

How does a comparative study of Handmaid's Tale and Gattaca bring to the fore ideas about dystopia?

A comparative study of The Handmaid's Tale (henceforth Handmaid's), a novel written by Margaret Atwood in 1986 and the film Gattaca, directed by Andrew Niccol in 1997, brings to the fore ideas about dystopia which parallel their individual contexts. This is evident in nature of Handmaid's as Atwood's dystopic vision of a society repressing the ability for the assertion of individualism through one's identity, and the strict, social compartmentalisation creating the necessity of rebellion. Similarly, Niccol utilises a dystopic lens to explore the frailties of humanity's relationship with its identity, and the ramifications of hierarchal constructs in the 'not-so-distant future'.

The comparative study of Handmaid's highlights the dystopic notion of a society which represses individualism to the extent of the loss of personal identity. This concept of a future without individual identities is evident through the metaphor of 'heads zeroes under white cloth', where heads are deemed insignificant and interchangeable, despite their typical role distinguishing people. This is reflective of Atwood's concern of garments like hijabs stripping identities of women. Atwood reinforces the significance of the individualism lost in her dystopic vision through the repetition of 'one and one and one' which emphasises importance of the each entity being independent. The notability of having a name, and thereby an identity, is underscored by the characterisation of it as having 'an aura, like an amulet' where 'amulet' connotes something precious and protective, taken away in Atwood's dystopia. Furthermore, the nature of allotting names to handmaids as stripping their true identities is reiterated through the alliteration of the names being 'patronymic, composed of a possessive preposition' to emphasise their characterisation of the handmaids as belonging to the Commanders rather than as individuals, reflective of the legal doctrine of coverture in the 1900's, entailing ownership of females by their husbands.

Niccol's Gattaca equally explores the frailty of human identity lost beneath society's beliefs as an element of dystopia, as with Handmaid's. The notion identity is manipulated to conform to society's views is reflected in the extreme close up of Vincent applying a false fingertip, creating a sense of duplicity in his covering of something uniquely his. While this contrasts with Handmaid's concepts of individualism, it is reflective of the 'designer babies' trend where personal traits are altered to society's standards of perfection. Niccol portrays the dystopic necessity of altering identities to socially conform through Vincent's factual tone as he limits his 'invalid self left in the valid world' to emphasise the routine nature of his social conformity. Additionally, the notion of Niccol's dystopia predetermining identities by genetics is highlighted by the dramatic irony of the mission head's gaze on Jerome, an invalid, as he claims 'nobody exceeds their genetic potential', his presence at Gattaca undermining this. Niccol explores a dystopic commodification of identity through the reductionist phraseology of 'most compatible candidate', where human conception is alluded to job recruitment, where ideal embryos are selected from collections of potentials. Thus this reveals Niccol's concern of the Human Genome Project being used to select desired traits, whilst paralleling the interchangeable identities in Handmaid's.

Handmaid's is a prophetic warning of a dystopic future where strict, social compartmentalisation create the necessity of rebellion. The subversion of social hierarchy in Gilead is symbolised through dress codes representative of social stations, but handmaids are costumed in red, symbolic of passion despite the objective of not sexualising them due to their biological reduction. Furthermore, the oppressive nature of society's social structures is evident through the polyptoton where the Commander is the 'head of the household, the house is what he holds' to reinforce the control the Commander has within Gilead society, reflecting the 'head and master' laws challenged by *Kirchberg v. Feenstra* 1979 that gave husbands the final say in all household decisions. Likewise, Atwood displays the subversion of societal roles through Serena Joy's garden presenting the sense of 'buried

things bursting upwards' as an analogy of oppressed individuals in trying to be freed in her dystopia. Additionally, the restriction of social mobility, is reflected through the symbolism of the window which 'opens only partly, its glass shatterproof' to reinforce the idea of suffocation within a social class, which cannot be escaped or broken free of, similar to the rigid caste systems observed by some rural Indian villages.

Similarly to Handmaid's, Gattaca also brings to fore the dystopic concerns of restrictive societal constructs and their impacts on the individual. Niccol delves into the entrapment of such dystopian social systems through the recurring motif of Vincent behind bars which highlights his inability to be free from society's low expectations of him, with such obstacles to success experienced by African Americans kept from accessing education until 1954. Furthermore, his desire to release himself from his societal position is portrayed through the point-of-view shot at the rocket launched through a glass ceiling, symbolising his desire for freedom from society's limits on individual progression, echoed in Handmaid's Gilead as well. The foundation of Gattican society on genetic superiority reflects Niccol's concerns of a recreation of Hitler's superior Aryan race, reinforced by the zooming in on the measuring pole marking Vincent as shorter than his younger brother, Anton, paralleling how superior physical attributes connote a higher ranking. Niccol demonstrates extent of categorisation within Gattica's dystopian society through the pun 'they had discrimination down to a science' suggesting that not only were poorer genetics prejudiced against due to scientific beliefs, but discrimination had become even methodical in its nature, paralleled by the strict social hierarchy present in Handmaid's.

Therefore a comparative study of The Handmaid's Tale and Gattaca brings to fore shared ideas of dystopia, despite being shaped by the different contexts, through their similar exploration of dystopic futures with both the suppression of individualism and social compartmentalisation.