



Shodhpith International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

(International Open Access, Peer-reviewed & Refereed Journal)
(Multidisciplinary, Bimonthly, Multilanguage)

Volume: 2

Issue: 1

January-February 2026

Feminist Theory in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Dr. Hriday Kant Pandey

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Siddharth University Kapilvastu, Siddharthnagar

Article Info: (Received- 06/11/2025, Accept- 15/12/2025, Published- 10/01/2026)

DOI- [10.64127/Shodhpith.2026v2i1002](https://doi.org/10.64127/Shodhpith.2026v2i1002)

Abstract

The feminist dimensions of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, examining how the novel interrogates patriarchy, bodily autonomy, language, and resistance within the dystopian theocracy of Gilead. Through a feminist theoretical framework, the study analyzes the regime's systematic control over women's identities, reproduction, literacy, and social mobility. Gilead's hierarchical caste system dividing women into Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, and Aunts demonstrates the politicization of motherhood and the reduction of women to reproductive instruments. Drawing upon historical materialist feminism, radical feminism, and intersectional theory, the paper investigates how the state regulates female bodies through surveillance, linguistic manipulation, and institutionalized sexual coercion. The erasure of personal names, restriction of reading and writing, and the normalization of reproductive exploitation illustrate how discourse operates as a mechanism of power. At the same time, the narrative foregrounds subtle and overt forms of resistance, including acts of memory, storytelling, female solidarity, and bodily defiance. By focusing on Offred's first-person narration, the study highlights how voice itself becomes a feminist act of reclamation. The novel ultimately reimagines feminism not as a fixed ideology but as an evolving struggle shaped by class, gender, and socio-political context. Reading *The Handmaid's Tale* through feminist theory underscores its enduring relevance to contemporary debates surrounding reproductive rights, state control, and women's agency.

Keywords- Feminist Theory, Patriarchy, Reproductive Control, Bodily Autonomy, Surveillance, Language and Power, Female Resistance, Dystopian Fiction.

1. Introduction to the novel and its feminist questions

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* raises critical feminist questions linked to patriarchy, oppression, subjugation, and resistance. Gilead, the totalitarian regime at the story's center, enforces a theocratic constitution that privileges men as rights-bearing citizens and prescribes women by their roles: Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, or Aunts. The regime's discourse politicizes motherhood,



reproduction, and fertility. Political slogans assign meaning to both social roles and the bodies that inhabit them. Rigidly controlled daily activities reinforce the regime's script for reproduction and constrain opportunities for autonomous action. The theocratic government's consolidation of power relies on a panoply of discursive controls. Names and titles especially those stripped of personal ownership reduce complex identities, constrain freedom of expression, and establish hierarchies of status. Gendered power relations saturate the regime's language; men possess surnames, which afford them legal, occupational, and societal identity, whereas women are forbidden to bear family designations. Repeated exposure to Gilead's propaganda fosters a debased political literacy, a truncated vocabulary, and an impoverished apprehension of the world.

The politicization of the body extends to autonomy and resistance. State-mandated practices regulate ownership of the body, the acceptability of diverse pleasures, and the limits of self-expression, while compulsory tasks fit bodies into narrow channels of permitted performance. Transgression takes multiple forms: reading and writing defy verbal restrictions, Maraud's defiance of sleep summons freedom beneath disciplined obedience, and retribution borne of desire plunges into violence. The regime perceives the body as a potential source of dissent and enacts laws and practices to diminish its political force. Framed as a concession to the law, a simulated conjugal act delivers a message of radical refusal. Incursions on freedom yet remain as choices and refusals. The negotiation of bodily autonomy conveys states of agency interwoven with the challenge of sustaining rebellious options.

The *Handmaid's Tale* deploys a vocabulary of social roles, class, and intersectionality, illuminating the links among gender, class, race, and social status. Gilead's framework of rights and responsibilities affords men a dominant political, economic, and social role across all factions of society regardless of class status, occupation, or income level. Although women hold subordinate social and economic status under both pre-Gilead and Gilead regimes, the legal framework adjudicating those relationships continues to operate, and avenues for exerting influence and carving out discretionary space persist. The distribution of power shifts further according to class, race, and ethnicity. Gilead cognizance of the body anticipates that literacy retains significance across divisions of class and status, yet women remain technically literate up to the coup.

2. The world of Gilead and the control of women

The Republic of Gilead is an extreme totalitarian regime, a theocracy that arose as a reaction to environmental disasters, declining birth rates, and a worldwide fertility crisis. Gilead, born from a desire to restore what many perceived to be traditional values and a Christian way of life, established a rigid social hierarchy based on gender and each individual's historical background. Men clearly dominate: they constitute the ruling class, hold all political and economic power, and control women's access to education, wealth, and property (A Callaway, 2008). Gilead forbids women to hold jobs and denies them ownership of property or money. Women's bodies function as ideological and political battlegrounds. Reproductive coercion is a tool to control women.

Gilead's hierarchical society assigns women designated roles that limit their freedom and subordinate them to men. Handmaids, Wives, Aunts, and Marthas illustrate the politicization of motherhood, reproduction, and fertility. The fertile Handmaids serve as a solution to Gilead's falling birth rate. Their symbolic names, derived from the patriarchal biblical narrative about Sarah and Hagar, indicate their sole purpose: to produce children for the elites. Atwood aligns the Handmaids' plight with real-world situations in which women are forced to bear children against their will (Balenović, 2018). Each woman's former name is erased; only the male Commander presiding over the Handmaid retains personal agency. The novel suggests that a woman can only fulfill her societal purpose once she conforms to gender roles.

3. Power, ownership, and language

The regime of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* uses language strategically to gain and maintain



power. Through names, titles, propaganda, and carefully designed discourse, it seeks to influence identity and thinking. Multiple researchers have connected power and language: for example, Foucault views discursive practices as a means of enforcing ideologies, while Becker notes the connections between a person's identity and their name (A Callaway, 2008). In Gilead, women have become less than fully human and are stripped of their identity. The term 'Handmaid' itself alludes to biblical narratives—a powerful denial of agency. Wives use household names to reinforce hierarchical structures, and official titles promote ideas of ownership. Propaganda slogans frame women as objects for protection and restore the notion of “pure women,” conflating womanhood and domesticity. Labels such as “unwoman” and “gender traitor” designate those violating the regime and further isolate them by encouraging discrimination.

The structures and practices of the Gilead regime, from State justification of dystopian rules to oppressive control measures and harsh disciplinary interventions, control women's bodies and disrupt bodily autonomy. Bodily rights govern what one can do with one's own body, rights recognizing one's existence and establishing the framework for appropriate outer engagement with the body (Kulić, 2018). Such norms consist of practices that are socially accepted, tolerable, or clearly defined boundaries that align with ethical and moral standards. These rights determine which practices are socially acceptable for a given body and reflect the way a society regards the individual and their form of life. Alongside the basic rights of being alive, the structure of bodily rights establishes far-reaching conditions for one's existence and involvement.

4. Bodies, reproduction, and resistance

Women experience political and personal oppression daily in the Republic of Gilead. Feminists have questioned how bodies and reproduction are controlled by patriarchal institutions. The Handmaid's Tale reflects theories employed by historical materialist feminists such as Silvia Federici, whom the novel echoes through themes of reproductive exploitation, biological time urgency, and grounded resistance work; Christine Delphy, whom it cites through frameworks involving outer bodies, gracefully replaced white women's bodies, and empowerment strategies; and Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, whom it observes through references to sexual violence and collective rights violations (Auxiliadora Castillo Soto, 2019) (Balenović, 2018).

Women experience political and personal oppression daily in the Republic of Gilead. Feminists have questioned how bodies and reproduction are controlled by patriarchal institutions. The Handmaid's Tale reflects theories employed by historical materialist feminists such as Silvia Federici, whom the novel echoes through themes of reproductive exploitation, biological time urgency, and grounded resistance work; Christine Delphy, whom it cites through frameworks involving outer bodies, gracefully replaced white women's bodies, and empowerment strategies; and Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, whom it observes through references to sexual violence and collective rights violations.

5. Social roles, class, and intersectionality

The Gileadean regime systematically oppresses women by enforcing rigid, hierarchical social roles. Each caste occupies a strictly defined position, with its own name, color-coded dress, and prescribed duties; Gilead's laws and ideology reinforce these distinctions, legally safeguarding the supremacy of elite men. The text highlights the power dynamics inherent in this caste structure, exposing how oppressive ideologies control individuals by exploiting existing social divisions (A Callaway, 2008). Atwood illustrates the intersections between class, race, and gender in a society where women possess limited power. Although Gilead favors upper-class white women, these privileges diminish because gender remains the determining factor in individual status. Yet, even within a theocratic context like Gilead, where religious language dominates public discourse, feminist critiques survive. Throughout the narrative, the regime's efforts to eradicate dissenting voices paradoxically affirm their persistence (Kulić, 2018).



6. Surveillance, fear, and the suppression of dissent

Every society deploys mechanisms of surveillance, collective control, and punishment to regulate social conduct. Gilead adopts extreme versions of such techniques, targeting the population in general but maintaining a stringent gender-based hierarchy. As noted, women experience intense monitoring and legal restrictions, and these measures serve to stifle dissent. The regime issues clear directives governing the appropriate display of emotions; accords strict social roles and behavioral scripts; corrupts the language; and propagates an ideology emphasizing fear, envy, and social isolation. As the narrator observes, surveillance becomes a powerful instrument of social policing through the mobilization of both “Eyes” and “Aunts.” The increasing prevalence of the phrase “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” serves as an index of rising discontent with the “apoplectic” social environment.

Gilead uses diverse means to monitor personal behavior, punish transgressions, and promote conformity to established social norms. Physical presence remains a crucial method of surveillance. Among ordinary citizens, routines, itineraries, and social obligations shape behavior, dictate encounters, and curtail opportunities for unsanctioned actions. Secluded places remain indispensable for illicit conduct; in historical Gilead, the Handmaid’s narrator perceives what she refers to as an “errand,” involving online research, as a dangerous deviation previously undertaken with others. Substantial powers of observation, official oversight, and public compliance characterize an increasingly unregulated society. “Nolite Te Bastardes Carborundorum” gains wider acceptance as discontent with the repressive order spreads, promoting suggestions for semi-acceptable rebellion even among broader sectors of the community. Substances heighten the efficacy of the Handmaid’s recourse to this vocable; readerly inquiry about the exact meaning reinforces the narrator’s isolation while nevertheless allowing for additional interpretation (A Callaway, 2008).

7. Female solidarity and acts of defiance

In Gilead, scenes of female solidarity and support intermingle with acts of defiance and rebellion. Handmaids are encouraged to forge connections in their own groups. During ceremonies, they join in a communal, silent prayer. When Offred first arrives at the Commander’s house as a Handmaid, she recalls how “the Aunts tell us the story of the waitress in the Mackenzie Hotel,” who is punished for providing the wrong accompaniment to a vilipended drink order (Gernhard, 2022). She sees in the tale a sincere warning of the dangers involved in the seemingly trivial act of writing a poison-pen letter—the story addresses and embraces two female roles, the waitress and the informer, but misses the moral of the story. An Aunt and a Mary both prefer the taste of lemonade. The reinforcement of the same message to different groups rather than across the board could point to oppressive structures specific to the office of Aunt and Mary; they do not feel it necessary to correct the Handmaids’ apparent misunderstanding of the text.

Offred is not the only Handmaid to dare small rebellions. When leaving the house, she gazes intensely at the sky, an action that does not provoke immediate censure from the Marthas and other Handmaids. Or, when she visits the doctor, she pursues the same paths home evenings that she did as a Wife. Farther down the street, in a different neighbourhood, a man and woman in the back seat of a car exchange funeral deference: she in an ovate hat, he in a roll of cloches. Such observations sustain a measure of hope that the world remains the same, even for those like Offred who now hold purely two-dimensional roles. Atwood’s Handmaid, like Butler’s Dana, remains convinced that her available corpus of data will be helpful in predicting likely scenarios, thus facilitating strategic intervention.

8. The narrator's voice and feminist critique

The narrator’s voice is critical to the narrative and to Offred herself. Offred’s perspective shapes the plot and speculation, the progress of the story’s central themes, and how readers respond to those elements. A first-person narrative enables readers to engage cognitively and emotionally with Of-

fred's suffering and trauma and with her desperate yearning for freedom and human connection. Theory-testing requires readers to view the story through other lenses and to ignore Offred's voice during much of the novel. Narration represents sections of the story and theme trajectories less accessible to a reader held spellbound by Offred's experience. The reliability of the first-person account is always open to question. While memory and perception can distort reality, Offred's story must nevertheless be approached holistically with an awareness of the potential interplay between individual experience and social reality.

While speculation, critique, illustration, and thematic progression can be achieved by a third-person narrator, hearing a story through the filter of its protagonist's consciousness often enhances the impact of the ideas. Theocentric references and concentration on reproductive grouping reveal a critique of patriarchy steeped in feminist theory. *The Handmaid's Tale* illuminates women's oppression and subjugation through motherhood, examines Offred's psychology as a politically and historically situated individual, and explores the role women play in their own oppression across gendered power hierarchies. It raises fundamental questions about motherhood, sexuality, and the family by analysing the use of motherhood, reproduction, and fertility as political instruments in the dystopia of Gilead.

9. Reimagining feminism in the narrative

The consideration of alternative futures links *The Handmaid's Tale* to feminist debates on agency and change. With this in mind, *Speculations* collects marginalized traces of women's freedom, imagining multiple possibilities for power and oppression. Such explorations draw on feminist theorists who share a compatibility with nihilism: Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous (Kulić, 2018). The intention is not to prescribe a specific course of action, but to ponder the connections between circumstances, visions, and desires.

10. Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale raises core feminist questions: How does Gilead establish and maintain patriarchy? How does the state oppress, subjugate, and control women? How do individuals resist? Feminist theory provides the analytical framework to answer these questions. Patriarchy is a term for male domination. Subjugation signifies the forced surrender of autonomy and will. The established model of oppression consists of the pervasive violation of bodily integrity, the imposition of involuntary servitude and slavery, the imposition of a state-controlled reproductive procedure, and the near-total restriction of intellectual pursuit and education. Resistance refers to actions taken by individuals. Five main modes of resistance occur in Gilead: discourse, reworking social roles, reconstituting the body, acts of defiance, and the establishment of clandestine networks. Reading Atwood through feminist theory illuminates literature's relevance to contemporary questions of power, control, and oppression (A Callaway, 2008).

Author's Declaration:

I/We, the author(s)/co-author(s), declare that the entire content, views, analysis, and conclusions of this article are solely my/our own. I/We take full responsibility, individually and collectively, for any errors, omissions, ethical misconduct, copyright violations, plagiarism, defamation, misrepresentation, or any legal consequences arising now or in the future. The publisher, editors, and reviewers shall not be held responsible or liable in any way for any legal, ethical, financial, or reputational claims related to this article. All responsibility rests solely with the author(s)/co-author(s), jointly and severally. I/We further affirm that there is no conflict of interest financial, personal, academic, or professional regarding the subject, findings, or publication of this article.



References:

1. A Callaway, A. (2008). Women disunited : Margaret Atwoodu27s The Handmaidu27s Tale as a critique of feminism.
2. Balenović, A. (2018). Ideologija Republike Gilead u Sluškinjinoj priči M. Atwood.
3. Kulić, B. (2018). Rodna apokalipsa: usporedba odnosa moći u Sluškinjinoj priči Margaret Atwood i Moći Naomi Alderman.
4. Auxiliadora Castillo Soto, M. (2019). Instrumentalization of Women's Bodies in the Novel The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood.
5. Gernhard, M. (2022). Sisterhood and Survival: An Exploration of Womenu27s Relationships in Feminist Speculative Fiction.

Cite this Article-

'Dr. Hriday Kant Pandey, 'Feminist Theory in the Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood' Shodhpith International Multidisciplinary Research Journal, ISSN: 3049-3331 (Online), Volume:2, Issue:01, January-March 2026.

"Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY), allowing others to use, share, modify, and distribute it with proper credit to the author."

