

# The Study of Ideology in *The Handmaids' Tale* Based on Althusser's view

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## ABSTRACT

Ideology has always been the most vital apparatus for each government and dominant groups of society to keep their superior position so that every inferior subject could remain obedient and live like a programmed machine that is required to operate according to some fixed and rigid codes. Sometimes these codes are so apparent and tangible in the society that breaking them would result in sheer oppression such as impressment, exile and even execution. However in modern era the controlling and domination are not applied through force and physical attempts yet it does not mean it ceased to exist. The traditional ways of oppression are not extinct; yet they remain in new forms, tools and weapons which in Althusser's terminology they are called RSA. Nevertheless there is another difference in modern time; it has been attempted to control the minds of people through other less vivid weapons. These weapons could poison the minds of subjects and control and train them in a way that dominant groups want without taking any violent action. This method of controlling mind is ISA in Althusser's view. *The handmaid's tale* (1988) mostly concerns with the ideology of ruling class and the way the ruling class shows the ideology to subjects by force and discourse shapes the way through which suppressed class perceives the world. The main character of this novel who is a woman is oppressed in different ways and her identity and beliefs are influenced by the ideology of the society consciously and unconsciously. Since the story takes place in Gilead as one small part of the world, it could be symbol of other societies and the analysis of that society can be extended to other parts of the world so this is a microcosmic study.

**Keywords:** Ideology; ISA; RSA; Oppression; Dominant Group

## 1. MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada in 1939 and she spent her childhood in there. She liked reading from early ages as she says '[N]o one ever told me I couldn't read a book. My mother liked quietness in children, and a child who is reading is very quiet' (qtd. in Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson 2002). By the age of sixteen she had made her mind to be a writer and she studies literature up to Ph.D. she had an unsuccessful marriage for the first time but not for the second time and her daughter was born in 1976. She had a lot of achievements and she was a key figure in Canadian literature. She is such an important author that each year a lot of works are dedicated to her and she is center of attention for many literary figures. Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson imposes that "A recent Annotated Bibliography on Atwood (compiled by the Society) listed 133 scholarly works published on

the author in one year alone, and there are currently over 35 specialized, academic monographs or edited collections that take her as their principal or sole focus” (3).

Margaret Atwood has had a very deep understanding of her own imagination. She has used her powerful imagination to create works for children in fairy tale’s lands. She created works that are rich in feminist elements and show the life of women from different angles. Also her works can be analyzed as political too. In a few of her works she could reflect dystopian and totalitarian societies in which people are obedient and can be manipulated by ideology of ruling class. Moreover her works show environmental disasters in national and global levels; in her idea pollution and destruction of environment are serious problems that are threatening the world. Hence it can be claimed her works are calling for reformation in different aspects of daily life. As it was mentioned in title, the main focus of this research is on concept of ideology. *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) is one of her most influential works that can be analyzed based on political structure in the book.

## 2. TWENTIETH CENTURY AND *THE HANDMAID’S TALE*

Twentieth century can be regarded as one of the most controversial and significant era in history of mankind which is a turning point for humanity and the way they think. The most important wars such as the First and the Second World War take place in this era. The most significant scientific discoveries in different fields that could affect human’s life happen in this era. Also this century witness’s major shift in the way that vast numbers of people lived as result of changes in politics, ideology, economics, society, culture, science, technology, and medicine. Due to such changes and progresses throughout the world, the life of people and their relationship became more complex than any other eras.

This era influences the literature and literary texts and leads into emergence of genre of science fiction and this situation causes many writers to create works that feature the future of humanity in genre of science fiction. Their works’ theme is mostly apocalypse and how people would live in alienated world in which they are severely controlled by ruling class; it is exactly what Margaret Atwood (1939) does in *Handmaid’s Tale* (1988). She creates the atmosphere of fear and oppression after the apocalypse in which people especially women are treated like slaves and they have no exact definition of their own identity. They are trained in a way that ideology wants and they surrender to ruling class consciously and unconsciously as Brisha (2011) claims:

In the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood brings the clear picture of the new republic which throws away the U.S. Constitution and establishes the Republic of Gilead in which women are viewed only as reproductive machines. This is because of the low birth-rates due to environmental crisis such as various nuclear plant accidents, leakages from chemical and biological-warfare stockpiles, toxic waste deposital sites and the use of chemical insecticides etc...(1)

## Althusser

Louise Althusser (1918-1990) can be put among Marxist thinkers. He Studied and supported what Karl Marx did and appreciated his method as a new science. Luke Ferret (2006) remarks:

From 1960, Althusser began a series of highly influential studies on the philosophy of Karl Marx (1818–1883), which he published in 1965 under the title *For Marx*. Against the current trend to integrate Marx's work into contemporary systems of thought, including Catholicism, Althusser insisted that Marx had founded a radically new science, incommensurable with all non-Marxist thought (3).

The concept of ideology is one of the most important concepts that Louise Althusser expanded and elaborated based on Karl Marx's idea. In Marx's view, people of a society are completely aware of this phenomenon. However Althusser elaborates and complicated this concept and adds more aspects to it. In his idea, ideology functions in practice more than theory. In his view Marx did not use scientific language to describe ideology and ideology is a complete unconscious phenomenon and abstract concept. As Althusser (1969) describe it:

Ideology is indeed a system of representations, but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with 'consciousness': they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their 'consciousness'. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them (233).

Althusser dedicates a great deal of his work to the concept of ideology. It can be said that "Althusser's most influential contribution to literary and cultural studies has been his theory of ideology" (75). As it was mentioned earlier, Althusser could present a more complete basis of ideology based on Marxist work in Althusser's idea, society is made of two different and separate levels that each operates independently. One level acts as repressive side in which laws and rules are enforced and violation of them has severe consequences and it is called 'repressive state apparatus'. Althusser (1971) writes:

The State Apparatus (SA) contains: the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc., which constitute what I shall in future call the Repressive State Apparatus. Repressive suggests that the State Apparatus in question 'functions by violence' – at least ultimately (since repression, e.g. administrative repression, may take non-physical forms). (137)

## 3. IDEOLOGY

Ideology is a concept which its existence was in parallel with the existence of human beings from the creation or evolution of human beings. However for thousands of years this concept was invisible to conscious subjects and in recent centuries some philosophers could be attracted to this concept and it can be claimed that "The concept of ideology has come to be associated with Marxism and Weber's account of the Protestant ethic is widely thought to

oppose Marx's celebrated contention" (Levine 25). Hence this concept is significant for Marxism and its branches particularly structural Marxism which emerged after Karl Marx and it can be relate to situation of life. Spencer et al. quotes in Lacassagne (2011) that "Ideology plays a particular role in the neo-Marxist theory of Louis Althusser (1977), who considers ideology as an important function of the existing social power relations" (65).

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Althusser categorizes the ways that can be used to control people in society. The first way is obvious in each society and people are aware of them. It is conditional; people know if they break the certain rules and violate them, they will be punished severely. This, method according to Althusser is called 'Repressive State Apparatus' which is:

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Hence government and ruling class of society uses such severe forces to dominate the society and practices the ideology of ruling class. The trace of oppression and repression can be realized throughout the novel. Different ways of oppression can be detected throughout the novel from the very beginning. In a conversation, it has been said that:

Last week they shot a woman, right about here. She was a Martha. She was fumbling in her robe, for her pass, and they thought she was hunting for a bomb. They thought she was a man in disguise. There have been such incidents. Rita and Cora knew the woman. I heard them talking about it, in the kitchen. Doing their job, said Cora. Keeping us safe. Nothing safer than dead, said Rita, angrily. She was minding her own business. No call to shoot her. It was an accident, said Cora. (Atwood 17)

Althusser (1971) writes that "the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus. The State is a 'machine' of repression, which enables the ruling classes (in the nineteenth century the bourgeois class and the 'class' of big landowners) to ensure their domination over the working" (137). This can be proved in other incidents of the story. While characters are on the way, Offred tries to describe a horrific situation as such:

What they are hanging from is hooks. The hooks have been set into the brickwork of the Wall, for this purpose. Not all of them are occupied. The hooks look like appliances for the armless. Or steel question marks, upside-down and sideways. It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted. (Atwood 29)

The oppression is common throughout the society and it can be proved since "Both novels [The Handmaid's Tale and 19884] envision a society in which perpetual war is used as a rationale for internal repression" (Bloom, 2004: 97). Also in the novel Aunts are used as the

weapons of repression as he believes that “The Aunts are repressive. Radical feminists can be repressive too. In the active syllogism of power, the premises of repression lead to conclusions of oppression” (81). This issue is reflected in the story as such:

No longer kneeling at the foot of the bed, knees on the hard wood of the gym floor, Aunt Elizabeth standing by the double doors, arms folded, cattle prod hung on her belt, while Aunt Lydia strides along the rows of kneeling night gowned women, hitting our backs or feet or bums or arms lightly, just a flick, a tap, with her wooden pointer if we slouch or slacken. She wanted our heads bowed just right, our toes together and pointed, our elbows at the proper angle. Part of her interest in this was aesthetic: she liked the look of the thing. She wanted us to look like something Anglo-Saxon, carved on a tomb; or Christmas cardangels, regimented in our robes of purity. But she knew too the spiritual value of bodily rigidity, of muscle strain: a little pain cleans out the mind, she'd say. (Atwood 173)

So as it is clear the Aunts here use force as a repressive act to train women how to act like real women in the past. Hence any disobedience from what it is said about how to behave must be punished physically.

Eventually it can be said that the Repressive State Apparatus or RSA plays an important role at maintaining social order of society and practicing disciplines which are related to the needs of ruling class in the system as Ferretter reminds that “What Althusser means is this. The RSA performs its social function, namely, maintaining the economic dominance of the ruling class or class alliance, through force or the immediate threat of force” (84).

ISA

Repression is not the only way to be used as a manipulative method however it is one of the oldest and most primitive methods to control people in dictatorial systems. In more advanced societies and systems there are other ways that they do not need to be so obvious and violent and even they can be more effective. Such methods are always available and around people and system does not intervene directly. One of them which has been developed by Althusser is called ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ which is another state’s tools of controlling like repression though it operates differently.

Handmaid’s tale by Margaret Atwood is a great example which can show how ideology is operating in discursive way. Language is the most important tools to impose ideology upon characters. Howells (2006) believes that “Metalinguistic play with both polysemy and paronomasia are notoriously recurrent devices in The Handmaid’s Tale to critique the institutional linguistic practices serving to promote ideology” (123).

Having read the novel carefully, the reader can trace the dominant ideology of ruling class based on Althusser’s ideas. There are different ways that the system employs to transfer its ideology and makes subjects breathe ideology unconsciously. Luke Ferretter writes:

He means that ideology is primarily the kind of discourse that we do not consciously appropriate for ourselves, rationally judging it to be true. It is not the kind of discourse to which, having critically reflected upon it, a person makes a conscious act of assent. Rather, ideology comprises the stream of discourses, images and ideas that are all around us all the time, into which we are born, in which we grow up, and in which we live, think and act. (77)

Also there are some agents who practice and act out the ideology of ruling class by their own doctrines and speeches. In the novel and from the very beginning the reader can understand the responsibility of Aunts which is just train the maids and transfer the ideology unconsciously. The horrible and strict situation of maids can be justified by what Aunt says; speeches such as “Think of it as being in the army, said Aunt Lydia” (Atwood 3) or “Where I am not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or” (Atwood 4). These two sentences show that Aunt Lydia is an agent of system who tries to train Offred indirectly and make her like situation so she is imposing ideology.

Althusser believes in unconsciousness of ideology as a complicated term hence whatever is said in society are just some concepts and images that try to dominate minds of subjects so that the subjects are not aware of such doctrines and concepts. In the novel, such concepts exist to control the minds of subjects unconsciously. In one scene Offred says:

I walk to the corner and wait. I used to be bad at waiting. They also serve who only stand and wait, said Aunt Lydia. She made us memorize it. She also said, Not all of you will make it through. Some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns. Some of you are shallow-rooted. She had a mole on her chin that went up and down while she talked. She said, Think of yourselves as seeds, and right then her voice was wheedling, conspiratorial, like the voices of those women who used to teach ballet classes to children, and who would say, Arms up in the air now; let's pretend we're trees. I stand on the corner, pretending I am a tree. (Atwood 10)

Again the agent of ideology emphasizes the ideas of present situation: “Ordinary, said Aunt Lydia, is what you are used to. This may not seem ordinary to you now, but alter a time it will, It will he-come ordinary” (Atwood 31). What character is suggesting here is that by passing time, the situation gets ordinary and becomes experience and shapes the experience of character in the world unconsciously? Luke Ferretter writes that “Althusser puts this most clearly when he describes ideology as the way in which people understand their world. Ideology, for Althusser, is the set of discourses in whose terms we understand our experience – it constitutes the world of our experience, our ‘world’, itself” (77).

Althusser believes that each subject is given a role in society in which the subject has to fulfill the role according to requirements of the system so his/ her existence is characterized by the social position of the person in society. Accordingly, Ferretter writes:

The science of historical materialism tells me about the material reality of my existence in the complex set of forces and relations of production that comprise the capitalist mode of production. Ordinarily, though, I do not think of my life in these terms. If I am in business, I might think of my life as a kind of competition, in which I need to be more shrewd, intelligent and hard-working than all the others. (78)

Such roles can be found out throughout the novel. Offred says that “I wait, for the household to assemble. Household: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship” (Atwood 68). It can be understood that Commander is a boss because society and ideology of it wants him, so whatever he orders, must be obeyed until death since he has the power to rule.

Another thing that ideology does is that it tricks people into belief that people are free to do what they want. Ideology does it unconsciously without they being aware of it as Althusser (1969) believes that “Men live their actions, usually referred to as freedom and ‘consciousness’ by the classical tradition, in ideology, by and through ideology; in short, the ‘lived’ relation between men and the world, including History (in political action or inaction), passes through ideology, or better, is ideology itself.” (233). Therefore whatever the subject does he supposes himself/ herself as the origin of it which considers it as freedom. However it is not freedom and it is the work of ideology.

What has been mentioned above regarding freedom and ideology can be found throughout the novel. Offred mentions that “A block past All Flesh, Ofglen pauses, as if hesitant about which way to go. We have a choice. We could go straight back, or we could walk the long way around. We already know which way we will take, because we always take it” (Atwood 27) and in other scene she says that “Rita scowls at me before slipping in to stand behind me. It's my fault, this waste of her time. Not mine, but my body's, if there is a difference. Even the Commander is subject to its whims” (Atwood 68). Here in the case of former determinism and the latter whims of male sex are ideology of ruling class in which the protagonist considers herself as the origin and free agent.

Also the freedom that is mentioned throughout history is ironic since freedom is practiced under some limitation which deconstructs the concept of freedom and makes it a nonexistent concept as protagonist says that “On this day we can do anything we want. I revise that: within limits” (94) or “A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze” (145).

## 5. CONCLUSION

In each society that is made of different groups with different scopes of dominance over people that are below them, there would be different weapons for them to retain their position as superior and dominant. Such weapons take different forms ranging from violent treatment, imprisonment, execution, exile to non-violent ways such as ideas that seem beautiful superficially.

One of the most significant effects that these ideas plays in subject's life in form of ideology is creating illusion that can trick people and deceive them. The understanding that ideology creates for people is not based on reality though people are deceived. In fact “Although ideology comprises the discourses in whose terms I understand my life, this understanding is a misunderstanding” (Ferretter 78). So the world in which we are living is not real but an illusion that playing it is own game. Therefore the subjects can be manipulated and controlled by the name of ideology.

Having read the novel, it could be understood that different forms of oppression have been employed to repress people in this society. The ruling class uses the most extreme way of intimidating people such as execution and hanging bodies in the public. The armed forces could be seen in all over the city and they are at the highest level of awareness. Moreover the ruling class uses other ways than oppression; they attempt to control people through different institutions such as language, movies, books and other ways associated with mind. Therefore this novel is a great example of using RSA and ISA that have been proposed by Louise Althusser in totalitarian societies.

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