

Abdol H. Joodaki, Sh. Afrougheh, Y. Jafari. *Belief machines of ideology in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: a Žižekian approach. Journal of Language and Literature 2013; 4(2), 10-20.*
DOI: 10.7813/jll.2013/4-2/2

BELIEF MACHINES OF IDEOLOGY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE: A ŽIŽEKIAN APPROACH

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DOI: 10.7813/jll.2013/4-2/2

ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's works represent the confrontation with power and the reality of violence. For Atwood, literature is a political device to show the function of ideology in a symbolic order. The word *ideology* has already been defined as a body of ideas that licenses social actions, as mistaken cognition, or a set of what are called ruling ideas. One of the most recent activities on this concept is the works of the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critics Slavoj Žižek. Žižek revives the concept of ideology in order to describe it as a form of social or political philosophy in which practical elements are as prominent as theoretical ones. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel and work of science fiction that portrays the life of a character named Offred in the Republic of Gilead. Set in the near future, in a totalitarian theocracy that has overthrown the U.S. government, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores themes of ideological indoctrination and the various means by which ideology gains agency. This article tries to follow Žižek's mechanism of ideology in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and elaborates the ways ideology is indoctrinated in the subjects.

Key words: Ideology, Belief Machines, Red Center, Household

1. INTRODUCTION

Born in Ottawa in 1939, Margaret Atwood works on her devoting interest in Victorian literature and early American literature. She has discussed various themes in her novels: *Lady Oracle* (1977), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Alias Grace* (1996), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). Describing the world around herself or the analysis of socio-political problems is always Atwood's subject in her novels and poetry. Atwood's works represent the "confrontation with power and its universal forms: dictatorship, tyranny, torture, and the reality of violence" (Rigney 104). According to Malak (1946-), her novel is represented in the form of a dystopia with some revision. It explains a social life of "frugality, conformity, censorship, corruption, fear, and terror based on those general terms of existence enforced by totalitarian states in such famous dystopian texts as Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984*" (9-10).

Society or symbolic order is inherently political and describing it is a political performance. In this regard, literature gains a political dimension 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 11). 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. To say in other words, literature is a political device to show the function of ideology in a symbolic order. Since the author "gets into the skull beneath the skin of men, whom she likes and pities, and of course of women, who are more interesting and sophisticated creatures" (Howard viii), Atwood opens a space for investigation of the ideological mechanisms of a society.

Ideology is "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science" (Jost 308). Anthony Giddens 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" (2). Malešević and MacKenzie believe "unlike many other concepts in social and political theory, ideology