

ISSUES OF CHILDHOOD AND SOCIAL UPBRINGING IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
DYSTOPIAN NOVEL "THE HANDMAID'S TALE"

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Abstract: This article analyzes issues of childhood and social upbringing in the context of the dystopian society described in Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's celebrated work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The paper demonstrates how, in the religiously and ideologically controlled society of Gilead, childhood, motherhood, and the educational system are transformed into political mechanisms. The study sheds light on the influence of the educational model presented in the work on human freedom, the formation of gender roles, and the ideological control of individual consciousness.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, dystopia, social education, childhood, gender, totalitarianism, control, feminism.

Since the end of the 20th century, issues of feminism, social equality, human freedom, and moral control have taken center stage in world literary studies. In this process, Margaret Atwood (1939) has gained particular recognition for her works rich in philosophical, political, and psychological layers. Her work critically analyzes the social and biological conditioning of the human psyche, as well as the concept of "humanity" controlled by society. Margaret Atwood's novel "*The Handmaid's Tale*" is one of the most influential examples of dystopian literature, in which all aspects of human life - in particular, motherhood, childhood, and upbringing - are presented as tools of political control and ideological formation.

In the work, the society of the Republic of Gilead creates a system of complete subjugation of its citizens, especially women, under the guise of "spiritual purity". In this process, childhood is not a natural biological stage, but an ideological construct controlled by the state. The writer's dystopian novel "*The Handmaid's Tale*", published in 1985, is currently being studied not only as a feminist, but also as a sociological and philosophical dystopia. The Republic of Gilead described in the work is a totalitarian state created on the basis of religious fanaticism, which completely controls all spheres of human life, including childhood and the system of upbringing. This article analyzes the system of childhood and social upbringing in Atwood's work and reveals the author's philosophical and critical attitude to this issue using artistic means.

The study used literary-analytical, sociological and feminist approaches. Through the method of literary analysis, the system of images in the work, symbolic signs, episodes related to childhood and upbringing were analyzed. Through the feminist approach, the mechanisms of the patriarchal system that determine the social role of women and children in the work were studied. Using sociological analysis, the ideological and pedagogical control systems of Gilead society were compared with real social phenomena.

Atwood shows how, through this process, human emotions - maternal love, compassion, freedom - are transformed into political tools. This can be understood from the following quote



from the work: *"We are containers; it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like the shell of a nut"*¹. (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ch.17) These lines reveal that a woman is not seen as a person, but as a "vessel" - that is, as the physical source of the birth process. In this way, Atwood exposes gender inequality in society and the control over the female body. The work represents the loss of the natural connection between childhood and motherhood, the reduction of a person to a biological function. Childrearing and ideological control play an important role in the work. In Atwood's work, the maternal instinct is interpreted not as a sacred feeling, but as a political resource. The "handmaids" are reduced to the level of "biological machines" that exist only to give birth. The children they give birth to belong not to them, but to the upper social class family of "Commanders". In this way, Gilead breaks the natural connection between motherhood and childhood, sacrificing it for the sake of ideological goals. Through this process, Atwood exposes how the social system can transform human emotions into a political tool.

In this work of Atwood, upbringing system is depicted as a tool of religious and political control. Children are raised in places such as religious institutions – "Red Center". In these centers, women and children are taught strict religious rules and moral standards. The content of education is based on the ideas of "obedience" and "purity". The author shows how through this system, education has become a mechanism that shapes a person not as a free individual, but as a creature subject to the system: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth". Although these words are taken from the Bible, in the work they are used for manipulative purposes, that is, forcing children to be obedient, and women to accept their fate. Thus, education in the society of Gilead shapes a person on the basis of ideological obedience, which leads to the complete loss of independent thinking.

Margaret Atwood uses the image of childhood as the ultimate symbol of freedom and humanity². In Gilead, children are no longer able to grow up in love and freedom, as they have become "children of the state." In this way, the author exposes the moral crisis in society. In the work, the separation of women from their children is a symbol of the loss of not only motherhood, but also of human values. The child is natural life, the mother is nature, and Gilead is an artificial system that controls this nature. The author also emphasizes that with the loss of childhood, society also loses its future. Atwood's dystopian work is actually aimed at warning humanity against ideological, religious, or political oppression.

Neuman interprets Gilead society as "a mechanism for the subjugation of women through an ideological system of education."³ The concept of childhood in Atwood's work is interpreted not as a natural process, but as an object of political and social control. The social education system functions in Gilead society as a means of ideologically shaping the human mind, subjugating women, and turning children into state property. Through the image of childhood, the author shows the loss of humanity, freedom, and moral values. Atwood's criticism is also relevant for modern societies, as she emphasizes the need to preserve free thought and humanistic values in human education.

In conclusion, it can be said that Margaret Atwood's dystopian work *"The Handmaid's Tale"* is a deep artistic analysis of the complex relationship between man and society, especially the politicization of childhood and upbringing. For Atwood, childhood is the purest and most innocent, and also the most natural state of humanity. However, in Gilead, this pure feeling has also become ideological control. Through this, the author warns the reader that humanity can

¹ Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.-P.24.

² Potts, Donna. *Contemporary Australian and Canadian Fiction: Writing in the Time of Globalisation*. Rodopi, 2012.

³ "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid's Tale*" (University of Toronto Quarterly, 2006).



lose its human essence if education serves political and religious pressures. Thus, Atwood's work is significant not only as a feminist dystopia, but also as a social novel that seeks a philosophical balance between education and freedom.

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