

Gender-Based Oppression in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Article Info	Abstract
<p><i>Article History:</i> Received 27 February 2024 Approved 27 April 2024 Published 30 April 2024</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: feminism, gender, objectification, oppression, violence</p>	<p>The perception of women as weak individuals results in their oppression, violence, and injustice, which are the fundamental reasons for their fight for equality, justice, and the right to be treated equally to men. The issue of women being objectified and abused by men is highlighted in the novel <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>. This study aims to identify gender-based oppression against women and its impact on their social and mental well-being in the novel <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>, using a qualitative descriptive method and a close reading approach to analyze literary motifs. The primary data source is the novel itself. The study utilized secondary sources such as journal articles, books, and relevant internet sources to gather data. The findings suggest that women experience various forms of oppression, including sexual harassment, gender role enforcement, objectification, and tight control by men. The impacts of this oppression result in trauma, psychological damage, internalization to survive, and loss of identity. In conclusion, gender-based oppression causes severe psychological and social agony for women.</p>

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INTRODUCTION

Margaret Eleanor Atwood, also known as Margaret Atwood, is a widely recognized and influential Canadian writer and sociologist. Atwood has achieved significant influence in both the realm of Canadian literature and sociological discourse. Atwood has been the recipient of multiple literary awards, including the Arthur C. Clarke Award for her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (Sánchez, 2018). In addition to literary awards, she has also been recognized by the National Book Critics Circle, receiving the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award and the Governor General's

Award for National Book Critics in 2001. Atwood has been regarded as an influential figure in the international feminist movement within the literary field (Yu & Li, 2019). Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa on November 18, 1939. In 1957, Atwood graduated from Victoria College at the University of Toronto with a degree in English Language and Literature. In 1961, she obtained her Master's degree in English Literature from Radcliffe College at Harvard University. Margaret Atwood is recognized for the subtlety of her poetry, the power of her fiction, and the illumination of her literary criticism. She has produced more than

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forty books, translated into forty languages (Staines, 2006).

The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is written by Atwood and it was published in 1985. It belongs to the dystopian genre, which portrays societies under a totalitarian regime, where oppression, terror, or deprivation make life difficult. Moore (2019) argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes how patriarchy oppresses women and how a totalitarian government controls societies using power. Sánchez (2018) notes that the categorization of women based on their age, social class, and fertility was prominent in the society described in the novel. Marthas, Ofglen, Handmaids, and Aunts are all groups of women with different roles in this society. The Marthas serve as servants and cooks, Ofglen is a spy, the handmaids are fertile women who are used as child breeders, and the aunts supervise and re-educate the handmaids. As a result, women in this society are deprived of their rights, and their bodies and lives are controlled and used to satisfy male interests. This study aims to identify the forms of gender oppression and analyze how they affect women in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.

Although several studies have been conducted on this novel, none have focused on gender oppression and its effects on women. For example, Weiss (2009), Arbaoui (2018), and Artauli M. S. S (2019) examined different perspectives on Offred's heroism and complicity. Weiss (2009) and Arbaoui (2018) focused on the role of storytelling as a form of resistance for Offred, the protagonist in the novel. Artauli M. S. S (2019) explored Offred's resistance by controlling her mind and consciousness, seeking inspiration from strong women, and refusing to fall into unnecessary thoughts. VanWormer (2021) discussed the objectification of women in the novel and history, emphasizing the importance of human rights, particularly for women. Pötzsch (2022) investigated the ethical concerns related to commercial surrogacy or contract pregnancy, as portrayed in the novel. Therefore, based on these gaps, this study highlights the need for further research on gender-based oppression and its impact on women in the novel. Therefore, the objectives of this study are as follows, to identify the forms of gender-based oppression and to identify their impacts on women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel is analyzed from a feminist perspective. The significance of this study is to raise awareness about the objectification and sexualization of women in society.

Feminism

Feminism refers to the emergence of women's movements in the United States and Europe during the civil rights campaign of the 1960s (Plain & Sellers, 2007). Dinshaw (2007) defines feminism as the ideals of a modern social movement aimed at advancing women, emerging in Western Europe and America in the eighteenth century, based on concepts of equality and emancipation in secular society. This movement reflects a collective awareness of women's struggles against discrimination in all aspects of life and against the negative stigma relegating women to a secondary position that undermines them as inferior group. (Burkett and Brunell (2023) assert that throughout Western history, the majority of women were confined to the home while men dominated public life. During medieval times in Europe, women were denied the right to own property, study, and participate in public life. This concept is a product of the belief that men are more capable of dealing with problems than women. According to Affroni and Hendrarti (2013), men are believed to be more mentally and physically capable of performing the job. The roles of women appeared to be restricted, their rights were seized, and they were assigned to strenuous labor. The prevalence of discrimination and marginalization motivated women to fight against injustice and free themselves from these atrocities. According to Yu and Li (2019), the feminist movement aims for equality rather than gender discrimination. It seems that Yu and Li fail to recognize that inequality and unjust treatment are also types of gender discrimination against women. Furthermore, the initial stage of the feminist movement was founded on oppression and hatred toward women.

The feminist movement striving for women's equality was categorized into multiple waves or phases, each with its specific objectives. According to Pruitt (2022), the first wave was around 1848 – 1920 and focused on obtaining equal rights for women in America. During this time, several resolutions were passed calling for a range of rights, such as women's suffrage. The following wave occurred during the 1963-1980 period. During the second wave, feminists called for the reevaluation of traditional gender roles in society and the elimination of sexist discrimination. The feminist movement that occurred in the 1990s is recognized as the third wave. The objective was to address remaining issues including workplace, sexual abuse, and the underrepresentation of women in Congress. This third wave feminist encouraged women to embrace their individuality and sexuality while striving for

inclusivity in terms of gender and race. The fourth wave of feminism is happening in the present day. Fourth-wave feminists are directing their efforts toward the institutions that enable such misconduct. Like their predecessors, fourth-wave feminists are struggling to reconcile with the concept of intersectionality and to ensure inclusivity and representation of all genders, classes, races, and sexual orientations in the movement.

Feminism and gender

Some feminists hold the view that sex and gender are distinct. In *Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender*, Mikkola (2023) argues that sex refers to the biological features that define females and males, whereas gender is based on social factors that define women and men. Biological features include chromosomes, hormones, and sex organs, among other physical characteristics that categorize the sex identity. In contrast, social factors refer to social roles, positions, identities, and behaviors that attribute to human. The primary objective of feminism in creating this distinction was to challenge the notion that biology determines destiny. According to Beauvoir's (1972) assertion as cited in Mikkola (2023), females become women through a process of acquiring feminine traits and learning feminine manners. Thus, masculinity and femininity are perceived as outcomes of nurture or upbringing. Mufidah (2023) defines 'performativity' as a process of shaping an individual's subjectivity over time. This is an example of citationality and iterability. For instance, a newborn baby may be referred to as a baby girl by the doctor, then by the parents and family, and continuously passed on to the community, forming the baby's subjectivity through attached performativity. Butler (1990), argues that gender is never natural but instead the result of performativity. Gender performativity suggests that individuals of any gender can display both masculine and feminine traits, depending on upbringing.

The societal perception of women as weak individuals leads to another form of oppression (Affroni & Hendrarti, 2013). The differences in the roles assigned to each gender contribute to the perception of one gender being superior to the other. Moreover, these phenomena result in what is commonly called gender inequality. It is widely recognized that gender inequality within social systems often leads to women being oppressed. According to Gheaus (2015) in his article 'Feminism and Gender', women experience certain forms of oppression, such as gender-based violence, domestic violence, and sexual abuse,

which unequally affect them. Women have a higher likelihood of experiencing rape or domestic abuse, leading to severe physical and psychological consequences. Furthermore, women are susceptible to having their bodies objectified and commodified. Practices like pornography and prostitution frequently objectify and treat women's bodies as commodities. This objectification contributes to damaging gender norms, and it further marginalizes and exploits women.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with Close Reading approach and analysis of the literary motif of the text. Close reading concentrates on specific aspects of a text to identify deeper meanings contained within it, such as the literary analysis strategy employed for this study (Pickering, 2018). According to Kinga (2014), close reading not only focuses on the literary meaning of the words but also on the metaphorical meaning of the text. This method helps to understand the whole meaning of the text and can be equally used in both prose and verse, as is the case in this study. A motif is typically a symbolic representation of a thing or event (Freedman, 1971). Motifs, such as symbols, sounds, actions, ideas, or words, can enhance a story by contributing images and concepts to the overarching theme (Literary Terms, 2015). The main data source for this study is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Other resources used included books, journal articles, and relevant Internet sources. To uncover gender-based oppression in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, the researcher applies the close reading method and subsequently analysis of the literary motif to reveal the forms of oppression and the impacts of such oppression on women in the novel. The method involves the following steps: First, read every chapter of the novel carefully. Then highlight with pen or pencil the important point of the text which related to topic of the research. Next, take notes or summary of the important points from the novel. Finally, all information from the notes taken to be analyzed to answer the research questions in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The forms of women's oppression

Various forms of oppression were imposed on citizens after extremists overthrew the

legitimate government and established a new regime called Gilead. **Authoritarian rulers oppressed and exerted pressure on women, resulting in sexual abuse, gender role enforcement, rights violations, objectification, and male domination. While men did not face the same direct oppression as women, they still suffered under the regime's control and the constant threat of getting punished.**

Sexual abuse and oppression were widespread among women in Gilead. Fertile women were designated as handmaids and deployed to live in the commander's house as concubines, whose task was to satisfy the commanders' desires. Women were valued for their fertility or ability to bear many children. Fertile women were a valuable resource for Gilead regime to support its program of increasing its citizens during the natality crisis (Arbaoui, 2018). In Gilead, women who were chosen to be handmaids must have the ability to become pregnant or they would be labeled as "Unwoman" and banished to the Colonies (Atwood, 1985, p.118). The term "Unwoman" was applied to the most inferior class of women (Birgita & Mau, 2003; Browning, 2021). In addition, these women were also vulnerable to exploitation by other men. For instance, the story recounts Offred's visit to a doctor for a routine health check; upon discovering that she had not yet conceived, the doctor proposed sexual intercourse to help her become pregnant. Offred, however, rejected his advances. In Gilead, women appear to be deemed worthless in the eyes of men. Women were viewed solely as objects of men's desire.

The novel portrayed another form of oppression of women, through the enforcement of gender roles. The female characters were forced into gender roles such as wives, handmaids, or Marthas, and their social status was determined by these roles. Wives were the Commander's spouses, they were responsible for maintaining their family's social and moral standards (Browning, 2021). Marthas were a group of women assigned to domestic servitude including cooking, while Ofglen is a secret spy. Handmaids were fertile women assigned the roles of child-bearers and domestic duties such as grocery shopping. Aunts were appointed to oversee, re-educate, and brainwash the handmaids, further, to ensure their compliance with the patriarchy. Of the female roles, Wives, Handmaids, and Marthas hold the lowest status and have virtually no autonomy. Ofglen and Aunts possess more authority and control within their respective positions. It must be noted, however, that men still wield far greater control and influence over the women in Gilead.

As a result, the division and categorization of women frequently led to conflict among various groups. "The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us. *Fraternize* means *to behave like a brother*" (Atwood, 1985, p.15). It is evident that these women were being forced into opposition against each other.

Women faced multiple disparities and were often denied their rights. In addition, they were frequently objectified, dominated by men, and valued solely for their reproductive abilities. For instance, the story highlights the prohibition on women reading and writing. As Offred says in the story: "Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden" (Atwood, 1985, p.41). In addition, to have property, to get jobs, jobs were only for men. Women were conditioned to be dependent on men, as was the case in a patriarchal society, and they had no freedom to actualize themselves; the secret police kept women under surveillance. The objectification of women in the story was experienced by Moira, who, after failing to escape from the Red Center, was employed as a prostitute in the "Jezebel". Also, when the Commander took Offred to Jezebel, he attached a purple tag on her wrist, "Here, the Commander says. He slips around my wrist a tag, purple, on an elastic band, like the tags for airport luggage. If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental," (Atwood, 1985, p.216). This purple label indicates that women are merely sexual objects used to satisfy men's desires (Birgita & Mau, 2003). In addition, women are stripped of their individuality and treated as nothing more than a set of ovaries and a uterus. In the story, Offred says, "She'll be allowed to nurse the baby, for a few months, they believe in mother's milk. After that she'll be transferred, to see if she can do it again, with someone else who needs a turn. But she'll never be sent to the Colonies, she'll never be declared Unwoman. That is her reward" (Atwood, 1985, p.118).

The implications of oppression on women

The widespread sexual abuse of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* has a deeply traumatic effect on women. This trauma is particularly experienced by women who become handmaids. As mentioned above, the main function of handmaids is to be the sexual object of the Commander on behalf of the population issue and to bear the Commander's children. If the women fail to reproduce, they are sent to the colonies and labeled "Unwoman". This label means that they are useless. Physically, they are women, but they fail to fulfill their gender roles as women in order to bear children. In addition, "Unwoman" is classified as the lowest class in

Gilead. Furthermore, the victim of sexual abuse is blamed for the rape. When Janine tells them that she was a victim of gang rape, instead of showing compassion, the aunts blame the victim. "But whose fault, was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. She did. She did. She did" (Atwood, 1985, p.70).

The regime of Gilead adheres to a patriarchal system that enforces traditional gender roles. Women are second and men are always first. Women are relegated to the domestic chores, while men are assigned to the heavy work. Women are conditioned to be dependent on men. Women have no power and control over their lives, they have no autonomy. Handmaids are forced to be sex slaves for the purpose of producing babies for the commanders they serve. Their basic rights and freedom are lost, and they must perform their tasks involuntarily in order to survive. If they break the rules, they will be sentenced to death. Therefore, women have no choice but to submit and resign themselves to their fate.

The objectification of women and the constant control of men in Gilead leads to a loss of identity and self-worth in women. Objectification means that women are seen only as sexual objects for men. In the novel, especially the fertile women who can bear children are objectified for patriarchal interests. Their activities are controlled and must follow the rules set by the ruling class. They are forbidden to use their real names, for example, the protagonist character in the novel Offred is not her real name, "Of" means that it belongs to Fred, her master, or the commander for whom she serves. Her real name is June. According to Billings (2023), the objectification of women may lead to self-objectification. Self-objectification is a situation where women internalize and agree with the values and beliefs associated with them (McKay, 2013). For example, in the novel, the aunts in the Red Center impart the concept to the handmaids that it is their ignorance of the rape or sexual harassment inflicted upon them. Women are believed to have a promiscuous nature; therefore, it is their fault when men commit sexual immorality against women.

The oppression of women in Gilead is not only physically violent but also mentally. People who are considered traitors or dissidents to the regime are hanged in public for passersby to see. Offred says "Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. There must have

been a Men's Salvaging early this morning. I didn't hear the bells. Perhaps I've become used to them" (Atwood, 1985, p.35). This is a way to mentally instill fear and terror. By seeing this incident, people would think twice about opposing the rules of the authoritarian Gilead regime. Offred encounters this situation several times when she goes shopping for kitchen supplies. She sees some people being hanged next to the gate. Witnessing these horrors forces Offred to obey and submit to the rules and policies of the regime.

CONCLUSION

The Handmaid's Tale is a dystopian novel that explores the theme of gender oppression. The regime of Gilead, which takes over the legitimate government, runs the government in a totalitarian manner. Its regulations and policies are disadvantageous, especially to women. The regime oppresses women in many ways. Women are oppressed both physically and mentally which influences women's social life and psychological; women, especially handmaids, are sexually abused, assigned to serve the sexual desires of their commanders, and impregnated to procreate children due to the crisis of fertile citizen of Gilead. In addition, the regime enforces gender roles on women, which leads to the categorization of women based on their functions. For instance, Marthas is a group woman who assigned for domestic chores, Ofglen for espionage the community, and Aunts function to reeducate and brainwash the handmaids. The wives have the most prestigious position, they are the wives of the commanders, the elite group who run the government. Certainly, the wives gain numerous facilities because they are parts of elite group. The lowest class is "Unwoman", they are labeled as "unworthy" because they are unable to fulfill their gender roles as mothers who can bear children. Furthermore, women become the object of sexual harassment because they are seen as the promiscuous group that can satisfy men's desires. Obviously, the oppression of women has a detrimental effect on women. Sexual abuse and violence cause trauma and psychological effects and loss of autonomy for women. While the enforcement of gender roles causes women to internalize the project imposed on them in order to survive, they also lose their freedom and rights. In addition, the objectification of women has serious consequences for their identity and self-worth. On the whole, gender-based oppression affects women physically and mentally, which ultimately leads them to endless agony.

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