Title: Women's rights in theocracies as portrayed in *Persepolis* and *A Handmaid's Tale.*

Research Question: To What Extent Were Women's Rights Marginalized Through the Misuse of Religious Texts by the Theocracies Present in the Novels *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood?

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Introduction

The plight of women's rights has often been the subject of literature. It is usually written from a feminist viewpoint. This literature manifests the underlying social conditions that contribute to the oppression of women. This theme has had an impact on readers of a wide variety of literary genres. Religion is also a very popular theme for literature, often being an important factor to the plot. Women's rights and religion are seen by many as relative in the sense that for years, the subjugation of women has been mainly tied to theocracies.

This essay examines the marginalization of women's rights through the misuse of religious texts by the theocracies present in the novels *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Although *Persepolis* is a memoir and *The Handmaid's Tale* is science fiction, these genres contrast each other enough to note differences in the extent to which women are oppressed within the literature. To answer the research question, the conditions of life and a woman's stance in society before the theocratic revolutions were discussed. This is followed by an examination of education, the loss of rights, sexuality, and religion applicable to the oppression of women. Additional verses in the Qu'ran and the Bible as related to the novels were read in order to compare the validity of religious teachings present in both novels.

Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* focus on the story of cultural changes during revolutions that affected women with new social norms and restricted lifestyles. *Persepolis* focuses on how once liberal, Iranian female citizens living under democracy were able to advance academically, politically, and socially. Despite such progress, daily life for women drastically changed with the Iranian Revolution of 1979, also known as the Islamic Revolution. Although Marjane is a young child at the time of the revolution, she remembers life beforehand and keenly observes the changes that come about in her personal life as well as in society. *The Handmaid's Tale* is told through Offred's point of view as she is forced into being a "Handmaid" in the Republic of Gilead. Once a working mother in the United States, Offred, like all other women, is stripped of her family and independence during the Christian revolution. Both novels demonstrate how women's rights and statuses were eradicated by the radical theocracies that gained control of their societies. It is then that the already underlying marginalization of women surfaces and becomes a harsh reality, influencing most laws and actions that the new governments in both novels enforce. Iran's and Gilead's societal perceptions marginalized women's social liberties in accordance with the oppressive rulings of the theocracies that gained control over Iran and the United States.

II. "I will not let the deeds of any doer among you go to waste, male or female - you are both the same in that respect" (*Our'an* 3.195).

Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women dressed as they wished, most opting for a Westernized fashion. They indulged in makeup, clothing, dying their hair, and many other acts of aesthetics. Soon, laws were put in place that stripped women of such freedoms of vanity. Marji

watches as all women don a head covering at the urging of the fundamentalists. At first, many women oppose wearing the head covering. This incites many protests that soon turn into violent riots that end with many women being injured and physically beaten. Marji states, "Everywhere in the streets there were demonstrations for and against the veil" (Satrapi 5). Marji becomes confused about her thoughts on the veil. She felt that she was very religious, yet her family behaved very modern which she believes is the opposite of what the regime encourages Muslims to channel. Marji's own mother opposes being forced to wear the veil as does her father. She attends a protest but quickly becomes frightened for her safety after her picture appears in an Iranian magazine. Despite her objections to wearing the veil, she eventually submits to it for fear of experiencing the violence that is exerted upon women. This intimidation due to physical force used by the fundamentalists recurs throughout the novel as women attempt to defend their freedom.

In the years before the revolution, Offred enjoyed many freedoms in society. Women were able to express their thoughts, vanity, and interests without fear of repercussion. They could marry any man and were often independent, receiving education and working jobs. Offred herself tells of her time in college, often remembering normal things such as smoking and drinking which she can no longer do. She also recalls freely expressing her sexuality and being joined by other women who held the same values of sexual fluidity. During the time at which Offred was a free woman, she recalls the strong feminist movement that her mother was a part of. They advocated the right of women to have abortions, encouraged both men and women to step out of the constriction of gender roles, and demanded that pornography be banned due to its depicted violence and degradation of females.

III. "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man: she must be quiet" (*New International Version*, Timothy 2.11-12).

Marji was raised in a family that she recognizes is different from most. They live comfortably as a result of her parent's educations; success, both monetary and educational, heavily influences her family's values. Her parents encourage her to seek higher education, even encouraging her dream of becoming a prophet. At the time in which the veil was implemented into school policy, the standards for education were also modified. Marji attended a non-religious French school as reflected by her avant-garde upbringing. However, male and female students were soon separated, reflective of a much bigger movement to divide society by gender. The young girls did not understand why they could no longer interact with their male friends, unaware of the sexual object that society held them as. This hyper-sexualization of the female body and limitation of their social interactions was instilled in the youngest members of society in order to uphold the beliefs and following of the Islamic regime. Such social standards were put in place in the children's educations with the help of teachers. Teachers often changed their position on matters with the changes in government. However, the teachers never shifted in teaching one thing; women have one place in society and that is within the home. Gender roles were clear to women; they could only assist in the home completing their domestic duties and looking after their husbands. Such inequality was the result of misinterpretation by the fundamentalists of passages in the Qu'ran such as "O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct" (*Qu'ran* 49.13), does not indicate that men and women should remain separated unless married; the verse indicates that Allah has

created two genders each with their own differences but the same opportunities and duties. However, the application of the verse taken out of context once again set women in Iran into archaic roles that they had not been forced into since the last four decades.

Similarly, after the revolution in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women were removed from receiving education. Offred notes on her daily trip to the supermarket that the money no longer has numbers on it. It has been replaced by coins with the pictures of milk, honey, meat and other items. "You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone" (Atwood 25). Women are not allowed to read or write, as that may give them the temptation of communicating with each other. The key to keeping power is for the Republic to destroy any forms of communication for women so that they may never know who objects to the oppression for fear of being found out and killed. Before the Ceremony in which Offred has sex with her Commander, he reads from a bible. Only he may touch the bible, and it is always locked away when not in use. Offred, like so many other women, wonders what it is like to have the attention of all the women in a room, watching you read with the desire of having such a privilege. This of course gives men an advantage over women since they continue to be educated and women depend on them for things such as literacy which was once taken for granted. At women's' gatherings, a man is always the one to read texts which further emphasizes the dominance that a single man can have over the hundreds of women in the room.

IV. "For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man" (*King James Bible* 1 Corinthians 11.7).

As part of any male-dominated culture in which women are marginalized, sexual harassment in *Persepolis* was prevalent. Women were threatened with rape if they did not wear the veil and where often emotionally abused if they did not want to submit to the oppression which they faced. This is best seen when one day Marji proudly announces to her parents that she was suspended from school for defying the teachings of fake historical events. Her father expresses his pride in Marji's resilient attitude but her mother scolds her. It is then that her mother tells her "You know it's against the law to kill a virgin…so a Guardian of the Revolution marries her and takes her virginity before executing her" (Satrapi 145). This statement demonstrates the value that is placed on women's "sacred" virginity. Iranian women are now seen as property of men, property which must not be damaged or else it is a sin. The act of marrying a woman against her will and raping her before execution is a degrading action. This is done to demonstrate to women that they must stay in their place, never speaking out against Islam. Marji's rejection of Iran's politics goes beyond rebellion; it symbolizes the growing awareness of her own sexuality. She begins to understand the expectation of a woman's "sexual purity" as well the correlation between this repression and the regime's power.

As seen in *Persepolis,* the revolution in *The Handmaid's Tale* also revolves around stripping women of various rights. Women in Gilead are no longer allowed to work and earn money of their own. Offred, once having been a working woman, is fired one day from her job and her bank account is suspended. All of her property and money is transferred to her husband's bank account. This is the beginning of the marginalization of women's rights in the United States. "Women can't hold property anymore. It's a new law. Turned on the TV today?"

(Atwood 178). This implies that women had been subjected to this treatment for a while before the drastic measure of taking all of their property. It had gotten to the extent where many women were not surprised, overwhelmed by how little power they held. It is apparent that the government expected women to revert to archaic roles in which any benefits that women could receive where given to her husband or male next of kin.

Offred's real name is never revealed throughout the novel, it is illegal and seen as a threat to possess such autonomy. Handmaid names are derived from the last name of the man that owns them and the possessive preposition "of" placed in front of it. These names erase their previous identities as free women and constantly remind Handmaids that they are simply the property of men. Offred states, "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood 136). There is irony in the usage of the word "sacred" as it implies that handmaids are of biblical importance when in fact religion is being misused to oppress them. Women who were sterile were discarded because they did not possess the qualities that made them worthy of ownership. All handmaids wear heavy red dresses, stockings, and white head-coverings. This indicates that they're interchangeable, each one serving the same purpose. These garments cause others to portray them as walking figures, going about their duties rather than being human beings with emotions and thoughts.

V. "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints" (Ephesians 5.3).

At school, Marji and her classmates share their confusion over the veil. She recalls, "We didn't really like to wear the veil, especially since we didn't understand why we had to" (Satrapi 3). The girls often mocked the fundamentalists and their teachers who enforced the new school

policy. They played with their veil as if it were simply a rag or even a jump rope, not yet understanding the sexualization of their bodies imposed upon them. Women were soon forced to dress modestly, covering their entire body as dictated by the regime. They were told that they must cover themselves completely in order to avoid rape. This victim-shaming was enforced strictly so that women obeyed the dress code and were shamed for being harassed when it did happen. This attitude was prevalent in all of Iranian society, demonstrated by the fact that the government broadcasted it on the news, "And so to protect women from all the potential rapists, they decreed that wearing the veil was obligatory" (Satrapi 74). This demonstrates the oppression under which women lived in Iran where men were not held accountable to sexual assault crimes.

Instead, women were blamed with the excuse that they set themselves up for the attacks. "Muslim women the world over choose to wear the veil. But when wearing the veil is mandated by law—as in Iran—it becomes unclear whether women wear it out of genuine personal and/or religious motivations, or merely to satisfy a public image required by law, as part of a mandatory 'public performance' "(Khan). The veil is more than a covering; it is a restrictive dress code which inhibits the physical image of women as well as their personalities. The women became reserved and less likely to fight back against the abuses of the guardians after donning the veils. When Marji's mother was an outspoken woman, she said to her husband "She should start learning to defend her rights as a woman right now" (Satrapi 76). However, once she is coerced into covering herself, she becomes reserved and is not seen to speak out against any abuse throughout the rest of the novel. Alternatively, not all women in Iran felt that the veil was a hindrance prior to the revolution since many chose to wear it. It is the subjugation of women that comes with the veil afterwards that creates a blatant disregard for men's violent actions toward women and strips them of basic human rights that they held prior to the revolution.

On the other hand, Offred is fully aware of the repression of her sexuality. She recalls a time when another Handmaid admitted that she was gang raped at the age of fourteen and had an abortion. The group of Handmaids begins to shame her and insult her at the prompting of the Aunts. "*Who* led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. *She* did. *She* did. *She* did" (Atwood 72). This stigmatizes sexual harassment, making it impossible to receive support after being sexually abused. In this form, the women of Gilead learn that they are not important; they do not deserve human emotion or proper treatment. The government realizes that the most effective way to control women is to limit and shame their sexuality. Offred's commander explains to her that the marginalization of women was necessary in order to give men something to work for, referring to the obedience that men show to the government in exchange for promotions which entitle them to women. It is not simply a matter of sex, rather a show of dominance over an entire sector of the population. Although at first it may seem as if the perversion of enjoying sex has been completely eradicated, it is later seen that harems exist where men indulge in sexual pleasure although it is forbidden. This signifies that men in *The Handmaid's Tale* have a total disregard of the oppression of women in order to better the Republic of Gilead.

It is claimed that the marginalization of women is done for the better of the entire society, yet men still have the enjoyment of sex that they had before the revolution. On the surface, it seems as if the society is now pure, yet it still holds elements of the past. It is only the women who are making these "sacrifices" for Gilead, while the men hold on to their privileges. Offred often fantasizes about catching the attention of the very men who uphold the patriarchal system that controls her. Her desire to do so stems from her sexual repression, and that of the men who are of lower rank. These men are either too young or powerless to be assigned a

Handmaid. Offred wants to feel like her body belongs to her once more, like she has power over men's emotions and actions.

VI. "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5.21).

In *Persepolis*, the fundamentalists created the female Guardians of the Revolution. These women were required to scope out any other woman who was not abiding by the dress code or wearing her veil correctly. Women who were not religious before the regime became overzealous, eager to follow the standards set by men. Despite the oppression of their own rights, the female guardians degraded and harassed anyone who did not fit meet their conservative expectations, threatening other women with physical punishment. Marji recalls the time when she encountered female guardians in her westernized attire and improperly worn veil. As the women chastise Marji for her appearance, she explains "Their job was to put us back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim women" (Satrapi 133). The regime took advantage of the diminished status and influence of women in society in order to uphold its tyrannical power. By allowing them a lower status in the hierarchy, the regime is able to subjugate the women while making them think that they have an important position in the social structure of Iran. This self-subjugation among women resulted in the repression of their own sexuality and adherence to patriarchal expectations that continually diminished their potential.

Likewise, women had no real power in the Republic of Gilead and relished in being given any position of trust. Older women became Aunts who had the responsibilities of re-educating the Handmaids. The most elite women were married to the Commanders, becoming the Wives. Women had few choices; they could either become Aunts, maids called Marthas, Handmaids, sex-workers, or unwomen. The social hierarchy of women is created by the patriarchal ideals of a man's power; the power to pick and choose his women given his needs. Although Offred had

experienced life before becoming a Handmaid, when she enjoyed her freedom, she now seems to adhere to the role created for her. This oppression is done through systematic brainwashing in which the women of Gilead are convinced that they must keep each other in a lower status of society. The joy of having power in a totalitarian state prevents them from protesting against their oppression which includes reiterating the oppressive laws of Gilead as well as blaming themselves for their misfortunes.

VII. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4.13).

"Give me children, or else I die…Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Genesis 30:3). The ruling theocracy of Gilead interprets this verse from the Bible in a manner that justifies women being made into handmaids. In actuality, it refers to Rachel who became jealous of her sister Leah who bore Jacob many sons. Afraid of losing his affection, she offered him to impregnate her slave so that she would give her a child to raise as their own. The Handmaids, on the other hand, are not made to believe that they are slaves, rather that they are doing their republic an honorable service. A Handmaid's purpose in giving birth is to repopulate the Republic of Gilead, rather than to strengthen marriages. This sets up a societal structure of marriage with the ultimate goal being to produce children even through adultery. During lectures, Aunts tell the Handmaids "Blessed are the meek," yet they do not mention the ending "for they shall inherit the earth." Doing so would encourage women to fight against their oppressors. As demonstrated, Gilead often uses biblical verses to its convenience, ignoring their intended messages.

Comparably, the Islamic revolution utilizes a religious text to justify forcing the veil upon the Iranian female population. The fundamentalists took verses of the Quran out of context such

as "And as for women past childbearing who do not expect wedlock, it is no sin on them if they discard their clothing in such a way as not to show their adornment. But to refrain is better for them. And Allaah is All-Hearer, All-Knower" (*Qu'ran* 24. 60). The verse indicates to women of an older age that they are free to go about unveiled, but advises that it is best to remain covered. Although it targets women who are no longer reproductive, other verses in the Quran do not obligate women of any age to wear a veil as the women in *Persepolis* are forced to. It is seen that women are given a choice and advised to keep sexual parts of their bodies covered with a modesty that other non-Islamic cultures also recognize. These values of modesty originate from societal perceptions of women rather than from the Qu'ran as the fundamentalists claimed.

VIII. Conclusion

The theocracies in *Persepolis* and *The Handmaid's Tale* present the absence of separation between church and state. Religion dominates the lives of the societies presented in both books, ultimately dictating the privileges that the members of society may be allowed. Most noticeably, women are a sector of the population which the theocracies seek to control. *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on the social and political oppression of women through the misuse of religion in order to indoctrinate society. This is motivated by the patriarchal system's desire to control women's bodies and their autonomy. Similarly, in *Persepolis* the sexuality of women is seen as a threat to the patriarchal ideology that the Islamic government in Iran upholds. Most surprisingly, the controlling of women is partly done by other women with a sense of self-righteousness in both *The Handmaid's tale* and *Persepolis*. This demonstrates that women, when stripped of an honorable place in society, become more likely to adhere to the rules of the group which is marginalizing them. Any power that a woman can attain under these circumstances is valid. This is a result of the repression of their rights such as education and demonstration of sexuality as

well as emotional and physical abuse. Both novels present the stark reality that society is quick to change their values to a position of their advantage so that certain members are in control. *Persepolis* and *The Handmaid's Tale* explore the marginalization of women's rights when targeted by radical belief systems and their use of misinterpreted religious texts.

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