



Deconstructing Dystopia: Applying Postmodernism to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

The seminal work of Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, beckons the readers into a dystopian world where the lines of power and identity become obscure, and the force of oppression looms over individual freedom. By setting her narrative in the theocratic dictatorship of the Republic of Gilead, Atwood depicts a nightmare of a patriarchal society where women are debased to servile status, and their bodies serve as the battleground in which historical and ideological struggles are waged.

1. Introduction

The seminal work of Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, beckons the readers into a dystopian world where the lines of power and identity become obscure, and the force of oppression looms over individual freedom. By setting her narrative in the theocratic dictatorship of the Republic of Gilead, Atwood depicts a nightmare of a patriarchal society where women are debased to servile status, and their bodies serve as the battleground in which historical and ideological struggles are waged (Atwood 23). In this context of systematic suppression, the author uses a wide range of narrative strategies that go beyond conventional plot schemes and encourage readers to question the essence of reality, truth, and writing itself. Offred's first-person narrative is

at the story's core and serves as an entryway into the world of Gilead. By seeing through the eyes of Offred, Atwood reveals the dark truths of the world and the women in an environment where any sign of disagreement is punished ruthlessly. However, intermittent mentions of Offred's past come in vivid flashbacks, allowing glimpses into the previous world that no longer exists. The novel's dénouement, on the contrary, is not characteristic of the regular course of events because Atwood includes an epilogue that does not meet expectations and effectively forces readers to look at the narrative from a different point of view. This concluding chapter on Historical Notes takes readers two centuries ahead to an academic seminar discussing the

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happenings in Gilead. Professor Pieixoto analyses Offred's story to reveal that it is just an incomplete reconstruction using audiotapes discovered many years after the Gilead downfall (Grace 483).

On the threshold, the novel seems to provide closure, revealing the destiny of Gilead and its residents. However, when examined closely, it is clear that Atwood's purpose goes beyond just the resolution. Not only does Atwood remove the boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and unreality, but she provides an additional layer of meta-narratives that questions the credibility of Offred's testimony. The epilogue features certain postmodern undertones, evidenced by Atwood's use of narrative strategies which contradict traditional narrativity and deconstruct notions of originality and authority. By juxtaposing Offred's narrative from her perspective and Pieixoto's scholastic examination, Atwood leaves the line between truth and interpretation of history in grey, encouraging readers to question the notions behind collective memory and national identity (Howells 42). The given essay makes it possible to accentuate the continuing role of "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood as a work of note that transcends the limitations of genre and ideology. The complex Atwood narrative will be discussed through postmodernist analysis, showing how storytelling can undermine an entrenched power structure to envisage new realities.

2. The Narratives of the Oppressed Woman and Privileged Man

To comprehend the importance of the complete story, it is imperative to analyse the first forty-six chapters of *The Handmaid's Tale* using the lens of feminism. The feminist literary theory of Elaine Showalter proves an excellent tool for this study, as outlined in her work. According to Showalter, women's writing evolves through three phases: feminine, feminist, and female. The feminine phase focuses on the imitation and internalisation of male-dominant literary traditions, and the feminist phase involves protest against patriarchy and advocacy for women's rights. Lastly, the female phase describes self-discovery and moves beyond gender limitations. These periods, although not so chronologically fixed, have guided female writers of all times (Showalter 16).

The feminist phase is closely related to "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood, especially in how Offred's narrative is shown. The central character is Offred, a handmaid in Gilead's dystopian society, and her own experiences shed light on the regime's repressive facets. Women in Gilead are not given basic rights like reading and writing. Therefore, the story of Offred is an act that seeks to overthrow the authorities of the oppressive state to fight back at its attempts to cower and mute women. Using different narrative techniques, Atwood reveals Offred's resistance and power in the context of Gilead. Offred's narrative style is marked by breathless urgency, created by short sentences and multiple flashbacks (Norledge 13). These flashbacks offer a glimpse into Offred's pre-Gilead life, emphasising her determination to resist Gilead's totalitarian power to erase her. In addition, Offred's use of possessives, including "my room" and "my territory," further establishes her claim of self-determination in a community that wants to rob her of her identity and free will. In essence, the narration provides resistance for Offred as she fights the memories of her past and expresses her autonomy. By characterising Offred's narrative as a site of resistance, Atwood subverts conventional notions of authorship and power relationships between reader and author.

Furthermore, one should identify the shock and dissonance aroused by the epilogue's disclosure of a male-written story. The sudden turn of view breaks the feminist line developed throughout the previous chapters, causing the reader to reconsider the interpretation of the text. The feminist literary theory, as presented by Gilbert and Gubar, provides important reads of the consequences of such a narrative disruption. Women writers have struggled to determine their authority and representation in a Patriarchal literary tradition (Gilbert & Guber 17). The epilogue's insertion of a male voice into this predominant female story space is evocative of an intrusion into this attempt to disrupt patriarchal structures. By highlighting the male storyline in the final chapters, Atwood emphasises the ongoing female fight for recognition in a society where males are the ultimate source of authority. (McWilliams 77). The book is more than just a feminist story; it is a sceptic comment on patriarchal conservatism and or religious conservatism. Postulating this background of

political and religious conservatism during the Reagan and Thatcher years, Atwood's novel overextends contemporary realities in creating a dystopian society that protests the spreading patriarchal trends. This societal denunciation provides additional proof of the novel's being distinguished as a feminist work (Sheckles 23).

The epilogue comes after Chapter Forty-Six and defies readers' preconceptions about the feminist character of the narrative. It shows that Offred's story presented in the novel is transcribed and rewritten by two male historians. The truth from this revelation belittles the concept of the argument as a feminist text. Suppose the first forty-six chapters continue the feminist writing traditions, emphasising resistance to patriarchal oppression. In that case, the epilogue changes the focus of the narrative lens to that of a male scholar, implying patriarchal control of a female voice.

This is evident by the analysis of Gilbert and Gubar, who bring out the effect of the power struggle involved in the epilogue. They claim that the male author usurping authority over his female character attempts to appropriate and silence her (Gilbert & Guber 42). Through Pieixoto's behaviour in the epilogue, Atwood reveals this historical trend of patriarchy, touching upon the oppression of women's rebellion in patriarchal societies.

In "The Handmaid's Tale," Professor Pieixoto criticises the reality and importance of Offred's story, more like attributing it to a statute of configuration rather than reality. He values statistical data more than personal experience, dismissing the significance of Offred as an individual while concentrating on the identification of the male Commander. This stems from Pieixoto's male chauvinist trend of favouring biographies for males over the narratives of women in this example (Atwood 109).

Pieixoto's continuous efforts to have full control over Offred's story represent patriarchal behaviour that is problematic. He highlights his role in retrieving and verifying the text, establishing himself as Offred's story's true editor. In comparing Offred's narrative to Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" and, by doing so, asserting editorial rights over her story, Pieixoto takes

possession of Offred, turning her into his property. This discovery debunks the reader's expectations in that one would assume that this is a narrative of protest told from the point of view of the oppressed handmaid. However, the epilogue discloses a male scholar pieced together Offred's story. The uncentring or decentralisation of the narrative is typical in postmodern texts that disturb the hierarchies and question conventional beliefs about the objectivity and valid historicity of constructed narratives (Heggen 21). Through the traditional mode of narrative constructivism, such as the first-person narrative, and the introduction of a narrative of privilege in Pieixoto, Atwood complicates the postmodern notion of challenging metanarratives. This also stresses the fact that no metanarrative is valid, be it that of oppressed feminist voices or that of privileged.

3. The Pseudo-Documentary Framing of the Narrative

A significant feature of "The Handmaid's Tale" is that it uses pseudo-documentary detail. It entails using the documentary style to depict the story in a fictional work. Through this rhetorical device, the story takes on certain elements of credibility and authenticity, thus making them seem more legitimate to the reader (Grace 490). Murphy (29) underscores the importance of using a pseudo-documentary model as this one is especially appropriate in science fiction books, such as "The Handmaid's Tale," where the distance between the reader and the destination (spatial or temporal) is often considerable. The concept of parabolic freedom by Darko Suvin underlines the necessity to cover the gap between the fictional life and the reader's life to create the conditions for cognitive involvement in the narrative (Murphy 431).

To overcome this problem, most science fiction writers, including Atwood, use a pseudo-documentary framing device that offers a familiarity and authenticity feel. Using this device, this narrative draws on the conventions of journalistic and academic writing that make it credible and encourages the readers to suspend their disbelief. By allowing reading the story as documentation or as some learn book, the text constructs the illusion that such a story can be perceived as a true description of events rather than a fictional story (Gibert 211). Pseudo-documentary framing is used in other fiction

literature works of science and other genres. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) uses letters and documents to add putative documentary evidence to the narrative (Grace, 492). On a similar note, Ernest Callenbach's "Ecotopia" (1975) employs journalistic writing techniques in his use of reports and journal entries to increase the credibility of the plot (Stroe 102). In "Always Coming Home" (1986), by Le Guin, the narrative is presented in the form of an ethnographic and textbook record constructed using ethnographic and academic framing, which further blurs the borders of reality and fiction (Le Guin 77).

Using a pseudo-documentary framing device in "The Handmaid's Tale," the world is presented as utterly dystopian and draws the reader into the realm of oppressive Gilead. By framing Offred's story as a historical document by male scholars, the text invites readers to question the constructed-ness of stories and the authority of thinkers who narrate them. This postmodern method deconstructs the consensual knowledge about the true reality and summons the reader to understand the ambiguity of fiction and fact, as well as the rhetorical reworkings of the motifs and the moral undertone (Aziz 56). Atwood uses a first-voice narrative mode throughout the book and includes a mock-document format at the novel's close. Based on the academic conference setting, the epilogue uncovers Offred's story was compiled from transcriptions of discovered audiotapes, presumably to authenticate and historicise the novel's events.

However, rather than bolstering Offred's narrative, the epilogue doubts its reliability. Pieixoto's "Problems of Authentication about The Handmaid's Tale" speech hints at the narrative's questionable validity (Laarakker 45). He admits to reconstructing and editing Offred's story based on conjecture, emphasising its approximation and the difficulty of verifying the identities of those mentioned due to likely pseudonyms. This epilogue challenges readers to confront the constructed nature of historical narratives. At first, it appears to confirm Offred's narrative, but it contradicts and denies it. Atwood problematises the historicisation process, turning it into another narrative and blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. Instead of traditional utopian or dystopian stories, using a pseudo-documentary framing device to establish validity, Atwood turns

this convention upside down to create an aura of unreality. This subversion exhibits the postmodern trait of resisting genre rules that reveal the narrative as a construct and makes the reader question the reliability of the narrative (Tolan 66).

4. Degrees of Dystopia

Dystopian stories contrast their dark setting with glimpses of the utopian element, presenting despair and hope to their audience. For example, in *The Iron Heel* by Jack London, the socialist utopia is created after the description of oligarchic dystopia in the story, illustrating the opposites that accentuate the hope of a better future (London 143). Likewise, *Fahrenheit 451*, written by Ray Bradbury, ends with his protagonist Montag meeting a band of intellectuals trying to uphold books through memory, offering a utopia in a civilisation bereft of books (Bradbury 134). These glimpses of utopian hope in dystopian sensibilities complicate the narrative and help readers reflect on paths of change and salvation.

The storytelling style in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is similar but shows itself more clearly in the novel's epilogue. Initially, the epilogue seems to portray a utopian setting where the downfall of Gilead is confirmed, and an academic conference is being held in a post-Gilead world. Women become leaders, native American culture switches to American academic culture, and there's a deep respect for natural resources. This utopian image contrasts sharply with the tyranny depicted in the previous chapters, and readers should expect a climax implied by progression and freedom (Horan 9). Nevertheless, when looked into more closely, the apparent idyll of the epilogue turns out to be polluted by deep-seated misogyny and old-fashioned patriarchal values. The speech rendered by Pieixoto, the male scholar, and the audience's complicity evokes stark reminders of the suffocating power relations and gender inequalities that choked Gilead and undermined post-Gilead society. Pieixoto's misogynistic jokes and belittling attitude towards women show the existing situation in which their experiences continue to be sidelined and co-opted; this is an undermining of the concept of true utopia.

In addition, Pieixoto's grip on the story of Offred highlights the continuity of chauvinism and the suppression of female voices. With this approach to Offred's story as a historical artefact to be dissected and interpreted by male scholars, Atwood criticises how women's narratives are often appropriated and skewed by patriarchal systems of knowledge production (Mufti 19). This inversion of the utopian ending upsets the reader's expectations and complicates the novel's conclusion. The two endings—concluding in Chapter Forty-Six and the epilogue, respectively—also make the substitution of utopia further difficult to achieve. Although some dystopian literary texts offer a utopian hope from outside the text, acting as a warning to the reader, the others provide an open-ended narrative, permitting hope for the protagonist's future. The Handmaid's Tale belongs to the latter group, as Atwood makes Offred's fate ambiguous. By concluding the novel with an uncertain fate, intending "Mayday" or "The Eyes," Atwood opens diverse narrative opportunities and develops a utopian impulse within the narrative. This vagueness makes the reader hopeful for Offred's survival and promises that even this dystopian environment might be favourable for her. Employing these turns of events, Atwood addresses these challenges of power, agency, and opposition in the worlds of dystopian fiction and reality (Morgan 19).

The epilogue of The Handmaid's Tale complicates the provision of utopian hope by leaving Offred's fate in question. Readers are denied knowing how Offred's history ends, which makes them want her to be happily revived in the utopian society. Nevertheless, this hope is going to be confronted in the epilogue, as it is disclosed that despite Gilead being ruined, the patriarchal society is still a reality with the same approach and mentality. The coexistence of a fallen dystopia and a rising sexist society contradicts the utopian hope implied in the metaphorical ending. Atwood subverts readers' expectations of a straightforward utopia or dystopia by including the epilogue. In place of an absolute juxtaposition, she introduces degrees of dystopia, making the reader's understanding of the narrative more convoluted. Readers are more acutely aware of the Gilead atrocities, and when reading the epilogue, they find this society distasteful due to its ideologies resembling what we saw transpire in Gilead. Refusing a simple "lesser of the two evils"

scene will force readers to face the undersides of the societies presented honestly. By omitting a resolution, Atwood provokes readers to ask questions about the novel's conclusion and to stay critical of the society in the epilogue. She avoids discussing the novel as though it was just an escape from reality. She makes it possible for readers to perceive and acknowledge the dystopian elements in their reality (Fisher 14). With this recognition, we can interpret that The Handmaid's Tale is not just speculative fiction about societies but about the society and their current state.

5. Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale makes readers wonder which authority they should believe, questioning established ideas of narrative reliability and authenticity. Both Offred and Pieixoto fail to become reliable narrators, as Offred's voice is silenced, and Pieixoto's account is overshadowed by the sexist undertones that are reminiscent of the Gileadean mindset. This ambiguity carries over to the end of the novel, which does not give a clean utopian or dystopian resolution but only shows a cyclical trend of dystopian societies elevating and then crumbling. The narrative strategy employed by Atwood fits well with the postmodern tradition, encouraging readers to interpret the text's meaning actively. Barthes' readerly interpretation highlights the reader's responsibility for the construction of the message of a text, as its meaning does not stem from its birth but from its reception (Barthes 8). The Handmaid's Tale illustrates this by disrupting traditional forms of narrative and compelling readers to question the legitimacy of competing arguments. With the help of unreliable narrators and defying the stereotype of genre, Atwood pushes readers to rethink their conceptions of dystopian fiction and its political facets. The uneasiness provoked by the epilogue's depiction of a society replicating Gilead's controlling attitudes stresses the novel's timeliness concerning the gender, power, and authoritarianism problems of modernity.

Additionally, The Handmaid's Tale demonstrates the two-faced nature of postmodern texts that utilise play with pastiche on one side and critical self-reflexivity on the other. Though it undermines the mainstream literary trends to achieve a novel

form of narration, it still poses a few crucial questions about history, individuality and subjectivity. By refusing to be forced into one truth or story, the novel encourages readers to engage in the process of interpretation and to question their prejudices about class. Essentially, *The Handmaid's Tale* is not merely a work of dystopia; it is a powerful questioning of patriarchy, calling for societal redress. By focusing on the postmodernist aspects of Atwood's narrative, the essay reveals new meanings behind the book's enduring value and ability to transgress ideologies.

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