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‘Cultural Hegemony’ As Hegemonic Culture in At Wood's The Handmaid’s Tale

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Abstract

The term Hegemony, is frequently used in the works of Late and Neo-Marxist Philosophers, literally means domination of the ruling class over the culture, economy and status quo of those who are administrated. The Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, uses the term Hegemony as the apparatus of the State to rule the subordinate class through certain dictating institutions; religion, schools, and media. Through unleashing the power over the subordinate class, the State accomplishes certain right wing policies. Gramsci asserts, in his Prison Notebooks, that “state should be understood not only as the apparatus of government, but also the “private” apparatus of “hegemony” or civil society” (261). The institutions regulate the ‘consent’ of the ‘civil society’ using violence and ideology over them, i.e. ruling class ideology. The Canadian futuristic novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* tells the story of the usurpation of the American soil by the ‘State’ called the Republic of Gilead. The power of the State is expressed through the Republic of Gilead, which uses religion as a major repressive apparatus to educate the right wing tendencies. The ruling class in the novel is “essentially conservative in the sense that they [do] not tend to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own, i.e. to enlarge their class sphere “technically” and ideologically” (Prison Notebooks, 260). Rather, it edifies the subordinate classes to be the victims. Women are treated as a “means of production” of children in this dystopian novel. The freedom of men and women is restricted; even there is no outlet for men’s sensuality. The magazines and pornographic channels are forbidden in Gilead. This paper analyses this prevalent condition in the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* through ‘Cultural Hegemony’ of the Republic of Gilead. The novel is analyzed from the perspective of the two seminal Marxist critics of the twentieth century, namely, Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.

Key Words: Hegemony, Ruling Class, Culture, Religion, State, Repressive Apparatus, Ideology, Dystopia, Gilead, and Means of Production.

The term 'Cultural Hegemony', one of the frequently mentioned terms in the Marxian theory, is elaborated in the Prison Notebooks of an Italian Marxist, namely, Antonio Gramsci, which denotes the cultural domination of the ruling class over the working class culture. Working class culture is slowly eroded by the culture of the bourgeoisie, whose power plays an important role in releasing Repressive State Apparatuses over powerless or working class people. According to Raymond Williams, a Welsh Socialist writer and cultural theorist, the word culture is an extremely difficult word to be defined. He defines it as a 'way of life'. Edward B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* defines culture as a "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Primitive Culture, 1). Culture is an idea, it exists only in the minds of people. It is formulated for the survival; hence, it is arbitrary in nature. The modern inventions are the products of culture. So one can say that it is a set of accepted beliefs, characters, collective behavior, practices and the attitude of the society. Culture becomes hegemonic with the intrusion of the people. Power makes culture hegemony over the people. It, with force, dominates the minds of the people for their acceptance and gradually replaces the former or already existing culture. So the hegemonic attitude of culture, because of power, imposes a new way of life into society. The research statement of this paper denotes cultural hegemony as hegemonic culture in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The difference between hegemonic culture and cultural hegemony is very simple. Cultural hegemony refers to the dominant culture where as hegemonic culture refers to the cultural domination of the dominated people. To impose the hegemonic culture in the society bourgeoisie uses Repressive State Apparatus. Gramsci has pointed out, in *The Prison Notebooks*, the hegemony-centric attitude is prevailed through various 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (Althusser) like church, religion, government/state, and party. To implement its own authoritative ideologies (right-wing tendencies), among the people in the society, the State uses RSAs, in the extremists way/ Fascist methodologies, to make the people as 'interpellators'. The State uses the Repressive State Apparatuses, like police, institutions, and caste (in India) as a force to threaten people. This hegemony-centric attitude reigns in the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. What Gramsci has said on religion is true in the novel. In it, the hegemonic attitude is carried out through RSAs. The theme of the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* is drawn from *The Old Testament*. The story of the novel takes place somewhere in the future USA in the Republic of Gilead, a Christian land. The narrator is its lady protagonist, namely, Of red, one of the handmaid’s in the novel. The Republic of Gilead abolishes US constitution and has taken up the

charge of ruling the Pre-Gilead people in USA. Gilead, as a State/Government, has laid down certain rigid conventions to be followed. It takes women in its custody and educates them to be the handmaids of the Commanders of the Republic of Gilead. Some of the Commanders, in the State, are known for their impotency. The widows, wives and other women in the pre-Gilead period are taken as the handmaids under the regime of the Republic of Gilead. If a handmaid is found to be infertile, she is sent to one of the colonies of Gilead, where they, however, lead the life of maids. Until the time of each handmaid comes to an end, she has to render her service to them. The handmaid's must wear red gown with full sleeve and a cap with a veil which hangs before their face. They are given a maid servant in the name of Martha's, who are without viable ovaries; act as the servants to the Commanders and the handmaids. If any one of the handmaids tries to escape from the Republic of Gilead, she is hanged publically, and the reason for their hanging is also hung with their carcass. To subjugate the people the Republic of Gilead uses RSAs to get the consent of its own civil society. The RSAs in Gilead are considered Guardians of Faith, Eyes (Spy), the Wall, Angels (soldiers), Aunts and Colonies. With the help of these repressive systems, the Republic is functioning in USA. These repressive forces make the people to be subordinates of State. Atwood gives the pictorial condition of the Republic of Gilead through her narrator Of red. In Gilead, "war cannot intrude except on television." (The Handmaid's Tale, 29) Gilead has no bounds. The doctors, lawyers and the students of the universities in the pre-Gilead is no longer the same in the land. The Universities are closed now. The studies have been put into a bound. The freedom of the people is restricted in the land. Women are not respected. The handmaid's are told that they are living in the happiest and in the Free State. The Aunts, as one of the Repressive Apparatuses of Gilead, keep on advising the handmaids about the freedom given to handmaids. The handmaids are not allowed to speak with other handmaids. They have not given a separate room. A Room of her own is banned here in the Republic. They sleep in the former US army cots. The Aunts, guarding them outside, have guns in their hands along with the Angels or soldiers. They are not permitted to enter into the place where the handmaids are sleeping, unless they are called for. On the whole the Republic of Gilead is a Police State. The false ideology is given to the handmaids that theirs "is a position of honor" (The Handmaid's Tale, 18). The commanders alone are supplied with wives and handmaids. Handmaids are respected in Gilead. They are not allowed to express their emotions, feelings and wishes towards other men, except Commanders. Of red points out the position of men other than Commanders in Gilead. When the narrator and her Eyes Of glen (spy), another handmaid who is assumed to be one of the spies of the State, walk for the shopping they produce their out passes to the soldiers, who should not whistle, touch and see the face of the handmaids. But Of red lifts her veil to allow one of the soldiers, Nick, to see her face. Here she says the condition of the men in the State through the following lines. As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, ... they're too young (28). She continues that Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there. ... They will suffer, later, at night in their regimented beds. They have no outlets now except themselves, and that's a sacrilege. There are no more magazines, no more films, no more substitutes; only me and my shadow, walking away from the two men, who ... watching our retreated shapes (28). The Gramscian theorization of the State / Government is applicable to the Republic of Gilead, which uses the cultural hegemony as to stamp its hegemonic ideologies among the civil society. A proper government/State, according to Grams, should establish a new type of law, which is "essentially innovatory". He also points out the significant role of the law to form a State. Thus he expresses that "If every State tends to create and maintain a certain type of civilization and of citizen ..., and to eliminate certain customs and attitudes and to disseminate others, then the Law will be its instrument for this purpose"(Selections from the Prison Notebooks, 246). The State is an educator. It teaches civil society to become its subjects. Grams believe that "[as] long as the class-State exists the regulated society cannot exist". The State in the novel is not at all a regulated government; rather it tries to regulate its own policies through RSAs. The prevalence of cultural hegemony in the State makes the ruling class to subject the subjects' collective consent. The use of the force, through the Angels, the Guardians of Faith and Aunts, help the State to spread its arms to get the consent of the handmaids (civil society) in the novel. Because of the fear towards the hanging in the public makes majority of the handmaids as interpellators. Hence, they are doubly marginalized in the Republic of Gilead. The Republic of Gilead functions as an educator. It educates its handmaids how to adapt themselves to the newly formed culture. Women, as they reach the Republic of the Gilead, they are sent to the training centers namely, Rachel and Leah Centers. They have been educated and re-educated by the trainers in the centers. Gramscian theorization of the cultural hegemony revolves around two things, class and the State. There are two classes, the ruling class and subaltern class. The civil society is taken as the subaltern class. The nature of the subaltern class is determined by the ruling class. This ruling class forms the State, which is repressive, even representative too, apparatus of the Government. Grams have explained the conception of law and government by the religion. He once has pointed out that church and religion play a vital role to make the civil society as faithful subjects. The State is used as the major apparatus in two distinctive formats, the government and the 'private'. Under these private affairs comes religion and church. When it is in the hands of the private, it becomes the apparatus of 'hegemony' (261). Then there occurs the birth of "the dictatorial ideological current of the Right" (261). When religion and the State/government combine together the type of dictatorial right-wing ideologies begin to dominate not only the culture but also the civilization, civil society, and ethical society too. All institutions are known for their repressive treatment. Schools, Medias, religion, and church are the major institutions through which the cultural domination takes place. In the Republic of Gilead too, both the religion and the State combine and form the fascist regime. In the fascist regime, writing, learning and thinking are prohibited. These fields are colonized and even commercialized. The customers become the one who are governed. Such is the status quo of the Republic of Gilead. It has closed the universities and Grams has rightly pointed out that "[w]here there is freedom, there is no State" (261).

Grams points out the limitation of the State, “whose functions are limited to the safeguarding of the public order and of respect for the laws” (261). But the Republic of Gilead fails in this aspect to protect its own people. It makes the position of women as a commodity. The Commanders, who are supplied with the handmaids, are consumers. The State Gilead functions as the Capitalists/bourgeoisie class. They reduce the respect of women to that of animals. They have fetched women as handmaids, and after removing their identity, they give them a new history. This is the extreme fascist movement which will be occurring not only in USA in near future but also in India too. Antonio Gramsci has already anticipated the situation in the early 1920s and 30s. The globalization and other capitalistic notions will change the present world. This article is written after reading Gramsci’s notion of the State and Government. The researcher has only applied the Marxist ideologies of both Gramsci and Althusserin the novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*.

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