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### A Colorblind Narrative

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” Desmond Tutu said it perfectly, and as Margaret Atwood’s novel shows, neutrality and subservience does not change anything for the better. This sentiment does not just include women aligning themselves with the Republic of Gilead in the novel, but also the complete lack of diversity that is apparent through Offred’s telling of events. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the erasure of race and the slave-like narrative of Gilead illuminates Americans’ dark past with discrimination and ignoring the plight of minorities.

Atwood’s dystopia depicts women as slaves of the regime, lacking any rights much like black slaves once did. Women are used as vehicles for child bearing and are denied the opportunity to be individuals living their own lives. And while it becomes easy to sympathize with the handmaids in Offred’s narrative, the obvious factor missing is the social construct of race. One cannot bring up gender discrimination without also addressing racial bias. Atwood touches on race briefly, noting that the “Children of Ham” and “Sons of Jacob” were sent away, providing a reason for not mentioning skin color throughout the rest of the novel. The fact that blacks and Jews are given such names and singled out exposes the inherent persecution they face. Some might find this avoidance of race relations in poor taste and others might see it as a necessary means to focus on gender discrimination, but, it also amplifies the harsh reality of society. To distance themselves from racial issues, white people often claim to “not see color”. Instead of evening out the playing field, this mentality silences people of color when they try to address how they have been victimized because of what they look like. This aspect of the dystopia is a painful and realistic reflection of how America chooses to deal with its racist and misogynistic history: ignoring it. Focusing solely on how white Americans are affected by the change in power solidifies their place in society as the only one of importance or relevance. This has been going on for too long in this country, and it is impossible to discuss injustice in America without also bringing up black people.

Americans have always tried to avoid black history for the sake of self-preservation, and *The Handmaid’s Tale* takes a similar approach with a different result. The republic of Gilead victimizes white women, many who are college educated, like Offred. These women, in our day and age, would be considered privileged and a part of the middle class, but they are stripped of their jobs, titles, and livelihoods for the sake of reproduction. White people have never been in this position, so in a way, this forces them to put themselves in the shoes of minorities who have struggled to even be considered humans. Women and men alike use systems like the underground Femaleroad (which Moira escapes with), which is immediately recognizable as the Underground Railroad. This allusion to American slavery forces people to remember the African Americans the story simultaneously attempts to erase. The aspects of control, like the inability of the handmaids to read, are also reminiscent of American slavery. These similarities are intentional and hint to the reader that this inequality is supposed to be familiar to them. By using forms of revolt that black slaves used, the story is heavily inspired by African American history, but without including them or crediting them for their contributions. This practice is

essentially the same as modern day cultural appropriation and serves as a lesson to remember, respect, and uplift the oppressed, rather than denying and appropriating their existence.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a world where women are subject to a tyrannical regime that strips away their rights as human beings and forces them into subjugation. Though their plight is depressing, it reflects America's all too real history of racism and sexism. By taking people of color out of the equation and borrowing their methods of survival from past times of slavery, Atwood addresses the erasure and belittlement of people of color. Being color blind is not the way to cure racism. By acknowledging and respecting our differences, we can make strides to create a society where any oppressive system is dismantled.