

**A Portrayal of Hegemonic Power in The Handmaid's Tale Novel by Margaret Atwood  
Cori Maryani, S.S.,<sup>1</sup> Dwi Linda Kusuma, M.Hum.<sup>2</sup>**

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts, State University of Jakarta

**ABSTRACT**

Ideally, people should behave in accordance with their own worldview. However, hegemonic practice manipulates people to act in accordance with the ruling class' interests. This study will examine Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony by scrutinizing the portrayal of hegemonic power in The Handmaid's Tale novel by Margaret Atwood. The study reveals that the ruling class in the novel uses consent as its main strategy in maintaining its power and coercion as the shield of its hegemonic power. Consent is most depicted by the use of manipulative discourse. It also shows that the ruling class maintains its authority by using privileges, rewards, movies, mass media, songs, Bible, symbolic outfit, and unified language. The occurrence of coercion in the novel is depicted by an existence of violence. It's represented by how the Handmaids are punished by using an electric cattle prod once they make mistakes or refuse to fulfill the ruling class' interests. Another portrayal of repression is depicted during The Salvagings. It's the occurrence during which those who are guilty are executed by the ruling class' repressive apparatuses or even by the Handmaids themselves.

**INTRODUCTION**

Ideally, people should behave in accordance with their own worldview. However, hegemonic practice manipulates people to act in accordance with the ruling class' interests. In this sense, the subaltern class actively gives its consent to be controlled by the ruling class. As Gramsci has stated, a subaltern class refers to those who consistently and spontaneously give their consent to be governed by the ruling government (Gramsci, A., 1999, p. 20). In this sense, Gramsci (1999) further explains, these people are always become the subjects of the ruling class' hegemonic activities (p. 207). Additionally, Gramsci emphasizes that:

[a subaltern class] has not yet gained consciousness of its strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop, and which therefore does not know how to escape from the primitivist phase. (Gramsci, A., 1999, p. 371)

There are certain phenomena that portray how hegemonic activities exist in society since hegemony occurs in every terrain of life. It's proved by Timo Duile (2020) who presents the occurrence of hegemonic activity in Indonesia during a 2019 presidential election. Specifically, he shows how the political elites in Indonesia insert religious and nationalist values into its political discourse. As a consequence, Indonesian people are only focused on those matters only,

and they pay so little attention on other important matters, such as environment, inequality, or economics. Furthermore, Timo Duile (2020) also shows how the hegemonic activity of the political elites in Indonesia is resisted by Nurhadi-Aldo *golput* campaign that encourages the Indonesian citizens to vote none of the candidates since all candidates have very little concern for public's needs. Thus, it represents how hegemonic power is never complete; the ruling class needs to keep maintaining its hegemonic power.

Hegemonic activities not only exist in political life but also in educational life, precisely at college. A study by Syukur Muhammad (2019) reveals that the upperclassmen at Universitas Negeri Makassar use both consent and coercion in order to control the freshmen. In this case, the portrayal of consent is depicted when the upperclassmen lead the freshmen into thinking that it's extremely crucial for them to participate in organizational activities. Meanwhile, the representation of coercion is showed when the upperclassmen impose particular sanctions for those who fail to meet the interests of the upperclassmen. Consequently, the freshmen are willing to fulfill the upperclassmen's interests, which make the upperclassmen succeed in establishing and maintaining its hegemonic power.

Hegemonic power not only exists in real life events, but it also occurs in literary works including novels. It's because, in creating literary works, in this sense novels, most authors are inspired from reality or their own experiences in real life. The *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) novel written by Margaret Atwood is one of the novels that vividly portray the hegemonic power. This novel is categorized as a dystopian fiction, a kind of genre that can be deemed as a warning against the negative consequences of the changes in society (Mirzayee, M., 2019). Hence, as a dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a story that's not entirely fictional. The novel has also won many prestigious awards and been adapted into TV series (2017 - present).

*The Handmaid's Tale* tells a story of a state named Republic of Gilead. The story is narrated by the main character called Offred who's one of the Handmaids in Gilead. As a Handmaid, her role is to conceive the ruling class' or the Commander's baby. In the novel, Offred narrates her past life, in which she lives with her husband and daughter, and present life, in which Offred lives as a Handmaid. Throughout the story, the hegemonic power of the Gileadean rulers is vividly depicted by the ruling class' struggles to win the hearts of those it

rules and maintain its hegemonic power by using several political strategies which can be classified into consent and coercion.

Since the practice of hegemony is clearly depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel, this research is focused on the issue of hegemony in the novel. Robert Cox (as cited in Houssay-Holzschuch, M., 2020) has stated that hegemony is a domination of certain group over another by promoting its worldview or interest to be accepted by another group as something natural and desirable or 'common-sense'. Meanwhile, Ranajit Guha explains that hegemony is impossible without coercion or force since the ruling class will always find resistances during its hegemonic process (Houssay-Holzschuch, M., 2020). Additionally, Raymond Williams asserts that hegemonic practice needs to be continuously recreated, renewed, and defended since it will be continually challenged, limited, resisted, and altered (Kim, S., 2001).

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony is most relevant to scrutinize the portrayal of hegemonic power in the novel. In Gramsci's theory of hegemony, he explains the crucial roles and the relation between consent and coercion. In this sense, Gramsci reveals that both of these notions are important in hegemonic process, but he asserts that hegemony relies more on consent rather than coercion (Houssay-Holzschuch, M., 2020). According to him, consent itself is gained when the ruling class' interests appear to be the interests of society at large (Jones, S., 2006, p. 46). In order to achieve the consent of the masses, Gramsci argues that the ruling class must take some values in the society and transform them into the ruling class worldview, allow the subaltern class to voice its aspirations, and give the subalterns particular privileges (Jones, S., 2006, p. 46-48).

However, for Gramsci (1999) hegemony is protected by the armour of coercion (p. 532). In this sense, he argues that,

The 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterised by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority (Gramsci, A., 1999, p. 248).

He also asserts that hegemony is a never ending process meaning that the ruling class needs to impose leadership even when it has already succeeded in winning the consent of the masses (Jones, S., 2006, p. 48). To put it in other words, the ruling class should be aware of the

changing thoughts and needs of those it rules which mean that the ruling class should be willing to keep adjusting its worldview. It's in line with Gramsci's presentation of power which is borrowed from Machiavelli's depiction of centaur, half man and half beast; power is a combination of consent and coercion. In this sense, Gramsci asserts that the masses will accept the ruling class' values more willingly when coercion can incorporate at any times (Houssay-Holzschuch, M., 2020).

This study will examine Antonio Gramsci's conception of hegemony by scrutinizing the portrayal of hegemonic power in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel by Margaret Atwood. The novel was chosen to be analyzed because *The Handmaid's Tale* is very popular starting from its publishing, in 1985, until present time, in 2021. This novel is still popular in every corner of the world because its TV series, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is still airing until recent time. However, despite its popularity, none of the studies scrutinize the issue of hegemony in the novel although this issue is vividly portrayed in the novel. Furthermore, the issue of hegemony is crucial to be discussed since people are mostly unaware of the hegemonic practices imposed on them which can be seen in a study by Timo Duile (2020) and Syukur Muhammad (2019). Both of these studies show how hegemony is dangerous since it can manipulate people to act in accordance with the ruling class' worldview. Therefore, this study will provide an in-depth analysis of hegemony portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel which can give insights into how hegemonic power is operated in society.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study is qualitative, and descriptive analytical interpretative is used as its research design in order to scrutinize the portrayal of hegemonic power in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel. According to Creswell (2009, Chapter 9), qualitative is an approach that is identified by its use of purposeful sampling, text or picture's analysis, an open-ended data collection, as well as interpreting the results of study based on the researcher's personal understanding. Using descriptive analytical interpretative, the study will analyze the dialogues and narrations in the novel which indicate the occurrence of hegemonic power, and then interpret them in order to describe the portrayal of hegemonic power in the novel. Antonio Gramsci theory of hegemony is deployed in order to analyze the data source indicating hegemonic power.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. CONSENT**

The ruling class in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel manipulates the subaltern class mostly by using consent. It's portrayed by how the ruling class or its agents consistently promote its values in order to be accepted and adopted by the subaltern class. As a consequence, the subaltern class acts in accordance with the ruling class' interests. Aunt Lydia is the most prominent character who continuously indoctrinates the subalterns, in this case the Handmaids. As the ruling class' agent, she succeeds in shaping the common sense of the Handmaids by indoctrinating them, which is mostly done by inserting the dominant values into her own discourse.

### **MANIPULATIVE DISCOURSE**

Aunt Lydia's attempt to manipulate the subalterns can be seen when she encourages the Handmaids to "Think of it [their duties] as being in the army" (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 2). Hence, it can be said that Aunt Lydia attempts to encourage the Handmaids to perceive their roles as similar to the army when, in fact, the Handmaids are oppressed and controlled in many ways in order to fulfill the ruling class' interests. In other words, Aunt Lydia indoctrinates the Handmaids by manipulating the way they see their subordinations. In this sense, Aunt Lydia urges the Handmaids to be thankful for having these roles since being a Handmaid is an honor just like the army. According to Gramsci (as cited in Jaques et al., 2019), in order to instill a common sense and establish hegemony, the ruling class needs to manipulate the belief-systems of the subaltern class. In this case, the Handmaids may opt for giving their consent to be controlled by the Gileadean rulers and perceive it as their best interests because Aunt Lydia has manipulated their belief-systems and instilled a common-sense.

Furthermore, Aunt Lydia's attempt to manipulate the way the Handmaids see their oppression is identified when she says that where the Handmaids are "is not a prison but a privilege" (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 2). In this sense, she urges the Handmaids to consider their roles as advantages given by the Gileadean rulers. In other words, Aunt Lydia implies a contradictory fact because she refers to the Handmaids as the ones who are privileged when, in reality, they're not more than the prisoners of the Gileadean regime. In addition, Aunt Lydia tries to prove how the Handmaids are really honored by telling them,

"After a while it will be either all front doors or all back"

“Aunt Lydia said she was lobbying for the front. Yours is a position of honour” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 3).

Hence, it can be acknowledged that Aunt Lydia leads the Handmaids into believing that they have high positions in the Gileadean society. In this sense, she convinces the Handmaids that they will be admitted in the Commanders’ houses in which they’ll be performing their Handmaids duties. It also implies that Aunt Lydia assures the Handmaids that they have higher statuses than other workers or subalterns in the Commanders’ houses. Additionally, by telling them that she’s lobbying for the front door, Aunt Lydia intends to express her respect and concerns toward the Handmaids, when actually it’s done in order to encourage the Handmaids to behave in accordance with the ruling class’ values.

In this sense, Gramsci states that society at large is *saturated* with the struggles to fulfill the subaltern class’ demands and the ruling class’ interests (Jones, S., 2006, p. 4). Hence, it’s represented by Aunt Lydia’s struggle to implement the ruling class’ interests, but, at the same time, she also tries not to ignore the subaltern class’ demands. It can be seen by how Aunt Lydia manipulates the Handmaids through her discourse, and she also fulfills certain demand of the Handmaids which includes the desire to be appreciated.

Moreover, Aunt Lydia also develops the sense of belonging of every Handmaid to the Republic of Gilead by saying,

“The Republic of Gilead, ... knows no bounds. Gilead is within you” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 5).

It presents how Aunt Lydia aims to avoid every Handmaid from feeling burdensome in doing her Handmaid duty. In this case, Aunt Lydia convinces the Handmaids that what they do isn’t because of the oppression they experience, instead it’s because they feel connected to Gilead. Thus, everything the Handmaids do reflects their affections or sense of intimacies with Gilead and not because they’re under control. In other words, Aunt Lydia attempts to create new identities for the Handmaids as Gileadean citizens. It’s in accordance with Gramsci’s view of hegemonic process. For him, in the process of hegemony, the ruling class needs to alter identities of those it rules by creating a collective will (Ives, P., 2004, p. 112).

Furthermore, Aunt Lydia assures the Handmaids that the Gileadean regime has given them freedom. She states,

“There is more than one kind of freedom, ... Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 5).

Therefore, it can be noted how Aunt Lydia indoctrinates the Handmaids by trying to find certain benefits achieved by women during the Gileadean regime, one of which is that now women feel safe while walking along the street since men don't speak, shout, or touch them anymore. In this way, the Handmaids are prevented from thinking of their oppressions. Additionally, by doing this, Aunt Lydia is also able to ensure the Handmaids that their present lives are better than the past. In this sense, she reshapes the Handmaids' perception regarding the value of freedom. It's in line with Gramsci's argument which says that, in hegemonic process, the ruling class needs to take on certain values of the subaltern class and reshape them into the ruling class' own ideals (Jones, S., 2006, p. 3-4).

## **PRIVILEGES**

The use of privileges in the maintenance of power is portrayed when a Handmaid is pregnant. In this sense, a Handmaid who's pregnant is released from her daily chores. It's revealed by Offred who states,

A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping. The daily walk is no longer prescribed, to keep her abdominal muscles in working order. She needs only the floor exercises, the breathing drill. She could stay at her house. (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 5).

Additionally, a pregnant Handmaid is provided with a special security since now she's the carrier of life and also obliged to do the medical check-ups (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 5 & 11). Hence, by giving certain privileges for a pregnant Handmaid, she may consider herself as being valued by the Gileadean regime. In fact, the privileges given to them are just for the sake of the ruling class' benefits. The use of privileges portrayed in the novel can be linked with Gramsci's theory of hegemony in which he emphasizes that (as cited in Jones, S., 2006, p. 48) hegemony isn't merely related to meanings and values but it's also connected with economic and material forms.

As a Handmaid, Offred herself also reveals that she's given particular privileges by her Commander. In this context, she's allowed to enter a private room of her Commander which no one, including his wife, is ever allowed to enter it (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 17). Thus, it can be

noted how the Commander intends to get close to Offred, so he can easily control her. According to Gramsci, in hegemonic practice, the ruling class must lead with a high degree of consent since the maintenance of hegemony highly depends on the relationship between the ruling class and its subaltern class (Jones, S., 2006, p. 3).

## **REWARDS**

The use of rewards in the novel is portrayed when a Handmaid successfully gives birth. It's revealed that,

After that [giving birth] she'll [a Handmaid] be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 21).

In this sense, the ruling class aims to encourage the Handmaids to give births with willing hearts in order to obtain these rewards. It's in accordance with Gramsci's argument in his concept of hegemony in which he states that hegemony isn't solely maintained through ideological means, but it's also secured through the use of rewards (Jones, S., 2006, p. 61).

Furthermore, the Commander also gives Offred some presents, the things she'd been longing for, which include a magazine and a hand lotion (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 25). His attempt in manipulating Offred isn't only represented by those rewards, but the Commander also brings Offred to a place called Jezebel's in which she reunites with her long lost best friend named Moira (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 37). Additionally, the Commander's wife, Serena, also gives Offred a present, which is a picture of Offred's daughter, since Offred agrees to fulfill her wish (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 31).

Therefore, the rewards given by the Commander and his wife suggest their struggles in order to win Offred's consent. It's closely linked with Gramsci's argument which reveals that, in the practice of hegemony, the ruling class needs to be alert to the demands of its subaltern class and also to the changing contexts in which the ruling class exerts its hegemonic power (Jones, S., 2006, p. 47-48).

## **MOVIES**

Another portrayal of hegemonic power is represented by the use of movies in manipulating the Handmaids. In this sense, Offred reveals that once a week the Handmaids

watch movies while at the Red Centre, place in which the Handmaids are trained before being transferred to the Commanders' houses (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 20). In this context, the Handmaids are shown different kinds of movie,

Sometimes the movie she [Aunt Lydia] showed would be an old porno film from the seventies or eighties. Women kneeling, sucking penises or guns, women tied up or chained or with dog collars around their necks, women hanging from trees, or upside-down, naked, with their legs held apart, women being raped, beaten up, killed. Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 20).

Therefore, it suggests that, as the ruling class' agents, the Aunts attempt to manipulate the Handmaids by showing the sufferings of women in the time before Gilead. It also indicates that the Aunts want to trick the Handmaids into thinking that Gilead has saved them from such brutality suffered by women in the past. Gramsci himself has revealed that popular culture is a site of struggle between the incorporations of the ruling class' worldview and the resistances of the subaltern class; popular culture is the terrain of negotiation between the rulers and the ruled (Storey, J., 1994, p. 10).

Another movie showed by the Aunts is about a pregnant woman,

“wired up to a machine, electrodes coming out of her every which way so that she looked like a broken robot, an intravenous drip feeding into her arm. Some man with a searchlight looking up between her legs, where she'd been shaved, a mere beardless girl, a trayful of bright sterilized knives, everyone with masks on. A co-operative patient. Once they drugged women, induced labour, cut them open, sewed them up. No more. No anaesthetics, even (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 19).

In this case, the Aunts intend to manipulate the Handmaids into thinking how horrible women in labor are treated by doctors in the time before Gilead. As the result, the Handmaids, who have lack of critical thinking, may believe that Gileadean government has made the right decision; that doctors aren't involved in labor anymore. It's correlated with Gramsci's notions of common sense and good sense. For Gramsci (as cited in Daldal, A., 2014), every person is able to reach the most advanced thought if she or he can distinguish between common sense and good sense. He further explains that people need to think critically and coherently in order to reach the good sense.

Moreover, the Aunts also show the Handmaids a movie which they call as the Unwomen Documentary. The movie portrays how women, in the time before Gilead, have so much freedom to wear everything they like,

“overall jeans with a green and mauve plaid shirt underneath and sneakers on her feet” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 20).

However, Aunt Lydia refers to these women as “typical of Unwomen”, which suggests that she attempts to set the criterion of a good and a bad woman based on the ruling class’ values or interests. It’s in line with Gramsci’s conception of hegemony in which he asserts that cultural products are redefined, reshaped, and redirected in order to fulfill particular interests (Storey, J., 1994, p. 82). Hence, it’s vividly portrayed in the novel, in which the ruling class’ agents try to redefined, reshaped, and redirected the movie in order to indoctrinate the Handmaids and fulfill the ruling class’ interests.

## **MASS MEDIA**

The ruling class’ ambition to control the society is also depicted by how the news on television is used as a medium through which the ruling class manipulates the masses. In this case,

“They [the ruling class] show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?”  
“Possibly he’s [the man on the news] an actor” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 14).

It shows how the ruling class makes use of the news media in order to inform the masses about the ruling class’ victory. It’s done by the ruling class as its attempts to lead the society into thinking that the ruling class always succeeds in achieving its goal. Additionally, it can also be said that the Gileadean rulers intend to tell its people that Gilead will be the greatest state. Therefore, it implies that that the ruling class aims to warn the subaltern class that it’s impossible for them to overthrow the regime. The use of mass media in hegemonic process can be related to Gramsci’s argument regarding hegemony which states that the role of broadcast news is crucial in the attempt to achieve the consent of the subalterns (Longhurst et al., 2008, p. 74). In addition, Meysam Ahmadi (2014) also argues that mass media can be used as one of the ruling class’ instruments in persuading the society at large. According to Gramsci, in hegemonic process, mass media is one of the central institutions that are used to promote the ruling class’ ideas, values, and beliefs (Longhurst et al., 2008, p. 72).

## SONGS

In maintaining its hegemonic power, the ruling class uses songs in order to manipulate the masses. In this sense, the ruling class decides the kinds of song which are allowed to be sung in public. It's revealed that the song considered as legal are the ones related to religion like "Come to the Church in the Wildwood" or the songs that give hope like "Whispering Hope" (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 14). Hence, it portrays the ruling class' intention to avoid resistances formed by the subalterns or to avoid them from committing suicide.

Moreover, in terms of illegal songs in Gilead, the ruling class forbids the songs which contain the word *free*,

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
Could save a wretch like me,  
Who once was lost, but now am found,  
Was bound, but now am free.* (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 10)

In this sense, Offred reveals.

Such songs are not sung any more in public, especially the ones that use words like free. They are considered too dangerous. They belong to outlawed sects (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 10).

Thus, it portrays that the ruling class aims to keep the subalterns away from the songs which may trigger them to break the Gileadean rules and challenge the regime in order to gain back their freedom.

The role of songs can be linked with the importance of language in hegemonic practice. Looking at Gramscian concept of hegemony, he explains that the role of language is crucial in order to understand how each individual interprets the world and creates meanings (Ives, P., 2004, p. 71). It's vividly portrayed in the novel, in which the rulers in Gilead deliberately decide which songs are legal and illegal based on its lyrics as the ruling class' attempt to maintain its hegemonic power.

## BIBLE

The Republic of Gilead is a highly religious state. It's portrayed by how the Commander always recites a Bible before doing a Ceremony; during which Offred must have sex with the Commander. In this sense, he tricks the subalterns, especially Offred, into thinking that he's

innocent and what he does isn't sinful since he acts in accordance with the Bible. However, it should be noted that it's only the Commander who's allowed to read or even touch the Bible since it's always kept locked up (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 15). Hence, the subalterns are prevented from interpreting the Bible by themselves. Besides that, there's also a possibility that the Bible has been altered by the ruling class in order to fulfill its interests.

The role of religion in the operation of power can be related to Gramsci's explanation regarding hegemony which says that hegemony is a situation in which the rulers use intellectual, moral, and also religious persuasion in order to win the consent of the subalterns (Hoorvash et al., 2017). In the novel, the use of religion in the maintenance of power is vividly portrayed when the Commander recites Bible before the Ceremony which enables him to achieve its goal.

### **SYMBOLIC OUTFIT**

In Gilead, all people despite their social statuses wear particular outfit which symbolize their roles. As for the Handmaids, Offred states,

Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 2)

It's done by the ruling class in order to make the Handmaids feel united or, in other words, to provoke their sense of togetherness. Hence, since they're one, the ruling class expects them to help one another in performing their duties as Handmaids. For example, when one of the Handmaids, Janine, is in labor, all of the Handmaids gather and help Janine in delivering the baby. As for the Wives, they also gather to comfort the Wife whose Handmaid is in labor (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 20). Furthermore, the symbolic outfit also enables the ruling class or its agents to control every movement of the subalterns easily and blur the social stratification or inequality in the Gileadean society.

Seeing it from Gramscian concept of hegemony, it can be noted that the symbolic outfit presents the ruling class' struggle in order to keep its subaltern class living in conformity. For Gramsci (as cited in Daldal, A., 2014), in the practice of hegemony, the ruling class intends to create a conformist society in which the masses accept their roles and duties with willing hearts.

Hence, the symbolic outfit exists in order to create a new identity for every Handmaid which, hence, enables the ruling class to achieve a conformist society.

### **UNIFIED LANGUAGE**

The last portrayal of consent in the novel is depicted by how the Handmaids greet each other. In this context, Offred reveals,

“Blessed be the fruit,” ... the accepted greeting among us [the Handmaids].

“May the Lord open,” I [Offred] answer, the accepted response” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 4).

In addition, the right farewell will be,

“Under His Eye” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 8).

Gramsci himself has argued that language has a crucial role in understanding the way human interprets the world and creates meanings. In this sense, he states that philosophy is contained in language other than popular religion, common sense, and good sense (Ives, P., 2004, p. 71, 73 & 113). Gramsci further asserts that a new language is created as the result of hegemonic struggles between two different cultures; the ruling class and the subalterns’ (Storey, 1994, p. 80-81).

Therefore, it can be noted that the Gileadean rulers aim to establish a new language due to its crucial role in hegemonic process. It’s crucial because a new language established in Gilead enables the ruling class to promote its worldview. It’s also has been explained by Nadia Urbinati (as cited in Jones, S., 2006, p. 35-36) that establishing hegemony means enabling communication between distinct cultures and then establishing a national culture since hegemony itself intends to make sure that no social classes become a “narrow province”.

### **2. COERCION**

In Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, he also asserts the crucial role of coercion in hegemonic practices. For him, hegemony is protected by the armor of coercion (Gramsci, A., 1999, p. 532). In Atwood’s novel itself, the ruling class in Gilead not only manipulates the society by using consent but also coercion. In this context, coercion is used in a critical situation or when the subalterns unable to fulfill the ruling class’ interests.

### **AT THE RED CENTRE**

In the novel, the Handmaids experience violence when they're at the Red Centre; the place in which all Handmaids are trained before being transferred to the Commanders' houses. In this case, the ruling class' agents who train the Handmaids, the Aunts, punish the Handmaids by using a weapon which is an electric cattle prod. As Offred has stated,

“Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 1).

She further explains that,

“No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 1).

Thus, although the Aunts are prohibited from using guns, they're still allowed to punish the Handmaids who break the rules by using an electric cattle prod. It's portrayed when one of the Handmaids make a mistake. In this sense, Offred reveals,

“all night we [the Handmaids] could hear her [Dolores] moaning off and on” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 13).

In addition, the existence of coercion at the Red Centre is also depicted when another Handmaid is being punished, as Offred states,

It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet and hands, even if it was permanent. Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes your feet and your hands are not essential (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 15).

The above quotations present that violence does exist at the Red Centre, and it occurs when the Handmaids fail to act in accordance with the rules in Gilead. It can be linked to Gramsci's theory of hegemony in which he asserts that (as cited in Storey, J., 1994, p. 80) even though hegemonic practice presents a society with a high degree of consent, conflict may still occur. Hence, hegemony should always be maintained not only by using consent but also coercion. It's vividly depicted in the novel, in which the Aunts, as the ruling agents, continuously maintain the hegemony by using consent as its main strategy and also coercion in order to discipline the Handmaids.

### **DURING “THE SALVAGINGS”**

The occurrence of coercion in Gilead is mainly portrayed during The Salvagings in which the ones who are declared as guilty are executed by the ruling class' repressive apparatuses and

also the Handmaids themselves. After that, their bodies are hanged on the Wall as a reminder for the subaltern class, so they won't attempt to challenge the regime. In this sense, Offred reveals,

It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. Sometimes they'll be there for days, until there's a new batch, so as many people as possible will have the chance to see them (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 6).

Gramsci himself has stated that power will be willingly accepted and obeyed by the society at large when violence is able to interrupt at any moment (Houssay-Holzschuch, M., 2020). Hence, it can be noted that the dead bodies being hanged on the Wall represents the intention of the Gileadean rulers to remind its subaltern class that they will abuse or execute whoever resists the regime. In this way, the subalterns will be more readily to obey the rules or law in Gilead.

During The Salvagings, there's also another kind of execution. This time, it's done by the Handmaids themselves, and it's called as Particicution. It's revealed when the ruling class' agent, Aunt Lydia, states,

“You know the rules for a Particicution,” ... “You will wait until I blow the whistle. After that, what you do is up to you, until I blow the whistle again. Understood?” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 43).

In this occasion, the Handmaids are made to act like the ruling class' agents. It's portrayed when one of the Handmaids, Ofglen, runs toward him, and she,

“pushes him [the suspect] down, sideways, then kicks his head viciously, one, two, three times, sharp painful jabs with the foot” (Atwood, 1985, Chapter 43).

Therefore, it proves Gramsci's statement that says the cultural, economics, and political aspects of hegemony are always underpinned by violence or coercion (Jones, S., 2006, p. 50). In this case, the ruling class not only uses its repressive apparatuses in punishing the guilty people but also its subalterns. Hence, by letting its subalterns involve in hegemonic activity, the ruling class successfully wins the spontaneous consent of those it rules or the Handmaids. It's proved by the above quotation which reveals how one of the Handmaids is triggered to abuse the man declared as guilty when, in fact, there's no proof of his crime.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Focusing on the hegemonic power of the ruling class presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* novel and by using Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the study reveals that the ruling class in the novel uses consent as its main strategy in maintaining its power and coercion as the shield of its hegemonic power. Consent is most depicted by the use of manipulative discourse. In this sense, the ruling class and its agents insert its values into their own discourse in order to make the subalterns act in accordance with the ruling class' interests. It also shows that the ruling class maintains its authority by using privileges, rewards, movies, mass media, songs, Bible, symbolic outfit, and unified language. Meanwhile, the occurrence of coercion in the novel is depicted by an existence of violence. It's represented by how the Handmaids are punished by using an electric cattle prod once they make mistakes or refuse to fulfill the ruling class' interests. Another portrayal of repression is depicted during *The Salvagings*. It's the occurrence during which those who are guilty are executed by the ruling class' repressive apparatuses or even by the Handmaids themselves. Besides scrutinizing it from the perspective of sociology, *The Handmaid's Tale* novel can also be analyzed from the perspective of psychology in order to explore the main character's struggle to survive in Gilead.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmadi, M. (2014). Cultural hegemony in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, 2(4), 98-103
- Atwood, M. (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. McClelland & Stewart Ltd.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*. California: Sage Publication Inc.
- Daldal, A. (2014). Power and ideology in Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci: A comparative analysis. *Review of History and Political Science*, 2(2), 149-167.
- Gramsci, A. (1999). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. London: The Electric Book Company.
- Hoorvash, M. & Rezvanjoo, S. (2017). Treasure Island and the economy of hegemonic resistance. *Journal of Language Horizons*. 10.22051/lghor.2018.16788.1065.
- Houssay-Holzschuch, M. (2020). Hegemony. *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 357–362. doi: 10.1016/B978-0-08-102295-5.10825-x.

- Ives, P. (2004). *Language and hegemony in Gramsci*. London: Pluto Press.
- Jaques, C., Islar, M., Lord, G. (2019). Post-truth: Hegemony on social media and implications for sustainability communication. *Sustainability*, no. 7: 2120. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11072120>
- Jones, S. (2006). *Antonio Gramsci*. Routledge.
- Kim, S. (2001). Hegemony and cultural resistance. *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 742–746. doi: 10.1016/b978-0-08-097086-8.95055-4.
- Mirzayee, M. (2019). Female identity in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood. *World Scientific News*, 123, 114-123.
- Storey, J. (1994). *Cultural theory and popular culture: An introduction*. Longman.
- Syukur, M. (2019). Hegemonic practices of upperclassmen to freshmen within college life. *Society*, 7(2), 71-82.
- Timo Duile. (2020). Challenging hegemony: Nurhadi-Aldo and the 2019 election in Indonesia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*.
- Western Sydney University. (2020, Feb 27). *American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style guide*. <https://library.westernsydney.edu.au/main/guides/referencing-citation>