



Curated Selves and Cracked Masks in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Bell Jar*

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of the “curated self” and its inevitable fragmentation in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of “gender performativity” and Simone de Beauvoir's concept of “the Other,” the study argues that female identity in both texts is not innate but socially constructed through repeated performances shaped by patriarchal norms. In the dystopian regime of Gilead, Offred's identity is deliberately curated as a survival strategy, masking her inner self while preserving fragments of her past. Similarly, Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* constructs a socially acceptable persona aligned with mid-twentieth-century ideals of femininity, only to experience psychological disintegration when these roles prove restrictive and inauthentic.

The paper demonstrates that both protagonists inhabit fractured identities, where the tension between inner subjectivity and externally imposed roles produces moments of rupture, or “cracked masks.” While Offred's resistance remains subtle and internalized, Esther's manifests as psychological breakdown, reflecting different but related responses to gendered oppression. By comparatively analyzing these narratives, the study reveals how systems of power sustain themselves through the regulation of women's bodies, speech, and desires, ultimately reducing them to “the Other.” The paper concludes that the distress experienced by both characters is not a result of individual failure but a consequence of the limited and enforced performances of gender within their respective societies.

Introduction

Born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Ontario, Atwood's 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 characterizes her novel in the following way: “the first trio (*The Edible Women*, *Surfacing* and *Lady Oracle*) has to do with women and men, last trio (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Cat's Eye* and *Robber Bride*) has to do with women and women only” (Ingersoll 219). Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts. Her father, Otto Plath was a professor of biology, and her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath was a high school teacher. Plath showed an early talent for writing, publishing her first poem at the age of eight. However, her father's death in 1980 had an immense impact on her and this event

would echo throughout her life and career. Later, Plath attended Smith college – a time marked by personal success and emotional struggles, including a significant stretch of depression that led to suicide attempt in 1953. This period of her life is depicted in the semi auto biographical novel *The Bell Jar*.

According to Cambridge dictionary “curate” means to carefully choose or thoughtfully organize and present. Thus, Offred’s ‘curated self’ refers to the meticulously established identity which she presents to the public in order to survive in the oppressive Gilead society. In the totalitarian regime of Gilead, where the rulers tried to erase the people’s identity, the protagonist asserts that “My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I’ll come back to dig up one day...” (Atwood, 90). The protagonist tries to keep her real past self alive in the memories. The crack in Offred’s persona is noticeable when she is alone by herself and drawn in the thoughts of her past where she was once a mother, a daughter and a wife.

Similarly, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood curates and molds herself in a way the society expects an individual to be - a brilliant student who is academically excellent and a perfect woman and a wife. However, this façade does not last long as she longs for freedom and authority and she wishes to break the rules of the society.

The word “curated” in the standard English dictionaries is “to select the best or most appropriate especially for presentation, distribution, or publication” (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary). which means carefully selected, organized and presented by someone in order to create a particular effect or image and the word “self” is “an individual’s typical character or behaviour” (“self”). means a person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others like one’s personality and identity. Therefore, combining these two words “curated self” will imply a consciously shaped identity which is not authentic, but deliberately edited in order to adapt to social and cultural expectations.

Literature Review

According to Danita J. Dotson, *The Handmaid’s Tale* illuminates the deplorable irony that a nation established upon the Utopian principle of ‘liberty and justice of all’ has also been a dystopia for those humans sequestered and tortured because of differences from main-stream culture. As casualties of a patriarchal based empire within the national borders, Native American, African Americans and women are all examples of people who have been historically locked away from the utopian American Dream. (67)

This statement means that the dystopian society that she creates in the novel is a reflection of the real world histories of domination. For example, women are categorised based on their reproductive abilities- Handmaid, Marthas, wives and those who don’t conform (infertile, political rebels, religious dissenters) are executed or sent to colonies. The subjugation of the women represents the oppression of the native people by the European colonisers. In chapter 10 Offred says “We are the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces in the edges of print” (7). which means that marginalized communities are excluded from the national narratives.

Dotson also says, “While Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid Tale* brandishes partial portraits of human right violation around the globe – especially in Iran, India, Germany, South Africa and the former Soviet Union – it is quite clear that Gilead is wholly the USA, embodying it’s past, it’s present and the potential USA.” (66). This implies that the way the women were stripped of all the rights, like they can neither read nor write, cannot hold property etc. depicts the human rights violation carried on the land of the United States, especially before the feminist movement took place. One of the striking similarities between USA and Gilead was that in the novel the women could not make decisions about their own bodies which is parallel to the anti abortion laws of the USA.

Mario Klarer remarks that “*The Handmaid’s Tale* adapts the literacy/ orality dichotomy in a new and highly gendered manner. By coercing all the female citizens into an oral tradition that forbids reading and writing, while leaving the male part of the population in possession of the literacy, Atwood suggests a very profound power structure of suppressing women.”(1). For instance, we get to see in chapter 5 it says, “when they decided that the name of the shop was too much of a temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone”(31). This means that Gilead does not want to give women any access to literacy as they replaced written words with images, forcing them into purely oral culture. Further, in chapter 15, we observe that during the ceremony the bible was read aloud by the man and it was forbidden to be touched by the women which shows that women were denied direct access to the sacred texts.

According to Janet Afary,

Atwood wrote her novel in 1986, perhaps a literary response to both the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought an Islamic Republic to power, and the growth of Christian fundamentalist organisations in the United States. Yet despite this foreboding novel, in the last decade threads of her vision have become a reality in Europe, the Middle East, and most egregiously, Afghanistan. (107)

esially in Iran and Afghanistan the authoritarian and religiously fundamentalist regimes have curtailed women’s right to education and rights to hold property. For example, under the Taliban rule the Afghan women have been banned from schools and denied healthcare and in Iran women were given dress code and their public presence were visibly controlled by the dictators. Thus, the theocratic rule in Gilead represent the real world chaos in the name of religion.

Stephanie Barbe comments “*The Handmaid’s Tale* plays a significant role in the evolution of women’s writing in so far as it represents one of the few commercially successful and critically recognized (if not universally acclaimed) contributions by a woman writer in a literary genre dominated by men— namely, satire”(39). Margaret Atwood showed her literary skills in the genre of satire which was earlier dominated by men as she employs satire in her novel to show how satire can be weaponized to convey and exhibit hidden messages. For example, in chapter 23, the commander reads from Genesis 30: 1- 3 before the ceremony, as “Be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the Earth” (95). By having sacred scripture justify ritualized state- sanctioned rape, Atwood parodies the misuse of religious texts.

Murray M. Schwartz and Christopher Bollas comments,

“ We assume that in her writing Plath projects her own psychic and somatic states, her self images, and a representation of her world of self- other relations. Her work records, for instance, a consistent spectrum of feeling... The repetitive nature of her object world, the fact that certain object relations and affective states keep recurring, suggest to us that Plath was unable to repress profoundly disturbing memories even through the actions of obsessive- compulsive defenses.. (149)

These critics argue that in her writing, Plath projects her own psychic and somatic (bodily, emotional) states. Her novels become a record of her inner turmoil as she reflects these states of depression, isolation and alienation in her writing. *The Bell Jar* itself is a metaphor of her condition as she feels suffocated, trapped and cut out from the outside world. In the novel, Esther constantly tries to validate and reconstruct her identity by being a daughter, student, writer, girlfriend but somehow it doesn’t feel authentic and her identity fails. Initially in the novel Esther Greenwood tries to distract herself through fashion, internships and relations but the return of dark thoughts shows the failure of repression. Thus, Plath’s claustrophobic and sufferings are reflected in the novel through the consistent recurring images of insomnia, depression and death.

According to Susan Sniader Lanser, “One of the reasons these women are reluctant to marry is that they fear repeating their mother’s lifestyle. Even if they believe they will create a marital arrangement which equalizes domestic and economic responsibilities, they doubt that this can or this will continue through the years of parenthood”(44). This statement highlights the women’s reluctance to marry because they see marriage as a trap that often repeats the generational trauma of their mother and the unequal dynamics between the men and the women continues within a household. Esther has seen her mother Mrs Greenwood live a life of compromise working tirelessly as a widow to support herself and her daughter.

Therefore Esther does not want to become a victim of this vicious cycle of marriage. For example: when Buddy Williard promises Esther of an impartial life and fairness, she doubts equality will ever last in practice because she has seen his hypocrisy like he expects Esther to remain pure virgin while he himself indulges in affairs

Theoretical Framework

This study will employ Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" to analyse how identity in both the novels are not fixed but constructed.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts that "gender is not something one is, it is something that one does"(25). She argues that gender is neither an essence or an internal identity but a type of repeated performance that is enacted by society.

Butler further explains that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). This claim destabilizes the idea of an authentic or stable self and instead suggests that identity is an effect of performance.

This chapter will also include Simone De Beauvoir's concept of "the other" from *The Second Sex*.

Analysis and Discussions

In *The Handmaid's Tale* "curated self" implies the identity of the protagonist Offred. Her identity is curated as we see in chapter 14 of the novel when Offred says "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden"(90). Her name comes from the commander's surname 'red', thus marking her as the property of the commander.

The sentence from *The Handmaid's Tale*'s chapter 2 "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of the blood, which defines us"(14), when interpreted from the lens of "gender performativity" and "the other" reveals that female identity is reduced to a biological function. Blood here is menstruation and childbirth, meaning that a handmaid's identity is fixed by biology. She does not exist as an individual with independent thought. She exists only in relation to what the state needs from her body. This is exactly what de Beauvoir means when she says woman is not seen as a subject but as something defined by others. Gilead creates handmaids who seem to voluntarily inhabit their roles. This is demonstrated in Butler's work *Bodies That Matter*, where she says "power works through the production of subjects"(2). For example, in chapter 23, Offred says "We are two legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices"(142).

Also, Offred's curated self is visible in her conscious manipulation of outward expression. In chapter 4, she remarks "I keep my face composed"(28). Therefore, we can assume that Offred's emotional restraints were the result of the curation and her performances are rehearsed and calculated.

Patriarchy in the Gilead is imposed by keeping women away from knowledge. In chapter 14, Offred says,

The Bible is kept locked up, the way once people kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn't steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our head turns towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story.(94)

The above paragraph shows that women are considered the servants and in Beauvoir's words "the other". Even a sacred holy scripture like the bible is used as a weapon against women. The phrase "incendiary device" means that it has the power to start fire, cause change and rebellion so women are not allowed to read it. Men placed themselves as the subject and narrates the bible and distorts it to their benefit and women are only allowed to listen like hearing a bedtime story. This event places women as "the other".

According to Butler, gender roles exist because they are repeated over and over and the repetition makes them feel natural. Offred in chapter 15 says, "the commander as if reluctantly begins to read. He isn't very good at it. Maybe he's merely bored. It's the usual story, the usual stories..."(95). She means that the same story is told over and over again and the commander is "not very good at it" and he reads "reluctantly", meaning he is just performing what he has been told to. He is neither spiritual nor faithful.

But it does not matter whether he believes or not. What matters is that he performs with authority and this “gender performativity.”

In Chapter 23 of *The Handmaid's Tale*, when Offred declares, “I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech” (135), Atwood offers a striking fictional articulation of Judith Butler's theory of “gender performativity”. These sentences reveal that Offred's identity is not experienced as natural, spontaneous, or internally coherent; rather, it is something that must be deliberately assembled in response to external expectations. The phrase “I compose myself” suggests conscious effort, implying that the self is not pre-given but produced through calculated actions, much like a rehearsed performance. By stating that “my self is a thing,” Offred objectifies her own identity, indicating a profound alienation between her inner consciousness and the socially legible persona she must present in public.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women in Gilead are systematically denied free speech, which show their position as “the Other”. Offred's observation in chapter 4, “We learned to whisper almost without sound” (35) tells us that whispering comes to represent women's inferior status. It illustrates how women are restricted to secrecy and pushed to the periphery of public life. Only fragments of their thoughts exist, shared in private and with caution. This supports de Beauvoir's assertion that the Other is permitted to exist but not to express themselves. Although women are physically present in Gilead, their voices are silenced.

Unlike Offred, Esther's curated self in *The Bell Jar* operates within a more free society but it is similarly constrained. The protagonist feels suffocated by the narrow feminine ideals that demanded domesticity which is why in chapter 7, Esther declares, “... I never wanted to get married. The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from them” (73). This metaphor means that men move forward while women take care of their household remaining at a fixed place. This justifies Simone De Beauvoir's idea of women as “the other” defined in relation to men in her work *The Second Sex*, “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him”(26).

De Beauvoir argues that the patriarchal society confines and restrict women to repetitive and uncreative tasks that prevents transcendence: “housework prevents the inability to transcendence”(497). Therefore, Esther's inability to excel in domestic roles is a kind of a passive resistance to confinement within four walls. However, because she has internalized her status as the other, this resistance manifests itself in self condemnation and not as an empowerment.

Chapter 1 of *The Bell Jar* shows “gender performativity” when Esther says, “I was supposed to be having the time of my life. I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes...”(2). This paragraph shows forced performance. Our protagonist is in New York wearing fashionable clothes, surrounded by glamorous women, working for a magazine company. This facade is considered a successful femininity in those times but Esther says that she feels nothing even though she was supposed to be having the time of her life.

There is a crucial moment of self awareness and resistance in chapter 9 of *The Bell Jar*, when Esther declares “that was one of the reasons i never wanted to get married. I hate the idea of serving man” (91). Here, Esther's rejection of marriage is a metaphor of the rejection of the institutional role that marriage assigns. From, Simone de Beauvoir's perspective, marriage is one of the primary structures through which woman is positioned as “the other”. Esther recognizes that within marriage, a woman's ambitions are expected to dissolve into domestic duty. Thus, her rejection shows that she doesn't want to become “the other”.

Esther's breakdown is the result of her inability to perform socially approved roles like wifehood, purity etc. The fig metaphor of chapter 7 where Esther says, "I saw my life branching out before me like a green fig tree... One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor”(67). is an example of “gender performativity”. Through the figs, she imagines a different role that stands before her. She is unable to choose one role because choosing one erases the other. This shows that feminine gender roles are very restrictive.

Marjorie Perloff's assertion that *The Bell Jar* is “an attempt to heal the fracture between inner-self and false-self so that a real viable identity can come into existence” (102). This can be productively read through Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Esther Greenwood's psychological crisis emerges from her inability to sustain the socially mandated performance of femininity that is repeatedly imposed upon her. According to Butler, identity is a particularly gendered identity which is constituted through repeated acts

rather than originating from an essential self; in *The Bell Jar*, Esther's "false-self" is produced through such compulsory performances of compliance, purity, ambition tempered by domesticity, and emotional restraint. While Esther outwardly enacts these roles to remain socially intelligible, her inner-self resists their coherence, resulting in an acute fracture between lived experience and performed identity. *The Bell Jar* thus functions as a metaphor for the suffocating enclosure of normative femininity, under which Esther's authentic desires and multiplicities are rendered unlivable. Perloff's notion of healing this fracture aligns with Butler's critique of stable identity, as Esther's narrative becomes an effort to dismantle imposed performativity and imagine a viable self beyond patriarchal scripts. The novel therefore frames Esther's breakdown not as personal failure but as the psychic consequence of a gender system that demands performance at the cost of authenticity.

The idea of "gender performativity" that gender is located in the acts that constitute it is also evident in chapter 6 of *The Bell Jar* "The best man wanted to be pure for their wives, but the best women wanted to be men"(62). For men, moral excellence lies in self-restraint until marriage. However, this act of purity does not restrict men from career, travelling etc. but women long to be men. This longing does not indicate a literal desire to change sex but to have access to what males have like freedom, authority etc. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that man is positioned as the Subject, the absolute human, while woman is defined as "The Other," existing in relation to him. To "be a man," therefore, is to become a subject rather than an object

In chapter 15 of *The Bell Jar*, Esther says, "If anyone does that to me again I'll kill myself"(168). At a literal level, Esther is referring to the traumatic electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) she received earlier which was administered without care or consent. This experience made her feel powerless and violated. However, from Judith Butler's perspective of performativity, this statement shows Esther refusing to continue being a passive body on which the authorities can act on. Butler argues that power operates by controlling bodies and enforcing norms. In the psychiatric system, Esther's body is disciplined so that she can return to "normal" womanhood which is calm, obedient, and socially acceptable. By saying she would rather die than undergo that treatment again, Esther disrupts this system. Her threat is not simply suicidal; instead, it is a rejection of a system that erases her agency. She is asserting, in the only language left to her, that her body is not something to be controlled without her consent. Through Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other", the statement reflects how Esther has been treated as less than a full subject. De Beauvoir argues that women are often denied autonomy and are acted upon rather than allowed to act. Esther's earlier treatment positioned her as "the Other" someone whose pain did not matter and whose voice was ignored. In chapter 10 of *The Bell Jar*, Esther recalls opening Buddy Williard's will years later and reading a letter he had written, "Buddy wrote that he was probably falling in love with a nurse who also had TB, but his mother had rented a cottage in the Adirondacks for the month of July, and if I came along with her, he might well find his feeling for the nurse was a mere infatuation"(106). This passage exposes how males put themselves at the center of emotional and moral life. Analyzing this passage from the perspective of "the other" we know that Buddy assumes that his emotions are the most important one. He treats love not as something mutual or ethical but as something that revolves entirely around his convenience. He considers the nurse as a distraction and expects Esther to be his true love. This proves Beauvoir's concept of "the other" given in the Volume 1 introduction of *The Second Sex*.

Judith Butler argues that gender norms do not sustain themselves naturally. They require constant reinforcement and the reinforcement occurs through discipline and punishment. The fact that societies rely on punishment proves that gender is fragile and performative. For example, we see in *The Handmaid's Tale* chapter forty-three "The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung by the neck in the meat shop window..."(285). Here, even the punishment is gendered. Men may be punished for political disobedience but women are punished for sexual disobedience. The executed women's body is displayed and dehumanized, thus proving Butler's theory of "gender performativity". On the other hand, in the book *The Bell Jar*, the punishment for not adhering to gender norms like femininity and motherhood is seen in the form of medical punishment. Esther is labelled as "mad" and her resistance turns to illness.

Conclusion

Thus, this study reveals that in both the novels the concept of “gender performativity” and “the other” is not natural. Instead it has been curated into women to make it seem natural with the help of regulation and judgements of the society. And if they tried to resist they are labelled as ‘traitors’ in case of *The Handmaid’s Tale* and ‘madwoman’ in case of *The Bell Jar*. Thus, both the novels reveal that women’s identities are not shaped by free choice.

This comparative study reveals that *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, though written in different historical and socio-political contexts, converge in their portrayal of women as the victims of “gender performativity” and “the other” curated by society.

This paper has demonstrated that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Bell Jar* offer a powerful literary representation of how “gender performativity” and “the other” takes place in the curated lives of Offred and Esther. In literature review, I found that the earlier criticism has examined the two texts independently whereas this chapter “curated self” addressed this gap and focused on the First, using Lara Mulvey’s theory of objectification and the male gaze, the study finds that women in both novels are often seen as objects, whether for visual pleasure, moral control, or reproductive purpose. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood absorbs society’s gaze. She judges her body, height, sexuality, and success based on the social standards of femininity. Her discomfort about looking “gawky,” her anxiety about sexual double standards, and her feeling of being displayed like a “sideshow” figure show how patriarchal culture makes women view themselves as spectacles. Likewise, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women’s bodies are clearly treated as objects. Offred’s ability to bear children defines her identity, and the Commander’s assertion that “Nature demands variety for men” reduces women to interchangeable sexual tools. Whether through subtle psychological conditioning or open theocratic control, both texts reveal the systemic objectification of women. comparative study of the two texts with the help of Judith Butler’s “gender performativity” and Beauvoir’s “the other”. Finally, the analysis reveals that the psychological distress experienced by both the women is not the result of personal inadequacy but because of the limited gender performances that they were expected to carry out in their respective world.

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