
RESEARCH ARTICLE

***The Handmaid's Tale*: Adaptation from Novel to Film and the Divergence in Conveyed Messages**

Kenza Dafir

PhD in English Literature and Cultural Studies, Department of English, Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Saiss - Fès, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah University, Fès, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Kenza Dafir **E-mail:** kenzadafir@hotmail.it

ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which the film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990) preserves the core message of Margaret Atwood's novel, despite significant changes and omissions. As a seminal work of dystopian fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* delivers a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression and authoritarian control. This study employs a comparative analysis to investigate key discrepancies between the novel and the film, focusing on excluded elements, plot restructuring and thematic shifts. By scrutinizing these modifications, the article demonstrates how the film diminishes the novel's emotional intensity and critical perspective, ultimately distorting its intended impact. The findings suggest that the adaptation's alterations result in a less detailed representation of gender, power and resistance, which weakens the novel's engagement with sociopolitical issues. This study contributes to larger discussions on the fidelity of literary adaptations and their influence on audience interpretation of politically charged narratives.

KEYWORDS

The Handmaid's Tale, film adaptation, comparative analysis, dystopian fiction, gender and power, sociopolitical critique.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 19 March 2025

PUBLISHED: 03 April 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.4.5

1. Introduction

From an initial analysis, it is evident that the film adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* does not accurately depict the Offred's character. The emotional depth of her suffering is less palpable, and the novel's rich symbolism is mostly absent from the cinematic version. Reading the novel, I envisioned a more confined and oppressive environment, one characterized by a grey and polluted atmosphere and reflective of the dystopian nature of Gilead's society. However, the film presents a surprisingly bright and colorful landscape, which significantly diverges from Margaret Atwood's vision. As a result, the adaptation fails to fully preserve the novel's intended message and thematic essence.

Although the film retains certain dystopian elements of the novel, it does not effectively convey the profound sense of hopelessness and despair experienced by the characters. The process of adaptation has fundamentally altered the story's focus, for the elements that make the novel compelling are diminished in the film. This causes a distortion of the narrative, ultimately weakening the clarity and impact of Atwood's original message.

To contextualize this discussion, it is essential to examine the notion of dystopia, a concept that is integral to the novel. Dystopia, as the antithesis of utopia, represents a society where conditions are undesirable and oppressive. These fictional worlds, set in the near future, often serve as cautionary reflections of contemporary societal anxieties and depict a reality in which individual freedom has been entirely eroded. This genre has gained significant editorial success in recent years, initiating an exploration of the factors that contribute to its growing popularity even beyond literature.

Numerous contemporary dystopian novels are set in post-apocalyptic societies governed by ruthless and authoritarian regimes. Unlike utopia, which embodies an idealized and often unattainable vision of society, dystopia derives its impact from its unsettling realism, frequently employing satirical elements to critique social structures. The increasing prevalence of dystopian

fiction might emerge from its ability to mirror real-world concerns, particularly regarding media influence and societal control. Many of these narratives depict a future that feels alarmingly plausible and likely to happen. For instance, some works emphasize media manipulation and the emergence of a revolutionary figure (*The Hunger Games*), while others explore rigid social stratification (*Beauty, Divergent*) or depict societies in which individual autonomy is entirely suppressed (*Matched, Delirium*). This raises the question of whether this genre's growing appeal reflects a shift in contemporary society toward increased surveillance and systemic control.

A key reason readers identify with dystopian protagonists is their relatability and sense of shared experience, meaning that their struggles resonate with contemporary audiences. In addition to serving as a warning about potential futures, dystopian literature offers critical inspection into the present as well, as exemplified by George Orwell's *1984* (Orwell, 1949). The genre's relevance substantiates its role not only as speculative fiction but also as a powerful scrutiny of societal evolution and the fragility of individual freedoms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Dystopia

The term *utopia* was first coined in 1516 by Thomas More, deriving from the Greek *ou-topos*, which means "no place". It describes an idealized society in which all aspects of life are perfected (More and Turner, 1984). In contrast, *dystopia* denotes a society characterized by imperfection, oppression and extreme forms of social control. However, there is ongoing academic debate regarding the distinction between *dystopia* and *anti-utopia*. A dystopia, as pictured in Orwell's *1984* (Orwell, 1949), is inherently oppressive and offers no pretense of well-being. In contrast, an anti-utopia promises to provide happiness and order even as it enforces systemic control, as seen in works like *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) and *We* (Zamyatin, 1924).

In the context of dystopian fiction, society is typically governed by an elite group that maintains power through force, oppression and surveillance. This form of rule often aligns with totalitarian ideologies, wherein the state exercises control over almost all aspects of daily life, thus reducing the individual to a mere component of the collectivity. Nevertheless, within such oppressive structures, individuals may develop a heightened awareness of human rights and recognize the inherent flaws of their reality. The resolution of dystopian narratives might vary: some conclude with a sense of hope, while others depict the protagonist's ultimate defeat. In many cases, a tragic ending serves to accentuate the gravity of the work's central themes, rendering its message more poignant and impactful. Ultimately, dystopian fiction revolves around a dissident group that challenges the illusion of societal perfection and seeks change. By engaging with these narratives, readers are equipped with the tools to critically analyze contemporary social and political systems, recognizing and resisting oppressive structures in real life.

2.2 Themes of Dystopian Fiction

Most works of dystopian literature explore themes of communism and totalitarianism, emphasizing the suppression of individualism in favor of collectivism. They often depict societies in which education and social conditioning reinforce absolute loyalty to the state. In such societies, individuals exist solely to serve the state, while any perceived benefit to the state is represented as a benefit to the people. Hard work is a fundamental expectation, yet personal ambition is entirely eradicated and channeled exclusively toward the advancement of the state.

To reinforce the notion of individuals as mere components of a collective entity, many dystopian societies assign citizens numerical identifiers rather than names. However, in nearly all dystopian narratives the protagonist is supported by an underground network or a small group that fuels rebellion, illustrating the idea that human beings are not meant to function in absolute isolation from social structures.

Dystopian fiction is typically set in a near or distant future, yet the structural composition of such societies remains consistent. These settings are often characterized by rigidly organized urban landscapes, implying uniforms, square buildings, linear streets and an absence of vibrant colors. Citizens wear standardized clothing and hairstyles are meticulously regulated. This strict uniformity serves a dichotomous purpose: first, it reinforces the illusion of sameness, which is central to the ideology of collectivism; second, it eliminates individual choice, ensuring that the state retains absolute control over every aspect of the citizens' lives. By restricting personal agency, the ruling authority effectively neutralizes any potential resistance.

Another attribute of dystopian governance is the use of familial terms to denote leadership, such as *Big Brother* in Orwell's *1984* (Orwell, 1949), and *Father* and *Uncle* in other totalitarian settings and oppressive regimes. This linguistic strategy imposes a sense of familiarity and obedience, further consolidating the authoritarian rule. By contrast, nature remains outside the state's control as it cannot adhere to the rigid mathematical structures imposed upon humans. As a result, in many dystopian narratives the natural world is either suppressed or perceived as a threat to the control of the state.

Religion is either an extension of state ideology or entirely abolished. In some instances, the state itself assumes the role of a venerated entity and demands absolute reverence from its citizens. Consequently, religious freedom and individual belief systems are eradicated, leaving only the sanctioned doctrines of the ruling elite. Sexuality is similarly regulated to serve the interests of the state. In some dystopian settings, sexual activity is strictly controlled or entirely prohibited to prevent emotional bonds from forming outside state-sanctioned structures. In others, promiscuity is encouraged but only as a means of furthering

the purposes of the regime. Reproductive rights are often nonexistent, and children are conceived artificially or through state-mandated reproduction programs. In such societies, they are not permitted to get emotionally attached to their biological parents, reinforcing the principle that the state - rather than the family - is the primary unit of social organization. In this vein, James and Glover argue that the very notion of sexual attraction stems from humanity's innate reproductive instincts, yet dystopian societies seek to suppress or exploit this natural impulse in order to maintain control (James and Glover, 1992). From a linguistic perspective, dystopian literature frequently manipulates language to reflect the mechanisms of control within the fictional society. Many dystopian writers invent new forms of speech, distort existing vocabulary, or employ paradoxical uses of language to create an environment where the truth is obscured. First-person narration is often employed to immerse readers in the protagonist's perspective to achieve a sense of credibility and immediacy. This deliberate manipulation of language ensures that clarity is elusive, and makes it nearly impossible to discern reality from state propaganda.

The philosophical foundations of dystopian literature can be traced back to Plato's *Republic*, in which individuals are naturally inclined toward pacifism but would still engage in warfare when necessary (Plato, 2004). In dystopian societies, however, citizens are either conditioned to be perpetually engaged in conflict or entirely pacified and made incapable of resistance.

A fundamental flaw in dystopian governments is their perception of humanity. Citizens are expected to exist not for their own fulfillment, but for the glorification of the state. Desire and autonomy are treated as threats, leading to a stark dichotomy akin to Orwell's notion of *war versus peace* - which is either total control or complete chaos (Orwell, 1949). The government's ultimate objective is to keep the population perpetually occupied, either through constant pleasure or rigid structure. Instincts - including sexual and emotional impulses - are suppressed, privacy is nonexistent and personal freedoms are severely restricted.

Dystopias are most effective when they successfully erase individual identity, reducing people to mere instruments of the state. Despite the oppressive nature of these societies, dystopian protagonists share a common journey of awakening. They come to recognize that the reality imposed upon them is neither natural nor just. What distinguishes them from the general population is their willingness to question the status quo, their insatiable desire for knowledge and their determination to seek a better existence. They embody the archetype of the activist, taking action not only for personal liberation but also for the betterment of humanity as a whole.

Corrupt and oppressive governments have existed throughout history, yet what makes a system truly dystopian is not merely its authoritarianism but the compliance of the people it governs. Fear, ignorance and manipulation are not always imposed externally; when internalized, they become even more insidious and enduring. In dystopian literature, the protagonists' struggle against these forces serves as a call to action, an implicit challenge for individuals to recognize and resist the mechanisms of oppression.

On this matter, Bethune contends that dystopian societies are inherently "harshly repressive," restricting both individuality and freedom of thought (Bethune, 2010). The term *dystopia* carries strong connotations of darkness and despair and evokes philosophical and political implications. The concept has been a recurring theme in literature for decades, dating back to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932), George Orwell's *1984* (Orwell, 1949), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 1953), and other seminal works. Having emerged in the mid-20th century, these novels responded to the political, economic and cultural demands of their time, offering cautionary prophecies of unchecked governmental power and societal apathy.

3. Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary and comparative research methodology that deliberately disrupts conventional disciplinary boundaries, enabling a diverse analytical engagement with the literary text. Grounded primarily in postcolonial, feminist and literary criticism frameworks, this approach conceptualizes the case study as a dynamic space for gender representation, agency and resistance. The problematization of gender roles is firmly situated within a postcolonial and feminist paradigm, where male supremacy, patriarchy and misogyny are interrogated as central constructs of examination.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 *The Handmaid's Tale: A Case Study in Dystopian Literature*

At this stage of the analysis, it is necessary to examine key aspects of the plot of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Set in a speculative future, the novel envisions the United States in the aftermath of an ecological catastrophe that has led to widespread infertility. This crisis results in the establishment of the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic dictatorship governed by a rigid patriarchal system. Rooted in a fundamentalist interpretation of the Old Testament, Gilead's primary purpose is reproduction. Fertile women, deemed a precious resource, are forcibly recruited into the Handmaid class. Stripped of their possessions, identities and autonomy, they are assigned to high-ranking Commanders whose wives are unable to conceive. The narrative is delivered from the perspective of Offred, a handmaid suffering from the oppressive structures of Gilead while intermittently recalling memories of her past life. The novel's conclusion is deliberately ambiguous and culminates in an epilogue that represents Offred's account as an artifact analyzed in a future academic symposium.

The novel serves as a critique of the consequences of dismantling women's rights. It depicts a society in which a faction of conservative Christian extremists detains power, enforcing rigid gender roles, re-instilling traditional values and systematically

oppressing women. The legal and social advancements achieved by feminists in the 1970s - such as reproductive autonomy, access to contraception and political participation - are entirely revoked in Gilead. Moreover, the portrayal of environmental devastation and declining fertility reflects the anxieties of the 1980s, particularly the concerns over pollution and nuclear energy. Unlike many dystopian works, *The Handmaid's Tale* tackles the link between sexuality and politics, illustrating how control over women's bodies becomes a means of sustaining an authoritarian regime.

Offred, the protagonist and narrator, embodies the psychological and physical struggles of life under totalitarian rule. She frequently reminisces about her past, recalling her husband Luke and their daughter. Throughout the novel, she endures the psychological torment imposed by Gilead's rigid structures. Despite her intelligence, perceptiveness and dark sense of humor, she remains an ordinary woman compelled into extraordinary circumstances. Ultimately, her escape is not facilitated by her own actions, but by Nick's intervention, which reinforces the themes of powerlessness and restricted agency.

4.2 Women's Bodies as National Resources

The entire structure of the Gilead state, with its rigid political hierarchy, is fundamentally built upon the control of reproduction, as it emerges in direct response to the declining birthrates crisis. To maintain this theocratic regime, women are systematically stripped of their autonomy, they are forbidden from reading, owning property, working, voting and engaging in any activity that might create independence and pose a threat to either the state or their designated male guardians.

This enforced subjugation constructs a society in which women are dehumanized and reduced to mere instruments of reproduction rather than individuals with agency. Their worth is determined solely by their fertility, reinforcing a hierarchical order that objectifies and commodifies them. At one point in the novel, Offred reflects on the drastic transformation in her perception of her own body: before the rise of Gilead, she regarded it as an instrument of her own pleasure; now, she recognizes that it is entirely controlled by the state, existing only as a vessel for procreation, since Gilead's ultimate aim is to strip women of their agency and ensure their complete submission through institutionalized oppression and ideological indoctrination.

4.3 Language as a Tool of Power

In the Republic of Gilead, while men are classified according to their military rank, women are assigned roles strictly based on their reproductive and domestic functions, categorized as Handmaids, Wives or Marthas. Social interactions are further regulated through predetermined greetings, and failure to use the correct phrase immediately arouses suspicion and reinforces the regime's pervasive surveillance.

Dystopian literature frequently investigates the convergence of authoritarian control and linguistic distortion, demonstrating how oppressive regimes manipulate discourse to reinforce power structures. The novel continues this tradition by illustrating how Gilead not only exerts control over women's bodies, but also extends its authority to their very names, depriving them of personal identity and reducing them to mere extensions of male dominance.

4.4 Rape and Systemic Violence

Sexual violence against women is omnipresent in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although the Aunts and Commanders insist that women in Gilead are afforded the highest degree of protection, respect and security, the factual reality contradicts this claim. While the official punishment for rape is severe, Gilead's very structure institutionalizes, perpetuates and legitimizes sexual violence. This is mostly evident in places like Jezebel's, where women are exploited under the guise of state-sanctioned entertainment. More significantly, sexual violence is embedded within the so-called *Ceremonies*, in which Handmaids are subjected to enforced intercourse with Commanders, which is an act framed as a religious duty rather than an assault on bodily autonomy.

Gilead operates as a theocracy, meaning that there is no separation between religion and the state; instead, political authority is legitimized through religious doctrine. Biblical names, references and religious rhetoric permeate the regime's official discourse, reinforcing its ideological control. The fusion of religion and politics is epitomized in the slogan "God is a national resource", which encapsulates the state's weaponization of faith as a means of maintaining power and justifying oppression.

4.5 Feminist Ideological Frameworks

While *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a feminist critique of patriarchal oppression, Margaret Atwood also draws parallels between certain aspects of radical feminism and the ideological foundations of Gilead, especially through the character of Offred's mother. Both radical feminists and the "architects" of Gilead claim to be protecting women from sexual violence, yet both also seek to restrict individual freedoms as a means of achieving this goal. Notably, like some branches of radical feminism, the regime of Gilead condemns many expressions of female sexuality. Furthermore, it strategically appropriates feminist rhetoric - particularly the notions of *sisterhood* and female solidarity - to consolidate its own oppressive structures. These analogies suggest that even within feminist discourse there exists a potential for authoritarianism, which reveals the contradictions within movements that aim to protect and empower women.

4.6 The Symbolism of the Red Dresses

The red color of the Handmaids' clothing serves as a powerful symbol of Gilead's central purpose, which is fertility. Red is associated with childbirth and menstrual blood, as a consequence of the regime's obsession with reproduction. Simultaneously, red also carries connotations of sexual sin, evoking Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850). This paradox reflects the contradiction at the heart of Gilead's ideology: while the Handmaid's reproductive role is justified through biblical doctrine, her forced sexual encounters with the Commander (who is a married man) constitute a form of legitimized adultery. The Eyes, Gilead's secret police, embody the regime's totalitarian control, symbolizing both the oppressive surveillance of the state and the omnipresent, punitive gaze of a theocratic authority that claims divine legitimacy.

At the core of *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred's story, a woman denied identity and given a name that signifies possession by the Commander she serves. Through fragmented memories, Offred recalls her past life, when she had personal freedoms, a husband and a daughter. Having witnessed the radical transformation of America into an extremist theocracy, she clings to her recollections as a means of psychological resistance. Her inner world and nostalgia provide her with temporary relief, contrasting with the physical and psychological subjugation she endures. The novel's relevance is evident in its critique of misogyny and biological determinism, which resonate with contemporary struggles for women's rights worldwide.

The film adaptation of the novel - *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), directed by Volker Schlöndorff - pronouncedly diverges from Atwood's original work. While some differences are minor, others substantially alter the narrative and thematic impact of the story. The changes can be categorized into four distinct areas, particularly in terms of spatiality and plot restructuring, ultimately shaping the way the novel's message is conveyed on screen.

4.7 The Body as a Site of Control

As envisioned by Atwood, the Handmaids' attire is designed to obscure and conceal their bodies entirely, depriving them of both physical autonomy and peripheral vision. Their uniforms, complemented by red gloves and socks, cover them from wrist to ankle ensuring that only their neck and face remain visible, though even these are partially veiled by the red fabric and white "wings". During the suffocating summers, the material of their garments is slightly lighter but remains equally concealing.

Conversely, the film adaptation represents a significantly altered version of the Handmaids' uniform. Natasha Richardson's portrayal of Offred features clothing that is relatively immodest for Gilead's strict standards. The outfit reveals inches of her legs and the thin material subtly outlines her figure. Moreover, the absence of the signature white wings is a major deviation. In the novel, these wings serve the crucial function of obscuring the Handmaid's vision - exacerbating her ignorance and submission - and preventing others from directly seeing her face. By omitting this essential element, the film diminishes a key visual representation of Gilead's systemic oppression.

This pattern of altering significant details transcends the Handmaids' attire. Serena Joy, the Commander's wife, is depicted wearing a dress that exposes her neckline, which is an unthinkable transgression within Gilead's rigid anti-sexuality code. Similarly, the filmmakers replace the Handmaids' identifying tattoos with bar-coded bracelets, and Offred's attire at Jezebel's - a black dress with a feather boa - diverges sharply from the novel's depiction. Additionally, Moira is shown wearing gloves to conceal the signs of torture, a detail that is absent in Atwood's text. These alterations, particularly in the clothing, undermine the novel's emphasis on visual oppression as an instrument of control.

Other crucial differences further dilute the novel's themes. During Offred's visit to the doctor, for example, the film removes the physical barrier that separates her face from his gaze in the novel. This sheet was emblematic of the dehumanization of the Handmaids, yet the film's version allows direct eye contact, diminishing the unsettling effect of that moment. Likewise, during the Birthing Ceremony, Ofwarren (Janine) is permitted to hold her newborn, whereas in the novel the Wife is the one who assumes total ownership of the child, with the Handmaid being immediately cast aside.

Another particularly significant divergence is the portrayal of Offred and Nick's relationship. In both versions, their affair represents an act of rebellion and a desperate escape from Gilead's suffocating control. Nonetheless, the film fails to capture the depth of their connection. While their relationship in the novel is marked by a combination of survival, desire and quiet defiance, the film simplifies it and reduces its emotional weight.

The most radical change occurs in the film's ending. Unlike the novel's ambiguous conclusion, which leaves Offred's fate unresolved, the film opts for a definitive and arguably more optimistic resolution. Offred - referred to as Kate - escapes while pregnant with Nick's child, and is shown living in isolation in a mountainous rural setting and awaiting messages from him. By explicitly confirming her pregnancy and survival, the film transforms Atwood's open-ended narrative into a clear sense of hope, thereby altering the story's thematic impact.

4.8 The Mind as a Site of Resistance

One of the most significant deviations in the film adaptation is the narrative structure, which fundamentally alters the essence of the novel. The novel is narrated in the first person by Offred, and this subjective viewpoint allows for a richer exploration of her inner thoughts, memories and emotional turmoil. The novel also frequently shifts between past and present, with Offred's fragmented recollections of her past life before Gilead interfered with her grim present-day existence. This non-linear storytelling

is a central feature of the novel, which creates an atmosphere of isolation, uncertainty and temporal disorientation that mirrors Offred's state of mind.

On the other hand, the film opts for a much more linear narrative, with events unfolding in a clear and chronological order. This choice significantly undermines the novel's portrayal of Offred's psychological state; the lack of flashbacks and the rigid sequence of events in the film strip away the ambiguity that is so crucial to the novel's effect. By adhering to a traditional and linear plot structure, the film belittles Offred's journey and represents it as a neat and organized story that feels less intimate. Offred's sense of isolation and her uncertain grasp on time are essential elements of the novel. These themes, which convey her psychological disintegration, are largely lost in the film's straightforward narrative. The ambiguity surrounding her memories and the disconcerting shifts between them are key to understanding her emotional state, but the film's decision to represent a neatly structured sequence of events makes her internal chaos harder to convey. Therefore, the film fails to replicate the novel's depth of introspection, which is so integral to Offred's character development.

The most striking difference lies in the voice of the narration. In the novel, the first-person perspective allows readers to entirely experience the world through Offred's eyes. Her thoughts, fragmented as they might be, form the backbone of the narrative, revealing her vulnerabilities, her memories of past life, and her gradual resistance to the regime. Oppositely, the film looks at Offred's story from an external perspective, primarily showing her interactions with the other. The camera seldom delves into her inner world, except briefly at the end when her thoughts are voiced in a way that does not even exist in the novel.

Furthermore, the film lacks any reference to Offred's mother, a character who makes for a significant role in the novel. Offred's memories of her mother and their relationship are central to understanding her past and the ideological tensions that existed before Gilead took over. The absence of this character in the film is a critical omission, as it eliminates an important emotional and thematic layer from the story. In the novel, Offred's mother represents a form of feminist resistance, and her absence from the film diminishes the depth of Offred's struggle and overshadows the general cultural context where Gilead emerged. While the film attempts to depict the story of Offred's life under Gilead, it ultimately falls short of capturing the novel's layered narrative structure and introspective qualities. The novel's fragmented and ambiguous storytelling creates a vivid portrait of Offred's psychological and emotional journey, one that the film is not able to fully replicate.

4.9 The Politics of Language

One of the most striking changes in the film adaptation is the introduction of names for characters who remain nameless in the novel. For example, Offred is given the name "Kate" and her daughter is named "Jill" in the film. Yet, in the novel, Offred's real name is never revealed, which maintains a sense of ambiguity and anonymity that is meant to serve a crucial thematic purpose. By giving the characters specific names, the film undermines the ambiguity that Atwood carefully constructs in the novel, which emphasizes the dehumanization and loss of identity inflicted by the totalitarian regime of Gilead.

The absence of names in the novel is a deliberate choice to reflect the extreme repression of individuality and personal freedom. Offred - whose name is derived from "Of Fred", the Commander's name - is robbed of her personal identity and the lack of a name symbolizes her status as a mere vessel for reproduction, rendering her existence anonymous and invisible. This makes for a critical commentary of Atwood on gender injustice: by not assigning her a name, the novel highlights how women in Gilead are reduced to their reproductive functions and denied autonomy to assert themselves.

On the one hand, the film giving Offred a name takes away the universality of her story. On the other hand, in the novel she is not meant to represent a singular individual; instead, she could be the embodiment of any woman in Gilead or in any society that oppresses women. The absence of a name allows readers to see Offred as a symbol, a spokesperson for all women whose voices have been silenced by patriarchy. By naming her, the film shifts her from a universal representation of women's suffering to a more specific and individualized character, which consequently changes the focus of the story from a critique of gender oppression to a more personal narrative.

As evinced, the theme of identity suppression is central to the novel. In Gilead, names are utilized to exert control over handmaids, who are even forbidden to know each other's real names. This further exacerbates the dehumanization of women and isolates them from each other, preventing any form of solidarity or human connection. Indisputably, the film's decision to provide names undermines this aspect of the regime, offering a sense of individuality and hope that is deliberately absent in the novel.

Additionally, in the novel, Offred's refusal to say "my room" is a subtle but significant act of resistance. While she apparently conforms to the role of Handmaid, she retains a quiet rebellion against the totalitarian system by refusing to fully accept the claim of ownership over her space. This small act of defiance is an internal rejection of Gilead's control and a powerful reflection of her enduring resistance to the system. Omitting this detail, the film underestimates Offred's traumas and silent rebellion. In the novel, such minute moments of resistance are integral to the narrative, which is living proof that the human spirit can find ways to resist even amidst repression.

4.10 Society as a Mechanism of Oppression

Another remarkable deviation between the film and the novel occurs at the end of the story. In the film, Offred kills the Commander with a knife, committing an act of violence that is absent in the novel. On the contrary, the novel portrays Offred as

having almost resigned to her fate and given up by the end. She is not involved in a manifest act of rebellion and the events that transpire are more ambiguous and open-ended. Offred receives the knife from an underground resistance group, but she does not choose to kill the Commander. Instead, she is placed in a position where her fate is largely left to the hands of others. Her passivity brings to the forefront the despair and powerlessness that take over in a totalitarian society where choices are eliminated. However, in the film, Offred's agency is heightened through a murderous act, which alters the thematic focus of the story. The novel emphasizes the lack of control she has over her life, while the film depicts a proactive and violent form of resistance that might suggest a hopeful or defiant ending, unlike what is represent in the novel.

Another notable difference lies in the portrayal of Offred's family. The film opens with a dramatic scene where she and her husband and daughter are caught during their attempt to escape to Canada, resulting in the death of the husband. This denies Offred any hope that he could still be alive, whereas in the novel his fate is left ambiguous. In fact, she spends an enormous amount of time contemplating his disappearance and their attempted escape failure. Therefore, the film's decision to explicitly show Luke's death disregards the emotional depth of Offred's uncertainty and the ambiguity about his possible survival that permeates the novel. Moira's character is also altered in the film. While in the novel she is introduced as Offred's best friend from college, in the film she is presented as a new friend that Offred meets at the Red Center. This change diminishes the depth of their pre-Gilead relationship and shifts the focus of their bond, which plays a paramount role in Offred's resistance to the regime in the novel.

Additionally, the film alters the dynamics of the Ceremony scenes, particularly the first one. In the novel, the Commander's wife Serena Joy silently observes the Ceremony with a sense of complicity, even though her feelings are more profound. She regrets her loss of power and freedom in Gilead and is portrayed as somehow sympathetic towards Offred. Contrarily, the film shows Offred crying during the Ceremony and Serena remaining silent, which undoubtedly distorts the emotional tone of the scene and simplifies the roles of the two women.

The novel also references Offred's return to the Red Center, where she is reindoctrinated after an illicit meeting with the Commander. The omission of this aspect from the film reconfigures the representation of her internal conflicts and the societal pressures she is confronted with. By withdrawing this element, the film misses an opportunity to explore the psychological and emotional burden that Gilead's regime takes on women. Moreover, among the most pivotal omissions in the film is the absence of the Wall, where criminals and transgressors are hanged for public display. It is a key emblem of Gilead's violent and controlling nature, and its exclusion from the film discards a trenchant visual representation of the regime's cruelty and ruthlessness.

Lastly, the novel presents a noteworthy moment of reversed Orientalist discourse, where Japanese tourists ask Offred and other Handmaids whether they are happy. This question, which seems absurd and paradoxical given Gilead's oppressiveness, is a critical juncture of cultural dissonance and critique of the Western supremacist attitudes towards the East. By overlooking this scene, the film misses another opportunity to deeply scrutinize how Gilead is perceived by the other and to challenge the audience's assumptions about its oppression.

4.11 The Significance of the Historical Notes

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the *Historical Notes* serve as a key narrative device that contextualizes and interrogates the events of the story. Presented as the transcript of a university lecture in the future, these notes provide an analysis of the Gileadean society from an academic perspective. This transition in narrative style offers an obvious disparity to the novel's intimate, first-person account of Offred's life as a Handmaid, allowing Atwood to elaborate on the historical wight of the events. By including the *Historical Notes*, the writer reestablishes the distance between the reader and the immediate horrors of Gilead, reminding us that it is not a simplistic and singular narrative, but an integral part of a dynamic and interwoven historical moment.

One of the key functions of the *Historical Notes* is to clarify how the Bible was used to justify the existence of the Handmaid institution. Professor Pieixoto's lecture explains how the use of religious texts was strategically employed to manipulate the masses into accepting oppressive practices. Explicitly mentioning of the "Particucution", a public execution ritual, draws a parallel between Gilead's practices and ancient fertility rituals, disclosing the extent to which Gilead's government distorted historical traditions to accommodate its own patriarchal interests. This is one of the few instances in which Gilead's systems of power are transparently and analytically deconstructed, suggesting critical distance from the narrative that focuses on the societal control exercised through religion and violence.

Furthermore, the *Historical Notes* expose a crucial detail about Offred's fate. They elucidate that the tapes were transcribed from an underground "Femaleroad" safe house, and confirm that Nick was a member of the resistance group "Mayday". This revelation calls into question the novel's ending, where Offred's destiny remains uncertain. However, ambiguity remains because, while we know Nick's involvement, we never fully learn what happened to Offred, which leaves her fate suspended in the reader's mind.

The reversal of Gilead's patriarchal structure seems to be a salient feature in the *Historical Notes*. In the new world order, white individuals become the subjects of study, counteracting the racial dynamics that were once central to Gilead's society. This mirrors Atwood's final interpretation on the power structures in operation: by situating Gilead's patriarchal rule within a broader

historical context, she invites the reader to ponder how power can be both absolute and fragile, subject to the forces of time, study and critique.

Nevertheless, the film adaptation entirely neglects the *Historical Notes*, leaving a significant discrepancy in the narrative and withholding from the audience a critical examination of the Gileadean regime and its eventual collapse. Without this academic perspective, the film provides a more immediate and emotional interpretation of Offred's story, but this comes at the expense of the analytical distance and historical framework that enrich and distinguish the novel. The film's deletion of the *Historical Notes* weakens its ability to engage with the broader political and historical questions raised by the novel, ultimately leaving the viewer with a more limited and puzzled understanding of the world constructed by Atwood.

5. Conclusion

In comparing Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to its 1990 film adaptation, it becomes clear that - while the overall narrative remains intact - the transformation from novel to screen dilutes and contaminates the novel's message, particularly regarding the systemic oppression of women. The alterations to vital components of Gilead society - such as the uniforms, the roles of women and the dynamics between characters - impact the emotional and thematic weight of the story. This lessens the intensity of the female oppression depicted in the novel, creating a version of Gilead that fails to fully evoke the sense of terror and dehumanization that Atwood's text wants to convey.

The film's alterations, involving the omission of major symbolic components such as the *Historical Notes* and Offred's first-person narration, serve to weaken the novel's inexorable denouncement of patriarchal dominance and its exploration of gendered power dynamics. Atwood's novel does not simply narrate a story of dystopian control; it also challenges the very foundations of societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality, illustrating how these constructs are historically manipulated and institutionalized for purely political purposes.

From a feminist standpoint, *The Handmaid's Tale* urges the perpetuation of a struggle against gender inequality that transcends time and place. It illustrates how institutions - be it in Gilead or in our own society - are inherently gendered and aspire to perpetuate gender roles. Through its portrayal of female subjugation and resistance, the novel urges readers to confront these oppressive systems and actively engage in the revolution of feminist principles that debunk them.

The lack of a fully-fledged feminist critique in the film version of *The Handmaid's Tale* is a momentous deviation from Atwood's intent. While the film represents a gloomy and macabre prediction of the future, it appears unlikely to be as terrifying and oppressive as the novel, which conspicuously lays bare the mechanisms of gender-based authority. Atwood's masterpiece remains an urgent call to action, exhorting us to problematize and dismantle the social, political and cultural systems that continue to endorse the degradation of women. Ultimately, this is why *The Handmaid's Tale* is perceived not solely as a dystopian novel, but also a revolutionary text that demands to perpetuate the feminist battle across generations.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Atwood, M. (1986). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- [2] Bellamy, B. (2014). Blast, Corrupt, Dismantle, Erase: Contemporary North American Dystopian Literature.
- [3] Bethune, B. (2010). *A golden age for dystopian fiction*. Maclean's.
- [4] Booker, M. (1994). *The dystopian impulse in modern literature*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- [5] Bradbury, R. (1953). *Fahrenheit 451*. Ballantine Books.
- [6] Claeys, G. (2010). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Hawthorne, N. (1850). *The Scarlet Letter*. Ticknor, Reed & Fields.
- [8] Hiestand, H. (2013). *Dystopia now*. Portland, Oregon: Air Raid Press.
- [9] Huxley, A. (1932). *Brave New World*. Chatto & Windus.
- [10] James, P. D., and Glover, J. (1992). *The Children of Men*. London: Faber & Faber.
- [11] Lowry, L. (1993). *The Giver*. Houghton Mifflin.
- [12] More, T., and Turner, P. (1984). *Utopia*. London: Penguin Books.
- [13] Orwell, G. (1949). *1984*. Secker and Warburg.
- [14] Plato. (2004). *The Republic* (C. D. C. Reeve, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
- [15] Rabkin, E., Greenberg, M., and Olander, J. (1983). *No place else*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.
- [16] Stock, A. (2011). *Mid Twentieth-Century Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought*. Durham University.
- [17] The Guardian. (2010). *The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood | Books review*.
- [18] Zamyatin, Y. (1924). *We* (G. Zilboorg, Trans.). E. P. Dutton.