

The Blame Game: Complicity and Rape Culture in Margaret Atwood's Novel and Hulu's



Adapted Series *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the Hulu award-winning televisual adaptation (2017-Present) portray a dystopic, theocratic regime known as Gilead. The regime's focus on female bodies and reproduction exemplifies what Kate Harding calls rape culture, a culture Gilead perpetuates through sexual violence, rape, and surveillance. Using critical race theory, media and close-textual analysis this project examines both works, arguing that complicity within the novel must be discussed in relation to rape culture and that while the series accounts for rape culture, it problematically manifests a type of feminism that privileges white women over women of color.



Methodology

Close Textual Analysis: Analyzing literary devices such as word choice, setting, narrative point-of-view and more in order to gather meaning from the text

Discourse analysis: Considering the language used and avoided in discussions/critiques of these works

Media Analysis: Noting the significance of details such as film angles, music choices, costuming and set design

Gender Theory: Scholarly discussion of the presentation of, tension between, and societal expectations of masculinity/femininity/"queer" behavior. This project will focus specifically on gender theory as it relates to rape culture

Rape Culture: An environment where "women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm" (Harding 3)

Critical Race Theory: A theoretical framework that examines the relationship between and construction of race and power within societies and cultures

Analysis

Scholarly Responses to Offred in the Novel

- Arguments for resistance: Use of language, emphasis on memories, and the act of recording her story
- Arguments for complicity: Passivity, victim mentality, lack of obvious action, comparison to other characters within the novel and the broader dystopian tradition
- While these responses do not deny the presence of sexual violence, the harsh critiques of Offred's complicity fail to accurately address the presence of rape culture

Analysis Continued

Rape Culture in the Novel

- Misuses biblical examples and language as divine precedence for the violent treatment of the handmaids
- "Nor does rape cover it: nothing is going on here that I haven't signed up for. There wasn't a lot of choice but there was some, and this is what I chose" (75)
- "We are for breeding purposes... We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (136)

Rape Culture in the Television Show

- The television show offers a corrective to the novel through its more noticeable acknowledgement of rape culture and resistance
- Rape as a "cultural and political act" (Mayer 140)
- "This is a brutal place... We're prisoners... They rape me, every month, whenever I might be fertile... I didn't choose this" (S1E6)
- Resists ambiguity present within the novel

Resistance in the Television Show

- Individual and collective resistance. Creation of an interpersonal female community
- "They do that really well, make us distrust each other" (S1E1)
- "Now there has to be an us because there is a them" (S1E2)

Privilege and Treatment of Race in the Television Show

- Despite its success in depicting rape culture, the television show has its blind spots, namely its consistent privileging of white women over women of color
- "If *The Handmaid's Tale* aptly addresses how the culture is grappling with sexual assault, harassment, and subjugation, it offers much less insight into how differences other than gender are at play in templates of inequality" (Hendershot 13)
- Through its sympathetic treatment of the two main white women—June and Serena Joy—and its insufficient response to their willful participation within Gilead, the television show perpetuates a type of feminism that largely ignores women of color



Conclusion

- Contrary to other scholars, I argue that examining the presence and treatment of rape culture in Atwood's original novel is necessary to ethically evaluate Offred's actions within the oppressive Gileadean regime
- Rather than participating in assigning blame or victim shaming, this approach considers how Offred, and other characters, subvert total complicity through acts of micro-resistance
- Through its adaptation choices, the television show presents a more noticeable depiction of rape culture—thereby contextualizing June's potential complicity—along with additional examples of resistance and interpersonal community within Gilead
- However, through its sympathies towards and consistent privileging of June and Serena Joy, the television show puts forth a problematically white feminism that largely excludes women of color
- This analysis of the novel and television show highlights the importance of interrogating systems of oppression, investigating our own privilege, and advocating for individual and collective resistance that does not further the oppression of others



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