

**Subjugated Women and the Politics of Power in Margaret Atwood's
*The Handmaid's Tale***

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Abstract

While there is plenty of traditional feminist critique of male power structures in Atwood's works, and particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale*. This study is especially significant because it is the first to adopt Foucauldian-feminist reading of the novel. Placing the novel in the contexts of Atwood's career, feminism, and dystopian literature, provides a fuller understanding of how the novel functions as an expression of the disunity of women. Thus, present paper focuses of *The Handmaid's Tale* from the consequences of patriarchal control and "traditional" misogyny, to the matriarchal network, and a new form of misogyny: women's hatred of women. The paper concludes that subjecting women in the novel is a systematic process, which produces them as always, the inferiors.

Keywords: Power, Misogyny, Women, Gilead, Handmaid



**"It's hard to imagine now,
having a friend"**

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and versatile writer. Her literary career began in 1961 with the publication of her first poetry collection, *Double Persephone*, and has grown to include sixteen poetry collections, twelve novels, eight short fiction collections, six children's books, and five major non-fiction works. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a thought provoking novel about the domination and governing of women by men. The novel became an immediate bestseller when published in Canada in 1985 and the United States in 1986. Handmaids are the crux of Gilead's survival, paradoxically the most valued, yet most despised caste. They are charged with reversing the plummeting birthrate, a vital mission following an age of readily available birth control, irresponsible management of nuclear waste and chemical weaponry, and indiscriminate use of agricultural chemicals. After being arrested for participating in non-traditional relationships (second or common-law marriages, or other extra-marital liaisons), the Handmaids are then turned over to the Aunts for training.

At the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centers (also known as the Red Centers), the Aunts indoctrinate the Handmaids in the matriarchy of Gilead. The Aunts are entrusted with the crucial duty of training the Handmaids because they rank among the most powerful female agents of the patriarchal order. In full collusion with the male leaders of Gilead, the Aunts stop at nothing to subdue and domesticate the Handmaids during their initiation. It presents a dystopia where freedom for women is restricted because of the new Christian government's extreme policies. This new society, The Republic of Gilead, is described by a woman called Offred. She is a so-called Handmaid, a kind of breeding tool for the republic. The ideology and ideas of this Christian government are presented to us through Offred's first-person narrative. Flashbacks also provide a picture of the society "before" Gilead. Gilead is described by Offred in a diversified way. She depicts Gilead within the framework of the discourse but she also describes it in a critical way with ironic undertones. Furthermore, in her flashbacks, she depicts the society "before" the revolution, before the creation of Gilead, which is important if one is to understand why Gilead exists. An essential part of the display of these two different societies is the way in which Offred highlights gender inequalities and power structures. This is most evident in Offred's description of Gilead and subtler in the description of the society "before". Although Offred seemingly describes the latter as better, the type of language she uses when describing her former life indicates that is not necessarily the case.

Within the confines of the Red Center, abuse is predominately psychological. Humiliation is a favorite technique of the Aunts. Janine, another Handmaid-in-training, repeatedly suffers public humiliation. For instance, an Aunt refuses to allow her a restroom break so she soils herself in front of the group. On another occasion, Janine is bullied into admitting she enticed the men who gang raped her, resulting in the abortion that marred her teenage years. Aunt Lydia condemns Janine, and all women who made

spectacles of themselves by "oiling themselves like roasted meat on a spit, [revealing their] bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public," and showing their legs without stockings (53). For Aunt Lydia, the sexual freedom women struggled to attain during pre- Gilead times was the source of their victimization. Women foolishly flaunted their bodies, tempting men to sexual violence. An immodest woman is punished by God, according to Aunt Lydia, to "teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*. Teach her a *lesson*" (72, emphasis author's). According to the Aunts, as spokeswomen for the patriarchy of Gilead, rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are consequences of women possessing sexual freedom and leading men on.

The present paper proceeds with theories of discourse by Michel Foucault, in order to conclude how power, in the form of oppression, works and how the terms language, "truth" and action are used to make that possible in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Offred is, in some respect, a rather weak person. There are several examples of other women in the novel who have not been nearly as affected by the "truth" of Gilead as Offred. They are active and determined not to live by the rules of the Gilead discourse. Offred's mother was involved in the feminist movement in the society "before", burning pornographic material and marching in support of women's right to abortion. She was frustrated about Offred's lack of interest in the women's movement and her habit of taking her rights for granted. "You young people don't appreciate things, she'd say. You don't know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are" (131). Offred's mother fears the consequences of slacking in this area, a fear that would prove to be justified, and after the creation of Gilead she is sent to the Colonies.

The female subjects in Gilead are under a constant surveillance, by which their disciplinary, subjugation, and productivity are ensured, because "control this rigid and precise cannot be maintained without a minute and relentless surveillance" (Bartky 63). This role of surveillance is mostly taken by the Eyes, the secret force of Gilead, "a net for the unwary, the Eyes of God run over all the earth" (Atwood 200). However, they manage to establish a state of self- surveillance, in which, the women find themselves acting as if they are being watched, even if they are not, because they suspect any one around to be an Eye; "Perhaps he was merely being friendly. Perhaps he saw the look on my face and mistook it for something else. Really what I wanted was the cigarette. Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye" (Atwood 25). Such suspicion is an ultimate effect of surveillance, which is organized and distributed: "to induce in the [subject] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, Discipline 201). This corresponds to the colonial gaze "within which the identification, objectification and subjection of the subject are simultaneously enacted: the imperial [or the masculine] gaze defines the identity of the [female] subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalterneity and powerlessness"

(Ashcroft et al. 2007). Such processes of identifying and colonizing the female subjects are established furthermore in the colonies, where women are named unwomen.

Opposed to the gaze of the Eyes, there are the Wings of the Handmaids, which surround their faces and prevent them from seeing the world around, only in a distorted vision; “Given our wings, our blinkers, it’s hard to look up, hard to get the full view, of the sky, of anything. But we can do it, a little at a time, a quick move of the head, up and down, to the side and back. We have learned to see the world in gasps” (Atwood 39). Their vision of themselves is distorted as well: “If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, [...] and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something” (14). Such a distorted vision recalls the Marxist notion of camera obscura, in which ideology constructs subjects and their consciousness and perspectives of themselves and of their realities. Nevertheless, the Handmaids are “totally seen, without ever seeing”, this is because “the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer” (Foucault, Discipline 202; Bartky 67). Such sovereignty is a male-privilege, exercised by the Commanders, the Eyes, the Guardians and all other male subjects in Gilead.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, exercising power is inevitably and directly interwoven with constructing knowledge, in which subjects and their beliefs, perspectives, identities, and classifications are all constituted and “demonstrated to be true and had assumed the status of definitively acquired knowledge, and [...] accepted without either proof or adequate demonstration” (Foucault, Archeology 181). First of all, the subjects’ faith and beliefs are not freely chosen but rather enforced; the official doctrine in Gilead is orthodoxy. It is strictly forbidden not to be an orthodox, and a sound reason for execution: “only two hanging on it today: one Catholic, not a priest though, placarded with an upside-down cross, and some other sect I don’t recognize.” (Atwood 206). Moreover, knowledge is controlled through eradicating the former sources of antecedent order. Books, universities, and arts disappear in the new system; “Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and the university is closed” (31). Instead, the only sources of knowledge left for use are the ones produced by the new system and its institutions that turn faith and knowledge into a product to be consumed, like Holy Rollers, which are machines for printing prayers.

Because things like truth and knowledge are not “outside power” and they are “produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint [which] induce regular effects of power”, the men exercising power in Gilead claim authority of such production (Foucault, Power 131). This authority as a “set of rules governing political actions, issued by those who are entitled to speak”, thus, it generally has “excluded females and values associated with the feminine” (Jones 119). However, the Aunts at the Red Center have a certain degree of authority, but in fact, they only contribute “to the association of the authoritative with a male voice” (120). Because of this very role, the Aunts are exceptions for some rules that prevent women from what is considered

masculine activities. Therefore, they are “allowed to read and write,” while the other women “can be read to [...] by him [the Commander], but [they] cannot read” (Atwood 135; 95). Through this set of rules and regulations, which determines who has the authority of speaking, female subjects are deprived of the power of words; “He has something we don’t have, he has the word” (96).

Offred’s fellow Handmaid, Ofglen is another woman who is seemingly much braver than Offred. Ofglen is involved in the resistance and she is the one who pushes their relationship beyond what is generally accepted among Handmaids. She gives Offred information about the resistance and wants Offred to pass on information received from her Commander, which is something Offred does not dare. When Ofglen hangs herself instead of being arrested by “The Eyes” (the secret police in Gilead) Offred is relieved since Ofglen then cannot reveal anything about her. “She did it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later” (298). Offred does not express any sadness, but rather relief that she, for the moment, is safe. While other women, like Ofglen, sacrifice their lives rather than to reveal anything that might hurt the resistance, Offred is satisfied just being alive. In her essay “From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor also notes this. “She is flooded with relief when the first Ofglen kills herself, because it means that no one will learn of her own disobedience and indirect affiliations with MayDay (the resistance, own note). Immediately afterward, she realizes that in feeling so, she has betrayed herself: “I am abject”, she says. “I feel, for the first time their true power” (Wagner-Lawlor 86). The effective Gilead discourse has made Offred “betray” her comrade Ofglen, by feeling relief rather than sadness. She becomes aware that the regime’s power has really affected her mind.

Yet another example of this is Offred’s friend from the time “before”, Moira. In the society “before”, Moira was, like Offred’s mother, an active feminist. The novel reveals instances of this in Offred’s flashbacks. “Now, said Moira. You don’t need to paint your face, it’s only me. What’s your paper on? I just did one on date rape” (47). These interjections like the one above on the subject of date rape provide the critique against the society “before” since it displays the conditions for women then. Moira also becomes a Handmaid, but she manages to escape from the Red Centre. However, she is eventually captured and put to work in a brothel. The common trait for all these three women is their failure, which Stephanie Barbé Hammer discusses in “The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”. Significantly, the rebellious females of Offred’s world are all defeated: Ofglen commits suicide in order to protect the May Day under- 42 grounds; Moira’s escape attempt is thwarted and she is imprisoned in the city’s brothel; Offred’s own mother is glimpsed in a film-documentary about the dreaded toxic-waste colonies. To survive, Offred seems to suggest, one must surrender. (6)

As Hammer notes, Offred surrenders to survive. All her life she has been surrounded by women who fight and sacrifice themselves for the cause, but she has not been able to join them. As a result, she gives in to Gilead discourse in order to survive, while the women who do not surrender end up dead. Offred wants Gilead to fall, but she does not have the power to participate in making it happen. Consequently, she relies on other women, but they fail. In an important way, however, her strategy did work as she actually manages to escape and her story is saved and later rediscovered. According to the historical notes, this would have taken place in the early years of Gilead, which would mean that Offred probably did not witness its fall. The regime is rather successful in maintaining the rules of their discourse uncritically because of the severe punishments anyone who criticizes the regime will be subjected to. The problem for the opposition is the widespread system of reporting anyone who speaks negatively of the state. Some people are employed as 'eyes', so one can never know who to entrust with one's discontent. Although Gilead is a society built on male dominance there are plenty of women who help maintain that system, which is a common and effective "divide and conquer" tactic. A limited amount of power is given to a small segment of the group of people who are the aim of control, thus creating a crack in the unity of that group. Those who have been given this power will strive to retain it because of the advantages it provides but also, inevitably, in fear of retaliation; while those who are really in power, in this case the ruling males of Gilead, have created a security buffer between them and the oppressed women. Men (or a minority of the men) are the rulers, some women have limited (but no actual) power, and most women are controlled and have no power. The representatives of these women with limited power in the novel are the 'Aunts'. They are women who are convinced that this kind of rule is justified and they help to control the other women. The 'Aunts' are in charge of the re-education of the women who are Handmaids. This type of tactics is described by Rhonda Hammer in *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism*, where she is especially interested in the anti-feminist movement and the women who aid it:

The most effective way to both paralyze and prevent widespread support for the feminist movement was not so much to disseminate those voices who represent the hardcore conservative and patriarchal opponents to feminism. Rather, publicizing and exploiting critiques by women was a more effective antifeminist tactic, employing members of the very disenfranchised groups the feminist platform resolved to empower. (13) Although not specifically discussing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hammer indirectly describes how the Gilead regime uses women to oppress women. Hence, by using women to represent anti-feminist ideas it gets that more effective, since it will be more difficult to realize that other women would want to prevent the evolvment of female rights and power, consequently convincing other women that the feminist ideas and arguments are not legitimate.

Moreover, these women help to enforce the notion that it is women who are to be blamed for the sexual violence of men. Hammer further describes a review in New

York Times from 1999 where Katha Pollit discusses antifeminist Wendy Shalit's work. In *A Return to Modesty*, the 23-year-old conservative journalist, Shalit, cites her experience in fourth grade sex ed to argue that feminism and liberal sexual mores have encouraged men to degrade women. "The solution: women should stay virgins and arm themselves [...] with blushes and long skirts to inspire chivalry in men" (15). Hammer addresses an important issue of feminism here. Despite the fact that it is men who are committing sexual crimes the logic is that women should change their behavior and not the other way around. This logic is exactly what the 'Aunts' have adopted and are teaching the Handmaids. The absence of this change of attitude in the society "before", which resulted in a large quantity of attacks on women, is one of the pretexts for creating Gilead. However, I will return to this later on. Here, I would like to turn to the issue of how the 'Aunts' work to change the minds of the Handmaids:

It's Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. . . But who's fault was it? Aunt Helena Says, holding up one plump finger. . . Her, fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison" (82).

As one can see from the examples above, Shalit's and the Aunts' logic is quite similar as the consequence of both of them is that the violence of men is not men's fault but women's "for leading them on". Anti-feminist reasoning thus holds that women should, for example, cover their bodies to a greater extent and restrain from sexual activity. Hence, these "opportunistic anti-feminist women" (Hammer 14) "exploit and commodify feminist issues" (Hammer 16), both for their own personal profit but inevitably for the profit of the whole anti-feminist movement. In theory, these traits described by Hammer, are quite similar to the traits of the 'Aunts', who gain personal profit from their kind of work, however, it will be very limited and the main consequence will be a strengthening of power for the Gilead government.

In addition, there are serious consequences for the women whom Hammer describes as "collaborators" when power is in the hands of the anti-feminist movement. Serena Joy, the wife of Offred's Commander is, ironically, a symbol of the loss of power for women. Before the revolution she was an agitator of the values that would later be law in Gilead. Offred remembers watching her on TV. "*Time* or *Newsweek* it was, it must have been. She wasn't singing anymore by then, she was making speeches. She was good at it. Her speeches were about the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home" (55). Obviously, the irony is that Serena Joy was advocating that women shouldn't be handling public affairs, but that was exactly what she was doing. Nevertheless, Serena Joy does not seem pleased with what Gilead has become, she seems bitter. Offred notices this. "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (56). What is interesting is that while Serena Joy had the power of expressing herself, she used it to undermine that very power.

As Offred notices, she is not happy with the situation. Consequently, advocating such ideas was all very well in theory, but the subsequent reality was not what she had expected it to be. Her bitterness has made her lose conviction and respect of the tough laws of Gilead. This is shown when Serena suggests that Offred should try to get pregnant with someone else since the Commander might not be able to do it.

‘Maybe he can’t’, she says . . . ‘No,’ I say. ‘Maybe he can’t’ . . . ‘Maybe you should try it another way’ . . . ‘what other way’?. . . ‘Another man’, she says. ‘You know I can’t’ I say, careful not to let my irritation show. ‘It is against the law. You know the penalty’ (215).

Firstly, Serena Joy recognizes that she does not believe in the official notion that men cannot be sterile. Rather, it seems she actually suspects that her husband in fact is, sterile. Then she suggests that Offred should commit a crime punishable by death. All this indicates a disrespect of the values of Gilead unfitting a person of conviction. Serena Joy has been transformed from a “collaborator” to a woman who seemingly regrets her choices in life which led her to lose the power of expressing her opinions.

The subject of sterility of men in Gilead, or rather the absence of sterility, is another example of how the regime works to devalue women by claiming that the failure of producing children can only be the fault of the woman, never the man. It is her body that is broken. A Handmaid will, if unlucky, end up with a commander who is in fact sterile. However, she will be blamed for the lack of children and declared an ‘unwoman’ which is practically a death sentence. The value of women is determined by their ability to produce offspring. Everything else is secondary or even irrelevant.

Consequently, what the regime says is true will become true, no matter what the truth really is. This is not unusual in dystopian fiction. It is also used by the totalitarian regime in George Orwell’s *1984* as Lois Feuer notes in her article where she compares *The Handmaid’s Tale* to *1984*: “O’Brien forces Winston to acknowledge that two plus two can equal five if the Party says so [...] O’Brien’s point is that truth, even the *a priori* truth of mathematics, is relative and subject to the violence-enforced will of whoever is in power.” (87-88). Hence, the “mathematics” of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, i.e. the science of bodily deficiency, is whatever the male dominated regime wants it to be. They have taken “truth” to a level where it may not be questioned however absurd it might seem.

Moreover, Staels points out that: “[i]n the *Handmaid’s Tale* Offred retrospectively witnesses her personal victimization as a Handmaid in Gilead’s theocracy. The totalitarian regime forces the inhabitants to submit to the power of one (moral) law, one true religion, one language code” (475). Staels describes how the society “before” changes into Gilead. However, as mentioned in the Foucault discussion, no discourse can be created from nothing; one cannot simply create a

“truth”. Even if the new “truths” might seem absurd, it must be justified in relation to the conditions of the previous “truths”. In the next chapter I will show how the regime justifies their “truth”.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood depicts a dystopian world, where women are subjugated by the male-dominant discourse of Gilead and its institutions and social networks. The novel is actually a tragedy, where no woman is successful. Offred's mother ends up in the colonies, Moira in a brothel, Serena Joy as a miserable housewife, and Ofglen ends up killing herself. Ironically, Offred, the character who tried the least to affect her situation, is the most successful as she manages to escape and tell her story. Offred finds herself hiding in a safe house somewhere, and the only two societies she has ever lived in are both societies where women were in one way or another oppressed, be it by means of sexual violence, language, knowledge or power. However, subjugating women is maintained by a series of processes including: constitutionalizing femininity, identifying and classifying female's subjects, disciplining and alienating the female bodies, constant and internalizing surveillance, and constructing knowledge. The Commanders, their Wives, the Aunts, as well as the Handmaids and the other women in Gilead participate in the process of producing, distributing, and redistributing discourse. All of those systematic procedures, which are explored and discussed in the paper, are set to achieve the ultimate purpose of the regime of Gilead; to construct female subjects that are both subjugated and productive. Although the female subjects in Gilead are oppressed and victimized by the dominant discourse, they are engaged in exercising power and reproducing the very discourse that oppresses and subjugates them.

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