



Dystopian Femininity: Feminist Themes and Gender Politics in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

*Gender strongly shapes a person's identity by affecting both their self-perception and the way they relate to others. A person's experiences, responsibilities, and relationships in their community can be shaped by their gender identity. However, gender represents only one part of identity, which can also be defined by sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and individual values. Understanding the different ways people perceive and express themselves, as well as the complexity of human experiences, depends on an understanding of gender and identity. A feminist analysis of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* explores how the novel portrays and challenges gender norms, patriarchal structures, and women's oppression. The narrative takes place in Gilead, a dystopian state in which women are restricted to reproductive responsibilities and have had their rights taken away. The impact of strict patriarchal authority is examined in this compelling tale. Many of its topics are still pertinent to contemporary feminist issues, including the struggle for reproductive rights, gender equality, and the perils of religious fanaticism. Gilead serves as a warning and a call to action since it is a heightened depiction of contemporary circumstances. In order to provoke readers to consider the ramifications of unbridled patriarchal power and the importance of resisting injustice, the article attempts to present a compelling feminist critique. *The Handmaid's Tale*, a classic in feminist literature, continues to explore gender roles, reproductive control, and women's resistance.*

Keywords: self-perception, ethnicity, patriarchal, oppression, dystopian, gender roles

Introduction

Feminism functions both as a political stance and as a critical framework that views gender as a key lens for analysing cultural practices, while also providing a platform to advocate for equality, rights, and justice. Fundamentally, feminism maintains that gender roles are shaped by social constructs rather than dictated by biology. Women are taught to take on roles like “daughter” or “mother,” not as a result of nature, but because society trains them to think, speak, and act according to prescribed expectations. Feminist cultural theory critically examines dominant gender roles as they appear in forms like literature, cinema,

and advertisements, exploring how these portrayals of women connect to real-life experiences and broader social conditions.

Women's Studies as an academic discipline began in the United States in the 1960s and extend to other developed countries in the 1970s. It has developed around three major areas in feminist theory:

- Feminist critiques of knowledge — recognizing that knowledge creation has historically been dominated by men, often excluding women's perspectives.



- The recovery and recognition of women's works, ways of knowing, and lived experiences, along with the revaluation of existing epistemological, pedagogical, and cultural practices.
- The shift from liberal feminist perspectives to more socialist and radical approaches in understanding gender roles and culture.

Within feminist studies, sex and gender are not considered the same. This distinction, first emphasized in second-wave feminist thought, marks a move away from biology-based explanations of male and female differences toward approaches that focus on social and cultural dimensions.

Feminism traces its roots to the late 18th century movement for women's rights, particularly marked by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). This was followed by works such as John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and American writer Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) (Habib M.A.R 274).

Margaret Atwood, who gained prominence in the latter half of the 20th century, became a key figure in Canadian literature. Works such as *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972) marked a shift in narrative style and thematic depth. Her later novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), became a landmark work in both Canadian and international literature. Margaret Atwood's contributions are part of a broader development in Canadian literary history, building on the foundations laid by earlier writers and contributing to the ongoing evolution of the Canadian novel. Her work, together with that of her contemporaries, has been instrumental in shaping Canada into a rich literary landscape with its own distinct voice.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, is a renowned Canadian novelist, poet, essayist, and environmental advocate. Growing up in the Canadian wilderness, she formed a strong bond with nature, a theme that would recur often in her writing. Atwood began her literary career in the 1960s with poetry, receiving critical acclaim for early collections such as *Double Persephone* and *The Circle Game*. She later gained widespread recognition for her novels, which often

explore themes of identity, gender roles, and societal norms.

Margaret Atwood's breakthrough came with the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which earned international acclaim, winning awards and becoming a cultural landmark. Her diverse body of work includes novels such as *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), both of which received prestigious literary awards. Margaret Atwood's literary achievements have earned her numerous honours, including the Booker Prize, Governor General's Award, and the Golden Booker Prize. In 2019, she was awarded the Booker Prize for fiction for *The Testaments*, a development to *The Handmaid's Tale*.

A dystopian society is a hypothetical or fictional community defined by oppressive regulation, usually imposed by an authoritarian government or elite ruling class. In dystopian literature, social norms are twisted, personal freedoms are limited, and there is often an atmosphere of continual monitoring and control. Dystopian stories frequently act as warnings, highlighting the possible dangers of unchecked authority, rapid technological advancement, or social trends taken to the extreme. Central themes in dystopian fiction encompass authoritarian rule, societal inequality, the erosion of individuality, and the struggle against oppressive systems.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts the dystopian society of Gilead, where women are stripped of most rights and forced into roles determined by their reproductive capacity. The story focuses on Offred, a Handmaid whose duty is to bear children for the ruling elite. The society is marked by strict social divisions, strong religious beliefs, and constant monitoring. Atwood's work delves into themes such as power, domination, gender roles, and the dangers of extreme ideologies.

Published in 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a powerful dystopian novel set in the theocratic nation of Gilead, which has taken over the United States. Offred, a Handmaid whose life is tightly controlled by a system that only allows her to reproduce, is the central character. The story is set against the backdrop of a totalitarian government and religious extremism,



examining issues of control, power, and the severe consequences of women being oppressed. The story serves as a warning about the risks of unchecked authority and the loss of basic human rights in a society where personal freedom is systematically stripped away.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood explores strict and restrictive gender roles in a future society where women's duties are closely monitored. Based on religious interpretations, the theocratic state of Gilead enforces a patriarchal system in which women are treated as domestic servants and child bearers. The book highlights different gender roles, including Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, Aunts, Commanders, and Econowives.

The main conflict in *The Handmaid's Tale* is Offred's struggle to preserve her identity under the harsh regime of Gilead. This conflict occurs across three different time periods. In the present, Offred tries to hold onto her individuality despite being used solely as a reproductive tool by the Commander and his wife. In her recollections, she remembers the Aunts—symbols of the regime's authority—and the harsh training she and other women endured at the Red Center. Offred also recalls her past, including her relationship with her mother, her friend Moira, and her husband Luke, which reveals the conflict between male domination and female independence before the rise of Gilead.

Throughout the novel, Offred remains in the background, but when she has the chance to speak out, she does so. For example, she talks to Moira at the Red Center and at Jezebel's, and she agrees to meet the Commander alone. However, she never openly rebels against the regime. Her mother actively challenges her submissive nature by participating in feminist demonstrations like Take Back the Night. "I should be angry with this man. It's not what I feel, even though I know I should. She had high expectations for me. I refused to live my life according to her wishes" (Atwood 50). Other resistance figures include Moira, who manages to escape the Red Center, Ofglen, and a member of the rebel group Mayday. Offred's resistance is less visible. She maintains her sense of

self by clinging to her memories and obediently noting what happens to her.

When Offred finally gives in to her repressed desire, the narrative takes a major turn. Nick represents one of her forbidden desires. Gilead's rules prohibit Offred from touching any men except the Commander. Although Luke represents another form of male control, his influence is weaker. Offred gives in to her feelings despite her fear and passivity, suggesting that desire cannot be entirely suppressed. Offred leaves her situation not because she wants to, but because Nick needs to get rid of her to protect himself. Despite her overall passivity, Offred manages to retain her sense of self. This is evident through the book itself, which is Offred's first-person account of her life.

Handmaids are stripped of all autonomy, including their names, education, jobs, and freedom of expression. In line with Mill's argument for self-determination, Offred turns to her inner voice as her only means of resistance. "To be happy, a being with higher faculties needs more... he must be able to pursue his own good in his own way." (Mill 72). Mill argues that women's perceived "inferiority" is due to their exclusion from public life and education, not a lack of ability. Women are denied the right to read, write, or hold positions of authority. As Mill warns, this enforced ignorance helps keep people in line. "What is currently referred to as women's nature is a highly artificial construct." (Mill 22).

He explains that women often appear to accept these positions not because they truly agree with them, but because they have been raised to believe this is the correct way. In line with Mill's warning about women who are brought up to serve men, characters like Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia help maintain tyranny by accepting Gilead's rules as their own. "From birth, they are taught that the proper virtues of their sex are softness, docility, and resignation." (Mill 15). According to patriarchal law, marriage is a form of slavery in which women lose their rights as soon as they enter into it; it is not a matter of personal choice. Both wives and handmaids have no legal power and are forced to follow strict duties.



Offred is moved around based on her fertility, and her previous marriage is broken up. Gilead is a perfect example of Mill's criticism of forced gender roles. In *The Subjection of Women*, he states that "the position of women in society is the one by which we can measure the general progress of society." No society can make intellectual or moral progress if half of its members are silenced. The dictatorship claims moral superiority to justify suppressing progress, but Mill would see this as a regression into barbarism. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a fictional illustration of the dangers Mill warned against, applying his ideas to highlight socially enforced gender roles, women's systematic disempowerment, the stagnation rooted in patriarchal values, and the suppression of women's freedom and intellect. Mill's work can be directly referenced to provide a contrast with the Enlightenment.

In a dystopian society, women's subordination is crucial to sustaining the regime's power. Through Offred's harrowing experiences, readers witness the harsh reality of a theocratic regime that strips women of their rights, autonomy, and even their identities.

The book examines how women can mistreat one another, often as a result of being trapped within a system that restricts their freedom. Serena Joy and the Aunts serve as unsettling examples of how coercion and indoctrination can lead individuals to endorse their own oppression. The constant presence of psychological and physical surveillance in Gilead highlights the theme of control. Offred, on the other hand, represents resistance as a strong force.

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