

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* – RELIGION, RITUALS, AND SYMBOLS

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Abstract: Margaret Atwood's seminal novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the Republic of Gilead, formerly the USA, a few years after a coup that has installed a totalitarian, sectarian regime under an elite group of men called Commanders. The population is controlled through fear. Torture is commonplace, spying and denunciation are encouraged, and there are frequent public executions. Society is strictly hierarchical; women are obedient, and few have roles outside their homes. Most people are infertile, so women who have had children outside a first marriage are, after a period of indoctrination, forced to bear children for childless, high-status couples and are known as handmaids. The narrator is one of these Offred. She is in her mid-thirties and is running out of time before being sent to the colonies to clear up hazardous waste. The growing despair of her existence permeates the novel. Fred is Offred's second commander. As a regime leader, Fred feels he can bend the rules: instead of confining his contact with Offred to the monthly insemination ceremony, he seeks out her company. His wife, Serena Joy, is desperate for a child, so she arranges for Offred to have sex with the chauffeur, Nick, which would result in both of them dying if they were caught. In snatched conversations, Offred learns from another handmaid, Ofglen, that there is an underground rebellion. When Ofglen is captured, she commits suicide rather than betray other group members, buying precious time for Offred. Nick, another member of the underground organization, helps Offred escape. As well as warning women not to become complacent about the gains that previous generations of women have achieved, Atwood's novel provides a subjective glimpse at the horrors that can occur when religion and politics collide.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Anthropology, Religion, Rituals, Symbols

This article aims to make the biblical and mythological texts understandable regarding anthropological issues in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, even for those without a background in the field, advancing theological investigation into fundamental and specific problems.

However, examining religious texts can enlarge anthropology issues and expand insights through systematic study, all opposed to/faced with quotes from Margaret Atwood's fiction, in this case *The Handmaid's Tale*.

1. Heart

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, chapter 32, we encounter the following quotation: "On the white enamel surface is a pile of radishes, washed but

uncut. Little Aztec hearts."¹ This reference is based on an Aztec sacrificial ritual in which the still-living victims' hearts were removed as an offering to the gods. The Aztec culture thrived in Mesoamerica from the 1300s until 1521, the ritual used to feed Huitzilopochtli with human hearts and bodies.

A different version of the myth depicts two Aztec groups engaged in furious combat and is found in the historical accounts of Diego Duran and Alvarado Tezozomoc. Huitzilopochtli, the leader of one group, defeats the warriors of Coyolxauh, a female leader, and rips apart their breasts before devouring their hearts.

The body was carried by priests and put face-up in another ritual area. They efficiently decapitated the victim by making an incision in the space between two vertebrae in the neck using obsidian blades that were sharper than modern surgical steel thanks to years of experience, thorough anatomical understanding, and their skills. The priests skillfully removed the face's skin and muscles with razor-sharp blades, leaving the skull behind. They then drilled deep holes in both sides of the skull and placed it on a wooden stake holding other skulls prepared. The skulls were headed towards the Tenochtitlan tzompantli, a massive skull rack constructed in front of the Templo Mayor, a pyramid with two temples on top. One was committed to Huitzilopochtli, and the other to the rain god, Tlaloc.

"The southern building housed Huitzilopochtli. When warrior sacrifices were made in front of this temple, the bodies were decapitated, dismembered, and flung down the steps toward the large round panel at its base."²

Alternatively, the morpheme "heart" is used to describe the most powerful word in the language of Old Testament anthropology. It appears in the Hebrew Old Testament 598 times in its most common form, "lêb," and 252 times in the form "lêbâb."

The account of Nabal's death in 1 Sam.25.37 appears the most revealing:

*"When Abigail went back to Nabal, he was in the house, eating like a king. He was very drunk and in a good mood. So she told him nothing until the next morning. In the morning, when he was not drunk, his wife told him everything. His heart stopped, and he became like a stone. About ten days later, the LORD struck Nabal, and he died."*³

In the first phase, the modern reader assumes rigor mortis set in after the man's heart stops beating. One subsequently discovers that Nabal continues to live for an additional ten days. Nabal lives for ten days after his organ dies. This fact demonstrates that the biblical author is not considering the heart ceasing to beat in our modern medical sense, as that would result in the man's immediate death. In the scripture, the body's transformation into stone is linked to death; in this case, given that Nabal continued to survive for a further ten days in this condition, the only possibility is paralysis. That would indicate a stroke to a doctor. A man can easily live another ten days after having a stroke. Therefore, the ancient storyteller saw the heart as a central organ that allowed the limbs to move. The heart's beating, and the brain, nerves, and lungs are not seen here as they were known to ancient Israelite anatomy.

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland&Stewart, 1985, p. 143.

² Kay Almere Read; Jason J Gonzalez, *Mesoamerican Mythology. A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs of Mexico and Central America*, 2000, p. 59.

³ Bible, 1 Samuel 25:36.

2. Death

The following fragment in chapter 19, is taken from *The Handmaid's Tale*: "This carving, done with a pencil dug many times into the worn varnish of the desk, has the pathos of all vanished civilizations. It's like a handprint on a stone. Whoever made that was once alive."⁴ probably refers to the handprints left by Hindu widows who engaged in suttee, a now outlawed tradition when widows burned themselves to death on the funeral pyres of their deceased husbands.

According to Sharada Sugirtharajah, the Hindu widows' act of sati, "suttee," literally translates as the widow self-immolating on her husband's funeral pyre.

The custom of burning widows was not exclusive to the people of India. As stated by European scholars, it has its roots in the earliest religious beliefs and superstitions of humanity. Other historical people who engaged in the practice included the ancient Greeks, Germans, Slavs, and others. The source of the word "Sati" is "sat," which means "the truth." Thus, it refers to a woman who upholds her moral standards. Chastity and personal purity have always been held up as the ultimate ideals of womanhood. Any woman who has attained this ideal's pinnacles is a Sat; Sati is the most well-known manifestation of this principle.

Fundamentalist religious organizations and residents alike vigorously promoted and spread these cultural beliefs around this practice, which served as a critical support system for the repressive practices against Hindu widows. But opposition to this practice was as strong, and it received harsh criticism for its horrifying and authoritarian nature. Sati wasn't officially outlawed until 1829 by the Bengal Provincial Government, thanks to the collaborative efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and William Bentinck, the country's governor general at the time.

As a result of exposure to Western culture and education, which led to a new awakening among the social reformers of 19th-century India, the need for social and religious reform became apparent. The new educated elite, like Raja Ram Mohan Roy⁵ and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, began promoting women's rights and the elimination of social evils like "Sati" and "child marriage," despite the status of women continuing to be demeaning and exclusive. Various more laws that condemned and made this practice illegal followed this act, yet the negative aspects of this custom still exist today unnoticed.

"Since the highly publicized death in 1987 of an eighteen-year-old woman, Roop Kanwar, in the Northwest Indian state of Rajasthan, there has been an explosion of literature on sati. The photograph of Roop Kanwar in her wedding outfit, seated on the funeral pyre and holding her husband's head on her lap as the flames engulfed them both, was distributed widely."⁶

The story of Roop Kanwar, the last recorded case of sati in India, has attracted significant attention and sparked a new wave of discussions and

⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland&Stewart, 1985, p. 78.

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raja_Ram_Mohan_Roy

⁶ Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Courtly Text, and Courting "Sati"* in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2001, p. 1.

movements. 18-year-old Roop Kanwar decided to commit suicide by jumping into her husband's funeral pyre on September 4, 1987, leaving behind a legacy that would endure for years. The large group of people watching this action described it as voluntary. This act shook the state of Rajasthan and sparked a massive national human rights crusade. There was a lot of confusion and upheaval brought on by an act of will. Eight months after being married, Roop Kanwar lost her husband. Her family and the townspeople supported her desire to conduct sati with great honor. However, she informed her parents of her husband's passing and her willingness to perform sati only after reading about it in the morning newspaper. Even though other cases of sati have been documented, Roop Kanwar's incident was different because of the widespread outcry from various women's movements and the political atmosphere surrounding it. These factors turned the incident into a conflict between the assertion of women's rights on the one hand and religious and cultural principles on the other. The passing of Roop Kanwar had several significant meanings. She was decorated with jewelry and wore the traditional red dress of a Hindu bride despite being a widow. Roop Kanwar has been portrayed as the epitome of women, intimately associated with Hindu nationalism.

However, the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Bill was introduced on October 1, 1987. The Parliament's two houses approved it, gained the president's assent on January 3, 1988, and went into effect on March 21. 25 of the 45 defendants charged with aiding and glorifying the crime had been found not guilty.

3. Angels (Angel-makers, Baby-farmers)

Another illustrative citation in Chapter 6,

"The men wear white coats, like those worn by doctors or scientists. Doctors and scientists aren't the only ones, there are others, but they must have had a run on them this morning. Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus. They were doctors, then, in the time before, when such things were legal. Angel makers, they used to call them; or was that something else?"⁷

contains various allusions, like the doctors who carried out legal abortions being identified by a fetus. In addition, the term "angel makers" refers to Scandinavian women who adopted unwanted children in exchange for payment; in other parts of Europe, similar women were known as "baby farmers"; these "adopted" children were eventually neglected, perished, or even murdered.

As defined by Wikipedia, a woman named "Anglamakerska" cared for foster children in exchange for a fee and, by her carelessness, transformed them into "angels," meaning that she gave them such poor care that they perished. Nevertheless, it could be possible that the authorities did not view the crimes committed by angel-making women as particularly severe, given the small number of court cases in which they were prosecuted. Richard Wavrin, a doctor who examined 160 foster families at the end of the 19th century, identified six instances

⁷ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland&Stewart, 1985, p. 27.

of angel-making in his research *About the foster care system and its arrangements in Stockholm (1892)*. Wavrinsky researched other deaths and blamed them on lack of money, unhygienic living conditions, or a lack of knowledge about child care. Perhaps angel-making was a significant factor in the high mortality rate for children born outside of marriage.

Asa Bolmstedt claims that the last angel maker to receive a sentence was Hilda Nilsson from Helsingborg in Sweden (for the murder of eight foster children). In 1917 receiving her sentence, she hanged herself in jail, preventing the verdict against her from being carried out. The conviction had been amended to life in prison before the suicide, but Nilsson was not informed of this alteration.

Women were permitted to give birth in secret starting in 1778 to reduce the high infant mortality rate caused by unmarried mothers abandoning their children to die. After the law was altered, it became more typical for unmarried mothers to leave their offspring to confident women who, in exchange for a fee, agreed to take care of them and provide for their upbringing. Neither the priest nor the foster children's board was undoubtedly informed of every birth due to the anonymity. Sweden officially had over 40,000 foster children at the end of the 19th century. This fact translates to about eight foster children for every 1,000 persons.

However, considering the anonymity, it is logical to conclude that the number was far more significant. Both "finer" families and those in poverty abandoned their newborn children; the former may have been done primarily to maintain the family's good name, and the latter may have been done because the single mother or her family did not have the resources to support the child's upbringing. Some single and married women have decided to defend themselves by taking in foster children over time. They could receive compensation from the Foster Children Board for looking after the children.

Alternatively, the single mother or her family members could pay herself to prevent allowing the child to grow up at home as a supposedly illegitimate child to conceal what had occurred. Some less responsible foster child recipients quickly realized that it was more financially advantageous for them to allow some of these children to pass away early from prolonged starvation and neglect because the money received still had to be kept in addition to the fact that the biological mother either rarely or never wanted to visit or inquire about her child.

These children could not be reported missing by the police for reasons that could be readily explained if they were not registered with the priest or the foster children's board. As a result, some "mothers" went so far as to actively remove the kids, as Hilda Nilsson, an angel maker, did. Soon after their mothers left the children in Nilsson's care, she killed them. The fact that the authorities hardly ever knew these newborns existed made this possible. Additionally, the mothers never desired to return to check on them.

Nilsson killed the kids in various ways, placing them in a washtub and then piling heavy objects like a washboard on top of them. Later, after the kids had died, she left the room and came back. She burned their bodies as the next phase in her process. When she didn't burn them, she sometimes dug and buried graves. In

contrast to other baby-farmer child murders of the day, Nilsson killed the kids. Most people abandoned the kids, leaving them to die from malnutrition and unsanitary living circumstances.

4. Abortion

What emerges from these statements is that it is not unexpected that we are facing an increased interest in this obscure period of feminist history and abortion presented in the dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Long before it became popular, Chicago-based feminist author Paula Kamen told the "Tale of Jane." Her part-documentary play *Jane: Abortion and the Underground*, which was released in the 1990s, was based on interviews she conducted with women who both used and operated the service. The past was still so recent at that time—just a few decades after *Roe v. Wade*—that many were reluctant to discuss it with her.

When Chicagoans called 634-3844 between 1969 and 1973, a voice would announce, "This is Jane from Women's Liberation. Leave your name and phone number if you need help, and someone will call you back."⁸

A member of a ladies' group identified as "Jane" would get in touch with everyone who left a note. The Janes offered safe access to abortion, which required the strictest secrecy, and the Collective achieved enormous success. The Janes answered 11,000 calls throughout their four years of operation. Despite routinely breaching the law, they were without fatalities, and none of the Janes received jail time.

The Jane Collective is a real-world illustration of how to give safe access to abortion when it is illegal and a prospective model for the future. About 20 women made up the Jane Collective; almost all were middle-class, white, and cisgender. Many were in their early 20s, and some were involved in the University of Chicago student movements. They gathered in private homes and kept their names secret to reduce the chance of being apprehended. They posted their phone number on the walls of public restrooms to share them. As soon as sympathetic medical professionals discovered the network, they started giving the number to patients looking for a discreet way to end their pregnancies.

The expensive cost of abortion and men's control over it quickly exasperated the Janes. The typical cost of the treatment was \$500, making it unaffordable for many. The Janes started sending practically all of their clients to one doctor open to negotiating rates to cut down on that expense. They soon discovered, however, that this supplier was not an MD but someone who had served as an MD's apprentice. The Janes reasoned that if he could learn to carry out safe abortions, they could too.

The Janes were doing half the abortion procedures by the summer of 1971, rapidly mastering them. Consequently, they were able to cut their pricing as a result. The Janes could offer free abortions because they had complete control over the procedure, and most consumers only paid \$50.

The Jane network placed a premium on performing abortions themselves for factors other than cost. The feminist health movement was founded on the ideals of peer

⁸ Aimee Levitt, *Jane: Abortion and the Underground relives the bad old days of covert abortions*, in *Chicago Reader*, 2017.

support and self-control. The Janes considered offering safe abortions in a setting where patients received assistance and instruction to be a sort of feminization.

Because there are no abortion providers in 89 percent of U.S. counties, the reproductive rights movement is already set up to assist pregnant people and other women in obtaining abortions. In a post-Roe United States, organizations like the National Network of Abortion Funds will find it challenging to meet demand.

The Jane Collective's hardships, as well as its accomplishments, can serve as lessons for the abortion rights fight. For the underground abortion movement to be revitalized, addressing racial disparities in health care will be a crucial component. Learning from the experience of groups like the Jane Collective can offer essential insights, consolation, and hope at a time when many Americans fear losing their ability to get abortion care.

5. FLDS

The quote from The Historical Notes, namely: "They thus replaced the serial polygamy common in the pre-Gilead period with the older form of simultaneous polygamy practiced both in early Old Testament times and in the former state of Utah in the nineteenth century."⁹ refers to the polygamy cases in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints engaged in the middle of the 1800s, a practice outlawed in 1904. Even so, the FLDS is a totalitarian cult that still participates in polygamy more than a century after the Mormon Church forbade the practice.

The secretive FLDS ultimately came under investigation in the mid-2000s due to massive allegations of systematic welfare fraud and child sexual abuse after hiding itself from the public for decades by essentially taking over and occupying small communities on the Utah-Arizona border. Many of the cult's adherents moved to live inside FLDS compounds in Colorado and Texas after FLDS "prophet" Warren Jeffs was found guilty in 2007 of complicity in rape.

One section of mainstream Mormon followers refused to renounce when the practice was abandoned in 1890 as part of a bargain with the federal government to grant Utah statehood. The ensuing sect, the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-day Saints (FLDS), spent most of the 20th century in or near the twin cities of Hildale and Colorado City on the Utah-Arizona border. Given the towns' isolation from surrounding populations and the ability to cross the border by local or state law enforcement forces in either jurisdiction, the group flourished in this isolated border area with just a few intrusions.

This view is supported by Flora Jessop, who writes in *The Church of Lies* that the group was strengthened rather than destroyed even when the U.S. government attempted to become involved. The governor of Arizona at the time, Howard Pyle, ordered a raid that resulted in the separation of children from their families and outrage in the media. The governor's political career was destroyed, and the polygamists were encouraged to resist a government violating their right to freedom of religion.

⁹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland&Stewart, 1985, p. 210.

The FLDS reached the turn of the twenty-first century with an estimated 10,000 members, mainly concentrated around the Hildale-Colorado City hub, with smaller groups dispersed as far away as Mexico and British Columbia, Canada. Rulon Jeffs, the father of the current head Warren Jeffs, established one-person rule and governed for more than 15 years. His son, who replaced him as a prophet and assumed responsibility for personally communicating the word of God to his followers, received this power from him when he passed away in 2002.

With an iron fist, the younger Jeffs governed the FLDS polygamy sect, prohibiting things like swimming and watching television and assuming sole control of the practice of "spiritual marriage." Jeffs was in charge of pairing wives with husbands and deciding when a wife needed to be "reassigned" if her husband allegedly strayed from the righteous path.

Even more alarming claims that FLDS women who have been "spiritually married" were encouraged to apply for government assistance programs for single mothers.

Before being apprehended in a routine traffic encounter in late 2006, Jeffs was able to move up the FBI's "Ten Most Wanted" list. While awaiting trial in 2007, Jeffs attempted suicide by hanging himself in jail. A Utah judge gave him two consecutive sentences of five years to life the following year, meaning he would serve at least ten years in prison for marrying a 14-year-old girl to her 19-year-old cousin. It is believed that Jeffs has as many as 70 wives, 24 of whom were underage, all this happening in the United States in the 21st century.

Mike Watkiss's documentary movie *Colorado City and the Underground Railroad* adopted a broader perspective, concluding that the FLDS showed tenacity in the face of heightened official scrutiny, and arresting the group's leader was seen as martyrdom. While fleeing, Jeffs was able to plan the relocation of several hundred of the families he believed to be the most devoted to him to a sizable compound outside of Eldorado, Texas, where dorms and a sizable church-like building were built. About 175 miles southwest of Denver, the organization spent \$2 million acquiring property in five different spots along the isolated eastern edge of the untamed Sangre De Cristo Mountains.

The FLDS's future is still unknown. Warren Jeffs reportedly renounced his role as prophet in a memo, while some indicate that he still leads the group from behind bars.

The Old Testament's depiction of polygamy is, nonetheless, problematic. The attempt to conceal the truth is futile. Although it seems evident that God intended monogamy from the beginning, Adam and Eve committed the first sin and were banished from the Garden. It is forcefully stated that modifications were performed during the following period. By Genesis 4, Lamech, Cain's son, has married two women. Abraham and Jacob, the two patriarchs, had several wives and concubines. Technically, the behavior constituted polygyny. In other words, women cannot have several husbands, whereas males can (polyandry).

The pervasiveness of life and death, monogamy and polygamy, peace and war, power and politics is paramount in Margaret Atwood's fiction, drawing its roots from real life, thus bringing the anthropological issues to the foreground.

For Atwood, war and politics thus become the most visible form of exerting power, of men attempting to dominate each other. „It's in my books because it's in life,” concludes Atwood when asked about the presence of wars in her books.

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