

A DYSTOPIAN REALITY

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, McClelland & Stewart publishers, 1985, 311 pages

Reviewed by **Clara Kariuki**

Written in West Berlin in 1984, published in 1985 by McClelland & Stewart in Toronto, adopted into a film in 1990 and written into an Emmy winning television series in 2017, Margaret Atwood spins a tale of chilling horror. *The handmaid's tale* is a 311 paged novel, that Atwood describes as speculative fiction because all its events are derived from reality. Atwood keeps stating that nothing she's written has not already happened, and nothing she built in the novel did not already exist. The novel was written in the middle of a tumultuous time for second-wave feminists and it inadvertently emphasizes the importance of fertility and reproductive health in family dynamics and economic prosperity. It is recommended for a mature audience due to the complex themes it explores.

Set in a dystopian North America, the novel follows Offred, a handmaid trapped in the totalitarian theocracy of the republic of Gilead, where she is reduced to nothing more than her biological function. There is a caste system in Gilead, and Offred is forced into a life of servitude to commander Fred Waterford and his wife Serena Joy. She is named Offred because she is 'Of' the 'Fred' household, she is stripped of her former identity and disturbingly indoctrinated in the ideals of Gilead. In this dystopia, due to past nuclear wars, environmental degradation and exposure to toxic waste, many people have been affected by the epidemic of infertility and there was a rapid decline in birth rates, making the 'sons on Jacob' rise up and set up the patriarchal Republic of Gilead, where fertile handmaids are subject to monthly state-sanctioned rape, based on a misconstrued understanding of Genesis 30:1-3 from the bible. Atwood describes her novel as a critique of the use of religion as a cover for tyranny.

The tale often jumps from past to present and vice versa and is vividly descriptive, where, as a reader, one feels very present in Offred's reality, which can often be mistaken for many realities in our day and age. Gilead holds traditional values dear, where men are those with rank and no fault, and women are the 'other', pushed into domestic roles. In Gilead, women are not allowed to read or write, they are not allowed to own property, they are not allowed to access private reproductive healthcare, they are not allowed the simple pleasures of listening to music, choosing their clothing or walking down the street unaccompanied, they are cultured into believing any sexual assault is their fault, which is ironic, considering the fact that, to this day, some women and girls are still fighting for their right to education, their right to own property, their right to reproductive healthcare and the basic right to express themselves through their choice of clothing, to this day, many victims of sexual assault, who had the courage to speak up, have to endure victim blaming and have to prove that they were indeed the victims. Women in Gilead are very much bound by the whims of the men in power, but, aren't we all?

It's interesting how Offred does not have the 'main character syndrome' of wanting to be the hero, she has succumbed, but not entirely, to the new oppressive regime. We see from her flashbacks that she had Moira, her best friend before Gilead and her mother, who were avid feminist activists, who participated in trying to push back the sons of Jacob when they were beginning to suppress women's rights and voices. We see in her present, that her walking partner Ofglen, is involved in an underground resistance called mayday, we see that Offred seems to forget herself and in this, we get to really feel her resistance in a different way, in her unguarded thoughts and feelings. Offred knew the feeling of losing everything from trying to escape with her family to Canada before they were caught, and she was separated from them for good- so her resigned nature is understandable, she has no closure with her past so recalling it is her coping mechanism.

In terms of fertility, the use of handmaids is not too far-fetched when we see cases of surrogate mothers, IVF and other artificial methods scientists have come up with to help families get children. Infertility should not be stigmatized; women should not be made to feel like they have failed in their marriages when they do not bear children. Men can be infertile too and there are various natural routes couples can take to get children. As much as fertile women in our society today are not enslaved like in Gilead, fertility is somewhat exploited for profit, under the guise of 'choice', surrogates, mainly from minority groups, are treated as goods and exploited for their bodily functions. Women's fertility and reproductive function have been used as a resource in many parts of the world, where women are kidnapped, their bodies used for fulfilling men's crude desires and their children taken and sold into child trafficking rings. In Gilead, children like Offred's child were taken and portrayed as national treasures for the commander's families.

In current times, some divorce data implies that infertility is one of the causes of the split. There is a rising number of countries with an ageing population, there are countries that have regulated birth with policies- all these have had a detrimental effect on the family. It is important for families to understand that complications do happen and not all couples are able to have children of their own, it is important for there to be stability in families where getting children is proving difficult, the family's role in society mustn't be entirely based on its reproductive function. It is important that individuals do not feel pressured to 'get married and make babies and this could be my opinion entirely but reading this novel exposes us to little freedoms and suffocating expectations that we, as a society may have overlooked.

The epilogue, which was a historical notes section, had to be the most unsettling part of the book because it portrays how we, as a society, may gloss over the details of one's story and how a wholly female centered perspective to this story was pieced together by men with a cavalier attitude, making you, the reader, question the whole story itself. Despite this, it would be intriguing to see a man's take on the republic of Gilead.

All in all, this novel leaves us with no closure whatsoever and closes with the words, "Are there any questions" and yes, yes, questions are whirling and one really profound one is, do we base

the family's role in society too much on biological and social reproduction, that the capitalization of fertility in the handmaid's tale could be a looming or pre-existing reality?