



VIA
PANORAMICA

Revista de Estudios Anglo-Americanos
A Journal of Anglo-American Studies

UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

Power to Change the Present

THEMATIC SECTION

Weaponizing Women's Bodies for Authoritarian Power: *The Handmaid's Tale* and Anti-Abortion Politics in the USA

CATARINA ALMEIDA

University of Porto

ABSTRACT: Since the United States Supreme Court overturned the Roe v. Wade decision in June 2022, the USA has faced a crisis in women's reproductive rights that has intensified following Donald Trump's reelection. This article asks why women's bodies are instrumentalized to fulfil the political goals of authoritarian regimes. It explores the role that attacks on women's reproductive freedoms play in Trump's political agenda by using Margaret Atwood's dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, as a cognitive map to understand the political instrumentalization of women's bodies and its consequences for women. It considers the manipulation of religion and ideas of womanhood, family values, and sexual morality as means of reproductive coercion, and how the state surveils those who try to circumvent the law. The article also examines how the undermining

RESUMO: Desde que o Supremo Tribunal reverteu a proteção Roe v. Wade em junho de 2022, os Estados Unidos têm enfrentado uma crise nos direitos reprodutores das mulheres que se intensificou desde a reeleição de Donald Trump. Este artigo questiona porque é que os corpos das mulheres são instrumentalizados para cumprir objetivos políticos em regimes autoritários. A pesquisa explora o papel que os ataques às liberdades reprodutoras das mulheres têm na agenda política de Trump ao usar a distopia de Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, como um mapa cognitivo para perceber a instrumentalização política dos corpos das mulheres e que consequências isso tem para as mesmas. O artigo debruça-se sobre a manipulação religiosa e reflete sobre a condição da mulher, valores familiares e moralidade sexual como meios de reprodução coerciva analisando como é que o Estado vigia

of women's bodily autonomy is fostered by socioeconomic divisions that marginalize and divide women, limiting resistance, and how the media disseminate propaganda that manufactures women's consent to their own repression.

KEYWORDS: Abortion, Reproductive Rights, Dystopia, Propaganda, Authoritarianism, Motherhood

aqueles que tentam contornar a lei. A pesquisa também examina como é que a desvalorização da autonomia corporal das mulheres é acentuada por divisões socioeconômicas que marginalizam e dividem as mulheres, limitando resistência, e como os media disseminam propaganda para fabricar o consentimento das mulheres na sua própria opressão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aborto, Direitos Reprodutores, Propaganda, Autoritarismo, Maternidade

INTRODUCTION

The concept of dystopia has been widely explored in literature and has become more relevant as we reflect and argue about the state of our social conditions as human beings. According to Tom Moylan, the dystopian narrative emerged as a genre in the early 20th century, as the world faced the chaos of shifting global politics, two world wars, and rapid economic transitions. The “horrors of the twentieth century” provided a thriving environment for the development of dystopian fiction, which enables “its writers and readers to find their way within (...) the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live” (Moylan 2000, 12).

Moylan explains that dystopias present the reader with “challenging cognitive maps of the historical situation by way of imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their authors’ and readers’ doors” (*idem*, 11). That is, dystopian fiction allows the reader to navigate fictional scenarios as if they were maps, and trace how power works; how populations are manipulated with propaganda and made complicit with repressive practices and rituals the regime defines as moral and just; and how the experience of the dystopia affects the psychological experience of characters. Through comparison, dystopian fiction provides readers with insights into the dystopian aspects of their own world and enables them to think critically about them “in ways not sanctioned by hegemonic institutions and ideologies” (*idem*, 17).

The Handmaid’s Tale was first published in 1985 by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood. The story is set in the dystopian Republic of Gilead (formerly the USA), where fertile women are used as reproductive vessels for the Commanders and their Wives. The former government of the USA is overthrown in a military coup by a white-supremacist, Christian movement called The Sons of Jacob, who, seeking to strengthen the white birth rate, assassinate the President, declare a state of emergency, and found the Republic of Gilead. Through the focus on fertility, Atwood’s dystopia sheds light on a system that eliminates women’s reproductive freedom, allowing the modern reader to imagine “a future cataclysmic society, characterized by oppression, dehumanisation, fear, and often government control” (McGuire 2024, 73).

As Christabelle Sethna explains, all “women are slotted into a caste system based entirely on their reproductive utility to the state” (2020, 2). The caste system is divided into Handmaids, Wives, Econowives, Marthas, Aunts and Unwomen. The Handmaids, who wear hoods to prevent their peripheral vision, are used as reproductive vessels as long as they are fertile; the Wives maintain the social status of elite households according to the idea of the “traditional family”; Marthas handle the domestic labour in each household; Econowives are women married to the poorer men that can take the roles of Handmaid or Martha; the Aunts are an unyielding conservative force responsible for the indoctrination of future Handmaids; Unwomen represent women outside the regime’s normalized concept of woman, for example, lesbians, sex workers, and feminists. “Unwoman” is also a term that can be used to punish the Handmaids. If they do not follow the rules, they can be reclassified as unwomen and sent to work in the colonies, where they will die from exposure to toxic trash. *The Handmaid’s Tale* helps us understand how an authoritarian society can be built upon the annihilation of women’s reproductive rights, and deepens our understanding of the political crisis underlying the repression of women’s reproductive rights in the USA today. In this article, I ask what *The Handmaid’s Tale* can tell us about why women’s bodies are weaponized to fulfil political agendas.

Although published in 1985, *The Handmaid’s Tale* continues to serve as a symbol of resistance against the abortion bans that have been introduced since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in June 2022 (Sethna, 2020). Most recently, many women wore the Handmaids’ red gowns during the ‘No Kings Protest’ on 14 June 2025 (President Trump’s birthday), which mobilized more than five million people. This shows that *The Handmaid’s Tale* continues to address the same feminist concerns that moved Atwood to write the novel in the 1980s. At that time, former President Ronald Reagan had gained support from “the rise of a pro-life, right-wing, Christian fundamentalist movement” (Sethna 2020, 1). However, the current situation feels different from the 1980s: now that *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned, states across the USA have legislated a variety of measures to restrict abortion.

Although dystopian fiction does not reflect reality per se, because it presents worst-case scenarios that highlight the unseen dynamics and possibilities of current social

conflicts, Atwood's fiction remains relevant as it enables the reader to compare the repression of women's reproductive rights in Gilead with the situation in the USA today. Readers may recognize in the prohibition and criminalization of abortion in Gilead, the normalization of rape, and the use of propaganda to indoctrinate women's compliance, similar patterns visible in today's USA.

WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS: RELIGIOUS MANIPULATION

During the US presidential elections in 2024, one of the most debated issues of the campaigns was abortion laws and women's reproductive rights. This topic was critical because in June 2022, *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973), an important federal ruling of the US Supreme Court protecting women's right to abortion, was overturned by the Court in the case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. 215 (2022), leaving the power to regulate the level of access to abortion to each state. Because the *Roe v. Wade* protection no longer exists, many states have made new laws to restrict or abolish abortion, while other states are passing legislation in order to protect it. In states with bans or severe restrictions, those women who have the procedure face serious health and legal consequences. The complex differences in state laws also create obstacles for women who seek an abortion across state boundaries.¹

There are currently 41 states with abortion bans in effect (12 with total bans), although all of them recognize exceptions that allow the procedure to be performed if there is a threat to the life of the pregnant person (Curhan 2024). However, because "these exceptions are not clear how much risk of death or how close to death a pregnant patient may need to be for the exception to apply", health-care providers are apprehensive of using their "reasonable medical judgement". The ambiguous interpretation of the exception under the ban "allows a court to review circumstances after the abortion has been completed and rely on the testimony of other medical experts to determine whether the treating physician met the standard". Physicians in the states of Idaho, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas have filed lawsuits to challenge

“the vagueness, narrowness, and lack of deference to physician judgment of the medical exceptions in state abortion bans” (Felix *et al.* 2025).

There are other situations that constitute exceptions under the abortion bans. These exceptions highlight differences in the definition of women’s health. While 41 states allow the procedure when there is a “threat to the life of the pregnant person”, only 22 states recognize this threat to the “physical health of the pregnant person”, while another 13 states recognize risk “to the *general* health of the pregnant person” (my italics). Only ten states allow abortion in cases of rape, and nine states allow abortion in cases of incest. If a fetal anomaly is diagnosed, only 13 states have exceptions in the law (Curhan 2025).

It is not only the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* that threatens women’s reproductive rights and health. In 2017, during his first administration, President Trump signed a bill into law giving power to companies to choose whether or not to cover the cost of birth control “based on the employer’s religious beliefs” and providing “an exemption for organizations and small businesses that object on the basis of moral conviction rather than religious belief” (ABC News, 2017).

This brings forward an important aspect in Atwood's dystopia, which is the regime’s coalition with Christian movements, and how they define the fundamentalist patriarchal values that guide the society. The regime institutionalizes Christian patriarchal values by using a biblical verse to manufacture consent for the treatment the Handmaids have to endure. This religious endorsement as the foundation of Gileadean values reinforces the idea that a women’s use of their body is conditioned by the interpretation of religious texts.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he Said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And She Said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her. (Genesis, 30:1–3)

This passage from the Book of Genesis is recited by the entire household before the “Ceremony” occurs, a ritual in which the Handmaids are forced to engage in sexual acts

with the Commanders to produce babies for their Wives, while the Wife holds the Handmaid down by the hands to be inseminated. The recitation of the biblical quotation implies that what is about to happen is natural and a result of divine providence. It also establishes the idea that the three people involved in the violent act are connected by God.

Indeed, the use of the Old Testament illustrates how Gilead appropriates religious scriptures to strengthen the authority of the regime. This portrayal of sexual violence in *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates the consequences of not separating religious concepts, beliefs, and systems from the administration of a country. Laura Reynolds supports this perspective by arguing that “selective interpretation [of religious passages] serves to maintain the status quo, providing a divine rationale for the systemic oppression and exploitation of women” (Reynolds 2024, 2). This argument applies to Atwood’s story as it illustrates the extent to which a religious mindset can excuse routine sexual abuse. As a worst-case scenario, it may offer some insight into what the alliance between Christian fundamentalism and anti-abortion legislation could mean for women in US society. It might serve as a warning of where restricting women’s reproductive rights as a means to advance the Christian conservative ideology might lead. Arguments for abortion bans are grounded in religious beliefs, mostly affiliated with anti-abortion Christian movements. An example is the Personhood Alliance, an anti-abortion Christian movement, which defines abortion as the “killing of an innocent human being”, which, in their perspective, “is a direct violation of their Personhood”. They argue that “the right to life originates from God and not the state” and therefore “the State is limited in its authority to authorize the taking of a life” (Personhood Alliance 2025). As well as appropriating the religious propaganda of Christian fundamentalism, the anti-abortion regime under President Trump is also informed by the radically conservative agenda of the Heritage Foundation, the architects of Project 2025, and the policy recommendations for a Trump presidency. Project 2025 not only recommends rules to reinforce conservative policies and increase executive power, but also ways of implementing more restrictions on abortion.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2024), Project 2025 includes plans to “revive a 19th-century law, the Comstock Act, to ban any abortion

medications and materials ... from being sent through the US Postal Service” and reverse the approval of mifepristone by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Mifepristone is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) as an important part of safe medical abortion care and is licensed for use in 96 countries. It is generally used with another drug, misoprostol (sometimes misoprostol is used alone). Mifepristone reduces the need for surgery, empowers women to safely self-manage their own abortion care if they wish to, and can therefore reduce demand on health-care services, which is important in regions with limited health resources (WHO, 2022; Sedgh and Taqi 2023). At present, it is unclear what will change regarding the availability of mifepristone since the Trump administration has taken what seems to be a step back, asking the court to dismiss the abortion pill lawsuit on grounds that “the case does not meet the legal standard to be heard in the federal district court in which it was filed” (Belluck 2025).

A cross-sectional survey study of US women of reproductive age indicates that, after the Supreme Court decision in 2022, the use of self-managed abortion increased significantly from 2.4% to 3.3% (Ralph et al, 2024). The same study showed that, besides the self-use of the abortion pill recommended by the WHO, many women seek harmful ways to terminate their pregnancy, such as “herbs”, “hitting themselves in the stomach” and “alcohol or other substances”. As a result of such measures of self-managed abortion, in 2023, 14.9% reported complications (mostly bleeding and pain) “requiring treatment by a physician or nurse”, but only 4.7% of those surveyed sought emergency medical care for a complication (Ralph *et al* 2024).

Although the specific details of reproductive coercion in *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the USA today are different, Atwood’s dystopia helps us understand how authoritarian laws and religiously inspired propaganda from extremist campaign groups and the state can combine to reshape the behaviour and thinking of women so that they become complicit in a regime that denies women rights and bodily autonomy.

The Handmaid’s Tale can be used as a framework to critically examine modern US society because it presents worst-case imaginary examples of measures to restrict women’s reproductive rights and illustrates their harmful consequences. Trump’s USA does not stray far from the conditions that define Atwood’s dystopian vision: from

permitting the interference of religious movements in presidential decision-making to forbidding the transportation of abortion medication and limiting access to birth control.

PROTECTION AND BODY SURVEILLANCE

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, body surveillance plays a significant role in maintaining the regime's order, for nothing the Handmaids do goes unnoticed by the Eyes, the regime's police. The use of surveillance as a means of control is common in dystopian fiction. There are two types commonly portrayed: overt and covert surveillance. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the population is aware of being watched and knows where Big Brother is watching them from, because surveillance equipment is installed everywhere (Searles 2022, 20). This is overt surveillance. By contrast, in Atwood's dystopia, surveillance is mostly covert. Policing is achieved through impressing the idea on the Handmaids that they might be observed, but they do not know when, how, or by whom.

The Handmaids are sometimes watched through a combination of overt and covert surveillance. There is a rule that a Handmaid cannot leave the house alone: she must wait for another Handmaid. As the protagonist Offred observes, "This is supposed to be for our protection, though the notion is absurd: we are well protected already. The truth is that she is my spy, as I am hers" (25). In this instance, Offred is referring to Ofglen, the Handmaid who accompanies her on daily walks to the grocery store. The implicit dynamic is that, if one Handmaid makes a mistake, the other is there to report it. The rule about not leaving the house alone, therefore, enables both types of surveillance because, while the Handmaids know they are being observed by another Handmaid (overt surveillance), they do not know when the other Handmaid might report them (covert surveillance).

E. Ç. Öykü explains that, because the women in Gilead are trained to report any minor deviation from the rules, the system fosters "a culture of fear and suspicion that effectively prevents the formation of any bonds of solidarity or trust" (2024, 26). This system also produces coercive solidarity where Handmaids are forced to be in each

other's company to serve as alibis. The system creates distrust among people, ensuring that no opposition to the regime arises.

Surveillance becomes more invasive when it goes beyond the work of spies and political police. Offred undergoes monthly gynaecological examinations. In Gilead, where values are deeply rooted in the exploitation of women's bodies, a routine visit to the doctor is also a means of surveillance and control over the Handmaid's body. The routine exams allow the doctor to "regularly inspect the interior of [Offred's] body", as Pamela Cooper explains. "Offred's vulnerability," Cooper observes, "is realized as the repeated experience of intrusion" (1995, 4). Although the Handmaids' experience of surveillance is extreme in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women's experience of fear of being discovered for having an abortion, where it is illegal in the USA, is not far removed from Atwood's dystopian vision. Through the representation of covert and overt surveillance, the doctor's invasion of the female body, and the everyday violations the Handmaids are conditioned to accept in Gilead, Atwood engages with issues familiar to women in US society.

A parallel can be observed between Atwood's dystopian representation of surveillance and the persecution of women who try to obtain abortions in the USA. US women are also watched, generally covertly. Because of the complexity and diversity of the laws against abortion introduced in various states, women who have an abortion do not know when they may be criminally charged, depending on which state they are in, or when they may have contact with health care or other state-run services that may denounce the procedure. There are many cases of women who have faced legal repercussions for seeking an abortion.

In July 2024, it was reported that a woman in Texas was arrested for murder after conducting a self-managed abortion in 2022. She is now suing the local sheriff, claiming that the "hospital staff violated patient privacy rights when they reported the abortion" and that she was interviewed and arrested by the sheriff's office "under direction from the prosecutors" (Gonzalez 2024). A woman in the state of Louisiana faced criminal charges for providing an abortion pill to her teenage daughter. The New York doctor who facilitated her access to the abortion pill is also facing criminal charges (The Associated Press 2025).



A recent case in Texas illustrates the power of covert surveillance discussed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. On 9 May 2025, a police officer in the state of Texas used a nationwide network of automatic licence plate readers to locate a woman who had self-managed an abortion. The officer accessed thousands of cameras, including devices in Washington and Illinois (where abortion is legal). He later claimed his intention was not to stop her from leaving the state to get an abortion. He declared he was motivated by her safety and that he initiated the search because her family was “worried that she was going to bleed to death and we were trying to find her to get her to a hospital” (Marcus 2025).

In the state of Texas, people are encouraged to report on anyone who has helped a woman get an abortion. Texas Senate Bill 8 encourages civilians to file civil lawsuits against anyone who assists or supports the procedure, rewarding them with \$10,000 if they win the lawsuit. Although a woman who has had an abortion cannot be sued under this law, this “bounty” is aimed at those who intervene in the process, and it can affect anyone from the person who drove the woman to the clinic to the physician who performed or suggested the abortion (Bowman 2022). This law has already affected women, as the possibility of facing lawsuits has deterred health-care providers from performing abortions. This resulted in the number of abortions falling by half in the month after the law’s enactment (*ibidem*). The possibility of being reported to the authorities for providing abortion ensnares health-care workers, too, in the system of surveillance.

By illustrating the extremes of a society built on consensual violence and surveillance of moral values, *The Handmaid's Tale* provides a framework to analyse what McGuire defines as a “future cataclysmic society” under extreme government control (2024). The Handmaids’ fear of being caught violating the regime’s values is a fictional dystopian scenario that illuminates the current situation in the USA regarding surveillance and repression of women’s reproductive autonomy. The fear and retaliation that women face under the surveillance regime of US abortion laws echoes Atwood’s dystopian vision.

MOTHERHOOD AND SEXUAL MORALITY

In Atwood's novel, personhood and motherhood are denied to women through the use of their bodies as reproductive machines. Their day-to-day existence is deprived of everything, including friendships, which cannot be formed even with others of the same social status. The regime strips them of their womanhood by "controlling the most fundamental aspects of their existence—their bodies, their sexuality, and their right to choose" (Öykü 2024, 23). The result is the instrumentalization of women. Offred observes that "[w]e are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important" (103). Offred's perspective on her body epitomizes what Öykü defines as the "commodification of motherhood". Women in Gilead are rewarded according to their ability or failure to conceive a baby. Women's fertility is "a form of currency" (Öykü 2024). As Öykü further explains:

Handmaids who fail to conceive are publicly shamed, labelled as an "unwoman", and threatened with exile to the toxic Colonies, where they face a slow death. Those who succeed in giving birth are granted temporary privileges (...) yet their status remains precarious and entirely dependent on their continued reproductive function. (2024, 24)

The commodification of motherhood can also be seen today in the USA, through the story of Adriana Smith. In February 2025, the 30-year-old nurse was declared brain dead after blood clots were detected in her brain. Adriana, who was pregnant at the time of her hospitalization, was kept on life support because abortion laws in the state of Georgia do not permit doctors to allow her to die once a fetal heartbeat has been detected. The "Heartbeat Law", as the act in question is called, allows an abortion to be performed in the event that the life of the pregnant woman is at risk, or if the fetus itself is not viable or presents low chances of a viable life after birth. The situation, exposed in an article by National Public Radio (NPR), is an example of the consequences women face because of abortion restrictions (NPR, 2025). The baby was delivered at 25 weeks on Friday, 13 June 2025, via C-section, since Adriana's body was no longer viable to continue carrying the fetus (Halpert 2025). This extreme example alerts to the commodification of motherhood as a dystopian symptom of a Christian fundamentalism

that defines morality based on a narrow ideal of womanhood. As Dayei Oh expresses it, abortion “represents a contest over the meaning of personhood, motherhood, family values, and sexual morality” (Oh 2025, 7).

The Handmaid’s Tale provides an insight into what happens to those women who rebel against the extremely narrow moral norms of Gilead. Jezebel’s is a brothel outside the city perimeter where women are taken to work as prostitutes. It is an underground network that operates in a hotel. The brothel allows men to evade the facade of Gilead’s sexual morality and laws perpetrated by themselves. The existence of Jezebel illustrates the double-standardness and hypocrisy of a male-dominated society that is too focused on women’s sexual morality to admit its own sexual desires. It also sheds light on how political leaders perpetrate predatory behavior while advocating moral values. The current scandal surrounding President Trump’s alleged connection to Jeffrey Epstein’s sex-trafficking ring of underage girls is a sordid example that underscores how male rulers can evade the moral rules of their own regime while exacting harsh penalties for women who do not conform.

By addressing the commodification of motherhood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* enables the reader to gain insights into the consequences of reducing motherhood to a negotiable concept, one in which only a single party benefits. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, it is the Commanders who profit from the transformation of motherhood into a motive for the exploitation of women’s bodies as a social necessity. The case of Adriana Smith invites a reflection on the parallels with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and raises the question of who benefited from the use of Adriana’s dead body as a container/vessel. In turn, the critique of sexual morality expressed in Atwood’s dystopia prompts an examination of the character of those in power. It demonstrates that, despite the moral image they project in public and their defense of Biblical tradition and propriety, the Commanders are equally susceptible to judgment for their transgressions. This analysis goes beyond Atwood’s dystopian fiction, inviting the reader to reflect on similar patterns of behavior among contemporary world leaders.

SOCIOECONOMIC DIVISIONS

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, besides the religious manipulation and surveillance, the regime uses a policy of “divide and rule” by separating them within their own community. Women are fragmented into opposed groups: those who have privileges and power to avoid the full consequences of the suspension of their rights and freedoms, and those women who have lost their rights and freedoms and autonomy over their bodies: “As the architects of Gilead knew, to institute an effective totalitarian system or indeed any system at all you must offer some benefits and freedoms, at least to a privileged few, in return for those you remove” (316).

In Gilead, the Wives are part of the privileged few as they hold high social ranks, meaning it is permissible for them to circumvent the legal system to obtain benefits such as smoking, which a Handmaid cannot do. Offred reflects upon these benefits when alone in the room she was given in the Commander's house: “The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances” (14). Atwood shows the impact of how the Gileadean regime disempowers women through divisions between them. The Wives intervene to maintain the Commanders' status, as well as to defend and regulate Gileadean values. The Wives collude in the depersonalization of the Handmaids by supporting the Ceremony or by taking responsibility for the punishments of the Handmaids when they break the rules. By representing the divisions between women, Atwood illuminates the motivations of authoritarian regimes in granting privileges to only a segment of society. She deconstructs the complexity of interpersonal relationships within a subordinate community, demonstrating how they are shaped by an authoritarian regime which derives its power from disunity and the suppression of solidarity.

Daniel Puglia and Aline Bonezi observe that this example reflects historical moments where “setting women against each other seems to be a strategy to keep them disunited—in a minority position with regard to instances of economic, political and cultural participation” (2019, 45). By allocating privileges to select groups, the regime ensures its stability in power, stratifying women according to their usefulness to the regime. The Wives secure their usefulness by embodying the idea of a traditional family

and by acting as a compass for moral order. Inequality between women ensures that they will never unite for a common cause against the regime.

A parallel may be found in Trump's USA. A study by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) examined the wave of misogynist expression on social media that followed Trump's reelection in 2024. This study found that several women, along with their male counterparts, appeared in posts defending Trumpist views. Especially prominent were women influencers in the sphere of traditional values; that is, women who have achieved privilege, power, and financial security by promoting a far-right agenda aligned with Trump. The ISD study identified a phenomenon of female complicity that contributed to the legitimization of the misogynist speech. This had the effect of fragmenting society into opposite poles: those who resisted the Trump regime and those who were complicit (ISD 2024). Although the divisions and alliances within contemporary US society are more complex than the women's caste divisions in Atwood's *Gilead*, the dystopia's clarity helps readers perceive how privileged groups use their influence to support Trump's control over the majority.

The Handmaid's Tale can also help decode how the socioeconomic effects of such imbalances in privilege shape the restrictions on access to abortion in Trump's USA. The restrictions in the 41 US states with abortion bans are severe, but women of higher socioeconomic status may have the means to evade anti-abortion laws, for instance, by travelling across state borders to a place where abortion is legal. This is more difficult for women with lower incomes and those living in peripheral or minority communities. This scenario mirrors the depiction of social inequalities in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Although the polarization in Atwood's dystopia is more about social imbalance than economic disparity (given the absence of currency), the social stratifications create gaps in access to certain privileges. These divisions, in turn, reflect the challenges women face in accessing abortion.

According to data from the US Department of Labor (2024), there are large differences in women's earnings, depending on race. Asian women earn almost as much as many men (94.2% of White, non-Hispanic men's earnings), while Hispanic women earn barely half that of White, non-Hispanic men (57.8%). White non-Hispanic women (79.6%) and Black women (66.5%) fall in between (US Department of Labor, 2024).

Such imbalances mean that the capacity to circumvent laws restricting abortion is not equal for everyone. Women with low incomes are disproportionately affected because of the “increased likelihood of being uninsured and decreased likelihood of having jobs with adequate wages or employer-based coverage” (Seervai *et al*/2023), which limits access to the abortion pill and medically assisted abortion and might also make it difficult to pay for a legal defense to fight criminal charges.

The parallels between *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the US government’s legislation against abortion are striking. Atwood’s dystopian narrative highlights why abortion is central to power. It divides people because it strikes at the core of deeply held belief systems, whether moral or religious. By framing abortion restrictions as serving a biological purpose determined by nature, far-right Republicans and Christian fundamentalists find it easier to justify the punishments and restrictions that women and health professionals may face while trying to fight a system that neglects women’s reproductive health.

SHAPING DEMOCRACY: MEDIA AND PROPAGANDA IN THE USA AND *ESTADO NOVO*

Authoritarian regimes resort to the manipulation of the media to promote controversial laws and moral values, namely reproductive rights and abortion. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman developed a propaganda model to explain how media manipulation functions. Their model highlights the extent to which dominant media are reliant on the resources of elite interests because they “are fully embedded in the market system”. As Herman explains:

The power of the U.S. propaganda system lies in its ability to mobilize an elite consensus, to give the appearance of democratic consent, and to create enough confusion, misunderstanding and apathy in the general population to allow elite programs to go forward. (2018, 9)

This description of the US media landscape also applies to the more systemic propaganda of the dystopian regime of the Republic of Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the media are used to manufacture women's consent to their own repression through propaganda that advances the narrative that the suppression of freedom is in everyone's interest. On the other hand, information is conditioned. The only access the protagonist has to news occurs before the Ceremony, when Serena Joy, a Wife, turns on the TV. While watching the news, Offred admits that she doesn't know if any of it is true, but keeps watching "hoping to be able to read beneath it" (88). The news report Offred watches concerns the wars in Gilead, and how a prisoner is used to show the success and mercy of the regime:

The prisoner accepts a cigarette from one of the Angels (...) He knows the camera is on him: is the grin a show of defiance, or is it submission? (...) They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news? Possibly he's an actor. (89)

Obviously, the aim of the TV news is not to inform the population about what is happening in the world but to make them feel comfortable and secure.

It is possible to draw a comparative historical parallel with the representation of women in the media during many authoritarian regimes, namely the *Estado Novo* regime in Portugal. Formed by the Constitution of 1933 and led until 1968 by dictator António de Oliveira Salazar, it ruled Portugal from 1933 until 25 April 1974, when it was brought down by a military coup. Marques *et al* (2019) analyse how Salazar's authoritarian regime used propaganda in women's magazines to exalt an image of the domestic woman as mother of the family, in charge of the education of her children and the maintenance of traditional values. The authors explain that, by constructing and shaping a feminine ideal, the regime disseminated a transmissible idea about what the role of women in society ought to be, using it, at the same time, as a distraction mechanism to shift attention away from the socioeconomic poverty of many Portuguese after the Second World War. For the regime, the feminine ideal was a way of reassuring the population that everything was fine, in a scenario where access to information was restricted and the media were censored.

During Salazar's dictatorship, married women needed their husband's approval to obtain birth control. Abortion was illegal and punishable by two to eight years in prison, according to articles 358–360 of the 1886 penal code. Although this penal code was revised in 1954, the criminalization of abortion was maintained (Ministério da Justiça, 1954). Salazar's motto was "God, Homeland and Family", since Portuguese education was deeply rooted in Catholic values. The organization *Obra das Mães para a Educação Nacional* (OMEN) (Work of Mothers for National Education) played, for example, an important role in disseminating the ideal of the submissive and domestic woman, especially among younger generations, due to their work with schools and with the women's youth organization, *Mocidade Portuguesa Feminina*.²

Women's reproductive rights were also attacked during *Estado Novo*. Those who wanted to work as nurses, for example, could not get married and have children, because the regime deemed it not proper for a married woman to work (Pinto *et al* 2014). In an interview with António de Ferro in 1932, Salazar stated that, "In countries or places where married women compete with men for work (...) the institution of the family, for which we fight as the cornerstone of a well-organized society, is in danger of ruin" (Ferro 2007, 90).³

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the repression of women's freedoms is likewise presented as necessary to keep everyone secure from the anarchy that existed in the USA before the coup by the Sons of Jacob. As Aunt Lydia tells Offred: "There is more than one kind of freedom (...). Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of the anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (30). As Flörke *et al.* explain, the Gilead regime's religious mindset is imposed on the women via a fusion of state and church power, and by inculcating the false notion that women have a choice: "[T]he role of a Handmaid is forced on women under the pretense of having the choice between breeding and going to the colonies, which is in fact a death sentence" (2017, 23). The statement by Aunt Lydia highlights how the propaganda of the Gilead regime manipulates the notion of a pre-regime society of chaos and a present one of security. A Commander explains the rationale: "This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement" (227).

Aunt Lydia's redefinition of freedom reminds us of the manipulation of language in other dystopian fictions such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell. Newspeak is developed as "a language meticulously designed by the state to restrict thought and communication" (Youvan 2024, 2), so that the regime's slogan of "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength" becomes logical and normalized. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, all written language is eliminated and replaced by signs. New words are invented to assign women to separate classes, subconsciously framing their role in society: "The creation of a new vocabulary assigns new roles that women are supposed to play" (Lone and Zafar 2024, 257).

The redefinition of the repression of women's freedoms as "freedom from" chaos and insecurity highlights similarities with Trump's USA. Trump has claimed several times to be advocating for women's rights. For example, at a Wisconsin rally during his 2024 campaign, he declared he would "protect women whether they like it or not" (Hubbard 2024). Other examples include signing an executive order on 18 February 2025 to reduce IVF costs (The White House 2025). As he signed Executive Order 14201 on 5 February 2025 to ban trans women from practising female sports, he promised to "[k]eep men out of women's sports" (Flath and Van Gelder 2025). Trump's propaganda is referred to as "genderwashing". Bjarnegård and Zetterberg have explored the connection between the narrative of freedom from chaos and the continued oppression of women's reproductive rights. They explain how many autocratic regimes use genderwashing to mask the harsh reality they create for women by manipulating "gender-equality reforms to seek procedural legitimacy or to claim international prestige or domestic performance" (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg 2022, 71). Despite Trump's claims to protect women, the reproductive health of women has been severely undermined by the bans and restrictions on abortion imposed since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.

CONCLUSIONS

Although this paper is restricted to specific historical and geographic contexts, it seems that the female body has always been instrumentalized by power, and women's reproductive rights have always been dictated by those in charge.

However, *The Handmaid's Tale* (and other feminist dystopian stories) may help readers discern how women's bodies are weaponized by authoritarian regimes. It shows how subtle the manipulation of women's bodies and minds is, even though it is done in front of our eyes, and how it helps create a social imaginary that manufactures consent from women themselves to comply with laws and moral norms that serve the regime's interest, not their own. It also reveals that in societies like the USA, which aim to implement socially conservative reforms, by attacking women's reproductive rights and using them as a propaganda means, ensures control over the population. At the same time, it marginalizes women, fragments ethical values and a sense of community among people, while driving society closer to an acceptance of authoritarianism.

Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia is surgical in illustrating these political, social, and media dynamics because it extrapolates the worst scenarios in a male-dominated theocracy where women confront sexual violence under the pretense of fulfilling their biological nature. *The Handmaid's Tale* encourages readers to think about the consequences that the attack on these rights and freedoms can have for women in modern society. Atwood's representation of an extreme, but realistic, scenario of the personal and social consequences of the annihilation of women's reproductive health and freedom helps readers navigate the current crisis in women's rights in the USA, and decode the political propaganda that makes it possible.

END NOTES

¹ This scenario puts women's reproductive health in jeopardy, hampering access to professionally trained health-care providers, not only because of state laws that forbid access to abortion, but also for fear of retaliation. For example, eleven states impose big penalties for those who undergo the procedure and the health-care providers who help them. According to Felix et al (2025), in the state of Alabama, "violation of the total ban constitutes a Class A felony and carries a minimum prison sentence of ten years and a maximum sentence of 99 years" for the physician. In Texas, there is a life sentence penalty that puts abortion in the same legal category as murder and domestic violence.

² Mocidade Portuguesa Feminina was an institution created during the *Estado Novo* regime to disseminate its values among young girls. It was a branch of the Mocidade Portuguesa which was similar to the Hitler Youth, but focused on girls.

³ "Nos países ou nos lugares onde a mulher casada concorre com o trabalho do homem [...] a instituição da família, pela qual nos batemos como pedra fundamental duma sociedade bem organizada, ameaça ruína" (author's translation).

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret (1996). *The Handmaid's Tale*. London: Vintage [1985].
- ABC News (2017). "Trump Administration Rolling Back Mandate to Cover Birth Control". *ABC News*, 6 October 2017. URL: abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-administration-rolling-back-mandate-cover-birth/story?id=50323927.
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (2024). "Project 2025, Explained". 14 August 2024. URL: www.aclu.org/project-2025-explained.
- The Associated Press (2025). "Louisiana Woman Pleads Not Guilty to a Felony in Historic Abortion Case". NBC News, 12 March. URL: www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/louisiana-woman-pleads-not-guilty-felony-historic-abortion-case-rcna195975.
- Belluck, Pam (2025). "Trump Administration Asks Court to Dismiss Abortion Pill Case". *The New York Times*, 5 May 2025. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/05/health/trump-abortion-pill-case.html>.
- Bjarnegård, Elin, and Pär Zetterberg (2022). "How Autocrats Weaponize Women's Rights". *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 60–75. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0018>.
- Bowman, Emma (2022). "As States Ban Abortion, the Texas Bounty Law Offers a Way to Survive Legal Challenges". NPR, 11 July. URL: www.npr.org/2022/07/11/1107741175/texas-abortion-bounty-law.
- CBS News (2025). "Louisiana Woman Pleads Not Guilty to Felony after Allegedly Giving Abortion Pills from N.Y. Doctor to Her Teen". *cbsnews.com*, 12 March. URL: www.cbsnews.com/news/louisiana-woman-pleads-not-guilty-abortion-case-pills-doctor-teen/.
- Cooper, Pamela (1995). "Sexual Surveillance and Medical Authority in Two Versions of the Handmaid's Tale". *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 49–66.
- Curhan, Talia (2024). "State Bans on Abortion throughout Pregnancy". Guttmacher Institute, 2024. URL: www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/state-policies-abortion-bans.



- Felix, Mabel, Laurie Sobel, and Alina Salganicoff (2025). "Criminal Penalties for Physicians in State Abortion Bans". KFF, 4 March 2025. URL: www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/issue-brief/criminal-penalties-for-physicians-in-state-abortion-bans/.
- Ferro, António (2007). *Entrevistas a Salazar*. Lisboa, Parceira A.M. Pereira.
- Flath, Lara A., and Amy Van Gelder (2025). "Ban on Transgender Women from Female Sports Is Challenged in Court". Skadden.com, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom LLP, 18 February. URL: www.skadden.com/insights/publications/2025/02/ban-on-transgender-women-from-female-sports-is-challenged-in-court?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
- Flörke, Bruno Jeremy, Anna Maria Jarosz, Henry Chase Richards, and Rachel Tatum (2017). *Reading Atwood in the Age of Trump: Power, Women, and a Sexualized Discourse in Two American Narratives*. Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University. URL: <https://rucforsk.ruc.dk/ws/files/59903964/BAGroup5Spring2017.pdf>.
- Gonzalez, Valerie (2024). "Texas Woman's Lawsuit after Being Jailed on Murder Charge over Abortion Can Proceed, Judge Rules." AP News, 24 July. URL: apnews.com/article/texas-abortion-arrest-0a78cbb8f44cc24c3c9c811e1cc2b4d3.
- Halpert, Madeline (2025). "Baby of Brain-Dead Woman Delivered in Georgia, Woman's Mother Says". BBC, 17 June. URL: www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1jwl9l9yneo.
- Herman, Edward (2018). "The Propaganda Model Revisited". *Monthly Review*, 1 January, pp. 1–26. URL: <https://monthlyreview.org/2018/01/01/the-propaganda-model-revisited/>.
- Hubbard, Kaia (2024). "Trump Says 'Whether the Women like It or Not, I'm Going to Protect Them' at Wisconsin Rally". CBS News, 31 October. URL: www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-protecting-women-whether-they-like-it-or-not-wisconsin/.
- Lone, Sartaj Ahmad, and Shahila Zafar (2024). "Gender, Language, Power: Discursive Mechanisms of Oppression and Agency in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale". *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 255–267. URL: <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/LA/article/view/20776>.
- McGuire, Kim (2024). "Dystopian Fiction: Can It Enable Us to Think Critically about Gendered Violence and Power?" *International Journal of Gender, Sexuality and Law*, vol. 3, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.19164/ijgsl.v3i1.1577>. Accessed 2 Aug. 2025.
- Marcus, Josh (2025). "Texas Police Used Nationwide License Plate Reader Network to Track Woman Who Had Self-Managed Abortion." The Independent, 29 May. URL: www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/crime/texas-abortion-license-plate-camera-b2760411.html.
- Marques, Aldina, Isabel Margarida Duarte, Alexandra Guedes Pinto, and Catarina Pinho (2019). "A Construção da identidade da mulher em revistas do Estado Novo". *Ex Aequo: Revista Da Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Sobre as Mulheres*, vol. 39, no. 39. <https://doi.org/10.22355/exaequo.2019.39.05>.
- Ministério da Justiça (1954). "Decreto-Lei no. 39688". *Diário do Governo*, series i, no. 122, 5 June, pp. 645–653.
- Moylan, Tom (2000). "Preface". *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Westview Press, 2000, pp. 11–21.



-
- Oh, Dayei (2025). "American Abortion Culture Wars as Religious Populism: 'Truth' and 'Fight for Truth' as Floating Signifiers". *Populism*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 16–52. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-bja10070>.
- Oyku, E. C. (2024). "The Institutionalized Oppression of Reproductive Responsibility: A Dystopian Interpretation of the Maternal Role in the Handmaid's Tale". *Journal of Research in Social Science and Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 9, pp. 22–32.
- Pinto, Filipe, David Araújo, and Sérgio Tomás (2014). "O Ideal Feminino Do Estado Novo". RTP Ensina. URL: ensina.rtp.pt/artigo/o-ideal-feminino-do-estado-novo/.
- Puglia, Daniel, and Aline Bonezi (2019). "The Handmaid's Tale: relações entre ficção e história" [The Handmaid's Tale: Relations between Fiction and History]. *Revell: Revista de Estudos Literários da UEMS*, vol. 3, no. 23, 2019. URL: <https://periodicosonline.uems.br/index.php/REV/article/view/3965>.
- Personhood Alliance (2025). "Abortion and Personhood". URL: <https://personhood.org/issues/abortion/>
- Ramanathan, Tara (2025). "No Kings' Protests". Britannica, 24 June. URL: www.britannica.com/event/No-Kings-protests.
- Ralph, Lauren, Rosalyn Schroeder, Shelly Kaller, Daniel Grossman, and M. Antonia Biggs (2024). "Self-Managed Abortion Attempts before vs after Changes in Federal Abortion Protections in the US". *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 7, no. 7, pp. e2424310–e2424310. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.24310>.
- Reynolds, Laura P (2024). "View of Discussion on the Relationship between Religion and Gender Oppression in the Handmaid's Tale". URL: www.paradigmexpress.org/SSSH/article/view/1175/1041.
- Searles, Alan (2022). *Beneath Big Brother's Eyes: The Surveillance State in Dystopian Literature and Contemporary Culture*. MA thesis, University of Iceland, June. URL: <https://hdl.handle.net/1946/40861>.
- Sedgh, Gilda, and Irum Taqi (2023). "Mifepristone for Abortion in a Global Context: Safe, Effective and Approved in Nearly 100 Countries". Guttmacher Institute, 21 July 2023. URL: <https://www.guttmacher.org/2023/07/mifepristone-abortion-global-context-safe-effective-and-approved-nearly-100-countries>.
- Sethna, Christabelle (2020). "'Not an Instruction Manual': Environmental Degradation, Racial Erasure, and the Politics of Abortion in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)". *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 80, no. 80, p. 102362.
- Seervai, Shanoor, Munira Z. Gunja, Laurie C. Zephyrin, and Reginald D. Williams II (2023). "Limiting Abortion Access for American Women Impacts Health, Economic Security: An International Comparison". URL: <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2023/limiting-abortion-access-american-women-impacts-health-economic-security>.
- Sobel, Laurie, Mabel Felix, and Alina Salganicoff (2023). "Who Decides When a Patient Qualifies for an Abortion Ban Exception? Doctors vs. the Courts". KFF, 14 December 2023. URL: www.kff.org/policy-watch/who-decides-when-patient-qualifies-for-abortion-ban-exception/.
- US Department of Labor (2024). "Women's Earnings by Race and Ethnicity as a Percentage of White, Non-Hispanic Men's Earnings", US Department of Labor, updated December. URL: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/earnings/race-percentage-white-hispanic>.



-
- The White House (2025). "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Expands Access to In Vitro Fertilization (IVF)". The White House, 18 February. URL: www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-expands-access-to-in-vitro-fertilization-ivf/.
- World Health Organization (2022). "Recommendations and Key Considerations". *WHO Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health and Well-Being, 2022 Revision*, WHO, 2022.
- Youvan, Douglas C (2024). "The Semiotics of Newspeak: Language, Power, and Thought Control in Orwell's 1984". ResearchGate, 24 March. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.32611.57128>.

CATARINA ALMEIDA

Catarina Almeida holds a bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences from Universidade Lusófona do Porto and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Communication Sciences at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto. Her research interrogates the role of journalism in the regulation of political regimes and examines how literature illuminates social dynamics. With hands-on experience as a campaign coordinator for "Rosa para a Ucrânia", social media manager, and web-documentary producer at Infomedia, she combines creative communication practices with rigorous scholarly inquiry. | ORCID: 0009-0001-1114-8487

HOW TO CITE

Almeida, Catarina (2025). "Weaponizing Women's Bodies for Authoritarian Power: *The Handmaids Tale* and Anti-Abortion Politics in the USA". *VIA PANORAMICA: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos* Vol. 14 No. 1, 2025, pp. 65-88. Web: <http://ojs.letras.up.pt/>. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/2182-9934/via14_1a6