

Dystopian: Fiction or Reality

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, "*The Handmaid's Tale*," illustrates the subjugation of women to reproductive roles under the authoritarian Gilead regime, which is rooted in Christian Puritan fundamentalism. The narrative describes how a political faction, the 'Sons of Jacob,' usurps the United States Government, establishing the 'Republic of Gilead.' Women are stripped of their independence, beginning with the loss of financial autonomy. Subsequent punishments include execution by hanging, exile to toxic colonies, or death by beating. This feminist dystopian fiction finds a parallel in the current situation in Afghanistan. The Taliban's takeover of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan led to the establishment of the 'Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan,' characterised by Islamic fundamentalism. The regime continues to deny girls education and women employment, while enforcing a stringent dress code. There is severe discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, with occurrences of massacres and widespread starvation, exacerbated by the refusal to provide U.S. aid to Afghan civilians. This paper seeks to compare the fictional Gilead regime with Taliban rule utilising "*The Handmaid's Tale*" by Margaret Atwood and Credible news reports from the region.

Keywords: Taliban, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Religion, Islamic fundamentalism, Puritan fundamentalism, literary journalism, human rights violation, Feminist dystopian theory

Introduction

Feminist Dystopian fiction is a subsection of dystopian fiction. It combines the elements of dystopian fiction with feminist analyses to demonstrate how patriarchal power structures can be fully institutionalised and normalised. It primarily focuses on gendered oppression and the systematic subjugation of women.

"*The Handmaid's Tale*," an example of feminist dystopian fiction by Canadian author Margaret Atwood, portrays the Republic of Gilead's usurpation of the United States government. Environmental disasters led to a falling birth rate, which the Gilead regime aims to control and regulate. Women's rights are abolished. They can no longer own property, have a job or read. Their bank accounts are frozen, and the money is transferred to their husbands' accounts. Unmarried women, widows and infertile women are forced into labour or sent to clean toxic colonies, while fertile women are assigned to high-ranking commanders to bear children for their infertile wives.

Offred is the protagonist and is assigned to Commander Fred. She narrates her life under the constant surveillance of the Eye and her aunts. Handmaids wear a red gown and a white winged bonnet; they are stripped of their identities and are known by patronymics (name derived from the name of a father or ancestor; Of-Fred). They observe a ritual ceremony where the Handmaid has to lie between the knees of the wife during the act of procreation, dehumanising the Handmaid. To escape reality, Offred often recalls her former life with Luke and her daughter. These flashbacks haunt her.

Under the guise of morality, public punishment is enforced. Handmaids are compelled to attend salvaging (executions), and women face flogging for minor infractions. Offred forges secret alliances, she meets the commander alone in his study, has an affair with Nick, the commander's driver, and joins the Mayday resistance group. The end of the book is ambiguous, Offred is taken away by the authorities, and whether to freedom or punishment is left unknown.

Taliban is an Islamic Fundamentalist movement that got its name from Pashto, meaning 'student'. It emerged in the early 1990s from Islamic religious schools (madrasas) and former mujahideen fighters from Southern Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan. Their ideology is a blend of Deobandi Islamic Tradition, Wahhabi Puritanism and Pashtun tribal code of conduct. They follow a strict and overly conservative interpretation of the sharia.

Taliban seized control over Kabul and much of Afghanistan in 1996, establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They were ousted by a US-led invasion in 2001. However, they retook power after the withdrawal of US and Nato forces in August 2021, collapsing the internationally backed government of the time. The current regime is led by Hibatullah Akhundzada with ultraconservative clergy and military loyalists.

Their hallmark is the severe suppression of women's rights. Secondary and higher education is banned for girls. Work outside Healthcare and teaching is prohibited, and there are restrictions on movement and dress, with women forced to wear the hijab at all times and only travel with a male mahram. The rule is characterised by authoritarian, centralising decisions made by the ultraconservative leaders, excluding former officials and diverse ethnic groups, cracking down on dissent, the media and civil society.

Taliban policies, donor fights and aid worker restrictions have caused severe humanitarian and food crises. International aid is reduced, pushing millions into poverty. Very few countries granted them recognition (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and UAE previously). Their human rights abuses- especially gender apartheid have resulted in sanctions and broad diplomatic isolation. They repress media and civil society through censorship, arbitrary detention, and intimidation of journalists, activists and critics, with freedom of expression drastically shrunk. They grew from being a rural religious movement into a repressive regime controlling Afghanistan and impacting millions of lives.

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, a body of scholarship has emerged that has drawn parallels between *The Handmaid's Tale* and the real-world politics in Afghanistan. Leclaire (1985) and Amin Malak (1987) coined the term "feminist dystopia", of which *The Handmaid's Tale* is a paradigmatic example. Later on, Trevino (2021) traced the evolution of the genre from Orwellian political totalitarianism to Atwood's gendered critique, demonstrating its ongoing social-political relevance. Human rights research and UN reports have meticulously documented the rollback of women's rights in Afghanistan, with Human Rights Watch (2022) listing 50 distinct prohibitions on women. They coined the term "gender apartheid" to describe the state-sanctioned gender segregation.

Hindustan Times (2024) published a journalistic article titled 'Women under the Taliban rule: Real life mirrors dystopian fiction' cataloguing the similarities between the two. An academic article by Akbari and True (2024) highlights the similarity between the Taliban's Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and Gilead's 'Eye'. Recently, there was a shift from merely documenting oppression to foregrounding Afghan women's agency, mirroring Offred's overt rebellion. Human Rights Watch (2024) and Al Jazeera (2022) describe underground schools and the Purple Saturdays Movement.

However, despite several thematic studies being done, very few peer-reviewed studies offer a granular point-by-point structural comparison across the domains, such as legal codes, family law and labour regulations. Most analyses are Western-centric and lack the direct incorporation of Afghan women's narratives. There is also a lack of temporal dynamics in analysing the Taliban's evolution and change in

policies between their 1996 and 2021 rule. This research paper aims to provide a systematic structural comparison using a mixed qualitative methodology. The Critical content analysis of texts and Critical Discourse Analysis, where it compares Gilead's foundational legal and social structures with Taliban decrees, edicts and policy documents, and shows how speeches and media coverage of Taliban propaganda mirror Aunt Lydia's indoctrination in the book to legitimise oppression.

Similarities between *The Handmaid's Tale* and Taliban rule

Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* left many perturbed; the dystopian world narrated was mentally disturbing, and readers only wished it was never a reality. However, Atwood has claimed that “nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time” (Evans), and some of it is inspired by her visit to Afghanistan in 1978. This reads like the message at the end of horror movies, saying whatever was depicted on screen took place in reality. The list of similarities between Gilead and the Taliban is a chilling reality where women in fiction and reality are completely stripped of their identities and autonomy.

To begin with, there is a complete ban on education for women. In the Gilead regime, women are not allowed to read and higher educational institutions are shut down. “markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read.” (Atwood 2). The Taliban has banned girls from attending school beyond grade six and has completely banned university education for them. “Taliban’s discriminatory ban is depriving at least 1.4 million girls of their right to education. This has taken a psychological and emotional toll on Afghan girls, extinguishing their hopes.” (“Taliban’s Attack on Girls’ Education Harming Afghanistan’s Future”) says a Human Rights Watch article on three years of them banning education for girls since August 2021. There is also a destruction of women's educational networks in both regimes, with the Taliban firing 7793 teachers and closing schools due to a lack of educators, and by dismantling professional networks in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Restrictions are imposed on the movement of women where in the novel women were not allowed to go out except for walks and shopping, “we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field.” (Atwood 9) while “Taliban authorities say women must be accompanied by close male relatives if travelling for more than 72km” (Azizi). In some regions like Kandahar, women are supposed to carry a ‘mahram card’ and have their male relative stay with them during their entire work day; moreover, male relatives get punished for minor infractions by women. These rules make women entirely dependent on men for basic survival and day-to-day needs. “Single and unaccompanied women, including an estimated 2 million widows, say they are essentially prisoners in their homes and unable to carry out even the most basic of tasks” (Barekzai et al).

Strict dress codes are imposed that cannot be violated, creating a forced uniformity in women's appearance. In the novel, all handmaids have to dress in red, where “The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen” (Atwood 12) and Taliban mandates full body covering and calls the chadori as the best hijab; “the decree is the first for this regime where criminal punishment is assigned for violation of the dress code for women” (Kumar and Noori)

Women are banned from employment and have no control over their finances. The Gilead regime started by freezing accounts of women, then threatening employers into firing their female employees and slowly wiped out any traces of women's employment. “All those women having jobs: hard to imagine, now, but thousands of them had jobs, millions. It was considered the normal thing” (Atwood 160). The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan did something similar in December 2022. They banned women from working in

NGO with letters sent from the ministry threatening to shut down all NGO's that hire women, citing a lack of dress code compliance by the women.

Their conservative interpretation of religion is used to justify oppression. Aunt Lydia indoctrinates the Handmaidens by quoting from the scriptures. “They can’t help it, she said, God made them that way, but He did not make you that way”. (Atwood 46) Similarly, the Taliban uses their ultraconservative reading of Sharia to impose dehumanising laws on women and justify their human rights violations. “Vice and virtue law weaponizes religion to justify Taliban’s oppressive rule”(Religious leaders, civil society oppose Taliban's vice and virtue law)

The punishments are extreme and make a spectacle that everyone is forced to attend. The Gilead regime calls it salvaging, and everyone, by rule, has to attend them. They aim to use these as deterrents for other people. “Taliban publicly flogged more than 580 people, including 42 women, in 23 provinces of the country in 2024, according to statistics released by the Taliban-controlled Supreme Court.” (Azizi)

Both regimes also use state-sanctioned policies to marginalise and erase ethnic minority groups. The Gilead regime sent African Americans (children of Ham) to segregated National Homelands and forced Jews to convert or leave and face execution if discovered. “Resettlement of the Children of Ham is continuing on schedule” (Atwood 80). The Taliban have massacred, arrested, tortured and forcibly displaced Hazaras. They have discriminatory policies against Shia, Tajik, Uzbek, Sikh and Hindu.

To counter the surveillance, women form underground resistance movements, risking their lives for a better future for the country. Offred was part of the Mayday movement. Similarly, women from Afghanistan formed the Purple Saturdays Movement despite severe resistance and punishments.

Finally, women are only valued for their role in reproduction. The Gilead regime has no use for infertile women and sends them to clean toxic colonies; Handmaid’s only job is to provide a child to the commanders. Taliban with their restrictions on education and employment for women have resulted in higher rates of child marriages and pushed women into domestic and child bearing roles. Women have no access to public spaces and are slowly erased from public life. They are under constant surveillance by the Ministry just like The Eye from the novel.

Conclusion

This research aimed at enumerating similarities between the two regimes and highlight the lived dystopian reality of Afghan women. It also aimed to trace the pattern that these oppressive governing bodies follow to understand and prevent it happening in other cultures and countries. The gross violation of human rights, violence against minority communities and depriving women of basic rights and agency, happens everyday in Afghanistan and very few measures are taken to counter it. While this research lacks primary sources from Afghanistan, it is a foundation for further research in this field that urgently requires the inclusion of Afghan women’s voices. The prominence of the Western lens due to the extreme censorship of Afghan journalists results in a biased version of Taliban rule and this research could benefit more from primary sources to ensure its neutrality. International Organisations need to interfere and treat this with utmost importance because it is millions of women who no longer have access to education or freedom to individuality.

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