

Female Agency and State Control in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

Dystopian narratives frequently develop during periods of uncertainty, using imagined futures to mirror social concerns that already exist in the present. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a theocratic regime in which women's bodies and identities are regulated through institutional authority. This paper examines how the novel presents the relationship between state power and female agency as it unfolds in the everyday life of Gilead. Drawing on a feminist critical approach, the study explores how patriarchal systems govern reproduction, language, and autonomy, while also recognizing limited but meaningful forms of resistance. It argues that although Gilead attempts to suppress women's individuality through routine practices and ideological control, agency continues to surface through memory, narration, and everyday survival. By tracing these tensions, the paper reads *The Handmaid's Tale* as a feminist dystopian text that cautions against the ease with which authoritarian systems can normalize gender-based oppression.

Keywords: Dystopian Fiction, Feminism, Power, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Control

Introduction

Dystopian fiction often takes shape during moments of social instability, when imagined futures begin to echo anxieties already present in contemporary life. Rather than inventing distant or implausible worlds, many dystopian texts intensify familiar social patterns in order to expose how inequality and control can become part of everyday existence. Within

this literary tradition, the regulation of women's lives and bodies frequently occupies a central position, particularly in narratives concerned with authoritarian or religiously driven systems.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* presents a society where gender inequality is not incidental but deliberately constructed through legal, religious, and social mechanisms. The Republic of Gilead arises in response to the environmental crisis and declining birth rates, yet its response depends on the systematic restriction of women. Identity is reduced to function, and personal freedom is sacrificed in the name of moral order and social survival.

This paper explores how *The Handmaid's Tale* represents the relationship between state power and female agency within the ordinary routines of life in Gilead. While feminist readings of the novel have extensively examined patriarchal control and female oppression, this study explicitly reframes agency as operating through survival rather than organized resistance. It argues that although the regime works to eliminate women's individuality through bodily regulation, linguistic control, and enforced roles, agency persists in constrained but meaningful ways embedded in everyday life. Seen in this light, the novel operates as a feminist dystopia that highlights the vulnerability of women's rights under authoritarian governance.

Dystopia, Power, and a Feminist Perspective

Dystopian literature frequently examines how power functions beyond visible violence, operating instead through social norms, institutions, and belief systems. In feminist dystopian texts, this power is often expressed through gendered structures that restrict women's choices, bodies, and identities. Such narratives reveal how moments of social crisis are repeatedly resolved through the control of women rather than through structural reform.

Feminist criticism has repeatedly observed that patriarchal systems tend to define women primarily through biological and social roles, leaving limited space for individual self-definition. Simone de Beauvoir's idea of woman as the historical "Other" helps explain the rigid hierarchy that shapes Gilead. In Atwood's novel, women are categorised according to

state usefulness—as Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, or Aunts—each role tightly regulating behaviour and limiting autonomy.

What distinguishes *The Handmaid's Tale* from more speculative dystopias is its grounding in historical reality. Atwood has emphasised that the practices represented in the novel have existed across different societies and periods. This historical basis strengthens the feminist critique of the text, suggesting that Gilead is not an abstract fantasy but an extension of real attitudes toward gender, authority, and control.

State Control and the Female Body

One of the most striking features of Gilead is the way control over the female body is woven into its political and social framework. Women's reproductive capacity is treated as a collective resource rather than a personal attribute, justified by the regime's emphasis on survival and moral discipline. Handmaids are valued almost exclusively for their fertility, and their bodies become sites of constant monitoring.

The erosion of identity is reinforced through naming practices. Offred's name reflects possession rather than individuality, signaling her assigned function within a Commander's household. This act of renaming symbolizes the removal of personal identity and demonstrates how language itself becomes an instrument of authority.

The Ceremony further reveals the extent of bodily regulation. Presented as a religious obligation, the ritual removes consent and intimacy, transforming reproduction into a controlled public act. Offred's observation that she is "**a national resource**" (Atwood) captures the reduction of the female body to state utility. Through such moments, Atwood shows how authoritarian regimes justify coercion by embedding it within ideology and routine practice.

Language, Silence, and Identity

In Gilead, control extends beyond the physical body to language and expression. Women are prohibited from reading or writing, effectively excluding them from knowledge

and public discourse. This enforced silence reinforces dependence and restricts the development of independent thought, as language is closely linked to identity and agency.

Offred's awareness of linguistic loss is evident when she reflects that “**thought must be rationed**” (Atwood). This recognition highlights how control over language shapes inner life, limiting not only expression but also the capacity to imagine alternatives.

Religious language further sustains authority in Gilead. Biblical phrases are repeated without interpretation, reducing complex texts to instruments of obedience. By controlling how language circulates and is understood, the regime narrows the space for dissent. Yet Offred's internal narration allows her to preserve a sense of self, suggesting that storytelling remains a quiet but persistent form of resistance.

Resistance and the Persistence of Agency

Although Gilead exercises extensive control over women's lives, *The Handmaid's Tale* does not depict its characters as entirely passive. Acts of resistance—often small and dangerous—recur throughout the narrative. Offred's recollections of her former life resist the regime's attempt to redefine her solely through function.

Even minor gestures acquire meaning in this context. As Offred recalls, “**Nolite te bastardes carborundorum**” (Atwood). Though seemingly trivial, the phrase operates as a private assertion of endurance rather than a call for collective rebellion. A similar moment occurs when Offred briefly exchanges a whispered greeting with another Handmaid during her walk, an action that affirms recognition within a system designed to enforce isolation.

Other characters demonstrate different responses to oppression. Moira's defiance represents open resistance, even though it ultimately fails within the system. Serena Joy, despite her role in enforcing Gilead's rules, displays moments of dissatisfaction that reveal the constraints imposed on women across social positions. By portraying agency in this limited

and uncertain manner, Atwood raises an uncomfortable question: whether survival itself risks becoming a form of accommodation within authoritarian systems.

Contemporary Relevance

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a fictional future, its themes continue to resonate in contemporary debates surrounding gender, authority, and reproductive rights. The novel illustrates how quickly legal and social protections can be withdrawn when justified by crisis or moral urgency.

By focusing on women's lived experiences, Atwood's dystopia encourages critical reflection on how power is exercised and whose freedoms are most at risk. It serves as a reminder that the erosion of rights often occurs gradually, through policies and practices that appear reasonable within their immediate context.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale traces how state power limits female agency through routine institutional practices rather than overt violence alone. Through the construction of Gilead, Atwood demonstrates how patriarchal authority can be legitimized through ideology, religion, and appeals to social necessity.

At the same time, the novel affirms that agency, though severely constrained, does not disappear entirely. By locating agency in memory, narration, and survival, the text complicates feminist readings that privilege overt resistance. Atwood's dystopian narrative ultimately suggests that authoritarian power is most effective not when it eliminates agency, but when it confines it to fragmented, private forms that rarely threaten the system itself.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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