



# A Feminist Critique Of Totalitarian Gender Politics In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper critically analyzes Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, from a feminist and political perspective. It focuses on the plight of women within the oppressive regime depicted in the narrative, examining the intricate web of power structures, gender roles, and reproductive control that dominate the totalitarian society of Gilead. The study also explores the subjugation and resilience of female characters within this context. Utilizing a feminist theoretical framework, the systemic oppression faced by women. It investigates themes of agency, resistance, and the role of language. The research highlights how Atwood's novel challenges patriarchal norms and exposes the role of language in subverting oppressive systems.

Furthermore, this paper delves into the relevance of *The Handmaid's Tale* in contemporary society and its impact on feminist discourse, emphasizing the novel's ability to provoke critical reflection on the potential consequences of political and religious extremism. Through this comprehensive analysis, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between gender, power, and politics as portrayed in Atwood's seminal work.

**Keywords:** Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Feminist Theory, Political Analysis, Women's Oppression, Gender Roles, Reproductive Control, Power Structures, Agency, Resistance, Language, Patriarchal Norms, Gilead, Dystopian Literature, Political Extremism, Feminist Discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* stands as a literary masterpiece that has captivated readers and sparked profound discussions since its publication. As a dystopian narrative, the novel paints a haunting picture of a totalitarian society called Gilead, where women are relegated to subservient roles and subjected to oppressive gender politics. In this gripping tale, Atwood weaves together a potent tapestry of power dynamics, reproductive control, and gender roles, providing a profound exploration of the plight of women under a draconian regime.

The present research undertakes a rigorous and critical examination of *The Handmaid's Tale*, adopting a feminist and political lens to uncover the nuanced layers of women's oppression and resilience within the confines of Gilead's repressive structure. Embracing a feminist theoretical framework, the study endeavors to illuminate Atwood's daring challenge to patriarchal norms and her exposé of the pervasive and systemic oppression endured by women in such totalitarian settings.

Central to this analysis is the investigation of themes surrounding agency and resistance, which portray the remarkable strength and fortitude exhibited by female characters in their struggle against an oppressive system. Moreover, the study delves into the significant role of language as a tool for resistance and subversion, highlighting its power to challenge oppressive norms and assert the agency of marginalized individuals.

Inextricably linked to the exploration of Gilead's gender politics is the broader examination of the novel's relevance in contemporary society. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a stark warning and a thought-provoking allegory, urging readers to contemplate the potential consequences of political and religious extremism. By shining a light on the extreme consequences of suppressing women's rights and autonomy, Atwood's work becomes a compelling catalyst for critical reflection on prevailing gender dynamics and the urgency of safeguarding women's agency and equality in the real world.

This research contributes to the intellectual discourse by providing a comprehensive analysis of the intersections between gender, power, and politics within *The Handmaid's Tale*. By engaging with feminist theory and political analysis, the study unearths the profound socio-political implications of Atwood's narrative, offering scholars and readers a deeper understanding of the complexity and gravity of gender politics and women's oppression within dystopian literature.

The subsequent sections of this research paper will delve into a meticulous examination of Margaret Atwood's masterful storytelling, dissecting the intricate threads of feminist critique and political insight that form the backbone of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

## DISCUSSION

The dystopian world of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a stark canvas upon which the intricate web of totalitarian gender politics is intricately woven. This research paper critically delves into the feminist dimensions of Atwood's powerful narrative, exploring the plight of women within the oppressive regime of the Republic of Gilead. With a lens firmly focused on feminist theory and political analysis, this study seeks to unravel the multifaceted layers of power structures, gender roles, and reproductive control that define Gilead's totalitarian society.

At the heart of this exploration lies the profound examination of female subjugation and resilience within the suffocating confines of Gilead's patriarchal norms. As Atwood's characters navigate the treacherous terrain of the Republic, their agency, resistance, and the role of language in challenging oppressive systems come to the forefront, presenting a compelling and timely discourse on the broader implications for women's rights and political extremities in contemporary society. By shedding light on the gripping narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale*, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the entangled relationships between gender, power, and politics, laying the foundation for an insightful analysis of the novel's profound impact on feminist discourse.

The Republic of Gilead emerges in response to declining birthrates, utilizing political subjugation as a means to address the issue by exerting control over reproduction. Within this oppressive regime, women find themselves reduced to mere reproductive machines, defined solely by their ovaries and wombs. The Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, referred to as the Red Center, is established to train and indoctrinate women into their assigned roles as Handmaids. These Handmaids are entrusted with the task of bearing children for privileged couples who are unable to conceive, adhering to the ideology of Gilead that dictates their subordination to men and their sole purpose of procreation.

Margaret Atwood's novel brings to the forefront her feminist concerns and explores the dystopian manifestation of these concerns within the powerful and overtly misogynistic political regime of the Republic of Gilead. Power is concentrated solely in the hands of men, while women are forced into sexual slavery. The citizens of Gilead are compelled to live lives of prudence, suppression, uniformity, and fear, with every aspect of their existence controlled by those in absolute authority. The social hierarchy established by the Republic of Gilead categorizes women into three groups: Aunts, Marthas, and Handmaids. Each group is assigned specific tasks and is expected to fulfill them without question.

Aunts hold a significant degree of power within Gilead and act as instrumental agents of the totalitarian theocracy. They are, indeed, the building blocks of the Republic of Gilead. Their responsibilities include preparing and training the Handmaids for their procreative role, as well as managing brothels and training prostitutes. They conduct numerous preaching sessions and utilize indoctrination techniques to achieve their objectives. Additionally the handmaid's are actually abused by the Aunts with the help of "electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts" (Atwood 4)

Marthas on the other hand are relegated to stereotypical domestic roles, engaging in menial tasks such as cooking, cleaning and gossiping. They are limited to low-status jobs like sewing or knitting, designed to keep them occupied and give them a false sense of purpose. Due to inability to bear children, they are deemed less valuable and are denied the opportunity to marry. Handmaids, considered highly valuable, are coerced into sexual slavery and entrusted with the duty of bearing children for elite couples who are unable to conceive. The handmaids are made to believe that if they abstain from obeying the protocols set by the Gilead regime, they will be expelled to the colonies "where women clean up radioactive waste as slave laborers" (Malak 9).

The central character of the novel, Offred embodies the experience of a Handmaid serving the commander and his wife Serena Joy. Prior to her role as a Handmaid, Offred enjoyed a fulfilling life with her husband, Luke and their daughter. She had financial independence, a job and access to knowledge. However, in the oppressive Republic of Gilead, Offred is stripped of everything including their names, "In order to erase the former identity of the handmaids, the state, moreover, cancels their original names and labels them according to the names of their Commanders, hence the names Offred, Ofglen, Ofwayne, Ofwarren" (Malak 11). Women are forbidden from holding jobs, having bank accounts, or gaining knowledge. They are denied any resources that could grant them independence. They are not even allowed to choose their dress and are supposed to wear the clothes approved by the regime. Offred provides a detailed account of her clothes:

I get up out of the chair, advance my feet into the sunlight, in their red shoes, flat-heeled to save the spine and not for dancing. The red gloves are lying on the bed. I pick them up, pull them onto my hands, finger by finger. Everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen. (Atwood 8)

Atwood portrays Offred as an ordinary woman of the contemporary period rather than representing her with heroic elements. Atwood comments: "The voice is that of an ordinary, more-or-less cowardly woman (rather than heroine), because I suppose I'm more interested in social history than in the biographies of the outstanding." (Bloom 2004: 16). Women however, accept their circumstances without questioning, as they have been indoctrinated to believe that adhering to Gilead's ideology grants them value and protection.

The top position in the social hierarchy is occupied by the Commanders' wives just below their husbands. They live a very shallow or unfilled life with a lesser amount of or rare enthusiasm. They are contemptuous of the handmaids as they themselves are not capable of procreation and have to silently monitor their husbands performing the sexual intercourse with them. Indeed, their role is very pathetic and is left only with pleading to god for the possibility of the conception. Since they cannot conceive and bear children, they are given the futile task of knitting the scarves for the army to keep them engaged. This is how Offred portrays their discontented lives: "Sometimes I think these scarves aren't sent to the Angels at all, but unraveled and turned back into balls of yarn, to be knitted in their turn. Maybe it's just something to keep the Wives busy, to give them a sense of purpose" (Atwood 13).

The research paper holds significant importance as it delves into the dystopian world and the societal structure it constructs. It sheds light on the grim future faced by individuals, particularly women under the oppressive regime of the Republic of Gilead. The novel exposes the manipulative strategies employed to brainwash and control the masses, a situation that is deeply concerning as it strips away individuals' freedom and autonomy, reducing them to mere puppets. It signifies the dehumanization that occurs under such political regimes. Through this exploration, we aim to gain a profound understanding of the inherent necessity of resisting blind obedience to authoritarian rule, advocating for the preservation of personal agency and freedom of choice.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, serves as a powerful depiction of the oppression faced by women within a misogynistic regime that views them as mere tools rather than human beings. Through her skillful storytelling, Atwood effectively warns women about the dangers of oppressive patriarchy. The novel is approached through a dystopian lens, presenting a society that is dehumanized and gripped by fear, controlled entirely by the ruling class. Atwood's meticulous exploration of the detrimental consequences of political and social structures on individuals leaves a profound impact on the reader. It serves as a stark message to the future generations, urging them to be vigilant and resistant towards such political organizations that seek to extinguish the very essence of humanity. *The Handmaid's Tale* stands as a testament to the importance of challenging oppressive systems and safeguarding the rights and agency of individuals, especially women, in the face of political extremism and systemic oppression.

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