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The Normalization of Female Subservience in the Handmaid's Tale: A Critical Study

Srushti Kamble

Department of English, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Chattrapati Sambhajinagar, India

srushkamble@gmail.com

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale presents a dystopian world where female subservience is not just enforced through physical oppression but is deeply embedded in societal norms, making resistance nearly impossible. This paper examines how the Republic of Gilead normalises female subjugation through three key mechanisms: language and renaming, religious indoctrination, and social surveillance. The novel demonstrates how erasing personal identities, manipulating faith to justify oppression, and encouraging women to police each other reinforce patriarchal control. Through a close reading of the text and insights from feminist criticism, this study highlights how oppression becomes most dangerous when it is internalised as normal. Atwood's portrayal of Gilead serves as a stark warning about the power of systemic conditioning, making The Handmaid's Tale a relevant critique of historical and contemporary gender dynamics.

I. INTRODUCTION

"We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print" (Atwood). Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopian novel that explores themes of power, control, and subjugation within a theocratic society (Reynolds). This dystopian reality emphasises that female subjugation is not merely imposed but woven into the very fabric of society, making resistance nearly impossible. As Aggarwal states, "Female subjugation refers to the societal situation in which women are forced to stay under the control of men" (Aggarwal). The novel builds upon this reality, presenting a world where gendered oppression is institutionalised under the rule of Gilead.

The novel follows Offred, a handmaid whose primary function is reproduction. Through her

perspective, the readers experience the suffocating control of Gilead, where women's roles are dictated by their reproductive abilities. By employing a textual analysis, this article will examine how *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays the normalisation of female subservience through language and renaming, religious indoctrination, and social surveillance.

The objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the mechanisms through which female subjugation is enforced and normalised in *The Handmaid's Tale*.
2. To analyse Offred's narrative as a lens through which the reader understands the oppressive system.
3. To explore the role of state ideology, religious control, and societal compliance in maintaining gendered oppression.

Language and renaming:

“Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power” (Bourdieu). In the novel, Atwood presents a dystopian regime where language is weaponised to sustain dominance. The restriction and manipulation of language in Gilead serve as a means to control thought, suppress dissent, and strip women of their autonomy. Kristina Murkett, in her article, notes that *“language in Gilead is paradoxical; vocabulary is both expanded and restricted”*(Murkett). This duality reflects the totalitarian structure of Gilead, where language is crafted to enforce societal roles while limiting self-expression.

One of the most striking examples of linguistic control is the renaming of Handmaids. Their original names are erased and replaced with patronymics such as Ofglen (of Glen) and Offred (of Fred), reducing them to mere extensions of men they serve. This is both a symbolic act and a method of psychological suppression. As Offred reflects in the novel:

“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.”
(Atwood)

This illustrates Offred’s internal struggle to retain her identity in a society that dehumanises her. Murkett observes that *“new names are created to label Handmaids as possessions of their Commanders”* (Murkett).

Beyond renaming, the Handmaids are prohibited from reading or writing, a restriction that prevents intellectual independence and rebellion. Books, newspapers, and films are systematically destroyed, leaving women reliant on state-sanctioned oral transmission of information. The novel emphasises this deprivation when Offred notes:

“The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once 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 ever got our hands on it”
(Atwood)

This passage underscores the regime's fear of interpretation and knowledge. Denying access to the written word ensures that women cannot question or challenge their imposed roles. In the book *“Language, Society, and Power”*, Linda Thomas, Sha'n Wareing argue that language can shape social realities, and in Gilead, it is used to condition women into submission.

Despite these restrictions, Offred finds moments of quiet resistance. One of the examples is her game of scramble with the commander. Murkett describes this as *“an act of ‘voluptuous’, thrilling rebellion”*(Murkett). The words that Offred chooses during the game, such as larynx (silence), valance (concealment), and zygote (procreation), all subtly reflect her constrained existence. This underscores the novel’s warning: language is never neutral, and those who control it would have immense power over thought and identity.

Religious Indoctrination and Justification:

Karl Marx famously described religion as *“the opium of the people”*, viewing it as *“an ideology, a way of thinking that attempts to justify inequalities in power and status”* (Henniger-Rener). This notion of religion as a tool for justifying power imbalances is starkly evident in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where Gilead distorts biblical narratives to legitimise the subjugation of women and enforce strict reproductive roles that strip women of their autonomy.

Gilead’s leaders rely heavily on Old Testament narratives to validate their oppressive policies, particularly concerning reproductive control. The most prominent example is the biblical story of Rachel and Leah:

“Give me children, or else I die... Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her” (Atwood).

This passage is instrumentalised to enforce surrogacy upon Handmaids, reducing them to reproductive vessels. As Reynolds explains, *“The sacredness of motherhood is twisted into a tool of control, where women’s bodies are governed by religious doctrine and state policy”* (Reynolds). Handmaids are thus denied agency over their bodies, their identities erased in favor of their assigned roles.

Religious control extends beyond reproductive policies. The societal hierarchy and expectations of women are justified through scripture. The Commander tells Offred,

“Blessed are the meek... she shall inherit the earth” (Atwood).

A misquoted version of Mathew 5:5. This manipulation of biblical text seeks to instill submission, reinforcing women’s passivity and compliance.

To ensure the success of these oppressive measures, Gilead employs indoctrination, particularly within the Red Center, where Handmaids undergo training under the aunts. The aunts serve as enforcers of religious doctrine, convincing women that their suffering is divinely ordained. Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids:

“It is not the husbands you have to watch out for, it’s the wives. You should always try to imagine what they must be feeling. Of course, they will resent you. It is only natural. Try to feel for them” (Atwood).

The aunts operate under the guise of upholding religious morality, yet their actions often contradict the doctrines they preach. Aunt Lydia claims:

“Gilead is within you” (Atwood).

Suggesting that obedience must be internalised. However, the aunts themselves do not conform entirely to these expectations. As Reynolds states, *“The Aunts play a crucial role in maintaining and enforcing the religiously justified oppression. They are women who have been given a semblance of power and authority in exchange for their loyalty to the regime”* (Reynolds).

This reveals the regime's hypocrisy, as those who enforce oppression often do so for self-preservation rather than genuine belief.

Despite the omnipresence of religious control, Offred and other women subtly resist Gilead’s indoctrination. One key form of rebellion is reclaiming religious language. Offred remarks,

“Nolite te bastardes carborundorum” (Atwood).

A faux-Latin phrase meaning ‘Don’t let the bastards grind you down.’ This phrase, left behind by the previous Handmaid, serves as a

whispered rebellion against the theocratic regime.

As Reynolds highlights, *“Subversion of religious doctrine is also a notable form of resistance”* (Reynolds). In the novel, the moments of internal defiance demonstrate the human capacity to resist even the most deeply entrenched ideologies.

Surveillance and Internalised oppression:

Simone de Beauvoir stated, *“The oppressor would not be so strong if he did not have support among the oppressed”* (Beauvoir). This is applicable in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, as Gilead’s patriarchal regime is not only maintained by men, but also by women who monitor, discipline, and repress one another, ensuring the longevity of the system. The Aunts, as previously described, as well as the wives and even the handmaids themselves, play their part in internalising Gilead’s ideologies.

The Aunts, led by Aunt Lydia, are involved in the psychological conditioning of the Handmaids. They superimpose repressive beliefs upon the women who come under their regime, making them internalise Gilead’s misogynistic culture. As Taylor Glazin notes:

“The Aunts are responsible for the torture and psychological abuse of the Handmaids. They are the ones to preach and inculcate the misogynistic beliefs of Gilead” (Glazin).

Serena Joy, once an advocate for traditional female roles, embodies this paradoxical complicity. Glazin states,

“Serena Joy is restricted by Gilead and is still viewed as ‘less than’ in the eyes of the law. However, her status has given her power over other women in Gilead. She exploits the power she holds over Offred” (Glazin).

Janine’s storyline shows how internalised misogyny functions in Gilead. After revealing that she was raped and has an abortion, the Aunts force the Handmaids to blame her for the assault. In ritualised chant, they repeat,

“Her fault, her fault, her fault... Who led them on? She did. She did. She did” (Atwood).

Indoctrination by the aunts ensures handmaids internalise this thought so they do not question the system. Resistance, as represented in characters such as Moira and the underground Mayday Network, emphasises how challenging it is to resist once oppression is internalised. Even Offred grapples with complicity. She identifies her compromises to Gilead's repressive norms, describing them as,

"Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (Atwood).

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a chilling portrayal of a world in which women's subordination is legalised, normalised, and reproduced through systemic domination. The very mechanisms of oppression, linguistic manipulation, religious indoctrination, and surveillance are interwoven to deprive women of agency and guarantee their compliance. Through Offred's story, the reader is engulfed by the psychological and social forces that sustain Gilead's regime and sees her resistance and grudging complicity. Her account reveals not only the sadism of state misogyny but also the unnerving flexibility of people to repressive systems.

Religious ideology within Gilead is not only a rationalisation for domination but is a weaponised tool that distorts scripture to preserve strict gender hierarchies. The selective manipulation of biblical texts guarantees that submission is seen as divinely ordained. Whereas compliance in society, enforced by the likes of the Aunts, Wives, and even the Handmaids themselves, illuminates how oppression is fostered when internalised by the very people it oppresses. Offred's experiences reveal the paradox of oppression: It is externally imposed but internally maintained, thus rendering resistance all the more challenging.

In the end, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a warning tale, one in which systemic oppression is not necessarily based on force of arms but on the pernicious reshaping of mind, word, and faith. Offred's acts of quiet resistance do, indeed, mark the enduring power of individuality, yet at the same time, they underscore the delicacy of

opposition to entrenched power. The novel leaves the reader with an unsettling truth: compliance, once made familiar, becomes synonymous with survival.

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