



18

**THE PORTRAYAL OF HEGEMONIC POWER IN MARGARET  
ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

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**Abstract:**

*The conception of hegemony initiates as an order of class alliance in which a 'hegemonic class' sign up political leadership over 'subaltern classes' by 'winning them over'. Hegemonic practice controls and manipulates people to act in obedience with the authoritative class's interests. This study will scrutinize Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony by diagnosing the illustration of hegemonic supremacy in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel by Margaret Atwood. The study unveils that the commanding class in the novel uses acquiesce as its principal system in bolstering its control and compulsion as the armour of its hegemonic power. It also exposes that the authoritative class that upholds its mastery by using privileges, rewards, mass media, songs, Bible, symbolic outfit, and unified language. The occurrence of coercion and despotism in the novel is indicated by a presence of violence. It is portrayed by how the Handmaids are tortured by using an electric cattle prod once they make blunders or repudiates to satisfy the commanding class's interests.*

**Keywords:** *Hegemony, Authority, Oppression, Armour, Assent, etc.*

Ideally, it would be great if individuals acted in line up with their true nature. However, hegemonic practice controls people to function according to the interest of the authoritative class. In this way, the subaltern class actively grants its consent to be regulated by the authoritative class. As Gramsci has stated, a subaltern class refers to those who consistently and spontaneously give their consent to be governed by the ruling government In this way, Gramsci further elaborates, these people are always become the subjects of the authoritative class hegemonic actions.



A subaltern class has not yet gained consciousness of its strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop, and which therefore does not know how to escape from the primitivist phase (Gramsci, 371).

Hegemonic power not only exists in actual life incidents, but it also takes place in literary works including novels. It is because, in generating literary works, in this way, novels' most authors are admired from real world or their own experiences in actual life. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) novel written by Margaret Atwood is one of the few significant novelists who brilliantly picture the hegemonic power. This novel is categorized as a dystopian fiction, a type of category that can be regarded as a caution against the negative aftermath of the changes in society. Thus, as a dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a story that is not completely fictional.

Margaret Atwood is a copious writer who is active feminist and associated with many human rights movements on the international scene. *The Handmaid's Tale* delineates the state of the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to the advancement of industrial civilization, the environment was defaced and the children and women were afflicted for severe ecological complications. In the case of drastically low fertility, the government uses military power to categorize citizens to clear up and resolve the trouble of infertility. They are impacted by the Bible. Cruel rules dominate the Gilead society. Women in Gilead are dispossessed of most of their liberties in exchange for security from voracious men. Specifically, handmaids are productive women compelled and labored into sexual subjugation to conceive child for the noble men known as Commanders. Women are devoid of rights to do what they like to do. They must adhere to the rules and cater to the needs of the Commanders. They simply serve as instruments for giving birth to the privileged families. In such circumstances the dispute between women and hegemonic power surfaces clearly. This paper analyses the hegemonic power from different views and unveil the persecution placed on women in the novel.

*The Handmaid's Tale* narrates a story of Republic of Gilead. The story is narrated by the principal character known as Offred who is one of the Handmaids in Gilead. As a Handmaid, her role is to conceive the authoritative class or the Commander's child. In the novel, Offred reveals her past life, in which she resides with her husband and daughter, and at present life, she is leading a handmaid's life. Throughout the story, the hegemonic power of the Gileadean rulers is elaborately pictured by the authoritative class that battles to achieve the hearts of those it controls and continues hegemonic power by implying some political actions which can be categorized into acquiescence and compulsion.

Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony is the most appropriate way to inspect the sketch of hegemonic power in this novel. In Gramsci's theory of hegemony, he elaborates the critical roles and the connection between consent and coercion. In this way, Gramsci unveils that both these concepts are salient in hegemonic activities, but he states that hegemony depend more on acquiescence rather than compulsion. In accordance to Gramsci, consent itself is earned when the authoritative class interests appear to be the interests of society on the whole. In order to accomplish the consent of the large group of people Gramsci argues that the authoritative class must take some merit in the society and convert them into the authoritative class worldview,



permit the subaltern class to voice its desires, and bestow the subalterns with certain advantages.

Gilead is a stringently hierarchical society, with a massive disparity between the genders. The Gileadean rebellions take over after terrorism destroys the US government. As soon as they dismissed all women from their jobs and emptied their bank accounts, Offred is left abandon, hopeless and dependent. Luke, however, doesn't appear too enraged at this turn of incidents, a subtle recommendation that even wise men may have ensconced chauvinistic behaviours, and that Gilead merely grasp these usual views to the analytical extreme. Soon Gileadean women find all freedom snatched from them, from the right to select their clothes to the right to read. Even women in state of power, like Aunt Lydia, are only permitted to cattle prods, never guns. The Commander's Wife, once a powerful patron of far right-wing religious concepts about women should stay in the home, now feels herself trapped and unhappily in the world she supported for. Gilead also regulated sexual brutality against women. The function, where the Commander attempt to inseminate Offred, is systemized adultery and a kind of rape. Jezebel's, where Moira works, is prostitution for the society's elite.

*The Handmaid's Tale* set in The Republic of Gilead, which used to be called as North America, with the difference that it has an oppression of men, totalitarian regime that disregards women and every right they have and them turning them into subjects of men. As only a number of women are left prolific, they are compelled to deliver as handmaids to elite class families that contain of a Commander and their Wife to get conceive and retain the population growing. Women are not permitted to work; they do not have the right even to choose the Commander they will be compelled to have sex once in every month. The handmaid will be sent to the second family if she does not get pregnant, and if she 'fails' again in the third attempt without success, she is sent to the colonies to work as labour, in radioactive and nuclear atmosphere. If she gets conceived, the circle goes back to the beginning, and she is sent to another family after giving birth to try again. Apart from this the handmaid has only two alternatives; The Colonies and prostitution. In the end, it is a ferocious ring that women cannot get away from.

I feel tremor in the woman beside me. Is she crying? In what way could it make her look good? I can't afford to know. My own hands are clenched, I note, tight around the handle of my basket. I won't give anything away. Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. It will become ordinary (Atwood, 39).

The authoritative class in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel operates the subaltern class predominantly by using acquiescence. It is depicted by the authoritative class or its delegates constantly encourage its values in order to be accepted and adopted by the subaltern class. As a result, the subaltern class behaves in the way that agrees with the ruling class interests. Aunt Lydia is the most notable character who constantly inculcate the subalterns. In this case, the Handmaids are brain washed by them, which is mostly done by injecting the supremacy values into her own discourse.



Though the story reviews the religious right, it also pictures that the feminist left, as demonstrated by Offred's mother and it is not the remedy, as the radical feminists, too, advocate flaming books, censorship, and brutality. One may criticize Offred for being too submissive, without conceding that she's a by-product of her society. One may misconduct the Commander's Wife for not showcasing unity to her gender and against Gilead, without understanding that this expectation, since it assumes that gender is the most important riot, it is just a lighter version of the anti-individual oppression of Gilead. This problematic interrogation of blame as well as the brutal depictions of the suppression of women earns *The Handmaid's Tale* reverence as a successful work of feminist literature.

To terminate, it is admitted that women only have to be closely unified and tolerate the suppression of male power. Through the novel, the writer aims to highlight the women who suffered from hegemonic power and oppression to fight for their own identity courageously. In today's life, the context of the novel can be identified in the whole world. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* furnishes great perception to readers to notice how a totalitarian, hegemonic state can assert the possession of the woman body, and exploit it as a mere reproductive tool discarding them once they are no longer fertile. This shows how women are compelled to give up their uniqueness, even though seemingly small actions like wearing identical clothes and being referred to possessively. These actions have a profound impact on their sense of self, to the extent that life becomes unbearable.

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