

9/11 Twenty Years Later

by Phyllis Chesler



I remained rooted to my chair, transfixed, as I watched the twin towers come down—and when I finally stepped out into my front yard, I said to my neighbor: “Now, we are all Israelis.”

It was an idea that I repeated many times in 2002 and again in 2003 in “The New Anti-Semitism” and one that my neighbor, German journalist Anya Osang, has also repeated many times, with even more understanding since she and her journalist husband lived in Israel for two years.

Twenty years later, and here I sit, reading an excellent article about 9/11 by Fern Sidman at *The Jewish Voice* and watching an equally excellent documentary on Netflix about 9/11: “Turning Point.”

Here I sit, transfixed again, reliving the timeline of Islamic terrorist attacks against Israel, America, and the West. I acknowledge that in record time, Israel stopped most such attacks with its Security Wall and then with its Iron Dome, for which it was defamed and demonized.

Europe and America also stopped many—but not all—Islamic/Islamist acts of terrorism before they could be carried out. However, I cannot understand how or why Western leaders and the “chattering classes” managed to forget, minimize, deny, and actually give cover to such plots and plotters. Jihadists are Holy Warriors against Racism. Jihadists are mentally ill.

And now, America has left Afghanistan where bin Laden plotted 9/11, and we have done so in the most shameful and dishonorable of ways. Who has best captured the reality of the

Taliban and their interpretation of Sharia Law?

Why, none other than George Orwell and Margaret Atwood. Strangely enough, many mainstream columnists viewed both "The Handmaid's Tale," "The Testaments," and the documentary based upon these works as dystopias that describe white Christian misogynist men and a Puritan-style Biblical Hell.

Michelle Goldberg, in the *New York Times* attributed the popularity of *The Handmaid's Tale* to Trump's ascendancy. She wrote: "It's hardly surprising that in 2016 the book resonated—particularly women—stunned that a brazen misogynist, given to fascist rhetoric and backed by religious fundamentalists was taking power."

Michiko Kakutani reviewed the film, *The Testaments*, also for the *New York Times*. She wrote:

Atwood understands that the fascist crimes of Gilead speak for themselves...just as their relevance to our own times does not need to be put in boldface. Many American readers and viewers of *The Handmaid's Tale* are already heavily invested with the story of Gilead because we've come to identify with the Handmaids' hopes that the nightmare will end and the United States—with its democratic norms and constitutional guarantees—will soon be restored. We identify because the events in Atwood's novel...now feel frighteningly real. Because news segments on television in 2019 are filled with images of children being torn from their parents' arms, a president using racist language to sow fear and hatred and reports of accelerating climate change jeopardizing life as we know it on the planet.

However, Atwood's Gilead reflects and foretells two other profoundly devastating realities, which neither the critics nor Atwood dwell upon.

Handmaid is about many things: Extreme misogyny, woman's Inhumanity to woman, and post-Orwellian totalitarianism. But

it is also about commercial surrogacy, a practice which has already been legalized in many American states, a commercial transaction which is seen as “progressive.”

The real handmaids in America today are the birthmother-surrogates who, out of economic desperation, or in a psychological fugue state, agree to carry a child for an “intended” parent or parents. Their diets and medical care is as closely supervised as in Gilead and they are sometimes forbidden to even see the babies in the delivery room. Breastfeeding is not an option. In one case, in California, armed guards prevented the birthmother from meeting her triplets in the NICU.

To be clear, Atwood foretold the horrific rise of surrogacy in America—but none of her admirers want to talk about this because it undercuts their pro-surrogacy agenda.

There’s another contemporary parallel that gets little attention. Gilead’s system of pseudo-theocratic totalitarian control in both her novels and in the Hulu adaptation of it does not accurately reflect what is happening in America today; it mirrors what is happening in many Islamic countries.

It is All About Afghanistan under the Taliban in the 1990s and under the Taliban right now.

Ironically, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood does mention Islam twice (to exonerate Muslims as the suspected mass murderers of Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Oval Office in Gilead and again in a reference to the “obsession with harems” on the part of allegedly Orientalist Western painters who did not understand that they were painting “boredom” Atwood’s quintessential Bad Guys are Caucasian, Bible-thumping, right wing, conservative, American Christians.

But where else than in the Islamic/Islamist world do we see forced face veiling, forced child marriage, women confined to the home, polygamy (a “wife” and a “handmaid” under the same

roof), male guardians and minders, cattle prod shocking, whipping, hand amputations, stoning, crazed vigilante mobs stomping and tearing people apart, and tortured corpses publicly displayed on city walls or hanging from cranes in order to terrify the populace? Or the torture murder of homosexuals? This is how the Taliban, (the Islamic Emirate), Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, Hamas, Hezbollah, and all their Pakistani and Indian Muslim Jihadist counterparts interpret, correctly or incorrectly, Sharia law.

How could all the reviewers not see what I so clearly see? Perhaps here's how.

I once lived in a harem in Afghanistan—(I love my opening line) but a harem simply means the “women’s quarters.” It is forbidden territory to all men who are not relatives. If you can’t leave without permission or without a male escort, you are in a harem and living in purdah.

A romantic courtship and then marriage had transported me back to the 10th Century and trapped me there without a passport back to the future.

However, I got out of the wild, wild East and I moved on. But I never forgot the way it was. I always understood that as imperfect as America and the West might be, it was still a much better place for women than the pre-Khomeini and pre-Taliban Islamic world. Forever after, I understood that barbaric customs are indigenous, not caused by foreign intervention; and that, like the West, Islam was also an imperial and colonial power; Arab Muslims owned slaves, and engaged in gender and religious apartheid.

I owe Afghanistan a great deal for teaching me this. Perhaps my radical Western feminism was forged long ago in pampered purdah in Kabul.

Like the handmaids and domestics in Gilead, the captive population in Orwell's [1984](#) is monitored around the clock

through “telescreens” that can view every room, each person. The telescreens broadcast Big Brother’s orders and conduct daily “hate” sessions. People are always anxious and paranoid; everyone has permanent enemies.

Today, Orwell’s Thought Police sound a lot like the Afghan Taliban or like Iran’s Virtue and-Vice squads, who arrest men and women for the smallest sign of “individuality” or difference, and who harass and arrest women for showing a single strand of hair, or a glimpse of ankle. Here’s Khaled Hosseini’s fictional description of life in Afghanistan before the Taliban in [*The Kite Runner*](#):

You couldn’t trust anyone in Kabul anymore—for a fee or under threat, people told on each other, neighbor on neighbor, child on parent, brother on brother, servant on master, friend on friend...the rafiqs, the [Afghan] comrades, were everywhere and they’d split Kabul into two groups: those who eavesdropped and those who didn’t...A casual remark to the tailor while getting fitted for a suit might land you in the dungeons of Poleh-charkhi...Even at the dinner table, in the privacy of their own home, people had to speak in a calculated manner—the rafiqs were in the classrooms too; they’d taught children to spy on their parents, what to listen for, whom to tell.

And here he is describing Afghanistan in the Taliban era:

In Kabul, fear is everywhere, in the streets, in the stadiums, in the markets, it is a part of our lives here...the savages who rule our watan [country] don’t care about human decency. The other day, I accompanied Farzanajan to the bazaar to buy some potatoes and naan. She asked the vendor how much the potatoes cost, but he did not hear her, I think he had a deaf ear. So she asked louder and suddenly a young Talib ran over and hit her on the thighs with his wooden stick. He struck her so hard she fell down. He was screaming at her and cursing and saying

the Ministry of Vice and Virtue does not allow women to speak loudly. She had a large purple bruise on her leg for days...If I fought, that dog would have surely put a bullet in me, and gladly!

Hosseini's descriptions are right out of *1984* or *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Two memoirs set in Iran, Azar Nafisi's best-selling [Reading Lolita in Tehran](#) and Roya Hakakian's [Journey from the Land of No](#), describe the savage curtailment of private life and thought—and of life itself—by radical Islamists.

According to Nafisi, Khomeini's goon squads closed newspapers and universities and arrested, tortured, and executed beloved teachers, prominent artists, intellectuals, and activists, including feminists, and thousands of other innocent and productive Muslims. The squads constantly harassed women on the street and at work. If a woman failed the dress-code standards even slightly, or by accident, she risked being arrested, probably raped, probably executed.

In *Journey from the Land of No*, Roya Hakakian describes the indescribable "Mrs. Moghadam," the newly-installed head of the Jewish girls' high school. Mrs. Moghadam tyrannizes, terrifies, and shames the Jewish girls. She tries to convert them to Islam. However, her true passion is more Talibanesque. She informs the innocent girls that, although they do not know it, they are "diabolical," "abominable," "loathsome," "lethal," capable of "drowning everything in eternal darkness," capable of bringing the "apocalypse" by showing a single strand of hair. To Hakakian's credit, she presents a rather dangerous turn of events as a dark comedy.

Mrs. Moghadam is definitely an Aunt Lydia, the lead female tormentor of the Handmaids, right out of Gilead, circa 1985.

As Muslim women are being tortured, honor-murdered by their families, or stoned to death, sometimes for refusing to wear

the veil, many Western multiculturally and politically correct post-colonial feminists are deconstructing and *wearing* the face veil and the head scarf as symbols of [anti-racism](#) and as a [form of respect](#) when they visit Muslim countries. Such feminists are also silencing and demonizing all other views in academic journals, in the media, and on feminist internet groups.

Atwood depicts an all-female power structure in which the handmaids are kept in line by cruel female "Aunts," led by Aunt Lydia, who casually apply cattle prods and tasers, who blame them as evil sluts, punish them with group condemnation, bouts of solitary confinement, exile them to the "Colonies" to die cleaning up toxic waste, etc. Such behavior seems to contradict feminist views of women as morally superior to men and as more compassionate and intuitive.

Like men, women are human beings and as such are as close to the apes as to the angels. Women are also aggressive, cruel, competitive, envious, sometimes lethally so, but mainly toward other women. I would not want to be at the mercy of a female prison guard—or a female concentration camp guard—in the West. But let's not forget the [Wives of ISIS](#)—the [all-female al-Khansa Brigade](#) who whipped, beat, and mutilated the breasts of girls and women when their heavy black burqas slipped.

Right now, some Afghan women are marching in favor of the Taliban. Of course, some are daring to protest Taliban rule and are facing terrifying violence as are the journalists who dare to cover their demonstrations.

Misogynist thinking and actions exist in America today but not only among right-wing conservatives. It is also flourishing among our media and academic elites. Such thinking is flying high under the banner of "free speech," "multi-cultural relativism," "anti-racism," and "political correctness." Dare to question this elite's right to silence and shame those who challenge their views—i.e., that the West is always to blame,

that jihadists are freedom-fighters, that the Islamic face veil is a free choice or a religious commandment, that polygamy encourages sisterhood, that Islam is a race, not a religious and political ideology—and, as I've noted many times, one is attacked as a racist, an Islamophobe, and a conservative, and swiftly demonized and de-platformed.

Atwood the divine novelist is absolutely entitled to depict whatever she wishes. But too many reviewers are playing partisan politics with her vision and are refusing to see other and larger global dangers contained in her work.

Women's freedom and women's lives worldwide are under the most profound siege. To focus solely on the United States or on the Caucasian, Judeo-Christian West is diversionary and blind. Women here are not the only or even the greatest victims. It is vain of us to insist upon it.

Part of this was published in my 2005 book, now out of print: "The Death of Feminism;" part of this is contained in my 2019 and 2020 books "Islamic Gender Apartheid: A Veiled War Against Women" and "A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killing;" and part of this was published two years ago in Quillette. All of it remains terribly relevant.

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