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## HANDMAIDS IN ATWOOD'S GILEAD VS HANDMAIDS IN THE HOLY BIBLE

*In her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood reveals handmaids as the products of the patriarchal society of the Republic of Gilead which considers women's existence related to sex and childbearing, thus depriving them of their human qualities and rights. Also, in the patriarchal society of the Old Testament (*Book of Genesis & the Book of Numbers*), women who couldn't bear children for their husbands had handmaids who served their masters through childbearing.*

*The present paper is an attempt to reveal the relation of Atwood's Republic of Gilead where Serena Joy had handmaids to bear her children to the City of Gilead in the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, where Rachel and Leah also had handmaids to bear them children.*

**Key words:** *Gilead, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah, unwomen, patriarchal, handmaids, womb, sterile, fertile*

### **Introduction**

In Atwood's novel, the society of Gilead had an urgent problem which was that of the widespread infertility, caused by pollution of the environment. The few fertile women who had remained were restricted into service as "handmaids" to bear children for the ruling class. Likewise, in the book of Genesis, the story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel is filled with much difficulty where handmaids serve their master to bear him children. According to the book of Genesis 29:31-30:24, Jacob had twelve children who were the offspring of four different women, his two wives, Leah and Rachel, and their respective handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah.

### **Handmaids in the Patriarchal Society of Gilead and in the Old Testament**

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Canadian author Margaret Atwood creates a dystopia of the near future beginning with a terrorist attack that kills the president of the United States. Diseases have spread by sexuality, and other errors of the modern world. Racist cults created a movement calling themselves "Sons of Jacob." They have launched a revolution, forced the Congress out, and suspended the constitution; thus creating the Republic of Gilead: a patriarchal society, sick with infertility. However, in Gilead, there were no men who had infertile penis,

sterility was only a woman's character. It is said, "It's only women who can't, who remain stubbornly closed, damaged, and defective" (Atwood, p. 204). Gilead men were never sterile. Having this in mind, Gilead women who couldn't become mothers, were left without a choice but that of a handmaid's assistance. But who were "handmaids" and how did they differ from "mothers"? According to Atwood's book, handmaids are described to be mothers deprived from their children. They are only child bearers and genetic mothers for children they could only "raise" in their wombs. As for the term mother; according to Margarete Sandelowski, the term mother can have different definitions and different types. "There are genetic mothers, birth mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, and other fragmented maternities created by male concepts of parenthood" /Sandeloski, 1990: 34/. Thus a handmaid can be a birth mother, the invention of which is the result of the male concept of the patriarchal society one of which is the Republic of Gilead.

It is worth mentioning that Atwood's book derives the story of **Jacob** as well as the name **Gilead** from the holy book of the Bible, specially the book of Genesis, and the story of Rachel and Leah, **Jacob's** wives (Genesis 29:31–35; 30:1–24). Leah, Jacob's first wife was fertile, whereas her sister Rachel, Jacob's second wife, was thought to be infertile until late in her life. Rachel competed Leah in bearing sons for Jacob by using a handmaid (Zilpah) as a proxy and took immediate possession of the children as soon as they were born. The case of Rachel is the same case as Serena Joy, the woman of hierarchy and social class who was the commander's wife in Gilead, but was also infertile and used a handmaid as a proxy to possess a child.

As for the name **Gilead**, it is also from Genesis, (**Hebrew**: גִּלְעָד English: [/ˈɡɪliəd/](http://www.LDS.org)<sup>[1]</sup>) (www.LDS.org) in the Old Testament and it means *hill of testimony* or hill of witness. (Hebrew Dictionary, appendix to Strong's Concordance of the Bible) According to the Book of Numbers, Gilead was the name of a city after which Machir called his son. Machir, Gilead's father, is the great-grandson of Rachel who called her son Joseph because it means "increased" in Hebrew; since Rachel believed that God will give her more children. Thus, she said, "The Lord shall add to me another son" (Genesis 30.24). However, before Joseph's birth Rachel and Jacob increased their children through the help of the handmaid called Zilpah just as Serena Joy and Commander Fred used their handmaid called Offred to increase through her.

It has to be mentioned that in Atwood's story of handmaids, the names of the handmaids were not to identify the person, but to show which Commander owns them, thus they adopted their Commanders' names, such as Fred, and preceding them with "Of." /www.henriksenenglish.wikispaces.com/. However, this is not the case in the *Book of Genesis*. It is remarkable that comparing *The Handmaid's Tale* to *The Holy Bible*, the official **vocabulary** used in Atwood's story "incorporates religious **terminology** and biblical references" (www.henriksenenglish.wikispaces.

com/, even domestic servants are called “Marthas” in reference to a character in the New Testament. The local police are called “Guardians of the Faith”, soldiers are “Angels” and the Commanders are officially “Commanders of the Faithful.” Moreover, all the stores have biblical names: Loaves and Fishes, All Flesh, Milk and Honey. Even the automobiles have biblical names like Behemoth, Whirlwind, and Chariot ([www.henriksenenglish.wikispaces.com](http://www.henriksenenglish.wikispaces.com)) .

The below table shows a comparison of the vocabulary used in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its biblical reference.

<b>Vocabulary in <i>A Handmaids Tale</i> with biblical reference</b>	<b>Used to refer to</b>
Marthas- a character in the New Testament	domestic servants
Guardians of the Faith	The local police
Angels	Soldiers
Commanders of the Faithful	Official commanders
Loaves and Fishes All Flesh Milk and Honey	Stores
Behemoth Whirlwind Chariot	Automobiles

Throughout the story, Atwood has referred to the bible over and over again. However, Atwood's wives in Gilead (such as Serena Joy) were "forced to have handmaids to bear them children" ([www.thehandmaidstaleolasite.edu](http://www.thehandmaidstaleolasite.edu)) which was not true for the wives in *The Holy Bible* where handmaids were ultimately the choice of the wives. Zilpah was chosen by Jacob’s wife Leah to compete with his second wife Rachel (Leah's sister) to bear children for Jacob.

<sup>9</sup> When Leah saw that she had left bearing, she took Zilpah her maid, and gave her Jacob to wife. <sup>10</sup> And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a son. <sup>11</sup> And Leah said, A troop cometh: and she called his name Gad. <sup>12</sup> And Zilpah Leah's maid bare Jacob a second son. <sup>13</sup> And Leah said, Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed: and she called his name Asher (Genesis 30:9-13).

Unlike Leah, Serena Joy in *The Handmaid’s Tale* was obliged to have Offred as a handmaid to give birth to a child for her husband whether she liked it or not. Aunt Lydia chose fertile women for the commander and Serena Joy helped to make the handmaid's womb fertilized to take the offspring later. It is obvious that the establishment of the patriarchal republic of Gilead had not only created the

existence of handmaids but by doing so, they have also deprived women of their human qualities, thus creating a female competition accompanied with jealousy and reproductive cruelty; “The Republic of Gilead has subjugated women and reduced Handmaids like Offred to sexual slavery. Offred desires happiness and freedom, and finds herself struggling against the totalitarian restrictions of her society” ([www.henriksenenglish.wikispaces.com](http://www.henriksenenglish.wikispaces.com)). Accordingly, Offred is described to envy the “Commander’s wife her knitting” (Atwood, p. 13) and thinks that, “it’s good to have small goals that can be easily attained” (Atwood, p. 13). On the other hand, Serena Joy, the commander’s wife envies Offred for being fertile. Serena Joy had a garden with colorful tulips to “order and maintain and care for,” (Atwood, p. 12) she also had “large diamonds on her ring finger” (Atwood, p. 12). Whereas, handmaids like Offred who had fertile wombs and could carry children for the commander were forbidden from the least things they would have enjoyed such as cigarettes, coffee, and liquor. Offred says, “I looked at the cigarette with longing. For me, like liquor and coffee, they are forbidden.” (Atwood, p. 14). Thus, Atwood's handmaids lived in lack and poverty which verses the state of the handmaids in the Book of Genesis who were given tents and whose children inherited their fathers.

Furthermore, despite their explicitly sexual duties, Atwood's handmaids were forbidden personal choice and enjoyment of sex. They were only supposed to be “the other woman” between a man and his wife. Offred, Commander Fred’s handmaid, in the pre-Gilead world of the contemporary United States, was “an ordinary sensual woman, with a college degree, a husband, a daughter, and a job in a library” /Stimpson, 1986: 764/, however, she has lost all her past blessings now and has turned to become “the other woman.” Describing “The Ceremony” where a handmaid participates in a non-marital sexual act, Offred reveals that it is “sanctioned solely for the purpose of reproduction, where the handmaid “lied motionless between the commander’s wife’s legs as if they are one person” (Atwood, p. 94). Whilst her sexual intercourse, the commander's wife has to invite the handmaid to share her power by permitting her to lie in her own personal space. Describing herself during “The Ceremony” Offred says:

“My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved...” (Atwood, p. 94).

Offred’s description of “the Ceremony” is ironic as well as horrifying. She cannot call “The Ceremony” making love or copulating, because that would imply that she enjoyed or took part in the act. She cannot also call it rape because she was given a choice and she had chosen to be a handmaid. Moreover, she has earlier been told by Aunt Lydia that for a handmaid, “pain and emotions do not matter” and her body parts except for the womb are of no importance. Accordingly, Offred,

like all the other handmaids in the Gilead society, could only have been “the other woman” in the sense of childbearing where senses are not interfered; neither from her side nor from the side of the commander. Alongside their emotional and sexual state misery, handmaids are supposed not to interact with any other person during their trial to get pregnant from the commander. Thus, the impossibility of human contact either sexually or socially in this society, under the watchful eyes of the cult regime, makes Offred and the other handmaids inferior not only to the woman genre but also to human beings in general.

Moreover, comparing Offred's clothing to that of Bilhah in the *Book of Genesis*, Bilhah is not identified with her clothes. Bilhah's own status in the household is somewhat ambiguous, yet she is given to Jacob as his “wife” (Hebrew *ishah*), although in one instance she is called his “secondary wife” (*pilegish*; NRSV, “concubine”) yet her state is much different than that of Offred who was compelled to wear a red uniform with a white cap in the shape of horns, as a sign of her sinful condition and was not allowed to share her body with the commander the way she liked. Offred says,

“Serena Joy grips my hand as if it is she, not I, who's being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful, and the commander fucks, with a regular two-four machine stroke, on and on like a tap dripping” (Atwood, 94).

Thus, she is more like a reproductive machine than a human being. Furthermore, in the listing of Jacob's twelve sons in Chapter 35, Dan and Naphtali are presented as the “sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid” (v. 25). Contrary to Offred, Bilhah is called Jacob's wife; and her sons are not disadvantaged. Rachel's biological son Joseph becomes a shepherd, “a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives” (Genesis 37:2). Whereas handmaids in Atwood's Gilead are deprived from their children as soon as they give them birth. They have a mission to complete, and then they will be gone leaving their offspring to the commander.

In Atwood's society of Gilead, women could no longer legally work, hold property, read, write, use beauty products, wear as they wish, or behave in any way they might chose. Men and women no longer belong to each other; instead, only women belong to men. Not to be sent to the colonies, where they will eventually die of poison and hard work, women served passively either as handmaids or domestics. Offred, the protagonist, was separated from her husband and daughter after the formation of the Republic of Gilead and was part of the first generation of Gilead's women. “Having proven fertile, she is considered an important commodity and has been placed as a handmaid in the home of the Commander Fred” (Wikipedia) to bear him children. Thus, it can be concluded that had it not been for the regime of the patriarchal Republic of Gilead which examples the society in the book of Genesis, women like Atwood's Offred and *The Holy Bible's* Bilhah wouldn't have been identified by their childbearing abilities.

However, comparing Offred to Bilhah, Bilhah is much more fortunate and much less inferiorized. Although “nothing is said about Bilhah’s fate, but she continued to be remembered as the ancestress of major clans in Israel (1 Chr 7:13)” (Frymer-Kensky). On the other hand, Offred is deprived of her human qualities. According to the rules of the Republic of Gilead, a handmaid stays in the commander’s household just long enough to bear a child to prove that she can bear children and thus is not an “unwomen.” But, living just for the sake of bearing a child makes her inferior to human qualities. Moreover, during a handmaids presence between the “fertile” commander and his “sterile” wife at the time of their sexual intercourse it is not only the handmaid who doesn’t feel or enjoy her body passions but it also disables the commander’s wife to enjoy her sex appeal with her husband because of the presence of “the other woman.” On the contrary, handmaids’ reproductive role supposedly finds its justification in the Bible where a handmaid is a “second wife” for the landlord.

It could be concluded that in both Gilead societies; in both books, *The Handmaid’s Tale* as well as in *The Holy Bible*, there are many issues that could be compared and contrasted in different ways. There are many **similarities** such as the use of the name **Gilead** and the use of the vocabulary that are related to **biblical terms**. Moreover, like the *Book of Genesis*, in her story, Atwood uses the assistance of handmaids to bear children for their masters. However, there are some differences in the way handmaids are treated in each book. Offred, for example, is a handmaid, like Zilpah and Bilhah; however, Offred is obliged on the commander’s wife and not chosen by her like Leah’s Bilhah or Rachel’s Zilpah. Besides, Atwood makes her handmaids live in poverty and fucked for fertility, deprived of their human feelings as well as motherly rights. Unlike Bilhah who was described as a “second wife”, yet a wife, and had her tent. She even had her name accompanied to that of her children’s throughout history. However, in both Gileads, handmaids are inferiorized to men and are described to serve their masters or “husbands” by affording them sex and bearing them children.

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