

# A Study of Woman's sufferings in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Lutfiyya Al-Duliami's *Ladies of Zuhal(Saturn)*

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**Abstract**— As a dystopic satire, both Margret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Lutfiyya Al-Duliami's *The Ladies of Zuhal (Saturn)* portray the present evils in the hope of bringing about social and political change. The former's cautionary tale portrays the physical and psychological oppression of women for the sake of male genes in a state called Gilead. Gilead is a theocratic dictatorship based on Puritanical fundamentalism, rigidly orders every aspect of the daily life of all but those in the most privileged positions.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is Atwood's creation of an imagined society in which women under a futuristic totalitarian regime reduces its female subjects to mere voiceless, childbearing vessels.

Recounted by a female narrator, *Offred*, the story focuses on the handmaids. These women are selected by the state for their potential ability to bear children at a time when infertility is high and live births have reached dangerously low levels. Though the woman's biological function is privileged, she becomes marginalized as an individual – as the prime aim is to find healthy, fertile women who can produce children for those ruling class of men in position of power and influence.

The latter is a female's epic portraying the sufferings of Hayyat Al-Babili who set down everything. The tale also depicts the other heroines' sufferings beginning with Hayyat's mother, Rawiyya, Fitnah, Manaar, Amaal, Zinah, Samia, Haalah, Shurouq, Luma, Helin, and ending with Briska Bernard, and other women who appear and disappear throughout this long heroic text such as Nahidah, Sahirah, and Siham.

This novel clearly depicts the tragedies of the Iraqis in general, and women in particular. It is an epic revealing the roots of the ruin in man's life; meantime, it aims at collecting the splinter groups so as to rebuild man with love and to retrieve the situation of the writer's dream as a real Iraqi woman. Sayidat Zuhal is the story of all, all the history of those who are killers and victims, lovers, dreamers, and visionaries.

However, in *The Ladies of Zuhal*, the role of the men is not minor although the female race is dominating. Her miserable and catastrophic life is similar to her husband's, Hazim, who encountered castration from the Saddam's security guards.

**Keywords**— *Woman's sufferings, Ladies of Zuhal, social satire.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In equal measure social satire and feminist dystopia, both *The Handmaid's Tale*, by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood and Sayeedaat Zuhal (*The Ladies of Saturn*) by the Iraqi novelist Lutfiyya Al-Duliami, are a tour de force in the tradition of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a mid- twenty first-century American dystopia riled by religious extremists. The chief goal of this theocratic government, which claims to base its laws on "biblical precedents" (*The Handmaid's Tale*: 305), is to increase the population in a society where man-made ecological disasters have reduced fertility rates to dangerously low levels. With the exception of three epigraphs and epilogue, the Atwood's novel is narrated in the first person by a 33-year-old 'Handmaid,' Offred. Through her eyes readers learn about her own past and present life and of the feats of social engineering achievement by the Gilead regime, which has its capital in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ironically, the headquarters of this totalitarian regime is what was once the campus of Harvard University, Offred's (and Atwood's) alma mater and a center for critical inquiry in the service of a once open and democratic society.

The period of time of Al-Duliami's novel extends from the fall of the totalitarian regime of Baghdad in 2003, and the disappearance of its tyrant who accepted the defeat and the ignominy of surrender which does not suit man's valor, to the fall of Baghdad into the hands of Hulegu in 1258. The period also covers the disgraceful death of Al-Mustansir Billah who was wrapped up in a carpet, and was battered by the soldiers who captured the country. Then, he was trampled down by the Mongolian horses till death. The actions may extend farther till the year 762 when Al-Mansour, the Abbasid Caliph, built Baghdad. The place where the actions are set extends from Baghdad to the North and South of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Nicosia, Tunisia, the Caspian Sea, Tbilisi, London, and Copenhagen as well as other cities and capitals where the escaped or those concealing themselves or those seeking the right of asylum set foot on. From this preface

of time and place, the writer draws the reader's attention to the importance of the introductory sentence to observe through the strong spot that she touches or feels of the bitter reality which the Iraqis lived since the establishment of Baghdad until its final fall at the hands of the American marines, Mellicia, and the veiled armed guerrillas.

*The Ladies of Zuhal* handles the stories of love, death, absence, kidnap, rape, castration, cutting off tongues, loss, and amputation, and other horrible stories that make young people become white-haired. However, the researcher cannot stop at the minute details furnishing this comprehensive narrative text, which the writer tries to collect in an artistic way all the unusual and abnormal phenomena appeared and turning the Iraqi life upside down.

## II. THEMATIC CONCERNS

### 2.1 *The Handmaid's Tale*

The novel depicts both futuristic technological developments and retrogressive puritanical practices; it is also addressing contemporary social reality. As in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "There is not a single detail in the book that does not have a corresponding reality, either in contemporary conditions or historical fact" (Freibert, 1988 : 284). As Atwood herself admits, "I didn't invent a lot" in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "I transposed" material "to a different time and place, but the motifs are all historical motifs" (Bouson, 1993: 136). In this sense, Atwood's genius, like that of the Gilead regime she constructs, lies in synthesis.

Indeed, like all political satires, dystopian novels possess a "social-political message, a didactic intent to address the Ideal Reader's moral sense and reason as it applies to the protagonist's – and our own – place in society and in history" (Gottlieb, 2001: 15). In this case the catalyst for Atwood's dystopia was the resurgence in the US of the vocal religious right of the early 1980s.

Despite being largely a dystopian satire, Atwood's novel also has the feel of an elegy, a nostalgic lament for an idealized past. At many points in the narrative Offred reminisces over her days as a college student, during which time quotidian freedoms, such as the right to question gender roles and the right to associate with people of her own choosing, could be taken for granted. These memories clash profoundly with her present, strained circumstances, in which compulsory sex with her assigned Commander – a monthly rape of sorts – is the mandatory focus of her schedule. Handmaids such as Offred are directed to pray, and she puts it, for "emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies" (*The Handmaid's Tale*: 194). The novel proceeds by, and gains its uncanny power from, Offred's ironic juxtaposition of

her imprisoned present and comparatively self-determined past.

Offered powerful yet understated narrative, told in parse yet poetic evocative language (Atwood began her career as a poet), depicts a government that claims for the Book of Genesis at its word, with devastating consequences for the women of Gilead. I say "claims" to follow the Bible because, in fact, the men of Gilead appropriate the text of the Bible merely to fit their political, social, and sexual goals. Moreover, "sexual relationships are regimented and supervised by the ruling elite, ostensibly in the interest of producing the maximum number of children in the state, but actually... to eliminate chances of forming personal relationships and private loyalties" (Gottlieb: 12) that could counter the regime's authority. Sex in Gilead is understood to be for purposes of procreation only, as it was understood by the Puritans in Massachusetts centuries earlier. In Gilead, "Anatomy is destiny" (Coad, 2001: 54); Handmaids who do not become pregnant have not any value to the society. "The handmaid's situation," writes one critic, "lucidly illustrates Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* about man defining woman not as an autonomous being" but merely as of value "relative to him" (Malak, 1987: 11-12). Offred's name in Gilead – a patronymic "composed of the possessive preposition and the first name [in her case, Fred]" of her Commander (*The Handmaid's Tale*: 305), but also suggesting "afraid," "offered," and "off-read" (misread) (Bouson: 138) – is a linguistic emblem of the regime's misogynistic social system. By contrast, the use of Offred's pre-Gilead name (her real name, which we never learn) is now "forbidden" and must remain "buried": "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (*The Handmaid's Tale*: 84).

In Gilead it is not only sexual rights that are denied to women; more personal liberties, including the right to hold property (178), choose a mate (marriages are not arranged [219]), and read and write are banned to most females, insuring that wealth and knowledge – and therefore power – remain decisively out of their reach. The price to women of transgressing Gilead's rules (or of being infertile) is high: the ever-present threat of being declared "Unwoman" and sent to the Colonies beyond the pale (where the Offred's mother has been sent, in effect to die while working in a toxic dump or radiation spill (248) cleanup squad. As Offred's friend Moira puts the regime's use of these squads,

**you've got three years maximum ... before They figure your nose falls off and your skin peels away like rubber gloves. They don't bother to feed much, or give you protective clothing or anything, it's cheaper not to. Anyway [the people in the squads are] mostly people they want to get rid of. (248)**

Gilead's toxic waste problem is the result of such ecological catastrophes as "nuclear-plant accidents," "leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles and toxic waste disposal sites," and "uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides, and other sprays" (304), all of which explain the society's low birth rate and rationalize its sexual and social engineering (and the social hierarchy that supports such engineering). Although less commented on than the novel's status as a "feminist *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" (Feuer, 1997: 83), the novel also functions as an 'environmentalist *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'.

Despite having a narrative frame set in 2195, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not really "about the future, but about the present" (Foley, 1997: 273); like other dystopian satires, it portrays an "exaggerated version of present evils" in the hope of bringing "about social and political change" (Stein, 1996: 59). Indeed, like all political satires, dystopian novels possess a "social-political message, a didactic intent to address the Ideal Reader's moral sense and reason as it applies to the protagonist's – and our own – place in society and in history" (Gottlieb, 2001: 15). In this case the catalyst for Atwood's dystopia was the resurgence in the US of the vocal religious right of the early 1980s.

- In *The Handmaid's Tale*, nearly everyone's identity has been stripped away. Although the most powerful have more privileges than some of the others, everyone has been renamed and repositioned.
- Children are precious, rare commodities in the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The production of children has become the Republic of Gilead's overcharging goal, governing nearly every aspect of life.
- The society outlined in *The Handmaid's Tale* honors and privileges marriages to the extreme. Second wife and children are rounded up as the likeliest candidates to become Handmaids.
- In a sense, everyone is required to be passive in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but women have it worse because they no longer have any financial or social power. (The Aunts at the Center are an exception, ...)
- Love is more remembered than practiced in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even when the characters have feelings for each other, they try to fight them off because strong emotions are dangerous.
- Women are not supposed to use their minds in the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*. They are forbidden from reading, working outside their homes, or even spending money. The small minority who are fertile are allowed to do so.
- There is a clear distinction between house and home in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Handmaids are placed in

other people's homes, which to them are just houses. There is no reason for them to feel at home.

- In the society of *The Handmaid's Tale*, even the powerful live very restricted lives, but the Handmaids, confined to their bedrooms except for sanctioned outings to grocery stores, childbearing ...
- We never quite know what is true in *The Handmaid's Tale*; even when people state their names, they are lying. Throughout the story we are reminded that this is a story and that the narrator is altering\*\*\*\*\*
- *The Handmaid's Tale* is partly an extrapolation of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, attempting to imagine what kind of values might evolve if environmental pollution rendered most of the human race sterile. It is also the product of debates within the feminist movement in the 70s and early 80s. Atwood has been very much a part of that movement, but she has never been a mere mouthpiece for any group, always insisting on her individual perspectives. The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, the rise of the religious right, the election of Ronald Reagan, and many sorts of backlash (mostly hugely misinformed) against the women's movement led writers like Atwood to fear that the antifeminist tide could not only prevent further gains for women, but turn back the clock. Dystopias are a kind of thought experiment which isolates certain social trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities. They are rarely intended as realistic predictions of a probable future, and it is pointless to criticize them on the grounds of implausibility. Atwood here examines some of the traditional attitudes that are embedded in the thinking of the religious right and which she finds particularly threatening.

But another social controversy also underlies this novel. During the early 80s a debate raged (and continues to rage, on a lower level) about feminist attitudes toward sexuality and pornography in particular. Outspoken feminists have taken all kinds of positions: that all erotica depicting women as sexual objects is demeaning, that pornography was bad though erotica can be good, that although most pornography is demeaning the protection of civil liberties is a greater good which requires the toleration of freedom for pornographers, however distasteful, even that such a thing as feminist pornography can and should be created.

The sub-theme of this tangled debate which seems to have particularly interested and alarmed Atwood is the tendency of some feminist anti-porn groups to ally themselves with religious anti-porn zealots who oppose the feminists on almost every other issue. The language of "protection of women" could slip from a demand for more

freedom into a retreat from freedom, to a kind of neo-Victorianism. After all, it was the need to protect "good" women from sex that justified all manner of repression in the 19th century, including confining them to the home, barring them from participating in the arts, and voting. Contemporary Islamic women sometimes argue that assuming the veil and traditional all-enveloping clothing is aimed at dealing with sexual harassment and sexual objectification. The language is feminist, but the result can be deeply patriarchal, as in this novel.

Without some sense of the varying agendas of mid-20th-century feminists and the debates among those agendas this novel will not make much sense. Women who participated in the movement from the late sixties and early seventies responded to this novel strongly, often finding it extremely alarming. Younger women lacking the same background often found it baffling. Ask yourself as you read not whether events such as it depicts are likely to take place, but whether the attitudes and values it conveys are present in today's society.

Atwood's strong point is satire, often hilarious, often very pointed. Humor is in short supply in this novel, but it is a satire nonetheless. Atwood's love for language play (apparent in the anagram of her name she uses for her private business "O. W. Toad") is a major feature of the protagonist of this novel. Her jokes are dark and bitter, but they are pervasive.

There are numerous biblical references in the following notes. You should provide yourself with a Bible, preferably a King James Version, which is what Atwood uses most of the time. Or use a great searchable

## 2.2 The Ladies of Zuhul

Al-Duliami's writings deal with social, political, and historical themes and concerns prominent in Iraq and the rest of the Arabo-Islamic world, such as the relationship between men and women, love, violence, and the struggle for dignified living.

*The Ladies of Zuhul* narrates the story of five Iraqi women and a French journalist who lived the hell of the 2003 War and the terrorism and violence that came after. "The marines, the armed militia, and the corrupted executives were lurking women" (182). The narrator wonders: "Baghdad is devouring her people.. What is Baghdad? Ghoul? Fate? A black wall hole ending by devouring itself?" (182). Thus, the names of the women are associated with the planet of Zuhul (Saturn) which is mentioned in a book written by "Qeedar" about the death of cities. Al-Kindi said, "Zuhul, in its nature, is cold and arid; it is dark and ill-starred which lasts thirty years, and its bliss continues to exist for another thirty years (242). Sheik Qeedar associates the first thirty years or the early period of them with the war with Iran, saying, as he is staring at the stars after his wife, Fitnah, was kidnapped and he looked a bit mad, that "He saw the planet of Saturn

feel compassionate to appear as he thought that ill-fate would afflict the country." All these sayings might refer to the narrator's perspective, narrated throughout the story and reality, that the novel responds to Sheik Qadeer's beliefs. In her conversation with her aunt, Hayyat confirms these sayings saying: "Every country makes its destiny with her hands, and brings the hands of ill-fate, destruction, bone, and peace. Our deeds and not the stars which decide our fate" (285).

Al-Duliami, throughout the events in her novel *Ladies of Zuhul*, observes and perceives the painful reality which the Iraqis have lived since the foundation of Baghdad till its later fall at the hands of the marines, the armed militia, the veiled armed gangs. The narrator wonders: 'Am I Hayyat Al-Babili, or am I someone else?' 'And who is Asia Kana'an holding her passport?' Therefore, there is a strange obscurity surrounding this central character on whom the other characters in the novel are pivoted around. She does not know herself because of the enormity of the frightening aspects which have seriously affected her resulting from the fall of Baghdad.

It is well worth noting that the writer has tried to collect a great deal of the new phenomena which have been arisen since the fall of Baghdad in 2003 till the present time. She also clearly refers to repulsive and appalling scenes which happened during the previous totalitarian regime, and the whole Iraqi people were always the victims. However, most of the authorities that took over the government practiced the role of the executioner. Consequently, Iraqis, the victims, once disguised themselves as the case with Hani Al-Babili, and once again disappeared as the case with Qeedar; otherwise, their fate was either the kidnap as the case with Fitnah (Qeedar's wife), and Briska (the French journalist) who was working for the France Press Agent and she wanted to hold meetings with certain personalities having their own private fables. Though the atrocities and the horrible acts which the writer has observed are limitless, I here refer to the act in one of the banks where four girls working, and they were slaughtered and their heads were separated from their bodies just because they had been not putting on veils. Moreover, the armed gangs amputated the feet of the boys who had been wearing short swimming pants as they were walking on their way to the swimming-pool, and they were left screaming outdoors.

## III. CHARACTERIZATION

characters who appear in literary works are usually chosen by the writers. Unless dealing with a real historical person (as, for example, Shakespeare does in his History plays), writers are free to decide exactly which characters they will include. Even when depicting real people, writers will often choose to present their own version of

that character: many people disagree, for example, with Shakespeare's depiction of *Richard III*.

So Atwood's and Al-Duliami's choice of their characters are quite deliberate, and their readers will do well to ask themselves precisely why they made their particular decisions. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, although Atwood is depicting a complete political state, she chooses a limited number of people to represent that society, and it is intimate relationships which largely concern her. There are references to 'the Aunts', 'the Commanders', 'the Commanders' Wives' and 'the Angels', but generally she focuses on individual representatives of these groups. Also, although there are, we are led to understand, numerous Handmaids, Atwood focuses mainly on only a few of these young women, especially Offred, Moira, Ofglen, and Janine (Ofwarren). Al-Duliami also deliberately depicts the relationship between the women and the city which is the essence of the dramatic narrative provocation and the reason for the idea of struggle suggested by Al-Duliami. The events, reminiscences and known history in the memory of Iraq are presented throughout the ordeal of the Iraqi personality in the disfigured city (Baghdad) before 2003 and after. Uncle Sheikh Qidar's wife was kidnapped by a powerful man in the Iraqi authority before 2003, and also he was arrested being accused of working with a banned political party. That was the first threshold of provocation that led to series of provocations beginning with the liability of Hayyat Al-Babili's life to be lost and the appalling confrontations in the city which was looted after 2003. After that Qidar disappeared, his niece was kidnapped, terrorists, gangs, and mafia dominated the life of the city. This means the defeat of existence, and the defeat of of the defended city being in the circle of the mythological jinx across what Saturn planet bears of pessimistic herald of loss, absence and death.

The text of *Saydat Zuhl* intentionally creates a tale based on the thought of the death of the place/the city and its characters through a series of themes, struggles and losses identified by specific events. However, the structure of novel puts these themes in a context of complicated functions beginning with counting on the metanarrative to strain the actions, to find deliberate awareness of them, and to uncover the unsettled relationships of the characters in the novel with the history of the city, its violent changes, and its hidden secrets.

Al-Duliami, in her novel, presents a shocking reading for the political and cultural life in Iraq. This reading implies the educated woman's obsessions throughout the sufferings of the main characters. The story of the novel explores the ordeal of the ruined city by the horror of the authority, the wars and the occupation, and the misfortune of woman in particular. This is not because she is the lonely lost woman, but she is the symbol of the death of

the city, and the deformation of the characters outside it. Then the emergence of exile which is changed into death of another kind.

*Sayyidat Zuhul* is a feminine novel which carries a feminine view that forms its narrative text, by analyzing its narrative structure and its basic elements: the event and some of the magical realistic facts, characters, place and time, multi-voices, meta narrative, poetic language and the symbolic imagination of Saturn.

The portrayal and the delineation of the fictional characters in both novels in question follow the method of direct definition. Both novelists rely on the direct analysis to reveal the true nature of their fictional characters. According to this method, the most prominent traits of the central characters are highlighted upon their first appearance. Critics refer to this method as "telling" in which the author does not only intervene in order to describe but also to evaluate the motives and specific traits of his/her character.

In *Sayyidat Zuhul*, Hayyat Al-Babili, the main character is as a woman of thirty-nine of age, a journalist and a writer, having a very strong influential personality. She endeavours to find replies to her puzzled questions; she is dreamy, a fancier of the impossible, merging all her human worries with the mythical heroine of magic and sublimity holding the motto of love in the time of death. She likens herself to "Zubeida alTimimmia" who had lived with the kidnapper "Naji Arrashidi", during the rule of "Dawood Basha". "Hayyat submits to the temptation of risk-taking within the labyrinth of history and its narrators' fabrications so as to mend the world loss in the text of tales inspiring superstition about history, the Caliphates, the barbarians, and the witty people.

"Hayyat Al-Babili is from a middle-class family whose grandfather was an officer killed by the English in Habbania during the days of 'ot 'Rashid Aali Al-kaylani's rebellion against them in the forties. Her father, 'Adnan Al-Babili' was a university professor and her mother 'Bahija Altimimi, arrested in 1968, was a liberal political freedom striver. Her divorcee, a university professor of political sciences and a human rights activist, was castrated during the reign of Saddam Hussein for his political activity. Therefore, 'Hayyat was scatterbrained and unidentified between "Hayyat Al-Babili" and "Asia Kanaan"; she, in one way or another, is a toymy for Baghdad the identity of which has been torn (*Sayyidat Zuhul*: 41).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred who has become one of the Handmaids is the narrator and protagonist of the story. She is a fertile woman forced to bear children for elite, barren couples. Handmaids show which Commander owns them by adopting their Commanders' names, such as Fred, and preceding them with "Of." Offred remembers her real name but never reveals it. She no longer has

family or friends, though she has flashbacks to a time in which she had a daughter and a husband named Luke. The cruel physical and psychological burdens of her daily life in Gilead torment her and pervade her narrative.

Manaar, in *Sayydat Zuhal*, is a physician exposed to the threat of murder like her brother Rafid, the University Professor, by the armed Islamic extremists who call themselves "Mujahidoon" (militants). They accused her of cooperating with the enemy, and receiving medicines from a foreign party distributing them to the hospital which were suffering from an acute shortage of the necessary medicines. When she refused to yield to their threats, she was attacked all of a sudden at night in Ramadan by four veiled men, breaking into her house at "The Blue Peacock Street". Then, they hurt her by raping one after the other. She describes them as men with : 'Young voices, and they are plebeian and furious, with an accent being a mixture of the rural middle parts. They are with a smell of a stable and ash' (42). Then, one of the shot her in her arm thinking she was dead. He informed his Emir (commander) , using his cellphone, that he had achieved the required mission ...'(43). Before leaving the house, they killed her brother Dr.Rafid on the pretext of being atheist believing in Darwin's theory ... .They killed her mother as well. After that they prayed in the garden of the house and had the Ramadan dinner which had been prepared before facing her tragic destiny. When her sister, Dr. Amaal, came back home from her clinic she found that her sister was still alive and she saved her in the proper time.then, she decided to leave the country for Baghdad became a dangerous place to live in; she noticed the signs of pregnancy on her sister, Manaar, and terminated the pregnancy secretly in her clinic, though her sister could not tolerate bleeding as she was in a deteriorated healthy condition. Hayyat Al-Babili narrated the tale of Manaar from an 'inward looking', and she was able to embody Manaar's perception and feeling as she was dying without committing any artistic breach.

Haala and Raawiya are both oppressed as the other women in the novel are. The former is an architect whose fiancé, Mohand, was Hayyat's brother, and she was about to lose her senses because of the death of her fiancé fifteen days before he was demobilized from the military service. Moreover, life in Baghdad had not given her the chance to be in breathing space for her brother had been killed during the fightings of Al-Najef when the Iraqi forces withdrew in chaos from Kuwait. She was also arrested by Marines after the occupation and prisoned in Abu Graib Prison accused of having resisted the American Forces and cooperated with a terrorist network. Finally, she was raped while she was in her monthly period. Therefore, she made up her mind to leave Iraq along with her mother so as not to be killed by her uncles avoiding the suffering of ignominy. Raawiya, on the other

hand, suffered years of mental and physical torment. She fell in love with a man called Nadeem, but he let her down and married a British woman. She was also wanted by militant and decapitating groups, so she was ready to get married with anyone, though she realized that all men were unfaithful. However, she married Samir just for an interest so as to be allowed lawfully to leave Iraq to Jordan. There, she became another woman deriding everything and even herself; her soul was desolate spending her time chattering, babbling while her body was just ashes (45).

Although a feminist story, *The Handmaid's Tale* gives some surprisingly sympathetic portrayals of men while those of women can be critical. Men are the most mysterious characters; they are the ones we know least about and the ones that Offred can provide the least insight into beyond patriarchal society, dominant male figures, and sexual predators. Few male characters have more than functional roles of the patriarchal state. Most have no names, only group identities such as the Angels, the Eyes, and the Doctor, except for those who Offred has immediate relationships with such as Nick and the Commander. Atwood herself states that feminism is a broad term covering anything from 'pushing men off cliffs to allowing women to read and write in Afghanistan'. Through the characters of Serena Joy and Moira she looks at how women's own misunderstanding of men and feminism could result in a backlash and repression leading to a women's way of survival that could be critical.

Nick is a romantic rather than a realistic figure, the mysterious stranger who is Offred's rescuer through love. He is more relaxed than other members of Gilead society, wearing his hat at an angle and winking at her. She also describes details of his appearance which prevent him from seeming threatening, '*creases around the mouth where he smiles*' (p.28), whereas everyone else is described by the clothes that they wear, symbolising their status. At household prayers he presses his foot against hers causing a sensual warmth that she is unwilling to acknowledge. During the daytime he is a comic figure, at night her lover, which is made more particular as he is acting under orders either by the Commander or Serena Joy. Like Offred, he is subordinate and therefore has to remain passive until ordered to go to bed with Offred by Serena Joy. Of this first encounter Offred gives three different descriptions; his attitude is not directly described and he remains a figure that cannot be fully understood, realised or analysed. However, in defiance of danger she repeatedly returns to him and clearly falls in love with him, yet the lack of emotional response and understanding between them that is described and revealed to the reader makes it difficult to ascertain to what degree it is love or simply sexual desire. Nevertheless her description of their lovemaking is suggestive rather than simply erotic. At no

point does the reader witness a direct conversation; therefore it is difficult to establish an analysis of him and his motives. Importantly she tells him her real name, something that is not even revealed to us, underlining the intimacy of their relationship. We want to believe that he is in love with Offred, yet he is the only member of the household not present when she departs. It can be taken from the Historical Notes that he did rescue her and was a member of the Mayday resistance. As a character he is very lightly described and his most significant role is as her lover, yet it is not a romantic story. Instead her relationship with him underlines the conflict she experiences of loyalty and sexual desires which eventually outweigh her loyalty to Luke and desire to escape.

The Commander is the most powerful authority figure in Offred's life. He is a high-ranking government official and it is to him that she is assigned so as to take his name. This is similar to slavery before the abolition; once slaves were freed from their masters they would often take the same surname. Yet the Commander is an ambiguous figure, substantial and shadowy, whose motivations remain constantly unclear. An elderly man with *'straight neatly brushed silver hair'* and a moustache and blue eyes, his manner is mild p.97, and Offred likens him to a Mid-Western bank manager. She sees him lurking by her room and trying to peer at her as she walks past, (p.59). demonstrating that he presents himself as a typical male power, isolated and benignly indifferent to his domestic affairs. He performs ceremony in dress uniform and she describes his actions as *'fucking'*, with his eyes shut – making him into a comical figure. As Offred begins to know him his typical male power stereotype starts to fall away. He asks her to meet him in his study *'after hours'* and it is revealed that he is a lonely man who requires friendship and intimacy. He does not ask her for kinky sex but instead to play scrabble, the most domestic and mundane of pastimes which appears an incredulous past normality to her. He offers her books and magazines consisting of a once normal life which are now forbidden to her, asking only for a kiss at the end of the night. This reveals a more complex characteristic to the Commander. He is an old-fashioned gentleman who treats her in a somewhat patronising way, *'In fact he is positively daddyish'* (p.193). Despite his obscure motives they manage to develop an amiable relationship. However it is still a matter of sexual power politics in which the Commander is dominant. He is traditional in his views and patriarchal assumptions, *'Natures norms'* (p.232) with which he describes Jezebels where they have a private sexual encounter. When Offred is taken away from the house of the Commander for the last time she sees him looking *'old, worried and helpless'*, expecting his own downfall shortly and in this way Offred had her

revenge upon him for the balance of power between them, *'Possibly he will be a security risk, now. I am above him, looking down; he is shrinking'*.

As the Commander's wife, Serena Joy is the most powerful female presence in the daily life in Gilead. Offred can observe her in her social role as one of the Wives but also at close quarters in her own home and she appears as more than just a member of a class of hierarchy. Unlike the other Wives she is referred to by her own name, but she is elderly and childless and therefore has to agree to having a handmaid in her own home as she cannot produce children herself. She clearly resents Offred as a reminder of her inability to have children and as a violation of the sanctity of marriage. It is ironic that we learn she was previously an ultra-conservative voice on domestic policies and the place of women within the home. Offred observes this as she is trapped within the ideology which she created, *'She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her'*, (p.56). Serena Joy's only place of power is her living room, where she has nothing to do but knit scarves for the Angels, and her place for expression is her garden. Yet even there she has to be assisted by her husband's chauffeur. Despite her apparently submissive status as a Wife, there is a harsh toughness and masculinity about Serena Joy. She lacks femininity, which juxtaposes her husband's *'daddyishness'* and perhaps susceptibility to manipulation or pliability by Offred for hand creams, magazines, and pieces of information. Serena Joy, unlike her husband, has no weakness of *'nature's norms'* and therefore no susceptibility. It is impossible for anyone to know what she is thinking. In Serena's cigarette smoking and use of slang we see evidence for this toughness. It is at her suggestion that Offred sleep with Nick to become pregnant, *'She is actually smiling, coquettishly'* (p.216). Serena Joy represents two aspects of Gileadean society, the role of dutiful Wife as a privileged status, as well as a twisted plot in infidelity and the extremes that people are willing to adopt in order to conceive. This is arguably a method of survival for perhaps desperate women, pushed to this extreme by inability to conceive and the social structure, which she ironically contributed to herself. However Serena is still unforgivable for she has her own revenge too, deliberately withholding from Offred the news of her lost daughter and a photograph of her which Offred has been longing for. Serena is beside the Commander when Offred leaves the house, her farewell to Offred holds none of the pieties of Gilead, *"Bitch," she says. "After all he did for you."* (p.299). Serena Joy demonstrates the very ineffectiveness of falsity of Gilead society and the criticism of her from a feminist perspective is criticism of anti-feminists and also of the perfection, which is a symbol of a decaying and flawed society.

Moira is the only female character within the narrative that is portrayed positively and with admiration by the narrator as she constantly resurfaces in the narrative. She is the embodiment of resistance and rebellion, identified by her own first name because she never became a handmaid. From Offred's point of view she embodies female heroism, although from the point of view of Gilead she is criminal. Although brought to the Red Centre, she manages to escape on her second attempt, disguised as an Aunt, which was not only comical but is symbolic of her refusal to conform to the Gilead class basis. She therefore becomes what all other Handmaids would like to be but don't dare and Offred envies her courageous resistance, 'Moira was our fantasy... We hugged her to us, she was us in secret, a giggle; she was the lava beneath the crust of daily life' (p.143). However when Offred last meets Moira at the Jezebels, she finds that she did not manage to escape to freedom but was instead caught at the border and sent to the brothel where she says she will have three or four good years before being sent out to the colonies. In this final meeting it appears that Moira's spirit has been broken by Gilead, yet she still declares herself to be a lesbian and her values as a feminist and as a heroine lie in her speaking out and challenging tyranny and oppression.

In conclusion, although written from a feminist perspective *The Handmaid's Tale* allows for closer analysis of characters to understand the complexities of an oppressed society. It does not simply deal with the oppression of women; Gilead outlaws choice, emotion and free will. Pornography, sexual violence and infidelity are all outlawed but so is love. It is not merely oppression of women, but oppression of human rights. Atwood is highlighting that we see gender roles too plainly, that this is both true of men and women.

#### IV. POINT OF VIEW

It is observed that *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Ladies of Zuhal* face a challenge that is a typical of satiric dystopias to portray the mechanism of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one. This is a challenge that the two novels handily meet. Everything from Offred's sense of space (She wears "white wings" around her face, "blinkers" that are "prescribed issue" and keep her from "seeing" and "being seen" (*The Handmaid's Tale*: 8), to time ("There's grandfather clock in the hallway, which doles out time [9]), to speech ("Blessed be the fruit," Ofglen greets Offred; "May the Lord open, Offred answers [19], is controlled by Gilead regime. It is no surprise that Offred succumbs to fatalism, admitting, "I try not to think too much.

Hayyat Al-Babili, in *The Ladies of Zuhal*, as Sharazad does to Sharayar, narrates to let others listen to one of her tales. She tells us the story of one of the security officers who has made the most beautiful girls among them to be one of his concubines. The story of of Mannar who was raped by austere Islamic armed men and then shot her, her mother and her brother accusing her of receiving drugs from a foreign states and delivering them to the hospitals. Mannar who was dying was saved by her kind sister, Amaal. What my tongue did for me?" (70); "other countries do not believe what happened to us (12). The writer reminds us of what the Mongolian did when they invaded Baghdad when they did not find more females to be headed they started decapitating the women's (222). The booksellers' market was burnt (216).

In both dystopias the regime in question places the population on a constant war-footing and on food rationing. In both novels the state manipulates emotion and rouses "bloodlust" through public spectacles, and uses scapegoats and public violence as "steam valves" (307) in *The Handmaid's Tale* to defuse hostility to state oppression. In *The Ladies of Zuhal* this takes the letters sent by Qidar ascertaining loneliness; not relying on anyone; being aware of enemies; calling for withdrawal in a way or another as he did. Qidar chose to turn it in an imaginary mythical orbit which mostly serves keeping the situation on earth as it is. Qadir wants Hayyat to live away from Baghdad in a small house in the mountain an isolated place (32). In *The Handmaid's Tale* this takes the form of in the "Prayvaganzas" and "slavagings," Handmaids actually take part in the brutal murder of state "traitors" (who turn out to be subversives). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in both novels "sexual repression assists" the government in maintaining "social control".

The ordeal of the main character Hayyat, the daughter of the leftist university professor Adnan Al-Babili in Alduliami's novel, is that her memory kept on suffering oblivion and great confusion. Because of that she became unable to specify her identity and human presence. This technically forms an objective correlative for what inflicted Baghdad city which she adores. Hayyat Al-Babili represents the Iraqi ever-lasting pain, and specifically that of females. On the other hand Offred, the protagonist in Atwood's novel, went on suffering from being deprived of her husband Luke and her daughter. She was no longer allowed, as other women were, to read as she lived in the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic military dictatorship. She had to lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander made her pregnant, because in an age of declining births, she and the other Handmaids were only valued if their ovaries were viable. Offred could remember the days before, when she lived and made love with her husband; when she played with



and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge.

The two novels are not merely novels to be read or just a road to cross, they are a number of questions collided with our petrified faces in front of the loss of whatever humane inside and around us. The two texts stir us up to ask questions and do something for they put us in a state of our own dues for our human existence. Both novels are epics exposing the root of the ruin, and gathering up the fragments of the true state of affairs to restore and rebuild man with love and the ability to dream. Although each novel has got its glaring idiosyncrasy, they tend to be tales of all the human beings and their dreams; and they are the history of all those killers, killed, and perceiving dreamy lovers.

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### المستخلص

تصور روايتي "حكاية الوصيعة" للكاتبة الكندية ماركريت اتوود و "سيدات زحل" للروائية العراقية لطيفة الدليمي الشرور التي انتشرت في مكانين بانسين فاسدين بشكل ساخر أملا في إحداث تغير اجتماعي وسياسي . تصور الرواية الأولى ذات الميزة التحذيرية الظلم والاضطهاد النفسي والجسدي الذي تتعرض له النساء للحصول على جينات المورثات الذكرية في دولة يطلق عليها "جلعاد". إذ أنها تقيم حكما دكتاتوريا قهريا مترمما ، مبنيا على مذهب العصمة الحرفية لجماعة بروتستانتية بيروتانتية . وللحكومة اوامر صارمة تشمل كل جوانب الحياة اليومية إلا أنها تستثني ذوي الامتيازات في مواقع الدولة.

"حكاية الوصيعة" هي من ابداع الروائية الكندية، ماركريت اتوود، تصور مجتمعا متخيلا لنظام دكتاتوري معاصر يقهر رعاياه من الاناث ليكونن مجرد أوعية صامتة لأنجاب الأطفال . وتسرد الحكاية على لسان اوفريد مركزة على الوصيفات كونها واحدة منهن و تختار الحكومة تلك النساء لقدرتهم الكامنة على انجاب الاطفال في زمن يصبح فيه عدم الاخصاب عاليا ، وتقل نسب الولادات بشكل خطير . ومع تميز الوظيفة البايولوجية للمرأة لكنها تصبح مهمشة كفرد في المجتمع ، لأن الهدف الرئيس أن الطبقة الحاكمة من الرجال الذين يتمتعون بالقوة والتأثير هو ايجاد نساء بصحة وبخصوبة عالية لإنتاج أطفال لهم.

وتعرض رواية الدليمي "سيدات زحل" معاناة حياة البابلي التي تدون كل شيء. وكذلك تصور القصة معاناة بطلات بدءا من والده حياة وراوية وفتنة ومناز وامال وزينة وسامية وهالة وشروق ولما وهيلين وتنتهي ببريسكا برنارد ونساء اخريات يظهرن ويختفين خلال سرد الاحداث في هذا النص الملحمي مثل ناهدة وساهرة وسهام.

وهذه الرواية ملحمة تراجيدية تكشف جذر الخراب ، وتلملم شظايا التشتت السياسي والاجتماعي لتعيد بناء الانسان بالحب واسترداد واقع حلمها كعراقية أصيلة. كما تتجه حكاية سيدات زحل لتكون حكاية الجميع وحلم الجميع وتاريخ الجميع قتلة ومقتولين وعشاقا وحالمون ورؤيويون . ومهما يكن من امر ، لم يكن دور الرجل ثانويا في هذه الرواية بالرغم منهيمنة المرأة على مجرى الأحداث. الحياة البانسة حياة البابلي مشابهة لحياة زوجها ، حازم ، الذي تم اخصانه من حرس صدام الامني .