a form of rebellion and campaigned for women's legal right to abortion, obtained in Britain in 1967. Although she had a child she did not wish to be legally tied to the father, preferring the company of women whom she could trust more. In the 1970s sisterhood was important to campaigners, some of whom moved to feminist communes where they lived either as lesbians, as Moira did, or led celibate lives. Feminist writers even recommended artificial insemination by sperm bank so that babies could be born without the father trying to exert ownership over the mother and child. This meant that women's bodies were under their own control, in contrast to the fate of Offred in Gilead for whom biology is destiny. In the bath to prepare her for `the Ceremony' with the Commander she laments, `I don't want to look at something which determines me so completely'. Offred's body is linked with a prize pig's, a chicken waiting to be tenderised and an open tulip. These are reminders of the way patriarchal societies have equated women with nature, whereas many of them wish to connect with culture and intellectual life, represented by the forbidden Scrabble and books in the Commander's study.

Post-feminism

In the West the second feminist movement is now regarded as over by most sociologists. Middle-class women have become complacent as they have gained most of the legal changes they sought in the 1960s and 70s. Women in other parts of the world are still grossly exploited through forced marriages, genital mutilation, sexual slavery and educational discrimination--movements addressing these issues are known as third wave feminism. Here, and in America, there has been a reaction against feminism, documented in Susan Faludi's Backlash. Books by male writers such as Neil Lyndon have argued that women's rights now exceed men's, and organisations like `Families Need Fathers' have sprung up in male defence. Some argue that women's desire to `have it all', both career and family life, has led to stress, child neglect and family breakdown. The media have been keen to focus on mothers who have given up high-powered careers to return to the home. Younger women seem to have little interest in feminism, taking their opportunities for granted and not realising that they could easily be lost again. This state of affairs is referred to as post-feminism.

Offred's mother warns of the dangers of complacency and prophetically tells her daughter, `History will absolve me'. Moira, another radical feminist, realises that women's rights are precarious and is unsurprised When they are tricked out of their money and jobs. Offred herself represents the present generation of young American women, well-educated, wanting a career, but rather scathing of feminism, valuing romantic love and somewhat traditional in some of her thinking. Atwood deliberately chose such a person as an Everywoman with whom the reader can identify. She said, `The voice is that of an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than a heroine), because I am more interested in social history than in the biographies of the outstanding'.

The novel is undoubtedly a warning to women, but its message extends beyond that to all people to avoid the dangers of the political apathy in which totalitarian regimes flourish.

**Citation:**

Swale, Jill. ""Feminisim, and Politics in The Handmaid's Tale: Jill Swale Examines the Social and Historical Context of Atwood's Novel." Literature Resource Center. Gale, 2002. <https://business.highbeam.com/437089/article-1G1-92950402/feminism-and-politics-handmaid-tale-jill-swale-examines>.