

# Althusserian Reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*

**Maryam Moradi, Fatemeh AzizMohammadi**

Department of English language, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran  
Department of English language, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

E-mail address: mono.maryam125@yahoo.com, f-azizmohammadi@iau\_arak.ac.ir

## ABSTRACT

Louis Althusser (1918-1990) builds on the work of Jacques Lacan to understand the way ideology functions in society. He thus moves away from the earlier Marxist understanding of ideology. In the earlier model, ideology was believed to create what was termed 'false consciousness', a false understanding of the way the world functioned. Althusser explains that for Marx "Ideology is [...] thought as an imaginary construction whose status is exactly like the theoretical status of the dream among writers before Freud. For those writers, the dream was the purely imaginary, i.e. null, result of the 'day's residues'" (1971:108). Althusser, by contrast, approximates ideology to Lacan's understanding of reality, the world we construct around us after our entrance into the symbolic order. For Althusser, as for Lacan, it is impossible to access the real conditions of existence due to our reliance on language. This could be seen throughout the novel by Margaret Atwood who writes *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) based on the concept of ideology. This is about how the heroine of the story and other women in the society are manipulated by the ideology of ruling class through a communist society. In such a world nothing is real and everything is just an illusion that is made by ruling class. The subjects trapped or forced to believe such misconceptions and unreality through different techniques that are employed by the rulers. The dominant forces and ideology are so strong that the subject at the end gets a new identity since she is required unconsciously without her knowing. The other aspect shown by this novel is the failure of revolution and communism in this society and persistence of capitalism that it never disappears.

**Keywords:** Misrecognition; Failure of Communism; Capitalism; Interpellation; Priest and Despot

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian and theocratic state that has replaced the United States of America. Because of dangerously low reproduction rates, Handmaids are assigned to bear children for elite couples that have trouble conceiving. Offred serves the Commander and his wife. Every month, when Offred is at the right point in her menstrual cycle, she must have impersonal, wordless sex with the Commander while Serena sits behind her, holding her hands. Offred's freedom, like the freedom of all women, is completely restricted. She can leave the house only on shopping trips, the door to her room cannot be completely shut, and the Eyes, Gilead's secret police force, watch her every public move.

*The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is a dystopian novel, by Canadian author Margaret Atwood who was born in Ottawa, Canada in 1939 and she spent her childhood there. She is the author of over thirty-five books, ranging from novels to poetry, short story collections,

books of essays and books that defy easy classification. Atwood is also the author of six children's books. She has written for various ages in different genres. Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson (2002) claims that "Atwood has written everything from children's books to literary and cultural criticism. Her work has been translated into over twenty-two languages and forms the basis of course syllabi from A Level to postgraduate work, and an entire academic society" (3).

Also some critics traces Atwood's autobiography and her real reflection of life in her own works but she denies it. It is claimed that "although a number of critics have traced autobiographical resonances in her work... Atwood herself generally insists on the distance between herself and her creations" (3). Maybe like other female writers she is one of the authors who were victim of male bias in writing too and her gender made challenges during her work since "Atwood has also struggled with the focus on her looks, and has commented in several essays about the difficulties of being a woman writer" (5). 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.

## 2. FAILURE OF COMMUNISM IN GILEAD AS A DYSTOPIAN SOCIETY

According to Marxist school of thought, there will be a time when the working class of society comes to understanding that they are being exploited by capitalism and ruling class. Under such condition, money and the value which is associated with it would mark everything thing and materialism would spread out throughout society. Even people and the relationship among them are would be characterized in terms of financial value. A lot of people have to work so hard in order that a few people get most of the wealth in society. Althusser (1969) writes:

This brings us to the real heart of the problem, and close to all the temptations both of idealism and of a hasty materialism. . . . For, at first sight, we are in familiar territory, I mean in that conceptual landscape in which we can identify private property, capital, money, the division of labour, the alienation of the labourer, his emancipation and the humanism which is his promised future. These are all, or nearly all, categories we shall meet again in Capital, and on this basis we might accept them as anticipations of Capital, or better, as a project for Capital... (158)

However when proletariat in society realize the situation and start to rebel against the dominant injustice in the society, they can improve the situation and move the society towards socialism and communism in which money is no longer in use and has no exchange or sign value and people are equal. Hence not only does financial situation of the society put pressure on working class, but also this class is limited in other aspects so the proletariat and intellectuals revolt to achieve the advantages in society. Althusser (1969) believes:

The social, political, religious, ideological and moral conditions prevailing in these countries quite simply denied their intellectuals any activity, the ruling classes (the nobility and the bourgeoisie, allied and united in their class interests and supported by the Churches) could in general only offer them servile and derisory employment. Under these conditions, the intellectuals could only seek their freedom and future at the side of the working class, the only revolutionary class. (24-5)

The state in Gilead is a dystopian society which mostly deals with power, oppression, fear and censorship. Although the governors sought to establish a society without any crimes, inequality and corruption, they failed to do so and instead they made a prison in which everyone is under control and people especially women are slaves. However some elements of communism can be traced in this novel when Offred says that “The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope. Even now that there is no real money anymore, there's still a black market. There's always a black market, there's always something that can be exchanged” (Atwood 11). Like communist society money is not valuable and people cannot purchase, rather government gives them what they need. In another scene, money and its value and how it used to be employed are explained by Offred:

It was considered the normal thing. Now it's like remembering the paper money, when they still had that. My mother kept some of it, pasted into her scrapbook along with the early photos. It was obsolete by then, you couldn't buy anything with it. Pieces of paper, thickish, greasy to the touch, green-colored, with pictures on each side, some old man in a wig and on the other side a pyramid with an eye above it. It said In God We Trust. My mother said people used to have signs beside their cash registers, for a joke: In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash. That would be blasphemy now. (Atwood 153)

It suggests that in present time, money is just a worthless paper that cannot be exchanged with any other commodity as before. Hence such scenes beside sentence “If there had still been portable money, it would have been more difficult” (Atwood 154) shows that this society is a communist society to some extents however it cannot fulfill the ideals of communism and capitalism still remains. It can be said that most of communist society as it was suggested in Marxist school can have class struggle though concepts of money does not exist and is not used anymore.

### 3. DOMINATION OF CAPITALISM

According to various structuralist Marxists particularly one of the most significant student of Althusser's – Pierre Macherey (1938) – each literary work consists of various meanings that is not just creation of the creative mind of author but different forces governing the society which includes the ideologies and interests of ruling class.

Hence reading of this novel would reflect the social class gap of the societies which has been concern since Marxist time so it is the concern of Althusser too. Like Marx, Althusser believes in the role of economy governing the system of society however it is not just economy which plays the most important role. In other words “Although Althusser does not necessarily reject the Marxist model of base/superstructure, he does, more or less, emphasize

how ideology is more pervasive and more “material” than previously acknowledged in the Marxist tradition” (Macris, 1998: 28).

This novel is replete with social struggles of different classes in the dystopian world where politics and the rank and power of different classes are considered important. From the very beginning of the novel, the division of people from different classes of society can be seen: “At the bottom of the stairs there's a hat-and-umbrella stand...There are several umbrellas in it: black, for the Commander, blue, for the Commander's Wife, and the one assigned to me, which is red” (Atwood 5). In this scene it is the color which distinguishes people from each other. The color “black is beautiful” and “blackness” is an essence or power” (Ferber, 1999: 29) shows the domination and power of commander over other characters. The other ideological color that is in interest of capitalist society is blue “Because it is the color of the sky (and perhaps because the sea is blue only on sunny days), blue is traditionally the color of heaven, of hope, of constancy, of purity, of truth, of the ideal. In Christian color-symbolism blue belongs to the Virgin” (3). Hence all good quality such as chastity and integrity is associated with the wife of commander who is the member of bourgeois and the limitation of different classes can be shown by color differences as Althusser and Balibar (1968) believe that “In the capitalist mode of production, the forms of class struggle are first inscribed in the forms of the production process in general, they appear as a confrontation of forces within certain limits” (222). The other color that stereotypes the working class is red. Offred is the handmaid who is exploited by ruling class and her umbrella is red since it “show(s) embarrassment, anger..Red is sometimes the color of the devil” (169) which equals the working class with mischievous people and it is just the stereotype that working class is associated with. Since “The working classes on...who on the whole do not read ‘literature’” (Ferretter, 2006: 128) should be separated from other classes and they do not deserve to be with higher classes in society and need their own mark to distinguish them from the rest. As story goes on the difference in social classes can be revealed. Chapter 4 opens with description of house, car and some characters which represents the domination of ruling class over other people:

I open the white picket gate and continue, past the front lawn and towards the front gate. In the driveway, one of the Guardians much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth. It's black, of course, the color of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek. The driver is going over it with a chamois, lovingly. This; it least hasn't changed, the way men caress good cars. Assigned to our household is washing the car. That must mean the Commander is in the house, in his own quarters, past the dining room and beyond, where he seems to stay most of the time. The car is a very expensive one, a Whirlwind; better than the Chariot much better than the chunky, practical Behemoth. It's black, of course, the color of prestige or a hearse, and long and sleek. The driver is going over it with a chamois, lovingly. This; it least hasn't changed, the way men caress good cars. (Atwood 13-4)

What is being described here shows how capitalism is working and other people are exploited according to interest of capitalists. Althusser (1971) believes that “To produce the maximum of commodities at the lowest price in order to get the highest profit, such is the irresistible tendency of capitalism. Naturally, it goes hand in hand with an increasing exploitation of labour power” (83).

The color that is picked for the car suggests the darkness of the situation in which people are living and represents hell since “in Shakespeare death, hell, Acheron, and Hecate are all black, while we also learn that “Black is the badge of hell,/ the hue of dungeons, and the school of night”(28). Hence the capitalism that is dominant means hell for people. The description of Nick, as the driver of commander shows people in lower class are considered inferior physically and mentally. In this scene Offred is describing Nick:

He lives here, in the household, over the garage. Low status: he hasn't been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn't rate: some defect, lack of connections. But he acts as if he doesn't know this, or care, He's too casual, he's not servile enough. It may be stupid- ity, but I don't think so. Smells fishy, they used to say; or, I smell a rat Misfit as odor. Despite myself, I think of how he might smell. Not fish or decaying rat; tanned skin, moist in the sun, filled with smoke. I sigh, inhaling. (Atwood 14)

It can be understood that economy has always been an effective weapon for ruling class to keep their position in society. Through their ignorance, they make other classes look inferior so they are able to claim the power and be in charge of work and workers as Althusser and Balibar (1970) believe that “In this way, classical political economy believed it had ascended from the accidental prices of labour to the real value of labour. It then determined this value by the value of the subsistence goods necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of the labourer” (20). When Offred goes shopping, she describes the situation and how people are categorized into different groups according to their clothes. Their clothes show their social rank. She says:

We turn the corner onto a main street, where there's more traffic. Cars go by, black most of them, some gray and brown. There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can. Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing. You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars. (Atwood 20-1)

#### 4. MISRECOGNITION AND IDEOLOGY

One of the most significant effects that ideology plays in subject's life 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.

Now this question is raised: how ideology deceives people? Althusser could answer this question with the help of Lacan's work. The work of ideology is not accidental; it exists and operates since there is interest within it for the creator of ideology in different terms. Ferretter remarks:

Althusser takes the term *méconnaissance*, 'misrecognition', from the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1980). In Althusser's account of ideology, it retains the connotation of desire that it has in Lacan's psychoanalysis. In other words, Althusser means that in misrepresenting or 'misrecognizing' historical reality, ideology expresses a wish or a desire. We misrepresent the world in ideology because we want to do so, because there is some reward or benefit to us in doing so. The nature of this reward differs with respect to the class position of the individual living within a given ideology – a factory hand believes in God in a different way from a factory owner – but in every case, in Althusser's view, ideology misrepresents reality because people want it to do so. (70)

Ideology and illusion which is its consequence are epidemic like a disease throughout the novel. This can be found in different scenes such as:

There were marches, of course, a lot of women and some men. Butscared. And when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. A few things were blown up, post offices, subway stations. But you couldn't even be sure who was doing it. It could have been the army, to justify the computer searches and the other ones, the door to-doors they were smaller than you might have thought. I guess people were. (Atwood 160-1)

In the passage, ruling class represents their action which is controlling people through operation of ideology and justifies it and they do it so subtly that even the subjects started to think in the ideology's framework of ruling class. Offred explains that "Maybe I don't really want to know what's going on. Maybe I'd rather not know. Maybe I couldn't bear to know. The Fall was a fall from innocence to knowledge." (Atwood 174). In another situation she goes on that "It's strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeters of our lives. I was like that too, I did that too" (Atwood 204). So it is the subjects who deceive themselves and it shows the power of operating ideology in the society that penetrates into minds of people.

## 5. PRIESTS AND DESPOTS THEORY

The theory of priests and despots plays an important role in mechanism and operation of ideology since it can change the illusion that the ruling class creates in the society. Althusser (1971) believes:

Priests or Despots are responsible. They 'forged' the Beautiful Lies so that, in the belief that they were obeying God, men would in fact obey the Priests and Despots, who are usually in alliance in their imposture, the Priests acting in the interests of the Despots or vice versa, according to the political positions of the 'theoreticians' concerned. (163)

Having read the novel, the reader can detect the lies and illusions that have been created by dominant class. Commander compares the current situation with old times in which corruption was common in the society. Offred narrates what the commander said:

We've given them more than we've taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before. Don't you remember the singles' bars, the indignity of high school blind dates? The meat market. Don't you remember the terrible gap between the ones who could get a man easily and the ones who couldn't? Some of them were desperate, they starved themselves thin or pumped their breasts full of silicone, had their noses cut off. Think of the human misery. (Atwood 196)

What commander tells is lie to show that the past was filled with sin but now they are following God's orders and they are all priests who must be obeyed by the people of the society particularly women. It is the ideology which forges such lies so the dominant class makes women dedicate themselves to the.

## 6. INTERPELLATION AND IDENTITY

Identity can be defined as "Particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that, in short- or long-term ways, give one a consistent personality and mode of social being" (Hall, 2004: 3). Human beings and identity have always been together and it is the identity that gives the subject existence. One way in which an identity can be shaped is the relationship that the subject can find with his/ her surrounding environment. Therefore if the created relationship is not based on reality and it is filled with the illusion, the identity is illusory. Moreover some philosophers particularly postmodern ones believe that identity is not shaped objectively, rather it is given through different forces in society.

Althusser associates identity with ideology; as it was mentioned before ideology exists in discourse within the society and unconsciously affects the awareness of the subject in the society. It is like somebody is out there and yells at him/ her to control the subject. Ideology tells the subject your existence makes you act in certain ways hence the subject's understanding of his/ her identity is an illusion. In Althusser's terminology it is called 'interpellation'. Ferretter writes:

By the thesis, 'ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects', Althusser means first of all that the most fundamental category of ideology – the category on which is founded all other ideological categories and concepts – is that of the 'subject'. It is in bourgeois ideology that the term 'subject' first arises...The concept of the free and self- determining subject is therefore an ideological concept. In reality, each human being exists as an individual inserted into the complex set of practices...by which her society produces the material conditions of its members' lives. (88-9)

In the novel, the identity and subjectivity of the characters are always challenged by the ruling class however they are product of the society and ideology interpellates them. In one scene, Offred talks about 'we' and the essence that has been given and shaped by the ideology of ruling class; the ideology defines determines the limitation of 'we'. Offred says that "We

were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories” (Atwood 49). The protagonist talks about another incident: “I lower my eyes to the path, glide by her, hoping to be invisible, knowing I'll be ignored. But not this time. "Offred," she says. I pause, uncertain. "Yes, you. " I turn towards her my blinkered sight. "Come over here. I want you."” (Atwood 179-180). Before Serena calls her, Offred thought that she was invisible and she did not have any existence but when she calls and says ‘hey you there’ she is given an identity and existence and she can be seen however this identity that is given to her, is not real and for herself; it is the work of ideology in which ruling class wants to exploit her when Serena mentions ‘I want you’. Althusser (1968) believes:

Ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace every day police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’. (162-3)

## 7. CONCLUSION

According to Althusser’s concepts of ideology, there are different techniques that can be used to change the appearances of lies and put into new form and shape so the lies would seem attractive and its persuasion power is increased. These techniques can be shown as techniques of priests and despots so the controlling image of ruling class remains intact. Since “The identity of Gilead physically, and ideologically depends on the colonization of physical space and the subjection of the physical body, where the status control of the body and of space are metaphors for each other” (Bignell, 2000: 12), the novel projects a critique of brutalisation and Atwood is concerned with dismantling the system of society that oppresses feelings and emotions of human beings. Atwood has created horrifying bleak and disoriented psychic and moral world of Gilead to make readers experience how this dystopia can be considered as a code for the colonized and enslaved state. To end what has been discussed about ideological operation, it is noteworthy to quote from Rigney (1987):

By remaining uninvolved, by maintaining innocence, the people of a nation have forfeited human rights and become slaves in the near future society of Gilead... Big Brother... is not simply an embodiment of patriarchy, nor of God, but rather of ideology, in general; Gilead has permitted itself to be poisoned with radio activity and with a far more precise entity: fanaticism that is political, religious and moral. (117)

Therefore it should be noted that, the ruling class of this society is using different ways to show that they’re right and people have to follow them. As the some passages from the text indicate, the communist movement that is mostly based on equality among the members of the society fails since the hierarchical relation and the system of master-slave remains however its form has been changed. The reason is the use of different techniques that have been focus of the study; the ruling class changes their lies and presents them in the form that the people of that society want.



---

## References

- [1] Althusser, Louise. *For Marx*. Trans. by Ben Brewster. London: The Penguin Press, 1969.
- [2] Althusser, Louise. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. by Ben Brewster. London: Unwin Brothers Limited, The Gresham Press, 1971.
- [3] Althusser, Louise. *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx*. Trans. by Ben Brewster. France: Presses Universitaires de France, Paris. 1970.
- [4] Althusser, Louise and Balibar, Étienne. *Reading Capital (part 1)*. Trans. by Ben Brewster. France: Librairie François Maspero, 1970.
- [5] Bignell, Jonathan. "Territories, Boundaries, Identities", Margaret Atwood the shape shifter in memory of Iqbal Kaur, 2000.
- [6] Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- [7] Fretterer, Luke. *Louis Althusser*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- [8] Hall, Donald. *Subjectivity*. Ed. John Drakakis, University of Stirling: Routledge 2004.
- [9] Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl. *The Cambridge Introduction to Margaret Atwood*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- [10] Macris, Vicki. "The Ideological Conditions of Social Reproduction". *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol. 9. no. 1, 1998.
- [11] Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Women Writers*, 1987.

( Received 14 February 2015; accepted 26 February 2015 )