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Bricolage of a Concubine Society: Resisting a Colonial Order in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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discourse, ideology, resistance, imagined community, *The Handmaid's Tale*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the tension between two competing discourses in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: the dominant ideology upheld by the state and the counter-discourse articulated by the handmaids. The official discourse constructs a covertly colonized community in which individuals are confined to strictly defined roles and spaces. Focusing on the role of religious authority as part of the Ideological State Apparatuses, the paper examines how the theocratic system of Gilead perpetuates control and submission. At the same time, it investigates how the handmaids resist this oppressive order by forming an imagined community grounded in shared suffering, memory, and covert communication. The analysis draws on Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, Louis Althusser's concept of ideology, and Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities to interpret how power and resistance operate within Gilead's social hierarchy. Employing close textual analysis within a qualitative framework, this study demonstrates how language, ritual, and collective identity serve as both tools of domination and subversion in Atwood's dystopian narrative.

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a seminal work of dystopian fiction centred around a country controlled by a theocratic totalitarian regime. Set in the Republic of Gilead, the novel depicts a world where women are colonized, devoid of their personal freedom and used as machines of reproduction. Focusing on the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* written by Margaret Atwood, this research paper examines the way the Gilead regime uses ideological and repressive state apparatuses to create and interpellate a state-fostered discourse, which is used to manipulate and colonize the fertile women, both mentally and physically, making them concubines who are bound to serve the nation by increasing its population. Margaret Atwood's narrative zooms in on the dystopian society pillared on the misinterpretation of religious scripts leading to the formation of a theocratic totalitarian state, a regime that exerts total control over women's bodies and lives and depicts a society characterized by extreme oppression and loss of personal freedoms, yet it also reveals glimpses of resistance and hope. This paper employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on close textual analysis as a research method, and utilises a mixed theoretical framework that draws on Foucault's concept of discourse, Althusser's ideology, and Anderson's concept of imagined communities to examine the hidden utopian

elements within the dystopia of *The Handmaid's Tale*. This paper revolves around the fact that "dystopia is the opposite of utopia and is typically characterized by dehumanization" (Claeys, 2017, p.4), but within each utopia, there is a concealed dystopia, and within each dystopia, there is a hidden utopia. Atwood, in her work *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, explains that dystopias are not merely works of science fiction but extrapolations from current trends and conditions. They imagine societies where these trends have continued to their logical and often horrifying conclusions. The novel picks up chunks of reality from different parts of world as she explains in her work that she would not put "anything that humankind has not already done, somewhere, sometime, or for which it did not have the tools" (Atwood, 2011, p. 88) and present it both as a mirror and a cautionary tale, exposing totalitarian, patriarchal and authoritarian practices existing in the society, warning against the erosion of fundamental rights of life through the manipulation of discourse and ideology.

Literature Review

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis since its publication, particularly in discussions

surrounding dystopian literature and feminist critique. Its examination of the *topos* of dystopia, including power, oppression, and resistance, has made it a rich text for academic analysis. Several scholars have examined *The Handmaid's Tale* within the broader context of dystopian literature. Derived from the Greek word “dus,” meaning bad or difficult, and “topia,” meaning place, dystopia translates to “bad place” (Claeys, 2017, p. 4). These narratives depict worlds where oppressive regimes, environmental disasters, or technological advancements result in bleak and nightmarish societies. Dystopias are characterized by totalitarian governments, rampant poverty, environmental degradation, and the loss of individual freedoms, often under the guise of maintaining order or achieving some misguided form of perfection. Gregory Claeys, in *Dystopia: A Natural History*, defines dystopias as fictional portrayals of deeply flawed societies, often marked by totalitarian control, widespread oppression, and lack of personal freedoms (Claeys, 2017). Tom Moylan, in his work, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, discusses dystopias as critical reflections on contemporary societal issues and potential future trends (Moylan, 2000). Dystopian fiction thus functions as a mirror, forcing readers to confront uncomfortable truths about their own world.

Karen F. Stein states in her essay, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: Scheherazade in Dystopia,” that the novel is narrated by a Scheherazade of the future, telling her story to save her life. Offred’s narrative serves not only as a means of personal survival but also as an act of resistance against the totalitarian state. Stein highlights this by stating that “her narrative itself is a criminal act, performed in secret and lost for many years” (1996, p. 269). By narrating her experiences, Offred inscribes both her victimization and her resistance, turning her personal suffering into a powerful act of defiance. She describes the novel as “a provocative inquiry into the origins and meanings of narrative” (Stein, 1996, p. 269). This suggests that the novel not only tells a story but also reflects on the nature of storytelling itself. One of the key issues it explores is “the narrator’s relation to her tale: the simultaneous fear and desire to narrate one’s story, and the attempt to create a self through language” (1996, p. 269). Offred’s fear of being discovered and punished for telling her story coexists with her deep-seated need to assert her

identity and humanity through narration.

Mario Clarer, in his essay “Orality and Literacy as Gender-Supporting Structures in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” examines the theme of literacy suppression within the novel. Klarer observes that “the banning of books and the ensuing ‘orality’ of the whole population” is a recurring motif in dystopian literature, including Atwood’s work (Klarer, 1995, p.130). The shift from a literate to an oral society in a dystopian world serves as a method for the ruling regime to exercise power by limiting access to knowledge. Klarer’s analysis resonates with Michel Foucault’s theories on discourse and power, specifically that control over knowledge production and dissemination serves as a means of exercising power. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the prohibition of books and writing is a direct attack on personal autonomy and intellectual freedom, essential tools for resistance and self-expression. By enforcing orality, the regime not only controls information but also shapes the very means by which individuals can conceptualize and communicate their thoughts.

Hilde Staels, in her essay, “Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*: Resistance through Narrating,” highlights the role of language in the governance of Gilead. She describes that the “governing discourse of the absolutist state” is an “artificial, so-called Biblical speech” (Staels, 1995, p. 457). This manipulation of religious scriptures legitimizes the regime’s authority and moralizes its oppressive practices. By co-opting biblical language, the state empowers divine legitimacy, making resistance not only a political but also a spiritual defiance. The use of “Biblical speech” in Gilead is a clear example of how discourse can be created to sustain power structures. The false interpretation of religion is used to manipulate individuals’ perceptions of morality and duty.

Valerie Oved Giovanini states in his essay, “An Army of Me: Representations of Intersubjective Relations, Ethics, and Political Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, that the series goes beyond critiquing patriarchal society by engaging with new concepts of subjectivity, morality, and political resistance. He says that it is evident through the character of Offred, whose identity experiences both fragmentation and empowerment through her empathetic relationships with others. The first section of the article examines the show’s cinematography, particularly how it portrays

trauma and defence mechanisms through the lens of Freud's ego psychology. In the second section, the article treats the show as an aesthetic object, exploring its impact on viewers' unconscious minds. The series opens new moral horizons, challenging and resisting patriarchal norms of self-sufficiency and individualism. This aspect is crucial as it reveals how the aesthetics of *The Handmaid's Tale* can evoke emotional responses and provoke critical reflections on personal and societal values. By presenting a dystopian reality that feels uncomfortably plausible and existent, the show encourages viewers to question and resist existing power structures and ideologies. The third section of the article connects the narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* to contemporary US politics, primarily through the lens of hashtag movements like #MeToo. The show's aesthetics, especially the iconic handmaid's robes, have transcended the screen to become powerful symbols of protest against oppressive ideologies. The visual symbolism of the robes has been effectively employed in real-world protests, demonstrating the intersection of art and activism. The use of these symbols in protests highlights the show's significant cultural impact and its role in boosting political resistance.

The Handmaid's Tale is a classic dystopian text that has been extensively researched from various perspectives, including feminist critique, political allegory, and Foucauldian analysis of power and control. Scholars have explored the mechanisms of repression and surveillance in Gilead, drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of discipline and biopolitics. However, I have used Benedict Anderson's concept of "Imagined Communities" to explore the utopian elements within the nightmarish dystopia of Gilead, leading to the creation of a concubine society. Anderson's theory, as articulated in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, posits that nations are socially constructed communities, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that group, united by shared experiences, languages, and ideologies (Anderson 2006, pp. 5-6). This framework provides a fresh lens through which to understand the secret concubine networks of resistance within Gilead. These networks can be seen as imagined communities, where the shared desire for freedom and the collective memory of a pre-Gilead past unite individuals in their collective opposition to the regime. By focusing on these elements,

this research fills a gap in the existing scholarship, highlighting the collective action and imagined solidarity as forms of resistance against totalitarian oppression. This approach not only broadens the scope of dystopian studies but also magnifies our understanding of how imagined communities can foster hope and resilience in times of dystopia.

The Dominant Discourse of Gilead

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopia where women are subjugated, oppressed, and dehumanized by the newly formed theocratic totalitarian state. In the novel, women's fertility rates are decreasing along with the country's population, so the fertile women are captured and forced into sexual servitude with the elite commanders of society. The so-called Handmaids are the state's dehumanized human machinery of reproduction; while the act of reproduction, of becoming a handmaid is justified through the manipulation of religious textures, especially by referring to the story of Jacob and Rachel.

In the novel, the democratic state of the US is overthrown by the theocratic totalitarian state which enforces a new kind of discourse to dominate, dehumanize and discipline the individuals of society. Michel Foucault, in his work *Discipline and Punish*, argues that discourse creates an epistemic reality and serves as a tool of control and discipline (2019). In the Republic of Gilead, discourse is created to legitimize the regime's totalitarian and patriarchal order. Foucault posits that "discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (1990, p. 101). He argues that discourse produces power by normalizing norms and truths, making them seem natural and unquestionable. In the novel, the aunts become the state subjects to normalize discourse by forcing handmaids to internalize it. Aunts preach the state's discourse to the handmaids that "there is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from" (Atwood, 1998, p. 24). The handmaids are forced to internalize that they have been given protection from the anarchic society, while their freedom has been subjugated. But the tactical use of words "freedom to" and "freedom from" makes the state's oppressive discourse quite natural

and unquestionable. Discourse has been framed upon stately motives, by which individuals are devoid of their autonomy and agency, transferring state control of their reins.

The theocratic totalitarian state, pillared on the false interpretations of religious scripts, positions the concubines as machines of reproduction, forcing them to internalize the identity of handmaids. Handmaids are exploited by the state's preaching of half-quoted religious verses like "Blessed are the meek" (Atwood, 1998, p.64). Handmaids are made subservient by making them internalize the truth generated by the state. A new ideology is constructed upon the religious discourse, which is used to control and discipline the handmaids' thoughts and behaviors. According to Louis Althusser (2008), ideology operates in such a way that it recruits subjects among individuals, transforming them into subjects through the process of interpellation. Interpellation is the process by which ideology is internalized and the identity is hailed in us through this process of internalization. Through the interpellation of a stately, fostered discourse, a censored society is created, where individuals must live within defined spaces and roles. All the fertile women in the society had been given the identity of handmaids and their previous names had been nullified by the state, leaving these dehumanized women to use the patronymic names "composed of the possessive preposition and the first name of the gentleman in question. Such names were taken by these women upon their entry into a connection with the household of a specific Commander, and relinquished by them upon leaving it" (Atwood, 1998, p. 306). Handmaids are dehumanized through this act of denaming, a characteristic topos of dystopian literature. The regime of Gilead forcibly gathers fertile women and shapes them into state subjects, whereby they are interpellated with the idea of procreating for the elite of society, or, to put it bluntly, for the capitalistic purposes of earning huge profits by selling and exporting their children, the priceless little beings.

The Republic of Gilead employs both Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses to enforce its ideology and establish disciplined control over society. Althusser posits that the intricate interplay between the Repressive State Apparatus and Ideological State Apparatuses allows for subtle combinations of coercion and ideology to

maintain societal control (2008). He explains that "the Repressive State Apparatus functions 'by violence', whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses function 'by ideology'" (Althusser, 2008, p. 78). Gilead uses religion as the most effective ideological state apparatus to brainwash and condition the handmaids as machines of reproduction, reproducing specifically for the interest of the state. Fertility of handmaids is considered a natural resource to be exported, which is normalized by writings that says "GOD IS A NATIONAL RESOURCE" (Atwood, 1998, p. 213). This phrase demonstrates how the regime manipulates handmaids to legitimize its control over reproductive functions, highlighting the state's exploitation of women's bodies for its political and economic ends. The state is involved in the most abominable of crimes: selling its humanity in return for materialistic pursuits of wealth. The regime of Gilead frames its policies not merely as legal but as sacred through a maintained discourse. The regime uses violence to discipline the handmaids, instilling a sense of fear through the display of bodies "hanging on the Wall". The Eyes, Angels, and Guardians all belong to the category of repressive state apparatuses, using violence to discipline and control society. These activities of repressive state apparatuses expose the state's monopoly on violence and the use of terror as a means of social control, which, too, is characteristic of dystopian literature.

Resilience: An Opposite Discourse

In the Republic of Gilead, the Handmaids' multiple acts of defiance generate an alternate discourse, challenging the oppressive regime of Gilead. Foucault says that "discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1990, p. 101). This hindrance and point of resistance become the starting point for an opposing strategy among the handmaids, a resistance to reclaim personal autonomy and human dignity. Despite the oppressive control exerted by the regime of Gilead, resistance emerges from the handmaids. The protagonist, Offred, rejects the regime's-imposed identity and yearns for freedom from the past. Offred wants to dislocate her dehumanization and wants so desperately to be human again, to be her own self. Offred's narrative becomes a critical site of resistance. She creates a discourse through

her own account of life, through her remembrance of the past. Memory becomes the tool through which she creates a discourse of a life deeply connected to the past, making it a tool for maintaining a sense of self. Offred's memories include her life with her husband, Luke, her daughter and her experiences of personal freedom. These recollections from the past create a narrative that is directly opposite to the state-fostered discourse.

She tries to humanize herself, among the dehumanizing conditions of Gilead, by remembering her name, saying that "I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me" (Atwood, 1998, p. 97). Offred's act of remembering and asserting her name becomes an important point of resistance, as it challenges the regime's attempt to dehumanize her and other women by stripping them of their names and identities. Her assertion of being valuable highlights an important aspect of human dignity: the recognition of one's worth beyond material and utilitarian value. In the colonized regime of Gilead, women's identities are defined by the roles given to them: Wives, Handmaids, Marthas, Aunts. These roles are stripped of their previous autonomy, having lost the jobs and money they once owned in the pre-Gilead society. But now they must live in roles defined by the regime of Gilead, unable to do jobs of their own will, and they are not allowed to read or write.

Foucault posits that "there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent" (1990, p. 96). In the society of Gilead, resistance is both overt and covert, ranging from public acts of defiance to internal acts of rebellion. Offred, too, displays diverse and multiple acts of resistance, as she says that "I tell him my real name, and feel that therefore I am known" (Atwood, 1998, p. 270). She violates the rule of using her former name, and through this act, she asserts her human identity. Offred's secret affair with Nick, her participation in the underground resistance group Mayday, and her subversive thoughts demonstrate the multiple acts of resistance that generate an opposing discourse. Her struggles not only encompass the arena of mental and emotional, but also the challenges of the physical and practical, showing resilience in both to demonstrate the extent of utopia concealed within a dystopia.

A Utopian Community

The resistance against the oppressive regime of Gilead develops an alternative discourse, which fosters the creation of an imagined utopian community among the concubines. This opposite discourse serves as a counter-narrative to the stately fostered discourse, which seeks to control women and to position them as machines of reproduction, while the opposite discourse seeks to liberalize women from the chains of an oppressive regime. Foucault argues that "where there is power, there is resistance and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1990, p. 95). The concubines or the so-called handmaids group together in acts of resistance through secret communications, envisioning a utopia within the nightmarish, dystopic and oppressive regime of Gilead. The protagonist, Offred, looks upon by chance "a tiny writing... scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail... Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" (Atwood, 1998, p. 52), a Latin phrase translated as "Don't let the bastards grind you down" which provides her with a sense of community. It connects Offred to the women who came before her, leaving behind a message of hope and a reminder of resilience. Anderson (2006) argues that imagined communities are created through the shared imagination of a common identity and a sense of belonging to a larger group. Offred develops a sense of connection and solidarity after reading the lines scratched on the wall. This phrase gives Offred the courage to resist the colonial order that persists in Gilead's society. She is pleased to develop a sense of a common identity as she says that "it pleases me to know that her taboo message made it through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened and read by me. Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy" (Atwood, 1998, p. 52). Offred's joy at discovering and repeating the words highlights the psychological and emotional support from knowing that other handmaids, too, share her struggles and resistance.

Benedict Anderson (2006) argues that shared experiences, struggles and resistances can foster a sense of belonging in a group even if its members have never met. The concubines establish among themselves a secret resistance group through a cypher word "Mayday", a French word meaning 'Help me'. This

secret group, open to every handmaid, forges the basis for a utopian community, a community bound by a common desire to bring down the Gilead from inside and to attain freedom and equality. All these multiple acts of resistances lead to the bricolage of a concubine society determined on the idea of resisting the colonial order of the theocratic totalitarian state. A utopian and a human space is created for the dehumanized handmaids, giving them a sense of belonging. The Handmaids yearn for a society that promises them the freedoms they once enjoyed, a world where they have control over their bodies, their relationships, and their lives. This imagined/utopian community creates meaning in the meaningless lives of the concubines and thus gives them a sense of hope to cope with life and to resist the oppressive regime. Through this community, Offred and other handmaids begin to develop a collective identity, a collective consciousness which gives them a purpose to continue the plurality of possible, necessary, improbable resistances, thereby envisioning a world free from the chains of dehumanization and oppression.

Conclusion

The Republic of Gilead uses both ISAs and RSAs to interpellate a stately fostered discourse, created by falsely interpreting the religious scripts, brainwashing and positioning the handmaids as mere machines of reproduction. Through the interpellation of this discourse, the handmaids are dehumanized and exploited by the state for national purposes. In response to the state's oppressive discourse, the handmaids develop a counter-ideology which leads to the bricolage of an imagined community among the concubines. In the dystopian state of Gilead, the creation of an imagined utopian community among the handmaids gives meaning to their lives and provides them with a reason to survive and cope with the oppressive state of Gilead. The bricolage of a concubine society or a utopian community provides handmaids with a sense of belonging and purpose amid the dystopian world's nightmarish times. In this way, this utopian community, born of shared struggles and collective identity, continues resisting the oppressive and dominant regime oppressing it, and succeeds in toppling the regime of Gilead.

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