
LANGUAGE RESISTANCE TO MALE DOMINATION IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S

The Handmaid's Tale

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RESUMO

The Handmaid's Tale é um romance essencial na obra de M. Atwood, um estudo sobre o ser humano (e especialmente sobre a mulher) que se recusa a ser um brinquedo do destino. Considerada não só uma fantasia distópica feminista como também uma sátira futurista, este livro foi escrito como reacção directa ao crescente poder político da ala direita mais religiosa na América dos anos 80.

Este romance conta em detalhe a história de uma mulher que vive sob uma ditadura patriarcal. Trata-se de uma história contada de um modo muito pessoal e parte do seu interesse reside na criação da voz e perspectiva da protagonista. Enquanto o pensamento utópico se baseia na premissa da abundância, a distopia liga-se à retórica e à economia da escassez, da falta e do desespero.

ABSTRACT

The Handmaid's Tale is a chief work among M. Atwood's studies of people (mainly women) refusing to be simple pawns in the game of life. Regarded as a dystopian feminist fantasy as well as a futuristic satire, this novel was written in direct reaction to the growing political power of the American religious right in the 1980s.

This novel tells the story of one woman under a patriarchal dictatorship. It is told in a very personal way, and part of its interest lies in the creation of her voice and viewpoint. Whereas utopian thought is founded on a premise of abundance, the dystopian is tied to the rhetoric and economy of scarcity, lack, and hopelessness.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, Margaret Atwood's novel will be examined with the aim of offering an insight into an important issue in the handmaid's narrative: language-resistance to oppression. In order to do this it will be divided in two parts.

LANGUAGE RESISTANCE TO MALE DOMINATION ...

In the first one – The Language of Power – the principal points of the novel's plot will be summed up, underlining the Gileadean laws as far as language, speech, and reading and writing are concerned.

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In The Power of Language one shall analyse the importance of language and storytelling to the mental health of the main character, Offred, the handmaid, and often it will prove useful to quote from the book itself. Emphasis will be given to her strategies to escape male domination, as well as to her justifications to her tape-recorded diary.

THE LANGUAGE OF POWER

Margaret Atwood's misogynist nightmare is a bold, chilling dystopia that speculates on where and how contemporary society is likely to derail and destroy itself. The novel is set in the late-twentieth-century Republic of Gilead, a futuristic military compound outside Boston, Massachusetts.

Against a backdrop of indistinct sectarian religious wars, Gilead is ruled by authoritarian fundamentalist Christians – enemies of homosexuals, dissidents, adulterers, divorced people, Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Quakers. Following a presidential assassination, the murder of members of Congress, the suspension of constitutional rights, and nuclear war, the story's conclusion looks back from a twenty-second-century perspective on a temporary world of chaos, as described in taped narratives by a female bondswoman known only as Offred (Snodgrass 1995: 245).

Reflecting real episodes of violence, censorship, archconservadorism, and antifemale measures throughout Canada, the United States, Iran, Romania, and Russia (Howells 1996: 129)¹, *The Handmaid's Tale* focuses on ultra-right-wing sexist coercion. Says K. Kumar:

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* women are enslaved to men, either as decorative spouses or as simple breeding machines. The anti-utopia (...) tends to take the form of an intensification and projection of currently existing patterns (Kumar 1991: 102).

Gilead's uncompromising theocracy imprisons women in a tight servitude under arbitrary labels: Wives, Widows, Daughters, Marthas (housemaids), Econowives (workers), Aunts (indoctrinators), Unwomen, and Handmaids (breeders).

¹ According to C. A. Howells Margaret Atwood's clipping files of items from newspapers and magazines which fed directly into her writing can be consulted in the Atwood Papers at University of Toronto Library.

After a nuclear war, the atmosphere is so tainted by toxins that many women have become barren or have borne freakish offspring, known as "shredders". The few women who retain fertility in second marriages and illegal relationships are torn from husbands and lovers, and rationed out as handmaids to breed children for the elite: the Commanders of the Faithful. The remaining female population scuttles about under the eye of a repressive patriarchal regime which pays lip-service to family values, performs public prayers and executions, and rejoices at the birth of healthy babies.

Atwood's politico-orthodox hierarchy is supported by female-controlled internment center set up in an abandoned high school gymnasium. The Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, or Red Center forms handmaids, and is run by the schoolmistress Aunt Lydia and her helpers, who brainwash fertile white breeders into compliance with mandated matings.

A seemingly benign bondage requires women to be renamed and rationed to men. This naming of women by class takes on greater amplitude for horror and comic effect. Handmaids are dressed in white wimples and shapeless red habits, hose, and gloves that contrast the colour-coded female hierarchy: white for virginal daughters, blue for Wives, black for Widows, khaki for Aunts, dull green for Marthas, and red, green, and blue stripes for working-class Econowives.

Under the discipline of a Martha, or household guard, and the tight-lipped care of Rita and Cora, the Commander's suspicious, short-tempered servants, one 33-year-old handmaid lives in a pleasant late-Victorian home, where she copulates with the Commander during her fertile periods. We know her by name only as Offred, the patronymic designation that indicates the Commander whose handmaid she has become in the regime of Gilead. The handmaids in Gilead have no identity except as potential childbearers; they are even stripped of their original names, which are replaced with possessive nominations like "Ofglen", "Ofwayne", or "Ofwarren", indicating their status as mere property of their commanders: "Glen", "Wayne", or "Warren". This renaming is imposed, not chosen, and as the reader is never told of the handmaid's 'real' name, one comes to think of her as Offred too, an unpleasant situation for it might seem one agrees with that renaming rule.

All reading and writing material is forbidden to women in general, handmaids as well as wives. Immured in a chaste upstairs cell without reading and writing material, television, cosmetics, cigarettes, tea, or coffee, Offred only occupation is to prepare her body for motherhood. When she goes to the doctor and refuses his offer to impregnate her to spare her an ignoble death for failure to conceive, Offred's mind returns to the cry of Rachel, Jacob's barren wife in the book of Genesis: "*Give me children, or else I die*" (p.71).

Handmaids in Gilead have two tasks: to do the grocery shopping and to reproduce if they possibly can. If they fail to become pregnant they are transferred to a different household where they have another chance; after three such chances, failure means removal to the Colonies, which is the life-in-death punishment that all women work to avoid at any cost (Bartkowski 1991: 146).

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Atwood highlights enmity among different levels of women by pitting Offred against Serena Joy, the Commander's wife. A former evangelist and gospel singer, Serena Joy glowers at Offred, who replaces a previous handmaid who hanged herself in the bedroom. Each month Serena supervises a loveless, ritual intercourse intended to provide the family with a child. In the sitting room, with the entire staff present, the Commander reads from scripture, a privilege forbidden to women of any status. Upstairs in the bed he mounts Offred, who lies face upwards between the spread thighs of the Commander's wife. Offred appears to comply with the perverse procedures, while secretly courting the Commander during illicit night visits. Her attachment to the Commander arises from her desire for news of the outside world, especially the whereabouts of her husband, daughter, and mother. Simultaneously Offred conducts an affair with Nick, the Commander's chauffeur.

As already said above, Offred's other task is to do the shopping for the household. Her regular shopping trips are done in the compulsory company of another handmaid who is her assigned partner, Ofglen, Commander Glen's handmaid. For several weeks they speak only those greetings ("Praise be") and farewells ("Under His Eye") which are sanctioned by the new order. Other allowed expressions are "Blessed be the fruit" and "May the Lord open", both referring to the reproductive function handmaid's have in Gilead. They never make eye contact, for in this society to look and to be seen looking may lead to punishment and even death. Later on they do look at each other and the looks become words, thus leading to the novel's final development.

The dreary, repetitive cycle of grocery shopping with Ofglen, readying her body for pregnancy, locks Offred in a circumscribed lifestyle that revolves around her menstrual cycle, the proof that her monthly matings have yet to bring sperm and egg together. Her survival hinges on being able to produce a child within three years. A momentous break in the monotony comes with the impending birth of Ofwarren's baby – another handmaid. A gathering of panting, chanting handmaids welcomes baby Angela, who is immediately placed in the hands of Commander Warren's wife. Offred returns home from the Birthday excursion in a turmoil of emotion. After another 'date' with Commander Fred, she retires to her room to cower in the closet as she represses hysteria.

At the novel's climax, events press Offred to desperation. At a Salvaging – a public ceremony in which criminals are punished – all of Gilead's women participate, including Offred, serving as executioners of rebels, adulterers, and dissidents. Offred is repulsed by Ofglen's apparent enjoyment of the lynching and by Ofwarren's retreat into madness.

At the end of the novel, after Ofglen's arrest, Offred panics that she will implicate her in the conspiracies of Mayday, an underground rebel network. As Offred returns to the Commanders door, she is met by Serena Joy, whose possession of a ornamented costume indicates that she knows of Offred's clandestine 'dates' with the Commander. These outings had taken Offred to Jezebel's, an old-time night spot where she reunites with Moira, a friend of her who had managed to escape from the Red Center.

Having her back to the wall, Offred's mind hastily picks over an unappealing set of alternatives. Repulsed by contemplation of fire, suicide, escape to Nick, pleading for the Commander's mercy, flight, or murder of Serena Joy, Offred is interrupted by Nick, who bursts into her room and insists that she accompany two unidentified men in a police van. As Offred is ostensibly arrested for revealing state secrets, the Commander objects to the lack of search warrant. Her captors ignore him and thrust Offred into the van. What happened next is not revealed to the reader.

Atwood concludes the novel with an insider's twist – a rapid flight to the future to gain a brief glimpse at the past. On June 25, 2195, the Twelfth Symposium studying Gileadean history convenes at the University of Denay, Nunavit. Professor Pieixoto explains how researchers unearthed 30 recycled cassette tapes from a way station in Bangor, Maine, assembled them into chronological order, and transcribed the journal on paper. The female narrator's description of her life as a handmaid during Gilead's early period suggests that she was the concubine of Commander Frederick Waterford, a highly placed official who was killed during a purge of liberals for harbouring a subversive. Pieixoto surmises that Offred escaped on the "Underground Frailroad" to Bangor, where Quakers often arranged escape to Canada or England. He hints that Offred, out of fear of retaliation against her family, may have lived out her life in seclusion.

THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

To reduce woman to silence is to reduce her to powerlessness; that is how the masculine will to castrate operates. (...) Thus – perhaps because of this – women's will to revolt necessarily passes through the use of language, the tongue. Language, the tongue, is woman's weapon (Brooke-Rose 1991: 242-243).

The Handmaid's Tale might not be a very optimistic book, but there is, however, a certain note of hope in Offred's continual attempts to resist the

overwhelming oppression to which she is exposed. In particular, and according to M. K. Booker, "Atwood depicts language as an aspect of both patriarchal tradition and feminine resistance" (Booker 1994: 83). Offred's voice survives long after Gilead has been relegated to past history. Her taped continuities of memory are heard 200 years after their recording, at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, in the year of 2195. The truth is that, using D. Cameron's terminology, Offred was *silenced*, but she was not *silent* (Cameron 1990: 4).

If Scheherazade needed to tell stories to postpone her death after sexual initiation in the bridal chamber (Showalter 1987: 301), Offred needs to tell her story in order to keep her mental sanity. As C. A. Howells puts it, "storytelling is [Offred's] only possible gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it becomes the primary means for her psychological survival" (Howells 1996: 127). Telling becomes a crucial issue, because language here is more than a social practice. Offred is dealing with social and political intervention through linguistic devices. She modifies language to her own purposes, thus eluding 'man-made' namings and definitions (Cameron 1990: 12-13; Gilbert 1988: 268). C. A. Howells underlines the fact Offred's strategy of resistance depends on *not* to remain silent:

Crucially Offred refuses to be silenced, (...) resisting the cultural identity imposed on her. She manages to lay claim to a surprising number of things which the system forbids: 'my own time' [p.47], 'my room' [p.60], 'my own territory'[p.83], and even 'my name'[p.94] (Howells 1996: 132).²

The truth is that this use of the possessive *my* came very gradually, as Offred realised she would need to cling to something that could provide her a sense of reality. At the beginning she said "The door of the room – not *my* room, I refuse to say *my* – is not locked" (p.18), but later on she would admit it as her room: "My room, then. There has to be some space, finally, that I claim as mine, even in this time" (p.60). The act of naming things makes herself the master of the situation (Cameron 1990: 3). Even if a fake master. Even in that time, even inside that prison-like mansion.

One way that woman can elude male scripting is by playing with mimesis. By deliberately mimicking and manipulating male-defined images of femininity, woman can expose the artifice of these images and roles – and utilise them to her own advantage (Palmer 1995: 192).

² The square brackets refer to the page numbers in Atwood's novel.

Offred too uses the concept of mimesis to defy Gilead's domination over her life. The very fact that Offred records her diary indicates her insistence on her own awareness and refusal to accept the official Gileadean line that women are vastly inferior to men in their linguistic abilities. After all, the brutal domination of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* is largely linguistic in nature, and Offred dares to build up "a strategy to resist and re-work the plots associated with patriarchy" (Palmer 1995: 188).

Offred's strategy to resist this control implies a refusal to accept the male-oriented linguistic rules. Storytelling allows her to escape the prescriptive definitions of Gilead, working as her last resource, her ultimate salvation. She proves that it is possible to fight against imposed silence, being thus able to maintain an identity of her own, apart from the one prescribed for her in this patriarchal society. "Atwood makes a point which explains this woman's need to reappropriate and redeem patriarchal language" (Gilbert 1988: 268). The fact of being considered male property seems to Offred a nightmare that one day will be over. She has to cling to that remote possibility to have anything to live for:

I intend to get out of here. It can't last forever. Others have thought such things, in bad times before this, and they were always right, they did get out one way or another, and it didn't last forever. *Although for them it may have lasted all the forever they had.* (p.144)³

Living in a cell-like daily routine her emotions were still free, and no dictatorship could take over her mind. To tape record what happened to her was Offred's way of letting people know her truth. She must have recorded the tapes after being free – if one assumes Nick to be her friend and not a traitor. The storyteller in I. Dinesen's *The Blank Page* advises the reader to recognise and trust the wisdom of all storytelling women: "Where the storyteller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness" (Dinesen 1957: 126).

Why cassette tapes? Maybe it was the only means Offred had to keep a diary, having no writing material available. Or maybe because "sentence [is] made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use" (Woolf 1990a: 37). The oral performance of storytelling makes it the feminine choice. Spoken words instead of written words. What V. Woolf said about D. Richardson can also be applied to Offred:

She has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the

³ My italics.

feminine gender. It is of a more elastic fibre (...), capable of stretching to the extreme, of suspending the frailest particles, of enveloping the vaguest shapes (Woolf 1990b: 72).

Storytelling is a form of self-expression of a "kind of automaton in the clutches of someone else's will" (Gubar 1987: 303). Offred gives the reader the reasons that make her own story worth telling, though it represents a single individual fighting against the oppression using language as a weapon:

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I wish this story were different. (...) I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. I'm sorry it's in fragments, (...) But there is nothing I can do to change it. I've tried to put some of the good things in as well (...) because where would we be without them? Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. (...) But I keep on going with this sad and hungry and sordid, this limping and mutilated story, because after all I want you to hear it. (...) By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. (...) you deserve whatever I have left, which is not much but includes the truth. (p.279-280)

Offred guards her lost name as the secret sign of her own identity and as a guarantee of her hopes for a different future: "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried (...) the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark" (p.94). She continually muses on her true name, which is only whispered to Nick as a gift in the love-making aftermath. "Her former name functions like a talisman, something she contemplates only in the safety of the night" (Bartkowski 1991: 145).

The night may be safe, but her room is not. She has a room of her own, but she can never be sure of being alone. There is the eye of surveillance in the ceiling above her, and there are the others in the house who are watching at most times. However, this room kept a message from a former handmaid, perhaps the one who committed suicide: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum", "Don't let the bastards grind you down". That handmaid had left these words carved into the floorboards of the room, and they give Offred some moral support during her lone suffering. Besides, it was a private pleasure of her to use these forbidden (because written) words. It was almost a silent prayer shared by the two of them.

Of course one cannot forget that the Republic of Gilead was still in its beginning, and this is why Offred is able to read the carved words. In a few generations, according to the new laws, no woman will be able to read or write, for they will not be taught those 'forbidden pleasures'; women will be condemned to illiteracy in Gilead.

This knowledge Offred still has enables her to satisfy Commander Fred's secret request to play Scrabble with him. Sure she finds it an amazing proposal, but she cannot dare to refuse it:

"I would like (...) I'd like you to play a game of Scrabble with me" (...) I hold myself absolutely rigid. I keep my face unmoving. So that's what's in the forbidden room! Scrabble! I want to laugh, shriek with laughter, fall off my chair. (p.148)

Offred realises that the Commander has now compromised himself, asking her to play a forbidden game. But soon she admits the pleasure she feels while playing with words, while building new words. It gives her a sense of power she had not felt for too long. The liberty in the use of language now experimented can only be compared to freedom itself, and it must be felt with the senses wide open, assimilated if possible by all five of them:

We play two games. *Larynx*, I spell. *Valance*. *Quince*. *Zygote*. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eyeblink of it. *Limp*, I spell. *Gorge*. What a luxury. The counters are like candies, made of peppermint, cool like that. Humbugs, those were called. I would like to put them into my mouth. They would taste also of lime. The letter C. Crisp, slightly acid on the tongue, delicious. (p.149)

Offred's narration is liberally spiced with wordplay and other demonstrations of her dexterity with language. Being herself the storyteller allows Offred to master reality. She can either invent several different endings to the same story or tell the truth. A female captive being seems to depend much on her own creative capacities:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head [of] what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. (...) When I get out of here (...) it will be a reconstruction too. (p.144)

Splitting the truth in several halves as one tells it can work as a self-protection against insanity. This is what Offred does when she thinks of Luke's whereabouts, as A. Heller puts it:

[Offred] durchläuft die üblichen Phasen von Entfremdung, Isolation, Rebellion und Resignation. (...) Sie ist nicht in der Lage, sich über ihre Situation zu erheben. (...) Der tentative Charakter von Offreds Erzählung geht manchmal so weit, daß sie mehrere Versionen desselben Geschehens anbietet. So erfindet sie drei Variationen über das Schicksal ihres verschollenen Mannes (Heller 1988: 199).

Offred thinks up these three possible hypothesis in order to protect herself from the hurting truth. Subconsciously she knows she will never find out if Luke is still alive, let alone where and how:

Here is what I believe.

I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken, the brown fronds from last year under the green ones just unrolled, or ground hemlock perhaps, although it's too early for the red berries.

(...) I believe this.

I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair. (...) God isn't the only one who knows, so maybe there could be some way of finding out. (...) Does he know I'm here, alive, that I'm thinking about him? I have to believe so. In reduced circumstances you have to believe all kinds of things.

(...) I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all, that he made it, reached the bank, swam the river, crossed the border, dragged himself up on the far shore, an island (...) I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light.

(...) Any day there may be a message from him. It will come in the most unexpected way, from the least likely person, someone I never would have suspected.

(...) Sooner or later he will get me out.(...) Meanwhile I must endure, keep myself safe for later. (...) It's this message, which may never arrive, that keeps me alive. I believe in the message.

(...) Whatever the truth is, I will be ready for it.

This is also a belief of mine. This also may be untrue. (p.114-116)

Offred knows one is never ready when the truth comes.

CONCLUSION

If one takes language to be one of the strongest measures of oppression-repression, then Atwood's novel shows with what swiftness and efficiency the rulers of Gilead have enslaved their citizens.

C. Kaplan, in her article "Language and Gender", asks the following question: "Do men and women in patriarchal societies have different relationships to the language they speak and write?" (Kaplan 1990: 59). The answer in *The Handmaid's Tale* seems to be a positive one, for language is the weapon men here use to manipulate women, but it is also the shield Offred has to protect herself from that male control.

In the novel emphasis is placed on the curious and often disjointed assortment of fragmented parts – body parts, memory flashes, scraps of feelings – which compose the subject, and over the working of which Offred frequently feels that she has little control (Palmer 1995: 183). The loss of

personal identity and individualism which threatens to engulf Offred, combined with the dehumanised nature of her existence under the Commander's roof, is exemplified not only by the fact that she is even deprived of her own name, but also by the lack of any kind of reading and writing material. Besides, language as a social practice is limited to a very few allowed utterances between handmaids. J. Derrida's following passage condenses this need of one's imagination to keep one's sense of balance:

L'imagination est à la fois la condition de la perfectibilité – elle est la liberté – et ce sans quoi la pitié ne s'éveillerait ni ne s'exercerait dans l'ordre humain. Elle active et excite un pouvoir virtuel (Derrida 1992: 260).

Offred develops a method to escape male oppression. She takes the decision of telling her story, she appeals to her imagination in moments of distress, she clings to a few words carved on the floor as a message of hope. She still can feel the pleasure of playing with letters and words, the pleasure the power of language gives to oppressed people. This plan of action she has is sustained by G. Steiner's claim that it is deep rooted in human society:

In most societies and throughout history, the status of women [has been] maintained in a condition of privileged inferiority. (...) Under sociological and psychological pressure [women] have developed internal codes of communication and defence (Steiner 1998: 39).

The desiring 'I' of dystopian hope and resistance is an 'I' in "reduced circumstances" (Bartkowski 1991: 145). However, this 'I' Offred expresses in spite of being conscious of her fragmented and shapeless story, is an 'I' that dares to tell us of the construction of a feminine subjectivity and of the discourse of female desire.

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