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## ANALYSING HULU'S ADAPTATION OF ATWOOD'S NOVEL *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* AND ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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**Abstract:** Hulu's adaptation of Margaret Atwood's much celebrated novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) deviates from the original to make an identity of its own. While the series deviate from the main text, it emphasises the need to bring about a change and challenges the structures which remain unshakeable throughout the novel. The adaptation explores themes of gender, patriarchy, good governance, theocratic regime in a more nuanced way than portrayed in the novel and its relevance in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** dystopia, theocratic regime, adaptation, subversion, multiple perspectives, digitalisation.

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Text (literary or cinematic) is always born out of a particular context, be it social, political or cultural. The text usually mirrors certain issues through it and aims to make the readers or the audience sensitive to them. In literary pieces, we find the writer using various tropes in order to attain this particular goal. If catharsis was the way to make the audience connect to the hero and his downfall then Brecht's alienation effect was to make the audience critical, objective and question particular notions. So, when literary texts got adapted into visual media there was a staunch disagreement to it. The potentiality of the visual text and its impact on the audience was always questioned.

Critic Theodore Dreiser in this context, comments- "Film adaptation of novel is not so much a belittling as a debauching process, which works harm to the mind of the entire world. For the debauching of any good piece of literature is- well, what? Criminal? Ignorant? Or both? I leave it to the reader". (Dreiser)

Television or cinematic adaption of any literary text has always been questioned on the grounds of authenticity. Critics along with readers for a long time believed that a cinematic adaptation can never do justice to the literary text which was always seen as superior in its form. Adaptations of literary texts in

visual media was scrutinised and were labelled with derogatory terms in its days of inception and for a long time even after that. But with time, this perception underwent a drastic change and readers as well as critics began to analyse 'adaptation' as a way through which a text survives the ravages of time and sometimes attain more relevance in the contemporary scenario in comparison to the timeframe when it was written. The 'adaptation theory' now shifted its focus from what is lost in the process of adaptation to what the text has gained by taking the new avatar.

Though adaptation in mainstream movies tries to remain grounded to the text, there are multiple socio-political and cultural issues that force the production to undergo certain level of sanitisation before it is presented to the large scale audience and this very act leads to the actual loss of purpose of the visual.

But 'digitalisation' has brought about a revolution in the visual media. Web series that came along with digitalisation believed in offering its audience maximum entertainment with its crisp story line, detailed character depiction and portraying topics which are otherwise sidelined in mainstream visuals.

Adaptation of popular novels and short stories is very common in web series and the impact it creates is beyond comprehension.

This paper is an attempt to understand how Hulu modifies and diverts in its adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a web series from its earlier novel form published in 1985.

### **Depiction of Dystopic Narrative**

Writers across time have used various tropes to comment, critic or urge the readers to bring about a change in the society. Set in distant future, dystopic narratives explore the horrific, disastrous condition of human life in a post apocalyptic world ruled by totalitarian or theocratic government. Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written in 1985 explores this theme of dystopia in United States where the democratic government is replaced by a religion- based totalitarian regime. Atwood in one of her interviews says that she started writing the novel when she was in Berlin during the Cold War and looked up to America as the society of hope and of democracy. She says- "The experience of having people change the subject, being fearful of talking to you, not knowing who they can trust, all of that was there"; and this exact kind of censorship, monitoring is reflected in her novel too. The dystopic state of Gilead has a Wall where dead bodies of people are exhibited to show others what it means to go against the government. The Wall in the novel alludes to the Berlin Wall that separated West Germany from East Germany.

The protagonist of the novel is Offred who is a handmaid in this regime and also the narrator of the story. The novel is Offred's dramatic monologue which is often broken, fragmented, distorted and left unexplored. The protagonist at multiple points in her narrative talks about her urge to just be alive and not to resist the government and their laws. The novel ends very ambiguously leaving the readers in a state of confusion as to what happened to Offred once she sat inside the van in the last chapter. The

chapter 'Historical Notes' that acts as a postscript nails the last bit of hope that the readers might have housed and thus qualifies as a dystopic novel. But the treatment of this dystopic narrative is slightly different in the web adaptation of the novel. While the novel ended on a bleak note, the web adaptation goes one step further to explore multiple complexities from this very particular point. Season II of *The Handmaid's Tale* begins from that point where the novel ended and attempt to give its audience a kind of closure. As the plot progresses the viewers feel a sense of hope rather than complete ambiguity and uncertainty that a reader might have felt.

## **Multiple Voices**

The problem with a single narrator is that a reader gets a single perspective and fails to explore the nuances. But many a times a writer creates problematic narrators so that the readers question the authorial voice and his/her discourse. In the novel Atwood uses fragmented narrative techniques, collapse of time frames, gaps and blanks to make the reader question the authenticity of the narrator and this is also highlighted in the postscript. The book explores, judges and understands characters from the perspective of Offred. Individual characters are left unexplored or are killed in the course of action. But the web series again makes a stunning move by allowing voice to multiple characters that are rendered speechless in the novel. Characters like Moira (Ruby), Emily (Ofglen), Janine (Ofwarren) Luke, Hannah, Serena Joy and many others are given voice at least to share their part of the story. This adds a new dimension for we can see and perceive the events from multiple angles and not judge anyone or anything as bad and good based solely on the narrator's perception. The novel does not stop here: in the entire course of the narrative the identity of the narrator is hinted once. The reader fails to figure out the name of the narrator. The narrator is called 'Offred' that is owned by Fred but the series very tactically not only gives her voice but makes her say her real name in the very first episode of the series.

The novel makes it hard to believe Offred but this disbelief is dismissed in the series not only by its multiple narrative voices but also of the realistic depiction of the same. Each character is sketched very carefully in the adaptation with perfect precision. The screenplay writers have tried to keep the characters as real as possible and never go overboard with them.

## **Treatment of themes and their subversion**

The most evident themes in *Handmaid's Tale* are gender oppression, autocratic rule, individual freedom and rights and hypocrisy. The novel explores the various levels of oppression met out to women and to some extent even men in the patriarchal regime of Gilead that envisages creating a utopic world by following the doctrines of The Old Testament. The state undergoes low fertility rate in women and thus believes a handful number of women should become 'Handmaids' following the story of Leah and Rachel from the Old Testament and help in procreation. The handmaids have no say in this kind of a setup. They are raped regularly in a state sanctioned law called 'The Ceremony'. Even the wife of the

commander who helped during the inception of the theocratic party is reduced to 'helpmate' and is restricted only to the domestic sphere. The state laws even determine and rule personal spaces. The state claims to be avid believers of Christianity and the novel does not explore the follies and the underlying hypocrisy of such a setup in a greater detail. Doubt, suspicion prevails among all the characters in the novel but all these themes are examined much deeply in the Hulu's adaptation.

Hulu's adaptation focuses on the larger theme of 'sisterhood' that is important to survive. All the characters who are perceived as 'spy' of one another turn out to be friends stuck together in the same condition. There is a point in the series where Offred leads the way and the other handmaid's enter the scene and slowly disperse and Offred says- "they should never have given us uniforms if they didn't want us to be an army."

This kind of resistance is completely denounced in the novel, whereas the adaptation advocates the need to resist and bring about a change. Episodes between Serena Joy and Offred are limited and are mostly sketchy in the novel. In the adaptation Serena Joy, Offred's owner and someone who hates her to the core, in the final episode of season II becomes her accomplice. Relationship between Nick and Offred, Offred and the network of Marthas all remain very ambiguous in the novel. The adaptation explores all these loose ends and brings about a closure by showing the rising resistance against government and advocates human love, empathy and unity even in times of despair. The hypocrisy of the government is explored at its best in season II when the government fails to understand the verses about love that Eden recites from the Bible before she is executed publicly. The novel and the series both have a chapter titled the 'Jezebel' where numerous women are trapped as prostitutes even though the state preaches purity and chastity. The fact that Moira and Emily (who are portrayed as homosexuals) survive at the end of the series again advocates the need for individual freedom to choose one's sexual orientation which cannot be dominated by the state.

### **Contemporary relevance**

Atwood comments in one of her interview-

When I was writing it, we were still in an age in which America was seen as a beacon of light, of liberal democracy, a model for the rest of the world ...We're not there anymore, because the rest of the world has changed and so has America. That is why I think people are seeing *The Handmaid's Tale* as more possible than they did when it was first published.

*The Handmaid's Tale* has brought about a revolution all around the world. The increasing popularity is because of its sudden relevance to the socio political condition of America which cannot be rejected. Released three months after Donald Trump's victory in US, the adaptation has strong undercurrents of what might happen if the government becomes a curb on personal freedom. The book which was popular during the release and got buried in the psyche suddenly resurfaced as soon as the adaptation hit the viewers market. Trump's certain authoritarian laws and his vice president's anti-gay and anti-

abortion laws flared up the fears that the series was portraying.

The season II of 'The Handmaid's Tale' became all the more vital because the progression in plot had undercurrents of the larger issue and deviates completely from the novel. The #metoo campaign which took a massive form in between 2017-2018 made its presence felt through Offred's life. The season focuses on how Offred mediates through the system and tries to grab onto power to make the most of it "not unlike women finding power in telling their own stories via #metoo and #timesup." The red robes and white bonnets soon became a sign of protest. Women dressed as Handmaids in U.S. recently protested against a Republican- sponsored bill intended to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act. Women from entertainment industry dressed as handmaids to protest against sexual harassment and unfair gender biases prevalent in the industry.

## **Conclusion**

While the debate goes on about the authenticity of literary text and the visual representation of the same, digitalisation in that context has really been successful in blurring those rigid lines of differences. Adaptations need to change the literary versions in order to get acclamation from its viewers and to definitely top the competition with other shows. Hulu's adaptation is a survival strategy in that case. The show would have lost its purpose if it had ended on such an abrupt note. Hulu's adaptation makes the necessary changes in order to make it relevant to the viewers of 21<sup>st</sup> century who otherwise might have failed to connect with the plot.

Every now and then authors and directors have revisited the past in order to comment, critic and reflect on a contemporary scenario and the adaptation is a masterpiece which brings various nuances to the viewers which otherwise would have been ignored.

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