

***The Handmaid's Tale* and *Persepolis* on the female protagonism in a post-colonial imperialist dystopia: an analysis**

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Abstract: The aspects of most of the modern literary works produced from political viewpoints, especially science fiction, feature dystopic societies. They present oppressive governments, and some sort of religious fanaticism, and as in a theonomy state, tend to be rooted in postcolonial contexts and are especially linked to female protagonism in the narrative, or lack thereof. Given this, the question is: how to identify the influence of post-colonial behavioral and structural patterns in a narrative of female authorship? The main objective of this research is to discuss the female role in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1998) and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003), emphasizing how imperialist and post-colonial ideals affect the feminine. This article is classified as a literary review with qualitative-interpretive research, of an applied nature, with exploratory objectives, and documental procedure. To theoretically support this article, we discuss *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1998) and the women of Gilead as colonized subjects (Sadeghi; Mirzapour, 2020). We follow the analysis of the politics of the female body under colonial domination (Katrak, 2006) and also draw the parallel between colonized nations and women (Zidan, 2013).

Keywords: *The Handmaid's Tale*; Postcolonial feminism; *Persepolis*; Postcolonial society; Patriarchy.

Resumo: Aspectos da maioria das obras literárias modernas produzidas sob pontos de vista políticos, especialmente de ficção científica, que apresentam sociedades distópicas, governos opressores e algum tipo de fanatismo religioso, como em um estado teonômico, tendem a ser enraizados em contextos pós-coloniais, e estão especialmente ligados ao protagonismo feminino na narrativa, ou a falta dele. Diante disso, a questão é: como identificar a influência dos padrões comportamentais e estruturais pós-coloniais na narrativa de autoria feminina? O principal objetivo desta pesquisa é discutir o papel feminino em *O Conto da Aia* de Margaret Atwood (1998) e *Persépolis* de Marjane Satrapi (2003), enfatizando como os ideais imperialistas e pós-coloniais afetam o feminino. Este artigo classifica-se como uma revisão literária com pesquisa qualitativo-interpretativa, de natureza aplicada, com objetivos exploratórios, e com procedimento documental. Para sustentar teoricamente este artigo, discutimos *O Conto da Aia* (Atwood, 1998) e as mulheres de Gilead como sujeitos colonizados (Sadeghi; Mirzapour, 2020). Seguimos a análise da política do corpo feminino sob a dominação colonial (Katrak, 2006) e também traçamos o paralelo entre as nações colonizadas e as mulheres (Zidan, 2013).

Palavras-chave: *O Conto da Aia*; Feminismo Pós-colonial; Protagonismo feminino; Sociedade pós-colonial; Patriarcado.

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1. Introduction

Colonization is the action or process of appropriation over a nation or group of people, and the colonized experience is global. There are many countries where land was (and still is) stripped of their natural resources, minerals, wood, and anything that can be of use to more dominant societies. The colonized people are subjugated and diminished in a crude process of taking away their cultural identity until the only sense of self left is one of the oppressors, which is supported by Daes (2000, p. 5) when she claims that “the experience of oppression is spiritual death”. As well, *The Handmaid's Tale*, written by Margareth Atwood, presents us with a scene rooted in reality masked as a dystopian novella. The transformation of the late United States into the republic of Gilead, transfiguring itself into a theonomy patriarchal state, shows the colonization of subjects as land.

Atwood's narrative (1998) emphasizes the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, drawing parallels between Canada's colonization and the female experience as conquered beings. The exploration of *Peuples autochthones du Canada*¹ by the British and French was marked by the hegemony, that is, supremacy imposed over the “lesser people”. Such an act of oppression that can also be found in the women of Gilead, in a way that they are taken away from their individuality, denudated from their autonomy, and eventually “[...] the experience of oppression becomes internalized as an accumulation of implicit, subconscious limitations on freedom” (Daes, 2000, p. 5).

The Handmaid's Tale (1998) exemplifies the sexual exploitation and moral subjugation that is present in the realities of economic and racial minorities around the world. The inequity in the life of those subjects is shown explicitly in Atwood's work, which gives an aggrandized portrait of reality, serving as a sort of circus mirror, exposing humanity's ugliest flaws. In this article, we will figure out how the influence of post-colonial behavioral and structural patterns can be identified in the female narrative. Along with it, the post-colonialism of the novel will reveal itself in the author's portrayal of society.

This literature review aims to discuss the female role in some literary works with a critical perspective, making use of historical and sociological analogies to better support the analysis. In addition, as specific objectives, it aims to show the metaphors and connections of women, and subsequently minorities, as people of color and LGBTQI+ counterparts, with Canada's native peoples' colonization process in Atwood's novel, seeking similar experiences in the narrative, like the marginalization imposed by the colonizers in both societies, the real and the fictional ones. As well as the issue of post-colonial feminine protagonism, not exclusively, but mainly, in late 20th-century and early 2000s political literature.

This research is inserted in the field of feminist dystopian literature and is being conducted with the intent of exposing certain behavioral patterns in literary works, especially *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1998), which evokes rooted social constructs that aim to be explored and discussed. Along the way, it will make use of

¹ Indigenous peoples of Canada.

numerous articles and academic papers, some of which are essential to this research's development; we discuss *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1998) and *The Women of Gilead as Colonized Subjects* (Sadeghi; Mirzapour, 2020). Following the analysis of the autobiographical novel *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2003) and also, drawing the parallel between conquered and colonized countries with women (Zidan, 2013), to mention a few.

2. *The Handmaid's Tale*

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopic novel, published originally in the 1980s, with various editions since. The author's mother country influenced greatly the novel's plot, her being Canadian and attributing pieces of Canada's colonial history to the tale.

Atwood's narrative presents the former United States enduring a military coup, where its government settles as a totalitarian theocracy and its societal norms change drastically into the male-dominated *Republic of Gilead*, giving powerful men control over women. Those women are divided into four classifications: the Commander's Wives, Marthas, Handmaids (Offred's category, the protagonist) and Aunts, each and one of them dressing color-coded vestments to determine their functions towards men.

The work is categorized as speculative fiction, a genre opposite to science fiction, for the first is a reflection of humanity, and science fiction presents a reality that is not possible today. *The Handmaid's Tale* presents characteristics of a dystopian novel, which is a sub-genre of the umbrella term "speculative fiction", and offers a vision of a future where societies confront either an environmental threat, technological control, or as in this case, governmental oppression (Oziewicz, 2017).

The Handmaid's Tale (1998) visualizes a future where conservative, right-winged Christians not only obliterate the progress women have made through centuries in search of basic rights but also set them back into a life of servitude towards men, as explicitly seen in the narrative. Atwood (1998) stated in a Reddit forum in 2017 that she did not insert in the narrative something that has not, on some level, already happened. She refers to centuries where the achieving of equal rights was out of sight, and, specifically to the city of Cambridge, in New England, where, during the late 16th century to the early 18th century, lived the theocratic Puritans, which in many ways resembled the Republic of Gilead. The strict rules, the control of every aspect of its members' life, and their intricate fundamentalism were ideals of the Puritans that the author puts in the dystopian narrative as a possible future if they had gotten the upper hand of the actual society. Puritanical thinking still exists today; they are the predecessors of congregational churches (Perkins, 1974).

Howells alleges that the novel "centered on human rights abuses and particularly the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime and is entirely social and political in its agenda" (2006, p. 163). Offred, the protagonist, as discussed before, is denied her identity, having her family, friends, and reality taken out of her, getting diminished into, as she describes the fertile women of Gilead "[...] two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1998, p. 176). This remark symbolizes a problem of colonized psyches, the loss of self-identity, and the forced acceptance of self-worth concerning the

role the colonizer wants the colonized to play. This modifies the vision the subject has of itself, and applies the real intent of colonization: to erase the possibility of rebellion by colonizing one's mind.

2.1 The post-colonial principles relating to Margaret Atwood's portrayal of society

Most societies with a colonized background still bear scars of a painful past, being these blood-stained lands or subservient manners of life, whatever it is, are relevant to highlight that these realities go far beyond speculative fiction, affecting daily lives, especially of women. There are many branches to discuss relating to the life quality of post-colonial societies, especially those of indigenous peoples belonging to colonized countries. For example, the Yanomami indigenous community of the Brazilian Amazon suffers from the issue of illegal mining in their reserves, which entails, according to their leaders, deaths by fire guns, induced alcoholic beverages, and rapes as well as sexual assaults of their women, leading to numerous deaths (Oliveira, 2022, p. 1). These outrageous conditions of life are nonetheless proof of the ongoing consequences of colonization, especially for indigenous peoples.

The resemblances between the lives of colonized women of Gilead and women of other oppressed post-colonial nations are astounding and can be found in the most conspicuous forms. In Gilead, as mentioned before, women are color-coded to separate themselves from each other according to their function. It is interesting to point out that the colors represent hidden meanings, the Handmaids' clothes for example, a deep tone of red, represent fertility, symbolizing the "lifeblood" since the Handmaids are to function like a womb. The Wives wear teal, a type of greenish blue, to represent their subservience to their husbands, while the Marthas wear green clothes that represent growth and healing, they are infertile women put to work as house servants. At last, the Aunts dresses in brown garments, since they are the ones to police and train the Handmaids, resembling soldiers from World War 1 and representing a hard fist. They are by far the women who hold more power than the others (Minnicks, 2018).

A parallel of Atwood's narrative with reality is the use of hijabs by most Iranian non-Muslim women. After the Iranian revolution (or Islamic revolution) in 1979 and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty that transformed the country into a fundamentalist Islamic republic, those women were obligated to use the veil, if not, were subjected to jail and even pledged guilty in case of any sexual assault (Abu-Odeh, 1991). Unfortunately, Margaret Atwood's novel constantly steps out of the boundaries of fiction, proving itself to belong to a masked reality, and not the out-of-reach dystopian world, as we've seen based on real-life parallels. As for an almost ironic resemblance of *The Handmaid's Tale* with real life, Iranian women under the Islamic fundamentalist regime are also incited to wear color-coded clothes, a white veil to cover their hair, and dark garments for discretion (Abu-Odeh, 1991). Although Iran has never actually been formally colonized, it is nonetheless an imperialist dictatorial regime that presents many traits of post-colonial societies.

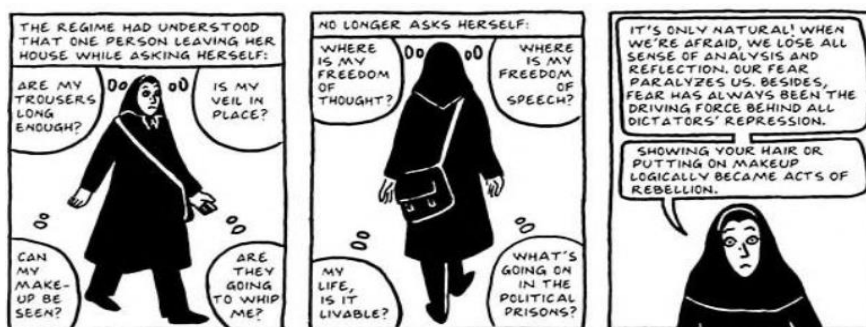
While the women of Gilead are forced to utilize the clothes without their consent or choice, Iranian women were slowly adhering to the hijab in the 1980s given the constant harassment in the streets, the constant pressure to preserve their family's honor. According

to Lama Abu-Odeh (1991, p. 152) “the way the girl dresses and how she behaves have heavy sexual significance. She is continuously subject to the test of ‘honor’ and reputation, which she never really passes”. The segregation of genders, women not being allowed to talk privately with a man without it being an offense to her family's honor, it was already there, the segregation was already there, far behind the start of the veil's usage in this sense (Abu-Odeh, 1991). In the end, it is not the piece of the fabric itself, but what it represents to those who wear them. To some, it can offer an alternative to empowerment, to others a caged cloth.

As a literary example of the reality shown above, *Persepolis* (2000) by Marjane Satrapi is an autobiographic comic book that portrays her childhood and early adulthood during and after the Islamic revolution. The book shows the Iranian people as well as the revolution, through the eyes of an Iranian, out of the Western lens. She lived in Tehran with her family and accompanied close the atrocities a totalitarian regime is capable of, friends and family members missing or dead at the hands of the government, political prisons and the ever-increasing loss of fundamental rights and freedom of thought, especially over women.

The veil usage came shortly after, limiting the already scarce forms of expression. This still is a reality in the daily lives of Iranian women, and those who are not rich enough to flee the country as Satrapi did, see the veil as the only type of protection in hand, a double-edged sword, for it offers only a conditional freedom, as stated by Atwood (1995, p. 165) “A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze”

Figure 1 — *Persepolis*: The Story of a Return



Source: Satrapi (2003, p. 148).

The point is, veiled or not, following Gilead's dressing code or not, these women are subjects of a totalitarian regime that uses vestment and gender roles as a distraction to deeper issues. Gileadian and Iranian women share more than similar experiences, they share fights against the morality police, patriarchal governments, gender apartheid, lack of free expression, tortures and political prisons. Nevertheless, above all, they fight theocracy.

3. Some Final Remarks

This article discusses the aspects of colonization of subjects such as land and draws parallels between Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1998) and the colonization of Canada by the British and French, and presents characteristics of supremacist behavior

imposed over indigenous people during the colonization process. It also explores the sexual and moral exploitation of minorities, especially women, in Atwood's narrative. It emphasizes the post-colonial female protagonism in the 20th century and 2000s literature, specifically dystopian and autobiographical, analyzing post-colonial principles in those works with *The Handmaid's Tale* portrayal of society.

It presents detailed aspects of Atwood's novel, analyzing directly the characters and universe of the narrative, seeking correlations between real-life events and fictional creations, like the Puritans of New England. Also, the research explores the narratives through feminist lenses, aiming to utilize the format of literature review to expose problematics inside the narrative, as well as to dissect Gilead's structural society to explore theocratic patriarchal governments, comparing and relating it to other similar discourses, like *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi and the compulsory use of the veil in Iran, seeking to identify and combat theocratic totalitarianism, the research data could use a little more development, but given the deadline, the main objectives were achieved.

In *Persepolis*, we constantly face the dilemma of changing the excruciating reality, as if a great act of mutiny is needed to solve humanity's issues. Still, the truth is, that there are complex layers composing society as it is, and it's a cruel reality that these problems can't be solved all at once. Despite all that, there is something that can be done, as Satrapi runs from Iran and writes a book to tell her story, and Offred decides to narrate her tale in the epilogue, both of these women confront the post-colonial structural behavior of being kept quiet, and that is how the system is slowly defeated, it shows resistance, even in the slightest, interrupting the female narrative of the oppressed; the self-discovery it allows turning the simplest act, one of rebellion. Future research relating to these topics can be considered as further analysis of the Iranian societal aspects, given its still vast fields to discuss, especially over the female behavioral chain connected to religion along the centuries.

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