

From Gilead to Syria: A Comparative Study of Patriarchal Oppression and Resistance in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" and Nagham Haider's "Winter Festivals"

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of Margaret Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia on Nagham Haider's *Winter Festivals*. The main objective of the research is to explore how Haider's literary works, specifically her *Winter Festivals*, reflect Atwood's feminist dystopian vision. The study adopts Atwood's approach of feminist dystopia as represented in *The Handmaid's Tale* to explore themes of gender oppression, objection of the female body, government control, and patriarchal power structures. In her novel, Haider draws heavily from Atwood's feminist dystopian vision, particularly in her exploration of the intersectional oppression faced by the women during the Syrian Civil War. Haider's novel portrays a society in which women are oppressed and denied agency and autonomy, which is a central concept in Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia. It can be concluded that Nagham Haider's *Winter Festivals* echoes Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopian theory in several ways. Both authors present patriarchal societies where women are oppressed and controlled, with women's bodies commodified and controlled by men. Both novels showcase governments exerting complete control over citizens through surveillance and propaganda. Additionally, they emphasize the significance of women's resistance and solidarity in the face of oppression. *Winter Festivals'* portrayal of a revolution against the Syrian regime and *The Handmaid's Tale's* depiction of Handmaid resistance show Haider's apparent influence from Atwood's feminist dystopian ideas in her writing. Finally, this research contributes to the growing body of scholarship on feminist dystopian literature, shedding light on the global reach and impact of Atwood's vision, as well as the diverse ways in which feminist writers around the world adapt and re-imagine this powerful genre to reflect their unique experiences and perspectives.

Keywords: female body, feminist dystopia, gender, patriarchal power, Syrian War

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood is a prominent writer who has contributed significantly to both poetry and fiction in the 20th century. In addition to her literary achievements, she is also recognized for her advocacy for humanitarian and environmental issues. Margaret Atwood's novels are known for their complex and multi-layered narratives, featuring strong and complex female characters who often confront issues of gender, power, and identity (Howells, 2006). Atwood's writing is known for its wit, irony, and satirical tone, which is often used to critique social and political systems (Nischik, 2000). Another key characteristic of Atwood's novels is her use of speculative fiction to explore complex themes and ideas. In many of her works, Kuźnicki (2017) explains, Atwood creates alternative worlds and societies that reflect or comment on contemporary issues and concerns. These worlds often feature dystopian settings, where social norms have been upended or destroyed, allowing for a critical examination of the ways in which power operates in our own society. According to Mead (2017), the worlds depicted in Atwood's fiction have been filled with misogyny, oppression, and environmental havoc. These worlds now seem disturbingly similar to our current reality. She stresses that Atwood is best described as the Prophet of Dystopia.

Although dystopian literature has a long history predating Margaret Atwood, she effectively incorporated and expanded upon the genre's tradition of exploring the struggles of women and feminist concerns. This has resulted in what can be seen as a unique form of feminist dystopia. Margaret Atwood has made significant contributions to the theoretical foundation of feminist dystopianism in Canadian and global literature. In her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood (1985) focuses on the oppression, sexual exploitation, patriarchal domination, and objectification of women in a dystopian setting. Tolan (2007) argues that the book gave rise to feminist dystopian fiction. The protagonist of the story is an oppressed woman, and the plot takes place in a society where dictatorship, constant surveillance, government control, and manipulation of the narrative are prevalent. Atwood's work offers a social and cultural critique of inherited conventions and traditions, motherhood, and the limited role of women in liberal democracies, which is even more starkly portrayed after a right-wing revolution that subjugates all women to men in Gilead, including in terms of reproduction for the Handmaids (Kuźnicki, 2017). Although women's roles have diminished, men's inability to reproduce also limits women's ability to become mothers (Mohammed, 2013).

Atwood's concept of feminist dystopianism has been widely adopted in various literary works since the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*. The character of Offred has become a symbol for the struggles of female immigrants around the world (Hendershot, 2018; Zidan, 2013). During the Spring Revolutions in Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia, people revolted against corruption, tyranny, and oppression, hoping to establish a new and better culture (Werber, 2014). However, some of these revolutions resulted in chaos, internal conflicts, and civil wars, forcing millions of people to flee their homelands in order to survive (Cook, 2017).

According to Khen et al. (2020), the revolution in Syria ultimately led to a civil war that resulted in the deaths of millions of people, torture, and the displacement of many Syrians from their homeland. Alsaleh (2021) adds that over half of the Syrian population was forced to leave the country due to the violence and economic decline. As they fled their homes, many immigrants experienced violence and atrocities during their desperate journeys or in the countries they sought refuge in. Women immigrants, in particular, were subjected to various crimes such as kidnapping, sexual assault, and sexual violence perpetrated by human smugglers.

Regarding the relationship between the Syrian war and literature, Columbu (2022) argues that the Syrian Civil War has had a considerable influence on Syrian literature, particularly on the novel genre. Bachleitner (2021) adds that following the outbreak of the war in 2011, many Syrian writers turned their attention to the conflict and its aftermath in their literary works. These novels, Lang (2021) argues, tend to focus on the human experience, emphasizing the individual struggles and challenges faced by those affected by the war, instead of the larger political or military conflicts. This reflects a shift in literary focus, as writers prioritize the impact of the war on the people and communities directly affected by it. By highlighting the personal stories of those involved, these novels offer a more nuanced and empathetic view of the Syrian conflict, emphasizing the resilience and courage of everyday people in the face of extraordinary challenges.

In recent years, many Syrian writers have focused on memory and trauma in their novels about the civil war. The conflict has deeply affected the Syrian society, and writers have examined how memories of the war and its aftermath have impacted individuals and communities (Joubin, 2020). This can include experiences of displacement, loss of loved ones, and the destruction of homes and communities. In this way, many writers have expressed a pessimistic view of the future, similar to that found in dystopian literature.

In terms of women writing, Asaf (2017) argues that the Syrian conflict has had a significant impact on women writers, who have developed a bleak and pessimistic worldview, seeing the world as corrupt, immoral, and scary. Anis et al (2023) agree that women writers have recognized the pervasive nature of chaos and evil, with destruction, murder, oppression, and poverty being commonplace. This perspective is often reflected in their literary works, which portray the violence and struggles experienced by female immigrants seeking safety and security in a world torn apart by war and conflict. In essence, the Syrian conflict has forced women writers to confront the harsh realities of their world and their society, leading to a sense of disillusionment and despair. Their literary works often serve as a reflection of this, highlighting the challenges and difficulties faced by women during times of war and conflict, and the impact it has on their lives and their sense of self (Behar and Firat, 2022).

In light of this argument, this study reconsiders Atwood's concept of feminist dystopianism and its reflection on Nagham Hayder's *A'yad Al-Sheta'* (translated and henceforth used as *Winter Festivals*). It traces the influence of Atwood's concept of feminist dystopianism on Nagham Hayder's *Winter Festivals*, examining the parallels in both authors' creation of patriarchal societies, the commodification of women's bodies, the depiction of governments with absolute control, and the emphasis on women's resistance and solidarity against oppressive regimes. Through these similarities, the study seeks to demonstrate the evident impact of Atwood's feminist dystopian theory on Hayder's writing in *Winter Festivals*.

Nagham Hayder is a Syrian novelist and dentist, born in Damascus in 1987. She obtained second place in the Syrian Ministry of Culture's short story competition in 2010. *Winter Festivals* is Nagham Hayder's second novel, published in 2018. The novel depicts two parallel journeys of heroines who meet in a refugee room that separates a past filled with wounds and memories in a devastated homeland from a safe future in a calm and cold place of exile. The novel won the Sheikh Zayed Book Award in 2019.

In *Winter Festivals*, Haider (2018) tells the story of the two girls Shahinaz and Rawiya who are brought together in a small room in one of the cold refugee countries, and the intricate and conflicting details of their lives, revealing the scars of their departure and the harshness of their asylum (Al-Haj, 2019). The novel delves into the intricate and often conflicting details of their lives, revealing the scars left by their departure from Syria and the harshness of the asylum they have been granted. Through the characters of Shahinaz and Rawiya, the author explores the struggles and challenges faced by Syrian refugees in their quest for a better life, highlighting the importance of empathy and understanding in a world that often seems indifferent to their plight.

Shahinaz and Rawiya reside in the same room, yet their aspirations, personalities, and desires make them distinct from one another. Shahinaz enjoyed a nightlife full of pleasure and excitement, indulging in moments of delight with those who desired her. On the other hand, Rawiya lived in a constant state of worry and anticipation, fearing everything around her and anything that could pose a threat to her safety, so much so that she kept a watchful eye on the day and people. They would reunite each day to share their experiences.

Nagham Haidar, who was born in Damascus in 1987 and currently resides in Germany, delves into the intricate details of her two tragic heroines, moving between different times and places to tell a story of living in the past and rejecting it at the same time (Mousa, 2022). She explores how previous experiences can still control the present and future, despite her characters' search for redemption in a new country and a new place. In this novel, Nagham Haidar paints a highly realistic and tragic picture of two girls from Syria who were forced by circumstances to seek refuge in a European country, seeking to continue their lives there after the war and revolution that erupted in their country, which separated them from their dreams and hopes. They went to that place to rediscover themselves and their lives once again

(Abbas, 2021).

To put it into effect, this study seeks to explore the parallels between Atwood's feminist dystopian ideas, as presented in her influential novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the themes and elements portrayed in *Winter Festivals*, bridging the worlds of feminist dystopian literature and the Syrian War context. While feminist dystopian literature has been studied extensively, this research adds a fresh perspective by examining how Atwood's ideas have potentially impacted the portrayal of a dystopian society within the specific context of the Syrian War. The topicality of this paper is also significant, as it contributes to the understanding of how literary works can reflect and comment on real-world socio-political issues. By analyzing *Winter Festivals*, a novel set against the backdrop of a devastating civil war, through the lens of feminist dystopian theory, the study sheds light on the interconnectedness of literature, gender, and political oppression in contemporary contexts. As thus, this study seeks to address the following research questions. First, in what ways is Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia reflected in *Winter Festivals*? Second, how does Nagham Haidar build upon Atwood's ideas and contribute to the genre of feminist dystopian literature? And finally, what is the significance of exploring feminist themes in dystopian literature, and what does it add to the broader field of feminist literary criticism?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Part 2 presents a theoretical framework that explores the feminist dystopian concept, its key components, and its relationship with feminist criticism and dystopian fiction. Part 3 is a detailed analysis of two literary texts, namely *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Winter Festivals*. Part 4 is a discussion of the similarities and differences between the two texts. Part 5 summarizes the main findings and highlights the significance of the feminist dystopian concept in contemporary literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

Feminist dystopianism is a subgenre of dystopian literature that focuses on the social, political, and economic oppression of women (Norledge, 2022). It imagines a future society that is ruled by patriarchal values, where women are subjected to various forms of discrimination and violence, including reproductive control, sexual exploitation, and forced subservience. The genre explores the ways in which gender-based power imbalances affect society, and often critiques contemporary gender norms and values. Feminist dystopianism can be seen as a way of raising awareness about the dangers of ignoring women's rights and advocating for gender equality (Wilson, 2014).

In his book *Feminism's Queer Temporalities*, McBean (2015) explains that the feminist dystopian theory is characterized by several major elements, including the presence of a patriarchal society where men hold all power and values are based on male dominance. Women are oppressed and subjected to various forms of violence and discrimination, often denied basic human rights and forced into subservience. Despite this, there is usually a resistance movement led by women who fight for equality through various means. According to Vieira (2013), the dystopian setting allows authors to explore the consequences of ignoring women's rights and the dangers of unchecked patriarchal power while critiquing contemporary gender norms. She stresses that the feminist dystopian theory raises awareness about the potential consequences of ignoring women's rights and advocates for gender equality through its portrayal of a future society where these norms have been taken to their extreme.

In this regard, Margaret Atwood's novels, Heybach and Sheffield (2013) argue, are often categorized as feminist dystopian fiction because they explore the oppression of women and the consequences of patriarchal systems. Atwood's works are set in fictional worlds where women are stripped of their rights and are relegated to subservient roles, and they often portray the horrors of patriarchal systems. Day et al (2016) explain that Atwood's novels offer a powerful critique of patriarchal systems, exposing the ways in which they harm women and illustrating the importance of gender equality. By portraying worlds where women are stripped of their rights and their voices, Atwood forces readers to confront the realities of gender inequality and to consider how they can work to create a more just and equitable society for all.

In the same vein, Kuźnicki (2017) suggests that the heroines in Margaret Atwood's novels are unable to be involved in and integrate into the new societies due to the systemic oppression and discrimination they face in their original and indigenous societies, which limit their opportunities for growth and empowerment. This lack of opportunity for growth and empowerment in their indigenous societies limits their ability to integrate into new societies.

Schäder (2018) agrees that Atwood's heroines are typically oppressed by the patriarchal systems of their societies, which limit their opportunities and freedoms. In many of Atwood's novels, the heroines are subject to strict gender roles that limit their ability to accumulate. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred is forced to serve as a surrogate mother for a high-ranking couple in a dystopian society where women are stripped of their rights and freedoms. In this society, women are solely valued for their reproductive capabilities, and any form of accumulation is forbidden. Similarly, in *Alias Grace*, Macpherson (2010) outlines, Grace Marks is a poor Irish immigrant who is imprisoned for a double murder in 19th century Canada. Grace is subjected to various forms of abuse and oppression, including sexual abuse and exploitation, and is unable to accumulate due to her position in society and the legal system.

Margaret Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia has had a significant influence on literature worldwide, with many authors adopting and adapting her ideas in their own works. In *The Power*, for instance, Alderman (2016) explores what would happen if women suddenly developed the ability to generate electrical energy and could use it as a weapon against men. Like Atwood's works, Cox-Palmer-White (2021) argues, *The Power* explores themes of gender oppression and the ways in which power structures can be used to marginalize certain groups. Another example can be seen in P.D. James' *The Children of Men*, published in 1992. According to Vernallis et al (2015), the novel is set in a dystopian future in England in 2021 where women have become infertile, and the human race is facing extinction. The novel explores themes of reproductive rights and the ways in which patriarchal systems can be used to control women's bodies. In this regard,

Gaard et al (2013) indicate that the book is largely based on Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia. It was also obvious that in *The Carhullan Army*, Hall (2008) is widely influenced by Atwood's theory where she explores themes of female empowerment and resistance to oppressive power structures through setting her novel in a future England where a group of women rebels against a repressive government and forms their own feminist community.

In her analysis of the conflicts in Utopian literature, Magid (2021) argues that Margaret Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia has had an influence on war and conflict novels, particularly in the way that it has encouraged writers to explore the impact of war on women and marginalized groups. Atwood's works often depict societies where women are subjugated and oppressed by men, and this theme has been echoed in many war and conflict novels that seek to explore the gendered dimensions of war and conflict. This can be clearly seen in novels such as *The Women's War* and *The Book of Joan*. *The Women's War* is set in a patriarchal society where women are second-class citizens and are denied the right to vote or hold political office. When a group of women rebels against this system, they spark a conflict that threatens to tear their society apart. In this novel, Glass (2016) follows Atwood's tradition where she explores themes of gender oppression and resistance, and it portrays women as agents of change who are capable of challenging patriarchal power structures. Similarly, *The Book of Joan* by is set in a post-apocalyptic future where a war between men and women has destroyed much of the planet. In this novel, Yuknavitch (2018) explores the ways in which gendered power structures can contribute to conflict and violence, and it presents a vision of a world where women are empowered to challenge and subvert these systems. In such novels, Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia has been used to highlight the gendered experiences of war, including sexual violence and the exploitation of women. The concept has also been used to examine the effects of war on gender roles and relationships, and the ways in which women resist and navigate their circumstances in the face of violence and adversity.

Despite the extensive literature on the impact of Margaret Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia on literature worldwide, little attention has been paid to its relevance to Syrian War fiction. This paper aims to address the existing gap in research by investigating the impact of Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopian concept on Syrian War novels, with a specific focus on Nagham Haider's *Winter Festivals* as a representative example. The research seeks to analyze the similarities between Atwood's feminist dystopian ideas, as depicted in her renowned work *The Handmaid's Tale*, and the themes, motifs, and narrative elements present in *Winter Festivals*. By exploring how Haider's novel aligns with Atwood's concepts of patriarchal oppression, the objectification of women's bodies, totalitarian governments, and women's resistance, this study aims to shed light on the influence of Atwood's ideas in shaping Haider's exploration of a dystopian society amid the Syrian War context. By using Atwood's feminist dystopia as a lens, war and conflict novels can portray a nuanced understanding of the intersectionality of power structures and gender dynamics in times of crisis. The incorporation of Atwood's concept can provide readers with a deeper understanding of the experiences of women and marginalized communities in wartime settings, ultimately contributing to the ongoing conversation around social justice and equality.

3. Analysis

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the power structure of Gilead is a rigid social hierarchy in which the commander holds absolute power, and no woman or group of women can challenge him. This system embodies male supremacy and operates like a feudal kingdom. Despite this, Offred tries to adapt to her surroundings and find solace in the commander's palace. She even goes shopping with another handmaid in an attempt to alleviate her loneliness and better understand her environment. However, these activities also serve as a means for the dystopian society to control and manipulate the minds of its victims and prevent them from resisting. This is a common tactic used by oppressive regimes to maintain their grip on power and suppress any attempts at rebellion or revolution (Dvorak, 1999; Isomaa et al, 2020).

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's initial attempts to integrate into Gilead's society are made in conjunction with the commander, who holds significant power over her as a handmaid. This illustrates how women are oppressed and marginalized in this dystopian society. Handmaids are reduced to mere instruments of sexual reproduction for the ruling class and their households. Men and the patriarchal system exploit and subjugate women in Gilead. To overcome her oppression and reclaim her feminist identity, Offred must engage in a process of reconstruction. She starts to develop a friendship with the commander, who uses his power to influence her behavior and manipulate her. Despite her desire to resist and assert her autonomy, Offred and the other handmaids are confined to their subservient role within the household hierarchy by the patriarchy. This highlights how the erosion of feminine identity and the prioritization of male loyalty have led to women's disunity and their continued oppression.

Offred initially tries to adjust to her new life as a handmaid in Gilead and seeks comfort in her sexual relationship with the commander. Her attraction to him is partly a coping mechanism to deal with the traumatic events around her. However, as she realizes the oppressive nature of Gilead's regime and the complete loss of her autonomy, she begins to rebel against the system.

The authorities in Gilead try to manipulate women into accepting their subjugation by telling them that their lives will be better under the new regime. This is exemplified by the question, "Do you remember the horrible split between those who were able to get a man and those who were unable readily?" The authorities suggest that women in the past were divided and unhappy because they lacked the protection of a man, and that under Gilead's rule, women are now valued and protected. This is a way to control women's thoughts and prevent them from rebelling against the new regime.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the patriarchal regime claims that it is better for future generations, and the handmaids are expected to accept their fate and respond appropriately to humiliation from both men and women. However, Offred challenges this authority through her love story with Nick, which she hopes will help her reclaim her femininity and dignity. Love is portrayed as a powerful force that undermines Gilead's

control Some argue that Offred's freedom is a result of her relationship with Nick, which actively works to overthrow the repressive regime. However, others believe that Offred's passivity is her way of quietly resisting her oppressors while still fighting for her identity within a government that wants her to forget her past. This approach allows her to survive and demonstrates that Gilead does not have complete control over her.

Like the Handmaids, *Winter Festivals* depicts a society where women are oppressed and forced to accept their fate. The civil war has had a devastating impact on the lives of women in the country, subjecting them to violence and displacement. Women have limited options and are left with nothing but to suffer either in their homes or as refugees. *Winter Festivals* portrays the story of two Syrian girls seeking refuge in a European country against the backdrop of the Syrian people's revolution against a tyrannical regime that began in 2011. The novel employs a narrative technique that switches between the perspectives of the two girls, Shahinaz and Rawiya, as they share their daily experiences in their shared room in a refugee camp established by a European country. The novel also portrays the reality of those who seek asylum through sessions with judges who study their cases and make the appropriate decisions regarding their futures. Some are granted residency and spend years integrating into the society by learning the language, working and adapting to life in that country.

Naghm Hayder's *Winter Festivals* tells the story of two Syrian women, Rawiya and Shahinaz, who meet in a refugee shelter in Germany. The novel follows their parallel paths as they struggle to come to terms with their pasts in Syria and adjust to their new lives in exile. Rawiya is the eldest daughter in her family who lives in Tadamon neighbourhood of the Syrian capital of Dmascus, where a massacre took place on 16 April 2013. Rawiya's father allowed some young men from the protesters to use his house as a place to hide from the police and as a result he was arrested and his fate is unknown to his family (pp.53-56). Shahinaz, on the other hand, is a prostitute who escaped Syria, with her pimp Fahad, after being tortured and threatened by her former sadistic client Qutaiba Alwahshi, a powerful military officer in the Syrian regime (131). As the two women become friends, they rely on each other to navigate the challenges of building a new life in a foreign land while still grappling with the emotional and psychological scars of their past experiences. The novel explores themes of displacement, trauma, and the search for a sense of belonging, offering a poignant and powerful portrait of the human cost of war and forced migration.

Shahinaz and Rawiya share a small room, with two beds stacked on top of each other, but their dreams, ambitions, and personalities set them apart. While the former lived a life of nightlife and pleasure, seizing moments of delight with those who desired her, the latter is a virgin who longs for love and a physical relation with a man who she can love and call her own. They would return every day to tell each other how their days went.

It's winter and on New Year's Eve, the snow is piled up outside their room, and it's very cold. Shahinaz, her pimp Fahad, and her roommate plan to celebrate the New Year by drinking a bottle of beer under the snowflakes next to the deer-shaped lanterns that are made and distributed throughout the city for the occasion. Shahinaz proposed that all the people going out to celebrate the New Year's Eve should drink a toast for Qutaiba (p. 35). She even shouted his name in the first seconds of the new year (p. 45).

Shahinaz was picked up by Fahad, the hunchback pimp who knew the way to officials, officers, and wealthy people. He presented Shahinaz as an exceptional and beautiful whore to them. Shahinaz was a prostitute who excels in her profession and knew how to attract her clients and make them spend on her. She shone in the prostitution market until she was requested by one of the most prominent security officers named Qutaiba, the intimidating and cruel officer who runs his branch, and the bloody criminal with the protesters and people in general.

Shahinaz is a skilled prostitute. She knows how to attract clients and making them spend on her. She was requested by Qutaiba, a notorious security officer known for his brutality towards protesters and people in general.

Shahinaz was used by officer Qutaiba for his own pleasure, summoning her to either his secret apartment or his security office. She was skilled in satisfying his sadistic and brutal desires through various forms of violent sex. However, while Qutaiba acted like a god in his branch with the detainees, protesters, and people, he was going through his worst days. The revolution had exhausted him, especially after it became armed and the Free Syrian Army emerged. Qutaiba was on their list of accountability and liquidation for the killings of the Syrian people. While heading with his family to the Syrian coast, his convoy was attacked by the revolutionaries, who killed his youngest son. Qutaiba went insane and began suspecting someone close to him had betrayed him, and he suspected Shahinaz. He summoned her and tortured her mercilessly in revenge, using the torture tools she had given him as a gift, trying to find out if she had leaked any information about him and his movements. She was innocent, but he left her between life and death.

Qutaiba called upon Fahd, and instructed him to take Shahinaz and seek refuge in a European nation. Fahd complied, concealing his true identity as a member of the Alawite community, who was running a brothel for Shahinaz and her clients. They fled to Europe, where they sought asylum, with Fahd posing as a member of the Alawite regime, who was secretly working with the revolutionaries and the Free Syrian Army. He claimed that he fled because of the regime's brutal crackdown and professed his love for Shahinaz, a Damascus girl who belonged to the revolution and whose family had suffered at the hands of the regime's war against the protesters and their families. Despite the risk, Fahd continued his pimping activities, but concealed them from the European authorities, aware of the legal consequences if discovered. Shahinaz was unhappy with her life in Europe and constantly missed Officer Qutaiba, but Fahd informed her that she could never return to Syria and that he would leave once his mission was completed. Despite Fahd's efforts to find her suitable employment, Shahinaz refused to accept her new life as a worker, as it meant giving up her former status as a beloved princess, and adjusting to a cold and unfamiliar environment.

Shahinaz's life is depicted as one filled with suffering and despair. She is a young woman who used to work in a brothel due to circumstances beyond her control, and her situation is made worse by the fact that she is living in a war-torn country where violence and chaos are a

constant threat. There is no glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak existence. Her dreams of a better life are completely shattered when she is forced to flee to a foreign country with Fahd, her pimp and operator, who continues to exploit her in the new country. Shahinaz's struggles highlight the harsh realities faced by many women in conflict zones and the difficulty of rebuilding one's life after being forced to flee one's home.

Rawiya is different from Shahinaz in many ways: the daughter of the solidarity neighborhood whose people participated in the revolution. Her father is a quiet man, and she is the eldest daughter in the house with two younger twin brothers. After the Syrian revolution and the participation of most neighborhoods in Damascus, its suburbs, and countryside in its demonstrations, her father allowed some fleeing protesters who were being pursued by security to enter his home and hide them. The result was his arrest and disappearance. When the situation worsened in Syria, and the regime began a campaign of killing and displacement of Syrians and destroying their country, Rawiya fled by sea to Europe, where she was able to save herself and settle in this European country.

Rawiya was a music teacher who lived her feminine concerns as a girl in need of love, affection, physical satisfaction, a home, and a family, but asylum postponed all these matters. She is now living in this camp with Shahinaz in a small room, not knowing anything about her, but she sees her taking care of her appearance a lot, and she goes out every day and does not return until evening. Rawiya is surprised by this obscure relationship between Shahinaz and Fahd. When she asks her, she answers that he is her relative and protector in exile.

Rawiya works to go through the stages of seeking asylum peacefully to build her life in this country and is constantly in touch with her mother. Her mother collects money and pays it to smugglers who promise to release her father or let her see him. Rawiya is annoyed with her mother, telling her that her father has been killed, and asking her if she did not see what the regime did to Syria and its people?! But her mother does not lose hope and keeps asking her daughter for more money to support her brothers and search for her father. Rawiya saves some euros from the asylum assistance she receives and sends them to her mother. She does not blame her for what she does. Her mother has no choice but to hope that she will find her father and he will return to his beloved family. Rawiya needs love like any human and needs the other half of a man to complete her and her humanity. She met a refugee like her at the asylum center, Irfan, who recently became a doctor. He took the risk with his whole family across the sea and was able to reach safety in Europe.

Rawiya's story highlights the struggles that refugees face when trying to build a new life. Rawiya and Irfan are both highly educated and talented individuals, but their refugee status makes it difficult for them to find work and pursue their dreams. The story also highlights the toll that political violence takes on families and communities. Rawiya's father is a victim of the violence, and her mother is still searching for him, hoping against hope that he is still alive. The story is a poignant reminder of the human cost of war and the importance of compassion and solidarity in times of crisis.

4. Discussions

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a prime example of feminist dystopianism. The novel portrays a totalitarian regime in the Republic of Gilead, which has replaced the United States. Women are treated as property, and their sole purpose is to bear children for the ruling class. The protagonist, Offred, is a Handmaid who is assigned to a high-ranking official for the sole purpose of bearing his child. She is stripped of her identity, her rights, and her freedom, and is forced to live in constant fear. Her every move is monitored, and any deviation from the prescribed behavior is punished severely. The novel highlights the oppression and marginalization of women in a patriarchal society. It is a critique of the restrictions placed on women's autonomy, their right to education and work, and their ability to control their own bodies. It exposes the dangers of a society where women are reduced to their reproductive function and denied any agency. Moreover, the novel illustrates how women can be manipulated and controlled through their sexuality and reproductive capacity, making it a powerful feminist commentary on the social construction of gender and sexuality. In this regard, the novel is best labelled as an embodiment of Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia. This can be explored under the three headings of Patriarchal society, objectification of female body, and government control.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Commander defends the oppressive laws of the new regime to Offred by arguing that they will ensure women's safety and enable them to fulfill their biological roles without hindrance. However, in this society, women are viewed as subordinate to men and confined by their feminine biology, as evidenced by Offred's sense of being entirely defined by her body. Throughout the novel, the Handmaids are dehumanized and reduced to mere objects or tools for reproduction, as exemplified by their status as "relative beings" (15). The new system in Gilead starts by stripping women of their financial rights. Every bank account with an F on it, referring to being owned by a female, was closed. Offred remembers this and comments on it as she became her husband's property, "we are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his" (182). Women are classified according to their roles and purpose in society. The handmaids are as Offred describes "we are two-legged wombs" (136).

The society depicted in Atwood's novel, Gilead, is patriarchal and women are treated as objects. Women's sexual desires are suppressed, and men are considered superior to women. The Ceremony is a ritualized form of rape that is performed by high-ranking men, including Commanders, their Wives, and Handmaids, to conceive children. Offred describes her and Serena Joy's positions during the ceremony, where Serena Joy holds her hands to signify their oneness, but in reality, she is in control of the process and the outcome. According to Offred, men receive Handmaids because the law considers all men fertile and only categorizes women as either fruitful or barren. Offred describes her and Serena Joy's positions during the procreation ceremony. "My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any" (93-94). The men receive the handmaids because, as Offred states, "There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not

officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law"(79).

Women in *The Handmaid's Tale* have also to live within rigid rules. The Republic of Gilead is a totalitarian regime that is controlled by Christian fundamentalists, who enforce power and control over its residents, leaving them helpless (Howells, 2006). The government uses various methods to establish control, such as The Rachel and Leah Center, the Wall, military force, and the Salvaging (Dahmane & Belagoun, 2020).

According to Mirzayee (2019), the Rachel and Leah Center, also called The Red Center, is a facility created to house and educate Handmaids in the ideology of Gilead. Its name is derived from the Biblical story of Rachel and Leah, which serves as a model for the role of Handmaids as childbearers in Gilead. The Aunts are responsible for running the Center, while the Angels provide security. Handmaids reside at the Red Center until they are assigned to a Commander.

Like the Red Center, Salvagings are "for women only" (272). Salvagings are acts of executions that are attended and executed by handmaids and they show Gilead at its most cruelty. The Wall also is a significant example that illustrates the government control in Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Wall serves as a tool for the government to instill fear in the populace (Stillman et al, 1994). The dead bodies of those who have transgressed against the state are publicly displayed on the Wall, and citizens are expected to view them. The purpose of this display is to serve as a warning to others, reminding them of the dire consequences of breaking the rules. The Wall represents the government's power to punish those who are perceived as sinners, and its presence creates a sense of fear and coercion among the people. The bodies remain on display for extended periods, allowing as many people as possible to witness the consequences of disobedience. This serves as a reminder that anyone who fails to adhere to the strictures of the Republic of Gilead may meet a similar fate.

It's the bags over the heads that are the worst, worse than the faces themselves would be. It makes the men like dolls on which the faces have not yet been painted; like scarecrows, which in a way is what they are, since they are meant to scare. Or as if their heads are sacks, stuffed with some undifferentiated material, like flour or dough.... The heads are zeros.... The heads are the heads of snowmen, with the coal eyes and the carrot noses fallen out. The heads are melting. (43)

Finally, the Eyes of God represent Gilead's secret police force. Their name and emblem, a winged eye, symbolize the ever-vigilant gaze of God and the totalitarian nature of the regime. The Eyes maintain strict surveillance over the population, ensuring compliance with the government's religiously-based laws (Howells, 1996). The Eyes operate with a sense of anonymity, instilling fear in those who might consider defying the rules. Their power is an unspoken one, but their presence is felt by everyone. The tragic suicide of Ofglen is an example of the consequences of crossing the Eyes, and their influence is felt until the very end of the novel, as Offred hears the ominous sound of their black van approaching.

In *Winter Festivals*, the author portrays the struggles of Syrian refugees in a European country. The author successfully delves into the psychology of the characters, providing a powerful and credible account of their personal experiences. The novel does not directly address the Syrian revolution and its people, but the reader can infer the devastating impact of the oppressive regime on the lives of the characters. Allam (2018) indicates that the author creates a contrast between the tyrannical and abusive characters and the simple, poor people who rebelled against oppression and fought for freedom, dignity, justice, democracy, and a better life. Rawiya, who fled herself and became a source of support for her family in Syria, represents the humanity and resilience of the Syrian people. The novel is a poignant reflection of the struggles of refugees and the human cost of political oppression and violence (Al-Arabi, 2021).

The novel explored how the two heroines, Rawiya and Shahinaz, were affected psychologically by being forcibly displaced and how it impacted their lives. They had to flee their homeland because of the war and sought refuge in an asylum, where their future was uncertain. The author delves into the complexities of their experiences, exploring the emotions and mental toll that comes with having to leave everything behind and face the challenges of starting over in a foreign place. The characters appear to be haunted by psychological pains that have no escape, leading them to behave in ways that seem illogical, but on the other hand, reflect the tragic reality of the lives that women live in exile, and the sorrows, losses, and cruelty they encounter there.

In *Winter Festivals*, Nagham Haider follows the feminist dystopian tradition of Atwood. Haider's story is largely based on three main elements, namely the patriarch society, Objectification of Female Body, and government control which are key elements in Atwood's concept of feminist dystopia. These can be illustrated as follows.

Patriarchal society in Winter Festivals

In *Winter Festivals*, women are often subjected to unequal treatment due to their gender, leading to a dynamic of domination and subordination in interactions between men and women in such societies. Sexuality plays a significant role in defining these relationships, as demonstrated by Shahinaz's sexual roles aimed at pleasing Qutaiba. These roles exemplify how patriarchal societies treat women. On one occasion, she played the role of an arrogant community lady wearing tight jeans who he had to humiliate and put in her place as a woman beneath a man. On another occasion, she played the role of an unfaithful woman who needed to be punished for her sins. She even played the role of a virgin exploring her body for the first time and a housewife who engaged in an affair and was afraid of being caught by her husband. In yet another role, she played a street hawker who longed to be touched by men (92). All of these degrading roles were a source of pleasure for someone like Qutaiba. When Shahinaz was with Qutaiba, she was not treated as a human being but as a possession owned by him. Their relationship is an example of a Master-Slave relationship, in which Shahinaz was victimized, brutalized, and dehumanized by Qutaiba during their role-play. In the end, he even tortured her and sentenced her to exile.

Fahd reminded Shahinaz that he was the one who had made her, but she retorted by reminding him of her past actions. She recounted how he had received extra money because she agreed to sleep with an official's two sons on the same bed, how she had slept with a foreign man who gave her number to all his friends, and how she had convinced Qutaiba to help Fahd's cousin avoid having his private parts smashed in prison by having sex with Qutaiba for hours on end (76-77).

Shahinaz told Qutaiba the truth about herself, that she was a prostitute who had been expelled from her country for only one night when she did not engage in prostitution (90). However, despite her honesty, Qutaiba, considering her an untrustworthy woman, banished her from her own country merely on the basis of suspicion.

When Rawiya blames Jihan for hurting her eyes with a pointless job like sewing and repairing old clothes, Jihan responds that "fat ladies with big bottoms need to make themselves useful by doing anything" (51). This perspective reveals Jihan's belief that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to be useful in society, especially in terms of performing domestic tasks. The fact that Jihan specifically mentions "fat ladies with big bottoms" suggests that she may hold negative attitudes towards overweight women and may view them as less valuable or capable than others. This attitude is reflective of the societal expectations placed on women to perform traditional gender roles and be useful in the domestic sphere.

Rawiya is very cautious of her appearance and behaviour. She spends her time, energy and money on buying bras. Bras are a feminine symbol of maturity. Rawiya is fascinated by buying different kinds and shapes of bras, putting them on and returning them back because there is no man in her life to help her choose the best-looking bras on her body (101). Bras not only highlights Rawiya's longing for a physical intimacy with a man, but also her unresolved feeling of violation when she was harassed as a schoolgirl by the young man who grabbed her right breast on her way to school (21).

Objectification of the female body

Winter Festivals represents a society in which women are objectified and viewed as sexual commodities for men's pleasure. Women are often sexually violated based on the desires and needs of men, and their sexuality is primarily controlled through sexual abuse and exploitation. Rawiya's harassment when she was only a little schoolgirl. A young man in his pajamas grabs her right breast and squeeze it as she ran in a hurry to school. She screams and he ran and join the queue to get freshly baked bread. Rawiya spent her school day crying in the school's restrooms as a result of what Hyder describes as "an assault that took the virginity of her right breast and a pornographic feeling that ruined her morning" (P. 21).

Fahd on the New Year's Eve celebration gave himself the freedom to touch Rawiya's body more than once. Rawiya reflects on the night by remembering how the main purpose of Fahd to come to the celebration is to touch the female party goers. "It was very obvious that he came to touch the women. He came very close to Rawiya's body and touched her shoulders and hands so many times pretending to hand her the beer" (P.48). Fahd reminded Rawiya with the young men who used to stalk girls in the streets with "their shaved faces, unbuttoned shirts, cheap perfumes and big ugly shoes" (p.48).

The novel portrays several instances of sexual abuse and objectification of women. In one example, Irfan kissed Rawiya and disappeared from her life the next day, leaving her without any explanation, which can be seen as an act of sexual abuse. Shahinaz, a prostitute, faced numerous hardships in her profession, including enduring the smell of deprived men, the scenes of hairy bellies over her soft body, and the dirt of the nightclub customers. Qutaiba, an officer, deformed Shahinaz's body by shaving her hair and torturing her with sadistic toys from her gift bag. Even after turning herself in to the police, Shahinaz continued to be objectified by men, as one man could not take his eyes off her body, even with his children present. Additionally, Fahd's attempt to set Shahinaz up with other refugee men was degrading to her. These instances highlight the objectification and sexual abuse that women, particularly those in vulnerable positions like refugees and prostitutes, often face.

Government Control

In Nagham Hayder's *Winter Festivals*, the author portrays a tyrannical government through various characters' experiences. Shahinaz's encounter with the military branch highlights the brutal treatment of citizens, as blindfolded and barefoot people lay scattered in the hallways, and blood stains the walls and floor.

As Shahinaz walked through the hallways of the military branch to meet Qutaiba for the first time, she moved with consistency and grace, deftly avoiding the blindfolded, barefoot people scattered along her path. She chewed gum nonchalantly, paying no heed to the alert department and its members shouting around her. The walls and floors were stained with blood, though she didn't seem to notice it as she hurried along. Shahinaz quickened her pace, deliberately avoiding seeing or hearing what was happening around her. She stumbled over something or someone, but kept moving, not wanting to know what or who she had tripped on (39).

Likewise, Rawiya's memories of her father's arrest by violent officers and her brother's physical condition due to the sound of cannons illustrate the devastating effects of government control on families. The corrupt military officers who took Jihan's money and gave her false hope of her husband's safety demonstrate the corruption within the government. Even neighbors like Um Emad, who informed on Rawiya's father, contribute to the government's oppressive regime. Qutaiba, a representative of the tyrannical government, uses his military uniform as a badge of honor for his heinous deeds and takes pleasure in torture and violence. Rawiya's loss of simple pleasures like smoking on her roof further emphasizes the pervasive nature of government control. Shahinaz's role-play with Qutaiba is disturbing

as it influences him to become more energetic in his job of interrogating, hitting, and torturing people. The government's corruption and cruelty are evident as people go missing with no trace, and families pay large sums of money for false promises of their return. Qutaiba's confessions about popping out people's eyes and killing them for writing an article highlight the brutal reality of living under a tyrannical government. The various experiences of the characters in the novel paint a cohesive picture of a government that seeks to control and oppress its citizens.

To summarize, Nagham Haider's *Winter Festivals* is influenced by this concept in several ways. Firstly, the portrayal of women in *Winter Festivals* is one of oppression, as women are treated as unequal to men, and their interactions are often characterized by a dynamic of domination and subordination. This is evident in the way that women are expected to perform certain sexual roles, which serve to reinforce patriarchal ideas of male dominance and female subservience. The character of Shahinaz, for example, is treated as a possession by Qutaiba and is victimized, brutalized, and dehumanized in their role-play, which is an example of a Master-Slave relationship. Secondly, the society depicted in *Winter Festivals* is one in which women are denied agency and autonomy, and their bodies are subject to the control of men. This is evident in Rawiya's experience of sexual harassment as a schoolgirl, as well as in Shahinaz's experiences as a prostitute. These experiences highlight the ways in which women's bodies are often subject to the sexual desires of men and how women are forced to navigate these desires to survive.

5. Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, depicts a future dystopian world where women's rights have been reversed, and they are subjected to colonization by patriarchy, cultural imperialism, and geographical colonization. The main characters are forced to move and detach due to this colonization. There are two types of settlement portrayed in the novel: physical and psychological settlement, where women are colonized in their bodies and minds simultaneously. Through the portrayal of Gilead, a dystopian society, *The Handmaid's Tale* effectively emphasizes the horrors that such societies impose on women. In this society, women are reduced to vessels, whose primary purpose is to bear children and save the country. The novel explores the life of a female character in a totalitarian society characterized by tyranny, constant surveillance, and government manipulation and control.

The idea that men are superior to women is a major cause of gender discrimination. Women are not given the same educational opportunities and are limited in their ability to make their own choices. This is due to the way in which women are oppressed and marginalized in society. In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women's names are changed to signify their loss of identity and connection to their past lives. Women's bodies are often colonized by men, meaning they are controlled and oppressed by men. Women's minds are also impacted by cultural norms and beliefs that can cause them to feel victimized and silenced. This is not only true for women, but men also face similar forms of oppression and victimization.

Nagham Hayder's *Winter Festivals* follows the feminist dystopian theory of Margaret Atwood in several ways. Firstly, both authors create a patriarchal society where women are oppressed and controlled by men. In *Winter Festivals*, Shahinaz is forced into prostitution, while in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's bodies are used for reproduction. Both authors explore the idea of women's bodies as objects to be controlled and commodified. Secondly, both novels depict a government with complete control over the lives of its citizens, with surveillance and propaganda used to maintain this control. Finally, both authors highlight the importance of resistance and solidarity among women in the face of oppressive societies. In *Winter Festivals*, Rawiya is part of a revolution against the Syrian regime, and in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Handmaids form a resistance to fight against the oppression they face. These similarities suggest that Hayder was influenced by Atwood's feminist dystopian theory in her writing of *Winter Festivals*.

It can be finally concluded that both *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Winter Festivals* by Nagham Hayder share several similarities, such as dystopian themes, patriarchal societies, the objectification of women's bodies, and government control. Both novels depict societies that are oppressive, where men hold all the power and women are subjugated and exploited. Women's bodies are commodified and controlled by the government in both novels, with reproduction in *The Handmaid's Tale* and prostitution in *Winter Festivals*. The governments in both novels have complete control over the lives of their citizens, using surveillance and propaganda to maintain their power.

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