

Gilead Resembles an Islamic Theocracy, not Trump's America

by Phyllis Chesler



Margaret Atwood, whose work I have long admired, is now being hailed as a prophet. It is quite the phenomenon. According to the pundits, Atwood's 1985 work, [*The Handmaid's Tale*](#), which [Mary McCarthy once savaged](#), and the recently-published 2019 sequel, [*The Testaments*](#), are dystopias which aptly describe the contemporary climate change crisis, toxic environments, the rise in infertility, and the enslavement of women in Trump's America.

Is this all Atwood is writing about? Do the increasing

restrictions on abortion in America parallel the extreme misogyny of Gilead, the theocratic state in Atwood's saga? Is the unjust separation of mothers and children, a la Trump on the southern border, what Atwood has foretold? Every review and interview with Atwood that I could find strongly insists that this is the case.

Michelle Goldberg, in the [New York Times](#), attributes the current popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale* to Trump's ascendancy. She writes: "It's hardly surprising that in 2016 the book resonated—particularly women—stunned that a brazen misogynist, given to fascist rhetoric and backed by religious fundamentalists was taking power."

Michiko Kakutani recently [reviewed](#) *The Testaments* for the *New York Times*. She writes:

Atwood understands that the fascist crimes of Gilead speak for themselves...just as their relevance to our own times does not need to be put in boldface. Many American readers and viewers of *The Handmaid's Tale* are already heavily invested with the story of Gilead because we've come to identify with the Handmaids' hopes that the nightmare will end and the United States—with its democratic norms and constitutional guarantees—will soon be restored. We identify because the events in Atwood's novel...now feel frighteningly real. Because news segments on television in 2019 are filled with images of children being torn from their parents' arms, a president using racist language to sow fear and hatred and reports of accelerating climate change jeopardizing life as we know it on the planet.

At the anti-Trump pro-women's rights marches around the country, some feminist protesters dressed like Handmaids in billowing, shapeless red dresses, their facial identities obscured by large, white Victorian-era bonnets, carrying signs that read: "Make Margaret Atwood fiction again" and "*The Handmaid's Tale* is not an instruction manual."

They have a point. Abortion rights are being steadily challenged and [nearly eviscerated in the formerly slave-owning American states](#). Right-to-life lawyers insist that the [protection of unborn children](#) without any gestational markers is the law of the land. We now have free states and slave states in terms of [access](#) to high quality, insurance-funded abortions. Pregnant, drug-addicted women are [being jailed](#) for child abuse.

However, Atwood's Gilead reflects and foretells two other profoundly devastating realities, which neither the critics nor Atwood dwell upon.

Handmaid is about many things: Extreme misogyny, woman's Inhumanity to woman (at which Atwood [excels](#)), and post-Orwellian totalitarianism. But it is also quintessentially about commercial surrogacy, a practice which has already been legalized in [at least 20 American states](#), a transaction which is seen as "progressive."¹

Many feminists favor altruistic and commercial surrogacy. They, their daughters, their friends, including their gay male friends, may be infertile, unable to maintain a pregnancy, or are womb-less and may need the services of a birthmother surrogate. Such feminists are Gilead's Serena Joy/Mrs. Waterford, a high-ranking Commander's wife, just as much as they are Offred, their enslaved, fertile Handmaid.

The real handmaids in America today are the birthmother-surrogates who, out of economic desperation, or in a psychological fugue state, agree to carry a child for an "intended" parent or parents. Their diets and medical care is as closely supervised as in Gilead and they are sometimes forbidden to even see the babies in the delivery room. Breastfeeding is not an option. In [one case](#), armed guards prevented the birthmother from meeting her triplets in the NICU.

Why choose surrogacy when other options are now possible? Today, in New York State, [newborns and infants are available](#) to all to adopt, including single, infertile, and gay couples. But they are mainly African- or Hispanic-American. Choosing one's own genes or eggs is not seen as racism, nor is it condemned as selfish and genetically narcissistic.

Many feminists believe that a woman's right to an abortion is dependent upon her right to sell or altruistically give away a baby she has borne; that doing so is not dangerous to the birthmother's or the baby's physical and mental health.

However, viewing a woman as merely a vessel for property that contractually belongs to "intentional parents" is in direct conflict with the grounds for a woman's right to an abortion. The embryo/fetus/developing child is part of the woman, it belongs to her because it is in her body. This fact gives her the right to terminate a pregnancy. If others claim this right, then what may stop the sperm donor, the state, the church, or the Wives and Commanders of Gilead from claiming custody and adoption rights?

Historically and legally, the definition of "mother" was always the birthmother. Many pregnant women bond with the developing embryo in their bodies whether or not the genetic material *belongs* to them or to their husbands. This biological reality is being overturned via a legal contract. In the past and in countries around the world ([Nigeria's](#) baby farms come to mind), high-value newborns may be obtained forcibly, by holding women captive. Slave women were raped by their Masters who had the right to separate mother and child by selling one or both of them.

Just as in Gilead, the modern practice of surrogacy breeds a false equality between sperm, egg, and legal adoptive motherhood versus months of painful IVF treatments, nine months of pregnancy, and childbirth. It completely erases the

pregnant woman and childbirth. Doing so disenfranchises womankind and the biological reality of pregnancy.²

Gilead's handmaids are genetically related to their children. Handmaids are forced to breast feed for a limited amount of time and then banished forever from the lives of their children. This is exactly what is now happening all across America. It is also happening every day when American citizen [mothers](#) unjustly lose [custody](#) of their children.

In my view, commercial surrogacy is matricidal and a form of child abuse. Strong words—but backed up by a range of [horror stories](#) about what happens when such arrangements, even of the [altruistic kind](#), go wrong.

To be clear, Atwood has foretold the horrific rise of surrogacy in America—but none of her admirers want to talk about this because it distracts from their anti-Trump agenda.

There's another contemporary parallel that also gets scant attention. Gilead's system of pseudo-theocratic totalitarian control in both her novels and in the MGM/Hulu versions does not accurately reflect what is happening in America today; it mirrors what is happening in most Islamic countries, a fact that Atwood and her admirers are too politically correct to notice.

Obscuring one's individual identity, masking one's face, sequestering women at home, may have been true of many previous cultures and regimes. However, in this day forced face veils (niqab) and burqas (head, face, and body bags) are mainly realities for women in Muslim countries and communities in the West. In [Iran](#) in July, three women were sentenced to a total of 55 years between them for protesting against the veil.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood does mention Islam twice (to exonerate Muslims as the suspected mass murderers of Congress,

the Supreme Court, and the Oval Office in Gilead (p.174) and again in a reference to the "obsession with harems" on the part of allegedly Orientalist Western painters who did not understand that they were painting "boredom" (p.69). Atwood's quintessential Bad Guys are Caucasian, Bible-thumping, right wing, conservative, American Christians.

Where else but in the Islamic world do we see forced face veiling, forced child marriage, women confined to the home, polygamy (a "wife" and a "handmaid" under the same roof), male guardians and minders, cattle prod shocking, whipping, hand amputations, stoning, crazed vigilante mobs stomping and tearing people apart, and tortured corpses publicly displayed on city walls or hanging from cranes in order to terrify the populace? Or the torture murder of homosexuals? This is how Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Afghanistan, the tyrants of Somalia and Saudi Arabia, interpret, correctly or incorrectly, Sharia law.

How could all the reviewers not see what I so clearly see? Perhaps here's how.

I [once lived in a harem](#) in Afghanistan—a harem simply means the "women's quarters." It is forbidden territory to all men who are not relatives. If you can't leave without permission or without a male escort, you are in a harem and living in purdah.

After a 30-month courtship, I married the glamorous, wealthy, very Westernized, foreign student whom I first met at college when I was 18. We never once discussed religion. Not a word about Islam. He had not prepared me for what life would be like in his country, even temporarily. For example, he had never even mentioned that his father had three wives and 21 children, that most Afghan women still wore burqas or heavy hijab, that I would be pressured to convert to Islam, and would have to live with my mother-in-law.

When we landed in Kabul, officials smoothly removed my American passport—which I never saw again. Suddenly, I was the citizen of no country and had no rights. I had become the property of a polygamous Afghan family. I was not allowed out without a male escort, a male driver, and a female relative as my chaperones.

This marriage had transported me back to the 10th Century and trapped me there without a passport back to the future.

I experienced what it was like to live with people who were permanently afraid of what other people might think—even more so than in Small Mind Town, USA.

I was terrified when I first saw women wearing ghostly burqas—ambulatory body bags, sensory deprivation isolation chambers—huddled together literally at the back of the bus. My Afghan family laughed at my over-reaction, which was considered abnormal, not their practice of burying women alive.

My dreamer-of-a husband kept assuring me that the dreadful burqa and my captivity would both soon pass. He lived to see this dream come true for about 15 years for the middle classes until it was shattered again, perhaps forever.

Many Afghan women have mothers-in-law who beat them and treat them as despised servants. Mine never hit me or ordered me to cook or clean, but she tried to convert me to Islam every single day and tried to kill me by telling the servants to stop boiling my water and washing my fruits and vegetables. I got deathly ill.

Poor woman, she was a deserted and much maligned first wife. She feared me, envied me, hated me—as a woman, an infidel, a Jew, an American, and mainly, as a “love match,” something considered too dangerously Western. Afghan mothers-in-law do [collaborate in or even perpetrate](#) the [honor/horror killings](#) of their daughters and daughters-in-law. So do rural

India-based [Hindu](#) mothers and mothers-in-law, Muslim mothers and mothers-in-law [world-wide](#), and Sikhs, to a lesser extent.

I got out of the wild, wild East and I moved on. But I never forgot the way it was. I always understood that as imperfect as America and the West might be, it was still a much better place for women than the Islamic world. Forever after, I understood that barbaric customs are indigenous, not caused by foreign intervention; and that, like the West, Islam was also an imperial and colonial power, owned slaves, and engaged in gender and religious apartheid.

I owe Afghanistan a great deal for teaching me this. Perhaps my radical Western feminism was forged long ago in pampered purdah in Kabul.

Islamic or Islamist totalitarianism today and as I knew it nearly 60 years ago in Kabul is the more obvious face of Gilead than the one imagined by Atwood more than 30 years ago.

Like the handmaids and domestics in Gilead, the captive population in Orwell's [1984](#) is monitored around the clock through "telescreens" that can view every room, each person. The telescreens broadcast Big Brother's orders and conduct daily "hate" sessions. People are always anxious and paranoid; everyone has permanent enemies.

Today, Orwell's Thought Police sound a lot like the Afghan Taliban or like Iran's or Saudi Arabia's Virtue and-Vice squads, who arrest men and [women](#) for the smallest sign of "individuality" or difference, and who harass and arrest women for showing a single strand of hair, or a glimpse of ankle. Here's Khaled Hosseini's fictional description of life in Afghanistan under the Soviets in [The Kite Runner](#):

You couldn't trust anyone in Kabul anymore—for a fee or under threat, people told on each other, neighbor on neighbor, child on parent, brother on brother, servant on master, friend on friend...the rafiqs, the [Afghan] comrades, were everywhere and

they'd split Kabul into two groups: those who eavesdropped and those who didn't...A casual remark to the tailor while getting fitted for a suit might land you in the dungeons of Poleh-charkhi...Even at the dinner table, in the privacy of their own home, people had to speak in a calculated manner—the rafiqs were in the classrooms too; they'd taught children to spy on their parents, what to listen for, whom to tell.

And here he is describing Afghanistan in the Taliban era:

In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the streets, in the stadiums, in the markets, it is a part of our lives here...the savages who rule our watan [country] don't care about human decency. The other day, I accompanied Farzanajan to the bazaar to buy some potatoes and naan. She asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her, I think he had a deaf ear. So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck her so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly. She had a large purple bruise on her leg for days...If I fought, that dog would have surely put a bullet in me, and gladly!

Hosseini's descriptions are right out of *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Two memoirs set in Iran, Azar Nafisi's best-selling [Reading Lolita in Tehran](#) and Roya Hakakian's [Journey from the Land of No](#), describe the savage curtailment of private life and thought—and of life itself—by radical Islamists.

According to Nafisi, Khomeini's goon squads closed newspapers and universities and arrested, tortured, and executed beloved teachers, prominent artists, intellectuals, and activists, including feminists, and thousands of other innocent and productive Muslims. The squads constantly harassed women on the street and at work. If a woman failed the dress-code

standards even slightly, or by accident, she risked being arrested, probably raped, probably executed.

In *Journey from the Land of No*, Roya Hakakian describes the indescribable “Mrs. Moghadam,” the newly-installed head of the Jewish girls’ high school. Mrs. Moghadam tyrannizes, terrifies, and shames the Jewish girls. She tries to convert them to Islam. However, her true passion is more Taliban-esque. She informs the innocent girls that, although they do not know it, they are “diabolical,” “abominable,” “loathsome,” “lethal,” capable of “drowning everything in eternal darkness,” capable of bringing the “apocalypse” by showing a single strand of hair. To Hakakian’s credit, she presents a rather dangerous turn of events as a dark comedy.

Mrs. Moghadam is definitely an Aunt Lydia, the lead female tormentor of the Handmaids, right out of Gilead, circa 1985.

As Muslim women are being tortured, honor-murdered by their families, or stoned to death, sometimes for refusing to wear the veil, many Western multiculturally and politically correct post-colonial feminists are deconstructing and *wearing* the face veil and the head scarf as symbols of [anti-racism](#) and as a [form of respect](#) when they visit Muslim countries. Such feminists are also silencing and demonizing all other views in academic journals, in the media, and on feminist internet groups.

I’ve [written](#) about this many times. Therefore, while I know that violence against women still remains a burning issue in the West, I agree with Allison Pearson’s recent article in *The Spectator*: [“The appalling vanity of Western Feminists who think Margaret Atwood writes about them.”](#)

Atwood depicts an all-female power structure in which the handmaids are kept in line by cruel female “Aunts,” led by Aunt Lydia, who casually apply cattle prods and tasers, who blame them as evil sluts, punish them with group condemnation,

bouts of solitary confinement, exile them to the “Colonies” to die cleaning up toxic waste, etc. Such behavior seems to contradict feminist views of women as morally superior to men and as more compassionate and intuitive.

Like men, women are human beings and as such are as close to the apes as to the angels. Women are also aggressive, cruel, competitive, envious, sometimes lethally so, but mainly toward other women. I would not want to be at the mercy of a female prison guard—or a female concentration camp guard—in the West. But let’s not forget the [Wives of ISIS](#)—the [all-female al-Khansa Brigade](#) who whipped, beat, and mutilated the breasts of girls and women when their heavy black burqas slipped. [Displaced ISIS women](#) continue their anti-woman reign of terror.

Misogynist thinking and actions exist in America today but not only among right-wing conservatives. It is also flourishing among our media and academic elites. Such thinking is flying high under the banner of “free speech,” “multi-cultural relativism,” “anti-racism,” and “political correctness.” Dare to question this elite’s right to silence and shame those who challenge their views—i.e., that the West is always to blame, that jihadists are freedom-fighters, that the Islamic face veil is a free choice or a religious commandment, that polygamy encourages sisterhood, that Islam is a race, not a religious and political ideology—and, as I’ve noted many times, one is attacked as a racist, an Islamophobe, and a conservative, and swiftly demonized and de-platformed.

While MGM/Hulu’s TV series is dramatically compelling, part soap opera, part horror movie, part Warrior Queen fantasy, the series is radically different from Atwood’s 1985 novel. For example, Atwood’s narrator, Ofglen, is not an increasingly daring, crazed, female assassin, as Elizabeth Moss brilliantly plays her. She is hardly heroic at all; under totalitarianism, heroism, collective or individual, is quickly ferreted out and destroyed. It exists but is rare.

Contemporary viewers are hungry for multi-racial characters, interracial and same-sex couples, “badass” women. Hulu gives them to us. Hulu’s Canada is a multi-racial, politically correct refuge for Gilead’s escapees; same-sex couples and feminists are government leaders. This is not true in the novel. On the contrary, in her 1985 Epilogue, Atwood has Canada rounding up and returning all Gilead escapees.

Atwood the divine novelist is absolutely entitled to depict whatever she wishes. But the current crop of reviewers as well as the filmmakers are playing partisan politics with her original vision and are refusing to see other and larger global dangers contained in her work.

Women’s freedom and women’s lives worldwide are under the most profound siege. To focus solely on the United States or on the Caucasian, Judeo-Christian West is diversionary. It scapegoats one country, one culture, for the far greater crimes of other countries and cultures.

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