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College English

In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood uses dystopian writing and religious principles to transform a section of the United States into a theocratic society. These principles produce Gilead, a civilization focused on population growth through forced means and clearly defined power dynamics between characters. Throughout the book, we see all the primary characters of the book crack under pressure and break these stringent principles. There are various times when characters question authority or the use/necessity of religious principles and I find myself reflecting on times that I had conversations with my dad with similar thoughts.

From my experience in an Islamic culture, certain principles can be considered misogynistic and are just common practice in my eyes. One of the most glaring examples of this is the respect that women receive compared to the positions that they're put in. When we look at *The Handmaid's Tale*, there's a consensus that the handmaids are vital to Gilead which is why Offred can say "I am a natural resource (65)". Their importance is often contradicted by the respect that they are given. They have to cover every part of their body otherwise they're considered indecent in public. They have no legal freedoms granted to them and all control of their lives is in control of the commanders and his wife. All of these inhumanities and yet the progression of society is completely dependent on them. This reminded me strongly of how unequal men and women are seen in my everyday life but to a much lesser degree. The easiest example I thought of is how women are treated during Ramadan. In the cultures I've grown up with, there have been exceptions to when a woman has to and doesn't have to fast, the main ones being when she's cooking/taking care of the house because of temptation to eat or drink and the other being when a woman is experiencing her menstrual cycle. I talked to my father once about how this luxury is a thing out of respect for a womans' efforts and nature but they

can't pray in the same section as us in the mosque or wherever location we're in when we both pray to the same God. The primary reason I've gathered is that a woman would be a distraction to a man when all of our undivided attention should be directed toward Allah. Women have to specifically be behind the men which is even more demeaning nor can they lead prayers in any context. There are deeper reasonings besides just gender but they all circle back to an inherent divide between man and woman.

The biggest I personally relate to in *The Handmaid's Tale* is Margaret Atwood's questioning of authority and principles. I believe that her framing of Gilead makes the reader intentionally question whether or not a society like this can exist and prevail. With it being a dystopian society, it's implied that none of the extremes of the book are supposed to be realistic potential realities but rather they are things to think about when it relates to human behavior. Using a religious context to advance these ideas is the most relatable method because of how many people worldwide value certain common principles through religion. Atwood uses characters like Moira and the Commander and events like the underground club to communicate a questioning of moral principles. I have had countless conversations with my dad questioning the existence of God and other Islamic principles because of the practicality of a God existing and the effect/purpose of these principles. One of the major ones that I've talked to my dad about and is very prevalent in Gilead is abortion. In Gilead, there's a no tolerance mindset when it comes to the subject and can lead to death for those involved. It's extremely forbidden for the purpose of repopulating Gilead and because Gilead is heavily influenced by Christianity. When I have conversations about abortion and the opinion of those who oppose it in Islam, it's for the same reasons as Gilead. The same lack of respect previously mentioned is also present because there's no choice presented for the woman involved and the impacts of these decisions presumably made by men can have dire consequences to those effected.