Biblical legalization in Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale: A Žižekian Approach to the Theory of Ideology

Yaser Jafari 1*, Shahram Afrougheh 2

1. M.A. Student, English Language and Literature Post-graduate Department, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran. 2. Assistant Professor, English Language and Literature Post-graduate Department, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran.

*Corresponding Author email: Yaserjafari1365@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Writing poetry, fiction, and criticism for almost fifty years, Margaret Atwood has immensely influenced Canadian literature. Her novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, comments upon the deeply flawed ideology of the Republic of Gilead. 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, Atwood creates the theocratic regime of Gilead and displays how the governors appropriate the text of the Bible merely to fit their political, social, and sexual goals. One of the most recent activities on the notion of ideology is the works of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. This article examines the notions of ideology in The Handmaid’s Tale from Žižek’s perspective. It concentrates on images, symbols, and propositions that the Handmaids encounter in their daily activities. The main significance of this study lies in the fact that none of the existing studies on the notion of ideology has explored the cooperation of political terms with psychoanalytic key words.

Key words: Žižek; Doctrine; the Bible; Handmaids; Gilead.

INTRODUCTION

Writing poetry, fiction, and criticism for almost fifty years, Margaret Atwood has immensely influenced Canadian literature. The Handmaid’s Tale was the first of her novels to reach a large audience in the US. It was also adopted into a film in 1990, something that made the story even more popular. The novel has brought the author the Booker Prize in Britain, the Governor General’s Award in Canada, the Arthur C. Clarke Science Fiction Prize, the Los Angeles Times fiction prize in the United States, and the title of “the most distinguished novelist under fifty currently writing in English” (Howells, 1995). The novel is set in a futuristic society called the Republic of Gilead where toxic chemicals and nuclear radiation construct a world that only a few women can bear children. Atwood writes about what the United States might look like if the bible formed all the rules and laws in the society. The women in the novel function as handmaids who are the official breeders for the symbolic order. In this regard, Atwood comments upon the deeply flawed ideology when the narrator describes the life in the Republic of Gilead. Linda Kauffman (1996) declares, “The Handmaid’s Tale functions as an anatomy of ideology, exposing the process by which one constructs, psychologically and politically, subjects of the state, and then enlists their cooperation in their own subjection.”

One of the most recent activities on the notion of ideology is the works of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. According to Sharp and Baucher (2010), since the late 1980s, Žižek has contemplated on the ideas of the great German philosophers Immanuel Kant, George Wilhelm Hegel, and Martin Heidegger, along with that of the famed generation of post-war French theorists, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Gilles Deleuze. Žižekian perspective has always “centred around two of the most difficult, but also most often maligned and misunderstood, thinkers: Hegel, the nineteenthcentury philosopher of ‘dialectics’, and Lacan, arguably the most brilliant, and certainly the most obscure of Freud’s successors” (Sharp and Baucher, 2010).

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), Atwood creates the theocratic regime of Gilead and displays how the governors “appropriate the text of the Bible” merely “to fit their political, social, and sexual goals” (Hogsette, 1997). Following Margaret Atwood, this article examines the
notions of ideology in The Handmaid’s Tale from Žižek’s perspective in an attempt to understand the source of domination of ideology in the Republic of Gilead. The main significance of this study lies in the fact that none of the existing studies on the notion of ideology has explored the cooperation of political terms with psychoanalytic key words. Placing The Handmaid’s Tale within the context of Žižekian viewpoint enables the researcher to return to the text and reinterpret Atwood’s creation of Gilead as a critique of what is happening now. This study is an interpretive process used to weigh presented social values of Gilead as a sample symbolic order; therefore, it may yield valuable results due to the Žižek’s mixed methods.

**Ideology: A Context for the Analysis of Doctrines, Beliefs, and Rituals**

Studying Žižek is a stimulating experience, “one is simultaneously informed, edified, and entertained” (Sciulli, 2011); his courage and willingness to criticize leftist conventions and common sense is attractive even when he is wrong, even when “his political judgment is questionable,” and even when “his taste is bad” (Hart, 2002). Born in 1949, Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic who participates in various disciplines such as political theory, film theory, and theoretical psychoanalysis. He has a gifted mind, with a surprisingly understanding of contemporary theory. As Matthew Sharpe (2004) maintains, Žižek has written books and articles in Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian, French, English, and German. He has written an extraordinary amount of them such as “intellectual engagements with everything from the history of opera, popular culture, and contemporary theory, to modern philosophy, European cinema, and political events” (p.2). Žižek’s works draw on three main areas of influence, philosophy, politics, and psychoanalysis. In each of these areas, Žižek is influenced by the writings of a single individual, “Georg Hegel in philosophy, Karl Marx in politics, and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis” (Myers, 2003).

The influence of Marx can be detected in Žižek’s works as the motivation for a particular method of thinking, praxis. This type of thought attempts to alter experience. Žižek’s battleground is the realm of ideas and culture, or the superstructure. For Marxists, the whole point of the superstructure- including all social and legal institutions, all political and educational systems, and all art- is to guarantee the reproduction of the existing method of economic organization- what Marx called the base, which in the present instance is Capitalism. Defining ideology as the way in which individuals understand their relationship with society, Žižek makes his most telling contribution to the Marxist tradition. He identifies that while Marxism was able to support this definition with focus on the mechanics of society, “it had very little to clarify how the workings of individuals should be regarded” (Myers, 2003). As ideology goes to work with psychological processes of individuals, it seems essential to find a theory of these processes.

In ideology after Postmodernism (2002), the root of ideology is discussed intelligently in this way: Unlike many other concepts in social and political theory, ideology is not an illegitimate child. We know that its father was Count Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy and that the date of its birth was 1796. We also know that de Tracy had grand designs for his firstborn – to become a universal and integral science of all ideas. More than anything else the father of ideology wanted his offspring to transcend and surpass the ideas that had motivated the French Revolution and gained dominance in its immediate aftermath. (Malešić and MacKenzie, 2002)

The word ideology has several meanings. An ideology is “a body of ideas that licenses, enables, and directs social action,” applies to “mistaken cognition that prevents people from seeing reality” as it is, and 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 (Ryan, 2010).

Žižek defines the term ideology, at the outset of his essay “The Spectre of Ideology,” his most consistent piece of writing on the subject, as the “generative matrix that regulates the relationship between visible and non-visible, between imaginable and non-imaginable” (Žižek, 1995). This definition introduces us to Žižek’s psychoanalytic understanding of ideology as what is discussed in Žižek: beyond Foucault: […] radically split domain, or rather an elusive kind of knowledge divided between its explicit manifestation (a rationally constructed and linguistically transparent set of ideas) and its uncanny appearance beyond appearance (an unthinkable, unrepresentable and unmediated nucleus of disavowed enjoyment). By claiming that ideology regulates the dialectical relationship between the above two orders (in Lacanian terms, between the order of the Symbolic and the order of the Real. (Vighi and Feldner, 2007)

Žižek also adds, in Tarrying with the Negative (1993), ideology can only be understood as a phenomenon involving the Hegelian totality:

For Hegel, the inverted ‘topsy-turvy world’ does not consist in presupposing, beyond the actual, empirical world, the kingdom of suprasensible ideas, but in a kind of double inversion by means of which these suprasensible ideas themselves assume again sensible form, so that the very sensible world is redoubled . . . he does not put forward another, even ‘deeper’ supra-Ground which would ground the ground itself; he simply grounds the ground in the totality of its relations to the grounded content. (Žižek, 1993)

The most direct and extended consideration on the category of ideology is Mapping Ideology (1995). “By way of a simple reflection on how the horizon of historical imagination is subject to change,” Žižek begins
"we find ourselves in medias res, compelled to accept the unrelenting persistence of the notion of ideology" (Žižek, 1995). In order to analyze ideology, Žižek introduces the notion of ideological doctrines.

Ideological doctrine involves the ideas, theories, and convictions of an ideology. There is ideology "in itself" (ibid 10); this is the notion inherited from Engels, and The German Ideology (1846). Ideology here is an idea or doctrine that aims to give rise to false consciousness. Ideological doctrines distort the subjects’ awareness of the truth of their symbolic order, therefore, they are false. They may misrepresent prominent facts about the current social status of order or they may work to close down possibilities for political transformation by representing the current status quo falsely as inevitable or the best of all possible worlds. To quote directly, Žižek remarks that ideology is "distorted communication" or:

[... a text in which, under the influence of unavowed social interests (of domination, etc.), a gap separates the 'official', public meaning from its actual intention - that is to say, in which we are dealing with an unreflected tension between the explicit enunciated content of the text and its pragmatic presuppositions. (Ibid)

For example, the doctrine of liberalism was partly originally developed in the ideas of the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704).

According to Tony Myers (2003), any narrative is formed by this three category. In the first stage of ideological doctrine, we deal with ideology in its pure state. Here ideology takes the form of a supposedly truthful proposition or set of arguments that, in reality, functions as a mask for an interested prediction. Locke’s arguments about government, for example, served the interest of the revolutionary Americans rather than the colonizing British.

Symbolic Legalizing through Biblical Doctrines in The Handmaid’s Tale

From the very beginning of the novel, Margaret Atwood describes Gileadian symbolic order with a strong attachment to religion and throughout the novel, the priority of religion over other social doctrines and ideas is stressed. Atwood suggests to the reader that the desire of the Other is the return to traditional doctrines:

A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion. When the window is partly open—it only opens partly—the air can come in and make the curtains move. I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this. Sunlight comes in through the window too, ami falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow strips, highly polished. I can smell the polish. There’s a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags. This is the kind of touch they like: folk art, archaic, made by women, in their spare time, from things that have no further use. A return to traditional values. Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want? (Atwood, 1986)

Hence, the doctrines of Gilead are not necessarily new; they are, in fact, a return to the accepted archaic convictions of a bygone, Puritanical and Christian fundamentalist era which holds the ideals of the Old Testament above all else. Gilead is, therefore, a theocracy; in other words, a government in which there is no separation between state and religion. Old Testament Christianity provides “a composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts, and so on, destined to convince” subjects of the truth of symbolic order (Žižek, 1995); all religions other than the official state religion have been suppressed. In fundamentalist Gilead, controlling all subjects is “essential for maintaining social cohesion” (Howland, 2001). The consequence is the strong application of the “authority of the nuclear, patriarchal family” where “children are to be obedient to their parents, wives, and other females in the household, to their husbands, and husbands, or Commanders, to their God” (Ibid).

The establishment of Gileadian symbolic order is based on the power that theocracy has on its subjects; the state has been named after the place where the patriarch Jacob set up his “heap of stones” and established his household. According to the Bible, receiving Leah in marriage instead of working for his father in law, Jacob understood that he was deceived by Laban in order to marry Rachel – Leah’s younger sister. However, Jacob claimed, “It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one. Finish this daughter’s bridal week and then we will give you the younger one also, in return for another seven years of work” (The New Jerusalem Bible, Genesis 29). While Jacob worked as Laban had requested, God realized that Leah was not loved and, therefore, opened her womb but in the process made Rachel barren.

As Leah became a mother to three sons, Rachel became jealous and offered her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob, as a surrogate, saying, “Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family” (ibid 30). Rachel bore Jacob two sons through the surrogate. In addition to Rachel and Leah’s other sons, they formed the twelve tribes of Israel which became divided into two groups. One of them served God at the altar and the other one served God only in public. The role of the Handmaids is thus like that of Bilhah, Rachel’s maidservant, to copulate with the Commander in a ceremony that is as long as it is complicated in order to conceive a child for the Wife. In this case, religion’s doctrines help “individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power” (Žižek, 1995).

In the light of these doctrines, the impregnation of Offred by the Commander is not considered rape by the big Other since it is totally justified as having a higher purpose. The totalitarian order, having its basis on
theocratic doctrines, has the ability to create followers even though something may be morally wrong (that is rape). Mary Daly (1990) talks about the mind/spirit rape, “in refined religious rapism, the victim is impregnated with the supreme Seminal Idea, who becomes the Word made flesh”. It is necessary in ceremony to read the Bible by Commander because it indicates that he behaves as a mediator between God and the Handmaids as Archangel Gabriel was the mediator between God and Virgin Mary and God’s words turned into Jesus Christ inside Mary’s body. In the same way, God’s blessing to Offred through the Bible will give her a baby. Just like Jesus, who sacrificed himself for humanity, the Handmaids, holding the future of Gilead in their hands, as they are told, have to sacrifice their desires, their needs, and at the end themselves for Gilead’s own good. Laurence Coupe argues:

The republic of Gilead, then, is a fictional instance of how the myth of deliverance may be appropriated in order to justify social hierarchy, despite its future-orientated trajectory. Specifically, the novel reminds us that the “salvation history” narrated in the Bible may be put to patriarchal use, justifying the subjugation of women. Deliverance has become domination (2009).

In addition, the basic premise of the symbolic function of the Handmaids is based on the Biblical story of “Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (Ruth, 4) as is found in the book of Genesis in the following chapters and verses: (29). Offred illuminates:

The rest of the women sit cross-legged on the rug; there’s a crowd of them, everyone in this district is supposed to be here. There must be twenty-five, thirty. Not every Commander has a Handmaid: some of their Wives have children. From each, says the slogan, according to her ability: to each according to his needs. We recited that three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts. (Atwood, 1986, p. 117)

The survival of the protagonist in the symbolic order depends completely on her functional capacity to give birth for the interest of Commanders. It is plausible:

The system is sanctioned by association with the Old Testament version of surrogacy practiced by Rachel, Jacob, and Bilhah. Gilead’s women of childbearing years recite the ancient words of Rachel quoted in one of the novel’s epigraphs: Give me children, or else I die (Genesis 30). (Hansen, 1997).

Offred is accepted by the big Other only because she once bore a child, a daughter earlier confiscated and given to a childless couple of the elite. If she or any other Handmaid could not conceive and bear a healthy baby after three postings with the aging, probably sterile leaders of the regime, she will at best be deported to the Colonies where the powerless clean up toxic wastes until their time is up. According to Žižek, the Bible, here, provides “discourses that aim to produce false consciousness” in Gilead’s citizens. They misrepresent “salient facts about the current political state of play” by placing one specific interpretation of the Bible as the ultimate truth by the help of belief machines (Sharpe, 2004).

There is no surprise that the official vocabulary and symbols of Gilead blend much religious terminology and includes many Biblical references. The narrator explains one of her shopings as:

We go to Milk and Honey, and to All Flesh, where I buy chicken and the new Ofglen gets three pounds of hamburger. There are the usual lines. I see several women I recognize, exchange with them the infinitesimal nods with which we show each other we are known, at least to someone, we still exist. Outside All Flesh I say to the new Ofglen, “We should go to the Wall.” I don’t know what I expect from this; some way of testing her, perhaps. I need to know whether or not she is one of us. If she is, if I can establish that, perhaps she’ll be able to tell me what has really happened to Ofglen. (Atwood, 1986)

Or somewhere else, she describes:

We got the fish at Loaves and Fishes, with its wooden sign, a fish with a smile and eyelashes. It doesn’t sell loaves though. Most households bake their own, though you can get dried-up rolls and wizened doughnuts at Daily Bread, if you run short. Loaves and Fishes is hardly ever open. (Atwood, 1986)

The use of names such as Angels, Guardians of the Faith, Commanders of the Faith, and the Eyes of God, draws references directly from doctrines of religion. In addition, the different stores, where the Handmaids goes shopping, are called “Milk and Honey” (Exodus, 3), “All Flesh” (Leviticus, 4), “Loaves and Fishes” (Matthew, 15:36); they are symbols found in the Bible. The religious images, citizens of Gilead encounter on daily activities, indicate that the state is under the will of God and on the basis of religious doctrines. These images, according to Žižek, are beliefs of “ideology in-itself” used to close down possibilities for political transformation by misrepresenting the current status quo as inevitable or the best of all possible worlds (Žižek, 1995). In addition, Atwood talk about the Commander:

He doesn’t even have to raise his hands. Then his voice goes into the microphone and out through the speakers, robbed of its lower tones so that it’s sharply metallic, as if it’s being made not by his mouth, his body, but by the speakers themselves. His voice is metal-colored, horn-shaped.

“Today is a day of thanksgiving,” he begins, “a day of praise.”

I tune out through the speech about victory and sacrifice. Then there’s a long prayer, about unworthy vessels, then a hymn: “There Is a Balm in Gilead.” (Atwood, 1986).
It is a direct reference to the Bible in the book of Psalms that says “Is there a Balm in Gilead?” (Jeremiah, 8). It seems true: The language of Gilead is the phallocentric word made flesh, the vehicle of a totalitarian state based upon literal interpretation of the Bible, at least as it is to be understood by the masses. The uses of such literalmindedness are emphasized by the falsification of Biblical texts and their eventual merger with the canon. (Hogsette, 1997).

It is typical of Gilead’s regime to use the Biblical doctrines, as sources, in such a way to respond its political goals. The Bible cannot be questioned because it is one of the most ancient books in world history and has translated and read by millions of people around the world. What is stated in it is considered by most Christians to be truth like Žižekian doctrines. However, the only difference is in the way the regime interprets doctrines from the Bible, upon which everything is based, and thus not disputed. In the same manner, it is considered in Gilead that no subjects, except some elites, has access to the ultimate truth. Here, ideology, in its “pure” state, is blocked by rulers and is viewed as a supposedly truthful set of arguments which, in reality, conceal a vested interest” (Myers, 2003). In Myth: New Critical Idiom, Laurence Coupe claims:,

Parodying oppressive religion is not the only point of The Handmaid’s Tale. What is being interrogated is the imposition of the Word upon words, of the illusion of truth on the power of imagination. The enemy is totalitarianism, the attempt to subject people to a perverse form of perfectionism. Significantly, the Handmaids are told that the slogan “From each according to her ability; to each according to his needs” comes from St. Paul, when it actually comes from Marx. The two grand narratives, the Marxist and the Biblical, are equally false when turned into absolute truth. (2009).

It seems reasonable to remark that doctrines, extracted from the Bible in the republic of Gilead, are texts “under the influence of unavowed social interests […] in which we are dealing with an unreflected tension between the explicit enunciated content of the text and its pragmatic presuppositions” (Žižek, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Žižek’s prolific output and intellectual writings continually challenge us to think through and beyond our preconceptions, including questioning ideas that we have received from Žižek himself (Butler and Stephens, 2006). The evidences of this research support the Žižekian idea of ideological doctrines: Gilead as a symbolic order utilizes religion to realize its political, social, and sexual goals. Traditional doctrines of the Bible offer discourses that produce false consciousness in Gilead’s subjects. Religion’s doctrines help “individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power” (Žižek, 1995). Old Testament Christianity provides “a composite of ideas, beliefs, concepts, and so on,” for governors to convince subjects of the truth of symbolic order (Žižek, 1995). These doctrines, extracted from the Bible, are blocked by governors as the authority in the symbolic order.

Most Christians believe that what is stated in the Bible is truth like Žižekian doctrines; the only difference is in the way the regime interprets doctrines from the Bible, upon which everything is based, and thus not disputed. In the same manner, it is considered in Gilead that, except some elites, no one has access to the ultimate truth. Here, ideology, in its “pure” state, is blocked by elites and are texts “under the influence of unavowed social interests […] in which we are dealing with an unreflected tension between the explicit enunciated content of the text and its pragmatic presuppositions” (Žižek, 1995). The Handmaids encounter religious images, symbols, and propositions in their daily activities. They are, according to Žižek, beliefs of “ideology in-itself” used to close down possibilities for political transformation by misrepresenting the current status quo as inevitable or the best of all possible worlds (Žižek, 1995). Placing one specific interpretation of the Bible as the ultimate truth, these doctrines misrepresent “salient facts about the current political state of play” (Sharpe, 2004).

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