

DANGERS OF COMPLACENCY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S THE HANDMAID'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Eleanor Atwood the Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, teacher, environmental activist, and inventor is best known for her prose fiction and feminist perceptions. Her works encompass a variety of themes including gender and identity, religion and myth, the power of language, climate change, and power politics. Her works delve into issues such as the subordination of women in male dominated societies, the complexities of gender and sexuality, and the loss of female identity within the institution of marriage. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal systems, exploring themes of oppression, autonomy, and the resilience of the human spirit. The article entitled Dangers of complacency in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* highlights the perils of passivity in the face of despotism and emphasizes the importance of resistance and awareness while sounding a warning against the risks of allowing complacency to accept and maintain repressive institutions.

Keywords: Complacency, Misogyny, dystopia, slaves.

The novel explores themes of powerless women in a patriarchal society, loss of female agency and individuality, suppression of women's reproductive rights, and the various means by which women resist and try to gain individuality and independence. The title echoes the component parts of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which is a series of connected stories (such as *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Parson's Tale*). It also alludes to the tradition of fairy tales where the central character tells her story. The message of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that political control of women's bodies and reproduction is wrong. This is communicated through examples of objectification and violence against women.

The novel also investigates the consequences of a society built on misogyny, where women are reduced to their reproductive functions and denied agency. Offred's struggle to maintain her identity, find a sense of autonomy, and resist the oppressive regime forms the central narrative of the novel. Through her eyes, readers witness the horrors of a society where misogyny is institutionalized and enforced by the state.

The Handmaid's Tale is an exposure of power politics where women are worst off because they are valued only as child-breeders in a society threatened with extinction due to pollution, AIDS and natural disasters, the national birth-rate has fallen to a catastrophically low level. This essentialist definition of women as “two legged wombs” (176) works entirely in the interests of a patriarchal elite, denying women any freedom of sexual choice or lifestyle. Most men are also oppressed in that society: there are male bodies hanging every day on the Wall. Male sexual activity is severely restricted as well.

A handmaid is a woman who serves as a surrogate mother in a dystopian society where fertility is rare and highly valued. Handmaids are subjected to strict control and surveillance, and their sole purpose is to bear children for the ruling class. They are stripped of their names and identities and are treated as property. The word ‘tale’ typically refers to a story or narrative. In this context, it signifies that the novel is a narrative, a story told from the perspective of the handmaid, giving voice to her experiences, struggles, and the oppressive world in which she lives.

As Howells says, “Atwood’s feminism concerns are plain here, but so are her concerns for basic human rights” (Howells 3). In the novel complacency manifests in various forms, reflecting both the oppressed and the oppressors within the dystopian society of Gilead. Many characters in Gilead, particular among the Handmaids, Marthas, and other subjugated groups, exhibit a sense of resigned acceptance to their circumstances. Despite the oppressive regime, they often conform to the establish norms and rituals out of fear or a belief that resistance is futile. The complacency allows the regime to maintain control over their lives without significant challenges. On the other hand, those in positions of power and privilege within Gilead's hierarchy may also display complacency. The Commanders and their wives, benefit from the system's patriarchal structure and may choose to turn a blind eye to its injustices. Their complacency perpetuates the regime's authority and reinforces the status quo.

A perceptive reading of Atwood's novels shows that as a Canadian writer she is not limited by any regional or geographical boundaries. She has presented her feminist perspectives elaborately in her novels. Atwood has created horrifying bleak and disoriented psychic and moral world of Gilead to make readers experience how this dystopia can be considered as a code for the colonized and enslaved state. The characters created in this novel are more terrifying and alienated than that of other female characters created by Atwood. The protagonist compares her life to that of pigs cooped up in Pens, rolling coloured balls around in order "to have something to think about I wish I had a pig ball" (86).

According to Atwood the most lethal weapon in the world's arsenals is not the neutron bomb or chemical warfare, but the human mind. In Gilead, personal identity is determined by functions and especially gender functions. To be a person is to inhabit one of the functions and the differences between people are given hierarchical depending upon their function in the society. Male infertility in Gilead is unthinkable as the protagonist says: "there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law" (75).

Atwood narrates women in the dystopian society of Gilead as subjugated, oppressed, and stripped of their rights. Gilead is a theocratic regime that has overthrown the United States government, establishing a totalitarian patriarchy where women are assigned rigid roles based on their fertility and perceived moral standing. At the top of the hierarchy are the Wives, who are married to high-ranking official and symbolize the ideal of traditional femininity: obedient, submissive, and loyal to their husbands. They are often wealthy and privileged, benefiting from the system's power structure but still subject to its constraints. Beneath them are the Marthas, domestic servants responsible for household chores and maintaining the daily functioning of Gilead's households. Their role is largely invisible, and they are expected to be efficient and unobtrusive.

The Handmaids, however, occupy the most precarious position in Gilead. They are fertile women who are forcibly assigned to elite men, known as Commanders, for the purpose of bearing children. Their identities are stripped away, and they are renamed according to the names of their assigned Commanders, such as Offred (Of Fred). Handmaids are subject to strict regulations, constant surveillance,

and ritualized rape in the form of the ceremony, where they are expected to conceive children for their Commanders and their Wives. They are essentially reduced to mere vessels for reproduction, denied autonomy over their bodies and lives. Another group of women in Gilead are the Aunts, who are tasked with indoctrinating and overseeing other women, including the Handmaids. They enforce the rules of Gilead, perpetuate its ideology, and punish those who resist or deviate from the established order. Despite being women themselves, the Aunts serve as enforcers of patriarchal oppression, complicit in the subjugation of their fellow women.

Throughout the novel, Atwood depicts the experiences of women in Gilead as harrowing and dehumanizing. They are denied agency, autonomy, and basic human rights, reduced to mere objects of male control and manipulation. However, despite the oppressive regime, Atwood also portrays moments of resistance and resilience among some women, highlighting the enduring spirit of defiance in the face of tyranny. Women in Gilead are relegated to subservient roles, subjected to systemic misogyny, and deprived of their fundamental rights. Atwood's portrayal of their experiences serves as a powerful commentary on gender oppression, the dangers of religious extremism, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of oppression. The title illuminates a dystopian realm where patriarchal dominance has plunged society into the abyss of oppression and gender subjugation. Through Gilead's lens, Atwood unveils the harrowing repercussions of unbridled authority and the corrosion of fundamental liberties.

At its core, the narrative unveils the stark imbalance of power, particularly evident in the plight of women who are reduced to mere reproductive vessels. Gilead's regime, built upon religious dogma and pseudo-scientific assertions, underscores the perilous fusion of ideology and control, reminiscent of historical misogyny. The relegation of women to subservient roles, epitomized by the Handmaids, reflects the systemic dehumanization and objectification ingrained in the society's fabric. Amidst the darkness, Atwood weaves threads of resistance and resilience, embodied by characters like Offred. Through her lens, readers witness the psychological toll of oppression and the enduring struggle for autonomy. Offred's journey serves as a poignant reminder of human fortitude in the face of adversity, urging reflection on the fragility of freedom and the imperative of vigilance against tyranny. In essence, *The Handmaid's Tale* stands as a powerful testament to the perils

of unchecked authority and the indomitable spirit that persists even in the bleakest of landscapes. Through its chilling portrayal of Gilead, Atwood compels readers to confront the dire consequences of complacency and the imperative of safeguarding basic human rights. The novel portrays a dystopian society, Gilead, where women are brutally oppressed and stripped of their freedoms. Set in a totalitarian regime that arose due to declining birth rates, Gilead controls women's bodies and roles with extreme measures, relegating them to roles such as Handmaids, Marthas, Aunts, and Wives. These roles are strictly defined, and any deviation is met with severe punishment.

Atwood's depiction of Gilead serves as a warning about the dangers of authoritarianism and the corrosion of basic human rights. The novel's thought provoking themes and chilling portrayal of a dystopian future make it a compelling and timely read, prompting readers to reflect on the direction of society and the importance of resisting oppressive regimes. Women in Gilead are reduced to their reproductive functions and treated as mere vessels for childbirth. They have no autonomy over their bodies, as seen in the degrading Ceremony where Handmaids are forced to have sex with their Commanders while the Wives watch. This systematic control extends to all aspects of women's lives, including their relationships, education, and even their thoughts. Despite the oppression, many women in Gilead comply with the regime either out of fear or because they find some semblance of power or comfort within the system. Even those who resist, like Moira, often face insurmountable challenges. The novel highlights the complexities of resistance and complicity, questioning where the line between the two lies.

Through the protagonist Offred, Atwood explores themes of identity, agency, and resilience. Like other Handmaids, Offred is stripped of her name and individuality, reduced to a mere function for the state. However, she finds small acts of resistance in her narration and memories, reclaiming some semblance of autonomy. The novel also delves into the dynamics between women, showing how the patriarchy pits them against each other. Even within the household, there is tension between the Wives and Handmaids, reflecting the power struggles inherent in Gilead's society.

Overall, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression and the dangers of totalitarianism. It warns against complacency and underscores the importance of solidarity and resistance in the face of injustice. Through its vivid portrayal of a dystopian future, the novel challenges readers to reflect on the value of freedom, autonomy, and human dignity. Atwood skilfully uses various literary devices to convey the dystopian nature of Gilead, including oppressive language, discriminatory social hierarchy, and the suppression of individual freedoms. Through Offred's experiences, readers witness the horrors of a society where misogyny is institutionalized and enforced by the state. The novel also explores the complicity of the characters who choose to comply with the regime rather than rebel against it. Offred herself struggles with her role in this oppressive society, grappling with feelings of fear, resentment, and ultimately acceptance. It utilizes language as a potent tool to explore power dynamics and societal control. Atwood employs various literary techniques to critique the manipulation of language by the ruling regime in Gilead. Through metalinguistic play, she exposes how language is used to impose ideology and maintain authority. Debrah Raschke, in her article, "Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: False Borders and Subtle Subversions," identifies the language and "how language systems formulate how we think" (257). Raschke recognizes three language structures present in the novel: the Gilead system, the narrator's system, and the academic rhetoric of the novel's closing 'Historical Notes'. Raschke examines these language systems as instruments of control.

Language is a tool of complacency in Gilead. The regime manipulates language to shape and control thought, limiting the vocabulary and expressions available to its citizens. This linguistic complacency contributes to the normalization of oppression and restricts critical thinking or dissent. The novel's loose narrative structure, characterized by flashbacks and repetitions, underscores the complexity of time and adds depth to the exploration of societal decay. The contrast between the past and present highlights the extent to which Gilead has usurped power and reshaped reality through linguistic manipulation. Central to the narrative is the theme of naming and renaming, symbolizing the loss of identity and autonomy under the oppressive regime. Handmaids are stripped of their individuality and reduced to mere vessels for procreation, their names reflecting ownership by their commanders.

Euphemisms further obscure the brutal reality of their existence, reinforcing the regime's control over language. Through metaphorical language and visual imagery, Atwood depicts Offred's negotiation of power through her body, revealing both her agency and subjugation within the patriarchal hierarchy. Offred's use of language, particularly in her diary entries, becomes an act of resistance, a means of preserving her identity and challenging societal norms. The totalitarian regime in Gilead enforces strict control over language, relegating certain words and expressions while promoting its own ideological discourse. Illiteracy is enforced to maintain power differentials, as those who control language wield authority. Offred's defiance through language represents a subtle yet potent form of resistance against oppressive systems.

Overall, complacency in *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects the ways in which individuals adapt to and internalize oppressive systems, either through submission or apathy. It highlights the challenges of resistance in a society where dissent is punished severely and underscores the importance of vigilance and activism in the face of tyranny. In conclusion, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a poignant social commentary on gender inequality, authoritarianism, and the power of language. Through intricate narrative devices and linguistic analysis, Atwood exposes the mechanisms of control and resistance in a dystopian society, urging readers to interrogate the role of language in shaping power dynamics and societal norms.

Works Cited

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