Political Responses to Dominant Version of Reality: Cynical Behaviors of Subjects in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale

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ABSTRACT: There is a widespread agreement among readers and critics that Margaret Atwood is not only a major poet but also very likely the best writer in Canada today. In her masterpiece The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood creates the regime of Gilead and displays how characters are cooperated in their own oppression. The Handmaid’s Tale functions as an anatomy of ideology and description of ideological behaviors. The study of characters’ behavior with a methodology that covers both psychological and political elements all at once is essential. In this regard, this research refers to Slavoj Žižek’s dynamic and complex theories. This study chooses Žižek’s discussion on the notion of ideological cynicism from 1985 to the present day and aims to provide concrete examples of this concept within The Handmaid’s Tale. The discussion has been manifold and offers a lot of material for socio-political interpretation of the novel. Replacing Marx’s formula for ideology, they do not know it, but they are doing it, Sloterdijk proposes that we can modify this formula by a cynical variation in this way: they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.

Key words: Žižek; Ideology; Cynicism; Handmaids; Offred.

INTRODUCTION

There is a Widespread agreement among readers and critics that Margaret Atwood is not only a major poet but very likely the best writer in Canada today (Mandel, 1983). As a remarkable author, she puts her own understanding in writing, “I began as a profoundly political writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me” (Richards, 1990). Describing the world around herself or the analysis of socio-political problems is always Atwood’s subject in her novels and poetry as “a part of life. It’s part of everybody’s life” (Meese, 1985). Atwood’s works represent the confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture, and the reality of violence (Rigney, 1987). It means that society or symbolic order, for Atwood, is inherently political, and describing it is a political performance. In this regard, literature gains a political dimension – which is not always free of restraints, “and politics has to do with what kind of conversations you have with people and what you feel free to say to someone, what you don’t feel free to say ” (Richards, 1990). To be precise, the way in which one behaves and whether one is subject to any restrictions in doing so or not is another political factor that is represented in literature. This factor may be internal, in the individual, but most likely it is external, inflicted upon the individual by other persons. Allocating Atwood the title of the most distinguished novelist under fifty currently writing in English, and quickly becomes a best-seller, selling millions of copies worldwide (Howells, 1995), her masterpiece The Handmaid’s Tale functions as an anatomy of ideology and description of ideological behaviors. There are several notable contributions to the analysis of the novel because it is both “best-sellers and the subjects of thousands of reviews and scholarly studies, written by scholars from China to Italy to Belgium to New Zealand, England, France, Canada, and the United States” (Wilson, 2003). J. Brooks Bouson (1993) announces that Atwood through her depictions of her female characters as objects of male desire or sexual commodities or passive victims, lays bare the cultural and literary script that assigns women the passive self-effacing roles and encourages them to collude in their oppression as they consent to femininity. Müllers
(2000) concentrates on a psychological analysis and deals with the construction and reconstruction of characters’ identities and bodies together with the construction and reconstruction of Atwood’s texts. He recommends constructionism asserts the process of understanding oneself, others, and reality that are depicted in Atwood’s work, and corroborate the fact, in connection with system theory, that human beings do not really construct absolutely new things, but transform existing reality.

All of these critical spotlights are important; but they let pass the crucial point that the symbolic order, portrayed in the novel, is a representative of a real ideological system in which characters’ keen cooperation plays important role. Therefore, the study of characters’ behavior with a methodology that covers both psychological and political elements all at once is still essential. In order to fill the mentioned gap, this research refers to Slavoj Žižek’s dynamic and complex theories. It intends to offer a comprehensive approach that enables the researcher to show how the political factors parallel the psychological factors. Žižek (2000) believes that his works are composed of three centers of gravity, Hegelian dialectics, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and contemporary criticism of ideology. He demands that his works should be taken seriously as Lacanian interventions in political philosophy and social theory. He has always argued that his theoretical positions lead to radical political conclusions. The aim of this study is to provide concrete examples of Žižekian concepts within The Handmaid’s Tale. This study chooses Žižek’s discussion on the notion of ideological cynicism. The discussion has been manifold and offers a lot of material for socio-political interpretation of the novel.

Ideological Cynicism: A Žižekian Perspective

It is true, as Anthony Giddens (1991) maintains that if there were a prize for the most contested concept within and without the disciplines of philosophy, politics, and cultural studies, ideology would very nearly rank first. The word ideology has several meanings. An ideology is “a body of ideas that licenses, enables, and directs social action.” For example, the ideology of racism consists of beliefs and reasons that validate social or physical violence against another ethnic group. Ideology, also, applies to “mislabeled cognition that prevents people from seeing reality” as it is (Ryan, 2010). Ideology in this sense describes the way dominant social groups maintain their power by imposing on society a framework for seeing society. Furthermore, ideology is considered as a set of what are called “ruling idea,” ideas that “forced into a position of centrality by ruling social groups” in order to reinforce their power (ibid). In any case, David Hawkes (1996) believes that it is absurd to divide our experience into the levels of idea, matter, and representation in the postmodern world. This means that any notion of ideology in the sense of a differentiated sphere of ideas must be abandoned. There is general agreement that the category of representation is fundamental; there is nothing outside representation. So ideology is not something which “affects only our ideas, it is something which happens to the totality of our existence, including material practice. It is not to be conceived as a misapprehension of reality” but as a distortion in the form taken by reality itself.

If one is concerned with the concept of ideology, then Marx’s theory – with all its limitations – comes into play. In this manner, for Žižek, Marx provides the most basic definition of ideology, “they do not know it, but they are doing it” (Žižek, 1995 b). Such a model of ideology after Marx (although it was his German friend Friedrich Engels (1820-95)) generally is called false consciousness. Ideology in this sense is a kind of innocence or ignorance of the reality we live in. On the one hand, there is “reality and, on the other hand, there is our understanding of that reality which is in some way distorted.” Ideology is precisely distortion that falsifies our understanding. Here, ideology is an “epistemological problem—a problem of knowledge” (Myers, 2003). For example, we do not know that when we go to college every day, we are reproducing the capitalist system (as workers, managers and entrepreneurs), so that is why we are happy to continue doing it. We do not know that every time we vote we are approving the status quo so we continue voting in the vain belief that our vote matters. As an example, Christians do not know that their beliefs are actually ways to keep them docile citizens so they continue to go to church every Sunday (ibid).

In such an ideological condition, the process of ideological critique is fairly clear and understandable. It is only required to enlighten the ignorant subjects to show them how their understanding of reality is distorted. At this point, as soon as ideology is identified as ideology, as a distorted version of the truth, it disappears. Nevertheless, Žižek is reasonable when contends that we are all, following the German theorist Peter Sloterdijk (1947- ), cynical subjects. He comments:

In the Critique of Cynical Reason, a great bestseller in Germany, Peter Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that ideology’s dominant mode of functioning is cynical, which renders impossible - or, more precisely, vain - the classic critical-ideological procedure. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he nonetheless still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it’. Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the
falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it. (Žižek, 1995 b)

Today we know that we are apprehended a distorted version of reality. In other words, we know that when we go to college we are being groomed to keep the system going. We know that when we go to a polling station our vote will not substantially alter the political system. Christians know that going to church helps in keeping them as docile citizens.

Žižek (1995 b) points out that the irrationality of an ideology involves the split between what people say they know and what they unconsciously believe as expressed through their actions. For instance, under the Stalinist version of the former Yugoslavia in the age of Tito (1892-1980), what Žižek calls ideological cynicism was common. The Party claimed to rule in the name of the common good; but people knew that the struggles were base on factional interests to capture power by different political groups. The strange thing was that official Yugoslav ideology effectively named the ruling bureaucracy itself as the “final obstacle to be removed,” if full socialist self-management was to be achieved (ibid). Žižekian cynical condition is explained as:

In this situation, rational knowledge called for the replacement of the bureaucracy by popular sovereignty. But this very bureaucracy demanded that everybody conform in their actions to the latest official shift in the party line. Thus, the ideology of “self-management” required cynical distance from the party line combined with irrational conformity to the institutional rituals of the bureaucracy. (Sharpe and Baucher, 2010, p.42)

What is clear here is that the cynical subject has already accepted that the official version of reality is distorted, but still does not get rid of that skewed vision. Here, Žižek argues that although we know that our access to reality is distorted, we cannot say that we live in a post ideological world; therefore, the distinction between ideology and reality still matters. In order to prove this claim, he begins by returning to the classic Marxist definition of false consciousness—“they do not know it but they are doing it” (1995 b). He believes that the ideological mystification existed in this definition is the issue of knowing or in the doing. Initially, it seems that ideology lies on the side of what people know, or rather, what they do not know, i.e. people do not know what they are doing. They misperceive the reality of their actual situation. But as cynical subjects, they know full well that their understanding of reality is distorted, but they stick to that falsehood and do not reject it. Replacing Marx’s formula for ideology, “they do not know it, but they are doing it,” Sloterdijk proposes that we can modify this formula by a cynical variation in this way: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (qtd. in ibid 29). Among many problems that have questioned the Marxist concept of ideology, an important one is its connotation of false consciousness. The very idea of ideology critique seems to place the scientific, intelligent, or enlightened critic on a plane high above the poor duped masses (Glynos, 2001). Žižek adds:

So now, we have made a decisive step forward; we have established a new way to read the Marxian formula ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’: the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. (1995 a, p. 311)

This account avoids the difficulty by “shifting attention from what people know to what they do” (Dean, 2006). It means people persist in actions despite what they know to be true. For example, one knows that tabloids are scandalous rags, delivering his attention to advertisers and the entertainment industry, feeding the celebrity—consumer machine, but he reads them anyway. He may even read them critically, ironically, as if he was different from the typical tabloid reader, but he is still buying and reading them. This continued activity is a “mark of belief, a belief that is exteriorized in a variety of institutionalized practices” (ibid). Marx, classically, defined the operation of ideology under the rubric “they do not know it, but they are doing it” (Žižek, 1995 b). Žižek (1995 a), however, suggests that the ideological form of today’s cynical reason, at least, needs a new definition. In their cynical subjectivity, contemporary subjects know very well what they are doing it (supporting the dominant system), but still, they are doing it.

**Cynicism in The Handmaid’s Tale**

Atwood’s novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, explores Offred’s responses to her thoughts, feelings, and memories, or her ideological fantasy - that is how she creates reconstructions of her experiences. Atwood suggests that in a fundamentalist dictatorship, known as the Republic of Gilead, most of the citizens as cynical subjects will endure oppression willingly. Offred, the protagonist, narrates the crucial changes as:

Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bath tub you’d be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being
believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives. (Atwood, 1986, p. 66)

In other words, The Handmaid’s Tale portrays the cynical behaviors of the subjects in a symbolic order. While the Gileadian regime imposes its power into the most minute and distant elements, it is a fact that the characters’ cynicism prepares the context for the establishment of Gileadian ideology (Somacarrera, 52). The changes that lead to the establishment of the ideology are subtle but progressive, and thus ignored purposefully by most people.

The first hint of cynicism in the novel appears when the new cashier at her local store declares Offred’s Compucard invalid. Offred responds:

I tried to tell her what had happened to me. When I’d finished, she said, Tried getting anything on your Compucard today? Yes, I said. I told her about that too.

They’ve frozen them, she said. Mine too. The collective’s too. Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We’re cut off.

But I’ve got over two thousand dollars in the bank, I said, as if my own account was the only one that mattered. Women can’t hold property anymore, she said. It’s a new law. Turned on the TV today?

No, I said. (Atwood, 1986, p.178)

Obviously, subjects of new symbolic order accept the situation without any protest; their cynicism is therefore a kind of “perverted ‘negation of the negation’ of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery” (Žižek, 1995 b).

She, also, reveals her cynicism in relation to events when her best friend Moira calls her attention to the changes that had been planned for many years, she remembers:

Look out, said Moira to me, over the phone. Here it comes.

Here what comes? I said. (Atwood, 1986, p.183)

Offred’s seemingly docile acceptance of the new situation appears to have been mirrored by most of the citizens involved in the change of symbolic order. There is little visible resistance to the new regime’s ideology even after the change had deprived people of their rights as well as stripping them of their names. Offred’s prevailing ideology, the same as other subjects, is that of cynicism; people no longer believe in ideological truth; She knows that their deeds is not fair, therefore, “she dose not take ideological propositions seriously” and ignore them (Žižek, 1995 b).

In Gilead, women lose their job and their money, or their access to their own money; therefore, they can no longer buy or own property. When Offred tells her doubts and fears to Luke, in spite of the fact that they understand the significance of the situation, they choose intentionally to do nothing and be docile citizens. Instead of invoking her wife to actively reject the changes and fight for her place in the society, Luke advices her to think of their family and the well-being of their daughter, as she reminds:

I didn’t go on any of the marches. Luke said it would be futile and I had to think about them, my family, him and her. I did think about my family. I started doing more housework, more baking. I tried not to cry at mealtimes. By this time I’d started to cry, without warning, and to sit beside the bedroom window, staring out. I didn’t know many of the neighbors, and when we met, outside on the street, we were careful to exchange nothing more than the ordinary greetings. Nobody wanted to be reported, for disloyalty. (Atwood, 1986, p.189)

Offred remembers that the number of protesters was few, which she did not attend. Wagner’s article “From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale” (2003) contends that Offred is politically complacent before the takeover, as Offred, explains:

We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. The news paper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives.

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. (Atwood, 1986, p.66)

What is clear here is that the cynical subjects have already accepted that the official Gileadian reality is distorted, but with a disarming frankness, they admit everything. As Žižek (1995 a) insists, here, the formula of ideology is no longer the classic Marxian they do not know it, but they are doing it; it is they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it.

Offred speaks of herself as a coward, terrified of pain, who wants to survive; for this purpose, she tries hard not to feel and she certainly succeeds in suppressing any sign of the anger that empowers him to traverse her ideological fantasy. In the very beginning, she announces, “I try not to think too much. Like other things, thought must be rationed. There’s a lot that doesn’t bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances, and I intend to last” (Atwood, 1986). It is clear that nobody really believes in the ruling ideology, every Handmaid “preserves a cynical distance from it and everybody knows that nobody believes in it; but still, the appearance
is to be maintained at any price” (Žižek, 1995 b). Doing so, people are enthusiastically building the symbolic order. Repeating her ordinary behaviors, she is being groomed to keep the symbolic order going. She knows that not only her actions do not substantially alter the political system but also they keep her as “pliable citizens” (Myers, 2003).

Offred’s cynicism becomes more obvious to the reader when she finally understands that there is an underground resistance and that her walking partner is a member.

We walk, heads bent as usual. I’m so excited I can hardly breathe, but I keep a steady pace. Now more than ever I must avoid drawing attention to myself.

“I thought you were a true believer,” Ofglen says.

“I thought you were,” I say.

“You were always so stinking pious.”

“So were you,” I reply. I want to laugh, shout, hug her.

“You can join us,” she says.

“Us?” I say. There is an us then, there’s a we. I knew it.

“You didn’t think I was the only one,” she says. (Atwood, 1986, p.289)

She is given a chance to change her behaviors and join to the efforts for a revolution. Her partner urges her to use her nightly secret meetings to find out something about the Commander, “find out what? I say” (ibid), she responds. Hansen (1997) believes that this mother without child, or Offred, is a cynical subject who knowingly “caught in the middle between knowledge and ignorance,” between action which supports the ideology and knowledge that there is a distorted version of reality- all too aware of what she lacks but incapable of changing, as she says near the end of her story, “I would like to be ignorant. Then I would not know how ignorant I was” (Atwood, 1986).

Toward the end of the novel, when Ofglen offers to help Offred to escape in the case of immediate danger, she remembers:

I scarcely take the trouble to sound regretful, so lazy have I become.

We could get you out, she says. We can get people out if we really have to, if they’re in danger. Immediate danger.

The fact is that I no longer want to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom. I want to be here, with Nick, where I can get at him. (Atwood, 1986, p.283)

Offred no longer wishes “to leave, escape, cross the border to freedom” and instead wishes to remain in Gilead with Nick (ibid, 271), with whom she is having an affair (and by whom she may be pregnant). She justifies her change of heart in terms of both love and expedience, “I have made a life for myself, here, of a sort” (qtd, in Shaffer, 2006). It seems that Offred’s mother was true by affirming that “truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations” (Atwood, 1986). Offred seems suddenly so content that she rejects to gather information about the Commander. However, Offred’s return to a level of cynicism, as an example of her interaction with or her response to the ideological fantasy is a reasonable explanation for her allusion to crying. She does not state whether she is crying because of a lack of ability to resist or not.

When the Commander takes her to an illegal nightclub, Offred calms her nervousness by telling, “All you have to do, I tell myself, is keep your mouth shut and look stupid. It shouldn’t be that hard” (Atwood, 1986).

This double standard is exactly what Žižek calls “the irrationality of an ideology” which involves the split between what people say that they know and what they unconsciously believe, as expressed through their actions (Sharpe and Baucher, 2010). What this narrator is guilty of, or capable of, by her own account, is not a distinct act, but the routine and cynical behaviors done by most of citizens in different symbolic orders. Commenting on her pre-Gileadian life, she says, “We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn’t the same as ignorance; you have to work at it” (Atwood, 1986). Now, she tries not to think or feel too much because she knows how she is verifying the system’s ideology by trying the nightclub’s rituals. Žižek’s account of cynicism and ideology is useful here by shifting attention from what people “know” to what they “do” that is to the way people persist in actions despite what they know to be; “they know very well what they are doing it (supporting the dominant system), but still, they are doing it” (Dean, 2006). Citizens in Gilead know full well that their understanding of reality is distorted, but they, nevertheless, stick to that falsehood and do not reject it.
CONCLUSION

In her challenge “to portray the mechanisms of oppression as credible enough, as sufficiently powerful and seductive, to represent a believable evil, not an irrelevant or farfetched one” (Deer, 1992, p.215), Atwood creates the regime of Gilead and displays how characters are cooperated in their own oppression. The results of this thesis indicate that in the Republic of Gilead characters accept the false interpretation of doctrines. In this situation, characters are cynical subjects that accept the system’s oppression willingly. It is clear that nobody really believes in the ruling ideology of Gilead, every Handmaid “preserves a cynical distance from it and everybody knows that nobody believes in it; but still, the appearance is to be maintained at any price” (Žižek, 1995 b). Offred’s prevailing ideology, the same as other subjects, is that of cynicism; subjects no longer believe in ideological truth; Offred knows that what is being done is not fair, therefore, “she does not take ideological propositions seriously” and ignore them (Žižek, 1995 b, p. 30). This type of behavior in the novel is revealed when subjects understand that their money is blocked or they lose their primary rights. Subjects of new symbolic order accept the situation without any protest. In this case, their cynicism is a kind of “perverted negation of the negation of the official ideology: confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery” (Žižek, 1995 b). Here, the formula of ideology for them is the Handmaids know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it.

No other Atwood’s fiction has aroused the public debate that has accompanied The Handmaid’s Tale, thus it should provoke lively discussions in different fields. This research has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. Considerably more works will need to be done to determine the performance of characters in the Republic of Gilead in public. For this end a dramaturgical model, analyzing interaction in terms of how people live their lives like actors performing on a stage, is valuable. Dramaturgy emphasizes expressiveness as the main component of interactions. It is termed as the fully two-sided view of human interaction.

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