



Article

Subaltern Oppression and Human Trafficking in *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

*The present paper offers a postcolonial reading of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on the exploitation of subaltern women through institutionalized sex trafficking and coerced labor, forms of contemporary slavery. Drawing on Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" the analysis investigates the conditions of marginalized women under the Gileadean regime. Atwood's dystopian narrative portrays modern subalternity through the systemic silencing of women rendered voiceless by intersecting structures of patriarchal, religious, and state domination. The essay examines how Gilead's fusion of theocratic governance and patriarchal ideology constructs a totalitarian order that erases female agency and explores the mechanisms of control and exploitation that lead to marginalization. Finally, the essay argues that Atwood subverts the silence imposed on subaltern women by enabling their narratives to emerge through the protagonist's voice, ultimately reclaiming spaces for resistance and testimony within the text.*

Keywords: Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Subalternity, Spivak's Postcolonial theory, Sex trafficking, Modern slavery, Bio-politics, Patriarchal domination, Resistance.

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Introduction

Although initially published in 1985, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has witnessed a remarkable popular resurgence in the early 21st century, due in part to growing concerns about the erosion of women's rights and broader fears of authoritarian regression (McWilliams, 2020, p. 91). This resurgence has not only inspired mass protests, artistic productions, and critical discourse. However, it has also resonated strongly with a new generation of women facing contemporary struggles over bodily autonomy and political agency. A significant catalyst for this renewed interest was the release of Hulu's television adaptation in 2017, which coincided with a broader cultural wave of female-centered media productions, such as the BBC's all-women panel on *"The Critic's Circle"* (McWilliams, 2020, p. 93). Set in the totalitarian theocracy of Gilead, formerly the United States and now an isolated, militarized regime, the novel envisions a society in which fertile women, known as Handmaids, are trafficked, enslaved, and forced into reproductive servitude (Auxiliadora Castillo Soto, 2019, p. 77).

These women are systematically stripped of identity and agency, labeled as *"sluts"* or other specific terms, and subjected to rigid state control through a regime of religious fundamentalism and legal oppression. Their prescribed function is singular: to bear children for the ruling elite. Theocratic laws enforce mandatory uniforms, red dresses, and white bonnets to suppress individuality and prohibit reading, writing, and interpersonal connection, particularly with other women. Surveillance is pervasive, with *"Aunts"* and informants policing the Handmaids for acts of so-called *"gender treachery"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 71).

In crafting this dystopian vision, Atwood powerfully interrogates the dominant historical narrative that prioritizes the voices of the elite. Instead, she foregrounds the silenced and the oppressed, challenging the traditional conception of history as the domain of the powerful. Giving narrative presence to those society render voiceless, Atwood urges future generations to adopt a more inclusive and critical perspective on the past and its legacy (Atwood, 1985, p. 123).

Historical Context of Sexual Slavery in The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) portrays a dystopian theocracy, Gilead, where women's reproductive capacity is weaponized under patriarchal and white supremacist control. Offred, the protagonist, is a forcibly conscripted reproductive laborer whose body is regulated by a state that fuses religious dogma with authoritarian bio-politics (Atwood, 2010, p. 32). Her condition exemplifies how modern societies reconfigure older patterns of sexual slavery into

institutionalized, state-sanctioned exploitation. Scholars have drawn parallels between Gilead and real-world systems of human trafficking, noting how gender, race, and class intersect to construct regimes of sexual subjugation, especially in post-conflict or neoliberal contexts (Castillo Soto, 2019, p. 39; Basu, 2018, p. 132).

Recent criticism foregrounds the need for an intersectional lens when examining *The Handmaid's Tale*. While Offred enjoys racial privilege, her commodification within a rigid caste system mirrors the logics of colonial governance and sexual slavery. Postcolonial scholars emphasize how the novel resonates beyond Western contexts, where the "*handmaid*" figure has been appropriated globally to signify resistance against reproductive and gendered violence (Altaher, 2020, pp. 62–64; Castillo Soto, 2019, p. 39). As Kempadoo (2015) warns, dominant anti-trafficking narratives often erase the agency of marginalized women, reinforcing colonial savior tropes (p. 29).

Critics Such as Rahimi (2022) contend that Gilead functions as a metaphorical colony, where reproductive control serves as a mechanism of both cultural and sexual domination, reinforcing hierarchies of power and erasing female autonomy (p. 88). Briedik (2021) similarly highlights the epistemic resistance embedded in Offred's fragmented narration, interpreting it as a subaltern strategy of reclaiming voice under surveillance (pp. 84–85). Khuram, Siddiqui, and Abbas (2024) apply Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, asserting that Offred's racial privilege outweighs her political disposability and reproductive objectification (p. 194). These readings shift the discourse from liberal feminism to a critical, decolonial feminist inquiry.

Moreover, marginalized voices' global reappropriation of Atwood's dystopia reveals the novel's complex reception history. Subaltern groups across Latin America and the Middle East have adopted the "*handmaid*" archetype as a symbol of reproductive injustice and state violence, transforming Atwood's imagery into tools of resistance (Altaher, 2020, p. 63). This global resonance invites reflection on how Western literary texts, despite inherent blind spots, can be re-signified by those they initially exclude.

Theoretically, Atwood's work invites a subaltern reading grounded in Gramsci's and Spivak's frameworks. Gramsci (1971) defines subalternity as systemic exclusion from hegemonic discourse (p. 182), while Spivak (1988) explores how colonial subjects, especially women, are denied epistemic agency (p. 271). In Gilead, handmaids are quintessential subalterns: voiceless, biologically instrumentalized, and epistemically erased. Offred's limited narration, filtered through censorship and trauma, mirrors the Spivakian paradox wherein the subaltern cannot fully "*speak*" within dominant discourses (Spivak, 1988, p. 294; Louai, 2012, p. 5).

This silencing operates through institutional control of reproduction, language, and memory. As Ismael and Saleh (2023) show, women in Gilead are disciplined through rituals and language, but resist through symbolic subversions and counter-narratives (pp. 147–148). The novel reflects the mechanics of domination and the ethical complexities of complicity and resistance under totalitarian patriarchy.

Economically, Gilead enacts a proto-Fordist sexual economy where female reproductive labor is commodified and regulated. Ettinger (2001) describes this as a mode of primitive accumulation, where rape and forced childbirth serve state-building goals (p. 148). It mirrors broader capitalist-patriarchal logics, where the female body is reduced to exchange value, echoing the co-optation of biological functions for nationalistic ends.

Despite its Western origins, *The Handmaid's Tale* has sparked global feminist engagement. While some scholars criticize its initial lack of racial representation, its symbolic structure has enabled subaltern voices to reclaim and reframe its imagery for their emancipatory projects. Thus, Atwood's narrative critiques biopolitical domination and is a contested site of feminist and postcolonial meaning-making.

Discussion

"Give me children, or else I die. There is more than one meaning to it. Because the Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants would not steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we would make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (Atwood, 1985, Epigraph)

The systemic violence enacted upon sex-trafficked individuals has long drawn parallels between the commodification of human bodies and the securitization of modern borders. Women, especially those marginalized by poverty, undocumented status, or limited legal agency, are disproportionately targeted by trafficking networks, which often operate alongside, or as alternatives to, illegal immigration routes (Kempadoo, 2015, pp. 28–30). In such contexts, modern slavery persists under the guise of coerced sexual labor. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood offers a potent dystopian metaphor for this phenomenon. Gilead, the theocratic and patriarchal regime at the center of the novel, institutionalizes gendered slavery through reproductive trafficking. The novel dramatizes how sexual subjugation, cloaked in religious dogma, is legitimized and systematized through ideological control.

Atwood anchors this dystopia with intertextual references that link Gilead's practices to biblical and literary traditions. The novel's epigraph, Genesis 30:1–3, recounts Rachel's command to Jacob to "go in unto" her handmaid Bilhah to bear

children on her behalf, a passage reappropriated by Gilead's regime to justify institutionalized sexual slavery. "*And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children... she said, Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her*" (Atwood, 1985, p.93). This scene is reenacted during the Ceremony, this narrative device not only underpins the state's coercive reproductive practices but also exposes how scriptural texts are used to legitimize subalternity. Similarly, Atwood draws from Milton's "*Paradise Lost*" to highlight the ideological fall from freedom to enforced obedience, wherein women's sexuality is both demonized and weaponized (Milton, 1667/2007). The Gileadean state correlates infertility not with environmental or biological factors, but with a perceived moral decay, thus framing women's bodies as both the cause and the remedy of a civilizational crisis (Atwood, 1985, pp. 112–114).

Within this bio-political framework, handmaids are trafficked, either internally within Gilead or across its militarized borders. The Red Center functions as both a site of indoctrination and commodification, where women are stripped of identity and recast into roles determined by their reproductive potential. The use of religious imagery, such as the reinterpretation of Bilhah (suggested to be of African descent), is weaponized to align with Gilead's racialized logic. The narrative's reference to "*unwomen*" and their relegation to the toxic Colonies mirror the historic exile and silencing of racialized, non-conforming women, a dynamic consistent with what Gayatri Spivak (1988) terms the epistemic violence inflicted upon subaltern subjects.

Furthermore, Gilead's practices echo broader colonial structures of domination and subjugation. Biblical justifications for gender hierarchy, such as Genesis 3:16, which blame women for the Fall, are reinterpreted to endorse patriarchal control and heteronormative violence. State practices such as military takeovers of academic institutions, criminalization of "*gender treachery*," and ritualized punishments like "*Particicution*" serve to dehumanize and discipline deviant bodies (Atwood, 1985, pp. 65–70). The Jezebel Club, a secretive brothel where selected women are sexually exploited while appearing liberated, further illustrates how the illusion of agency can mask deep systemic coercion. These intersecting mechanisms render the handmaids not merely reproductive vessels but trafficked subjects within a totalitarian regime structured on patriarchal and theological subalternity.

Mechanisms of Control and Exploitation in Gilead

In contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourse, dystopian narratives like *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985) have gained renewed relevance as literary sites that critique the institutionalized subjugation of marginalized identities, particularly women. Set in the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, Atwood's novel dramatizes how

authoritarian regimes manipulate gender, religion, and bio-power to control and exploit women's bodies. Mechanisms of control such as enforced dress codes, religious indoctrination, and ritualized sexual violence serve not merely as tools of domination but as technologies of systemic dehumanization that strip women of voice, agency, and subjectivity. As Sisson (2020) observes, Gilead's regime operates through "*a dual process of sanctification and commodification*," transforming women's reproductive capacities into divinely sanctioned obligations while reducing their bodies to instruments of state control (p. 114).

Similarly, Erdem (2021) underscores how coercive social practices, such as the Red Center's indoctrination and the imposition of strict dress codes, reduce Handmaids to state-sanctioned reproductive roles, effectively stripping them of individual identity and suppressing resistance (p. 55). By weaving together patriarchal ideologies with pseudo-religious justifications, Atwood exposes the brutal efficiency of regimes that normalize structural violence under the guise of divine order and national preservation. This introduction lays the foundation for a deeper exploration of how *The Handmaid's Tale* unveils the interlocking systems of gendered oppression that function through seemingly ordinary mechanisms of control and ritualized exploitation.

Through its detailed portrayal of Gilead's mechanisms, ranging from male dominance and ritualized sexual practices to clothing codes and ideological training, Atwood exposes how authoritarian structures co-opt gender, religion, and tradition to normalize exploitation. This analysis paves the way for a deeper investigation of how such mechanisms function within and beyond the fictional world, echoing enduring concerns about regulating female bodies in patriarchal societies.

Commanders: Patriarchal Authority -The Role of Gender

The regime of Gilead enforces gender roles not merely through law but through symbolic and physical domination. Male power is institutionalized and unchallenged, while women, particularly Handmaids, are stripped of names, rights, and identity. Scholars such as Rivera (2020) argue that "*the imposition of patriarchal power in Gilead mirrors real-world practices of gender oppression, where the female body becomes the primary site of state control*" (p. 84).

Economic disenfranchisement, such as the freezing of women's bank accounts and transfer of property rights to male relatives, serves as a precursor to their ideological transformation. "*Economic disenfranchisement becomes the first tactic of bio-political control in Gilead*," note Al-Mansour (2023), emphasizing that stripping women of property rights in Gilead not only fosters compliance but reframes dependency as

moral obligation (p. 71). “Women cannot hold property anymore” (Atwood, 1985, p. 187)—reflects the regime’s swift reordering of gender relations through legislative and domestic complicity.

At the pinnacle of Gilead’s rigidly stratified social order reside the Commanders, men who govern through a combination of military power, religious dogma, and patriarchal entitlement. These figures are physically and ideologically removed from the burdens of domestic labor, as indicated by Offred’s recollection of the “river of scrubbed floors” beneath the upper echelons of Gileadean households (Atwood, 1985, p. 23). Only elite Handmaids, valued for their biological capacity to bear children, are allowed proximity to these men. In this structure, women become commodified as “*walking wombs*,” stripped of personhood and reduced to reproductive utility (Atwood, 1985, p. 27). As Azarmi and Zarei (2022) observe, Gilead’s class-gender matrix “*reifies women’s bodies as territories of conquest and colonization, where fertility becomes a weapon of political capital*” (p. 12). The Commanders thus emerge as architects and beneficiaries of a system that weaponizes fertility against the very women who possess it.

This disregard for the Handmaids as sentient beings is institutionalized through a bureaucratic and theological apparatus that renders women both hyper-visible and simultaneously invisible. Their ovulatory cycles are tracked, their diets controlled, and their movements surveilled, while their voices and names are systematically erased. In a conversation with a Guardian, Offred recounts how women are classified according to function, “*dull*” or “*entertaining*”, and evaluated solely on their reproductive capacity (Atwood, 1985, p. 32). According to Chatterjee and Lim (2023), this rigid taxonomy is emblematic of Gilead’s “*bio-caste system*,” which segments womanhood into reductive roles, each with a fixed, state-assigned destiny (p. 153). The Commanders preside over this system not only as political rulers but as moral arbiters, justifying reproductive slavery through sacred rhetoric.

Despite their elevated roles, the Commanders are portrayed with satirical irony. Their physical shortcomings, varicose veins, poor eyesight, and coughing fits clash with the virile image they are meant to represent (Atwood, 1985, p. 40). This disconnection between image and embodiment underscores Gilead’s performative nature of power. Their religious garb, long black cloaks and hoods, concealing all but their mouths, evokes Catholic legalism and signals the merging of political theocracy with ritualistic control (Atwood, 1985, p. 42). As Tang and Brown (2023) note, “*the Commanders’ costuming reinforces their position as godlike figures, even as their physical frailty reveals the hollowness of their dominion*” (p. 47). Their power is thus not rooted in

inherent strength or virtue, but in carefully constructed mythologies and visual symbols designed to perpetuate obedience.

Even their sexual authority is filtered through ritual and bureaucracy. The Ceremony, a state-mandated act of reproduction, requires a pre-scripted reading from the Bible, which attempts to depersonalize intimacy and transform sex into a sacred duty (Atwood, 1985, p. 45). However, as Offred observes, some Commanders quietly subvert the ritual's formality, seeking emotional closeness or nostalgia for lost affection. One Commander refers to the Ceremony as *"the last evidence of love,"* suggesting a conflicted humanity buried beneath authoritarian decorum (Atwood, 1985, p. 46). According to Cooper (1996), Gilead's patriarchal authority relies on *"repetitive displays of power to secure its dominance, exposing the internal contradictions and insecurities of the regime"* (p. 375). The performance of dominance thus masks internal contradictions, where personal longing coexists with systemic cruelty.

Critically, the management of reproductive rituals often falls to the Commander's Wife, who is confined within her own socially rigid and emotionally fraught sphere. Offred describes the Wife's surveillance and complicity during the Ceremony: her skin *"shining, as if the skin has been peeled off a fruit,"* and a smile *"full of secrets,"* both of which evoke the artifice of her pre-Gilead life as a televangelist (Atwood, 1985, p. 35). Serena Joy's transformation from media figure to domestic overseer exemplifies the regime's reconfiguration of public female roles into private servitude. As Muhlisin and Abdussamad (2024) suggest, *"Wives in Gilead occupy an ambivalent position: they are both privileged and powerless, administrators of ritual and prisoners of its consequences"* (p. 32). Her jealousy, rigid control, and emotional detachment are shaped not only by her complicity but by her loss of status in a male-dominated hierarchy that fetishizes fertility over fidelity.

The Commanders represent the culmination of patriarchal authority in Gilead, wielding a simultaneously absolute and absurd power. Their dominion is upheld through formalized rituals, symbolic dress, sacred texts, and gendered hierarchies that reduce women to reproductive vessels and ideological objects. However, their frailty, emotional detachment, and dependency on others to maintain their authority expose the instability of the system they lead. As Jafari and Shams (2022) argue, *"The Commanders embody a paradox: they appear omnipotent within Gilead's hierarchy but remain deeply reliant on the institutions, costumes, and rituals that obscure their human fallibility"* (p. 110). In this way, Atwood critiques totalitarian power and ideological illusions that sustain its legitimacy.

Clothing as a Mechanism of Control in Gilead

Clothing functions in *The Handmaid's Tale* as a potent mechanism of subjugation and symbolic control within Gilead's authoritarian system. The red garments worn by Handmaids operate as visual markers that strip away personal agency, reducing women to reproductive roles within a rigid gender hierarchy. Scholars such as Erdem (2021) argue that clothing in Gilead acts as a social code that reinforces submission and erases individuality (p. 79). Atwood (1985) describes the dress codes as a ritualized practice, "*dressing as prayers*" that not only conceals the female body but also enforces obedience and conformity (p. 44).

The regime's use of color-coded uniforms clearly demarcates women's roles: Handmaids wear red to signify fertility and surveillance, Wives wear blue to denote chastity and authority, while Marthas wear green to reflect their domestic roles (Atwood, 1985, pp. 45–50). According to Wallenius (2025), this color system functions as a visibility strategy that makes Handmaids easy to monitor, discouraging escape and ensuring constant observation (p. 12). The anonymity imposed by the red dresses and white veils erases individuality, transforming women into indistinguishable symbols of their assigned roles.

Clothing in Gilead extends beyond fabric to regulate behavior, such as banning high heels, to further suppress female autonomy and restrict physical freedom. As Barnard (2013) and Rubinstein (2018) explain, clothing acts as a visual language of power, a tool that disciplines and stratifies bodies through symbolic meaning (Barnard, p. 105; Rubinstein, p. 14). The dress code constructs a visual regime of immediate and internalized order.

This system's psychological effects are evident in Offred's reflections on her garments, which evoke confinement and erasure. She describes her uniform in detailed terms, "*the red skirt is ankle-length... the sleeves are full,*" accompanied by "*wings*" that limit her vision and symbolize submission (Atwood, 1985, p. 44). The impact of these enforced identities leads her to an internal crisis, "*thinking death, walking womb*" (p. 46), illustrating the existential damage inflicted by such symbolic violence. Illustrating the existential damage inflicted by such symbolic violence, scholars such as Stillman and Johnson (2014) underscore how Gilead's dress code produces docile, obedient bodies and perpetuates power through rigid visual hierarchies (p. 77).

Ultimately, Gilead's clothing operates as a calculated tool of ideological domination. It visually enforces the patriarchal regime's control, suppresses individuality, and imposes a false sense of order through rigidly defined, symbolically charged appearances.

The Red Center and the Sanctification of Sexual Oppression

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents a harrowing vision of state-sanctioned gender oppression through interconnected mechanisms of ideological indoctrination and ritualized sexual violence. Central to this structure are the Red Center and Jezebel's, two spatial and symbolic institutions that embody Gilead's manipulation of womanhood into reproductive and sexual subalternity. Through these mechanisms, the regime enforces obedience, erases individuality, and sacralizes subjugation, ultimately transforming the female body into a controlled site of state interest.

The Red Center, functioning as a re-education camp, represents the regime's ideological apparatus of control, where Handmaids are subjected to psychological manipulation masked as moral purification. Here, theocracy merges with biopolitics, as women's fertility is weaponized in the service of state survival. The Red Center, officially named the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, functions as a carceral institution where Handmaids-in-training are forcibly stripped of their former identities and reconstructed into obedient reproductive vessels, as women's fertility is weaponized for the survival of the regime. According to Khan (2022), *"The Red Center's indoctrination mirrors contemporary techniques of coercive control found in extremist ideologies, Khan emphasizing the psychological violence that masquerades as moral purification, and he sees the Center as a method of breaking and remaking the female self into a submissive reproductive tool"* (p. 56).

The spatial transformation of a former high school into this ideological training ground visually represents the inversion of education from empowerment to subjugation. *"The Red Center serves as the mechanism through which women are symbolically reborn into silence and submission,"* write Azarmi and Zarei (2022, p. 11). The women are subjected to theological reinterpretations that recast freedom as submission, evident in Aunt Lydia's chilling assertion: *"Now you are being given freedom from. Do not underrate it"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 34). This rhetorical manipulation transforms Gilead's pedagogical model into one that normalizes suffering as a sacred duty (Jafari & Shams, 2022, p. 109).

Economic disenfranchisement, such as the freezing of women's bank accounts and the transfer of property rights to male relatives, serves as a precursor to their ideological transformation. *"Economic disenfranchisement becomes the first tactic of biopolitical control in Gilead,"* note Muhlisin, M., & Abdussamad, Z. (2024, p. 30). Identifying how financial dependency is weaponized to coerce submission. Offred's recollections of these transitions, *"Women cannot hold property anymore"* (Atwood, 1985,

p. 187), reflect the regime's swift reordering of gender relations through legislative and domestic complicity.

Under the Aunts' instruction and constant surveillance, the Red Center transforms into a physical and symbolic prison. A militarized infrastructure of control thwarts Offred's escape attempt: *"There were super-agents and electronic barriers"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 23). Tang and Brown (2023) describe this as the fusion of *"state technology and sacred law,"* wherein the female body becomes both battlefield and prison (p. 48). The regime's power lies not only in visible brutality but in its capacity to preempt and neutralize dissent before it materializes.

The brothel Jezebel's offers a parallel but equally coercive form of control. Although it appears to allow more liberties, cosmetics, casual speech, and sexualized clothing, it remains tightly regulated and entirely exploitative. Jezebel's represents the hidden face of Gilead, where elite male officials consume what the public regime publicly forbids. *"Jezebel's marks the convergence of repression and indulgence,"* assert Tang and Brown (2023), *"where elite male power is exercised through the consumption of objectified women"* (p. 43). The women's garish costumes render them commodified and de-subjectivized, turning them into *"static symbols of male desire, visually coded to sustain patriarchal dominance"* (Erdem, 2021, p. 77).

Offred's idea, that the women at Jezebel's *"look like dolls"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 305), captures the performative disempowerment central to the regime's ideology. The illusion of rebellion at Jezebel's is itself a mechanism of control. As Wannamaker (1994) explains, Jezebel's is *"a carefully orchestrated performance of sexual submission that ultimately reinforces patriarchal power, limiting any real form of female resistance"* (p. 134). These structures mirror Banet-Weiser's (2018) argument that *"popular feminism often operates within a surveillance framework, where visibility and voice are permitted only within neoliberal, patriarchal boundaries"* (p. 25).

The Ceremony, ritualized sexual violence disguised as divine duty, epitomizes the regime's control over female sexuality. Stripped of consent and recast as a sacred act, the Ceremony erases individual agency and reconstitutes rape as institutionalized obedience. *"Gilead's practice of institutional rape, disguised as religious ritual, reveals the regime's systematic erasure of women's autonomy under a patriarchal theocracy"* (Stillman & Johnson, 2014, p. 78). It echoes Spivak's (1988) theory that the subaltern woman is doubly silenced, through literal domination and symbolic reinterpretation.

Ultimately, both the Red Center and Jezebel's serve to institutionalize gendered subalternity. In the Red Center, women are dismantled and remade into sacred vessels of reproduction. At Jezebel's, they are rebranded as sexual commodities for elite consumption. The same patriarchal logic bound these two poles, chastity and

deviance. As Callaway (2008) points out, Gilead uses education and religious ritual to manufacture “*docile, reproductive female bodies trained to serve the divine state*” (p. 91).

Through these parallel mechanisms, *The Handmaid’s Tale* critiques historical and contemporary forms of structural gender violence. “*Atwood’s dystopia exposes how gendered subjugation is perpetuated when violence is framed as sacred duty and consent is redefined by authoritarian structures*” (Jafari & Shams, 2022, p. 108). The ongoing resonance of this critique lies in its exposure of how ideology, ritual, and surveillance intersect to transform women into instruments of state power, silencing their voices while appearing to sanctify their suffering.

The Subaltern Subject

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) presents a dystopian vision through the constrained consciousness of Offred, a woman forcibly enlisted as a reproductive servant under the theocratic Republic of Gilead. The novel is rendered entirely through Offred’s interior monologue. This technique not only captures the psychological dimensions of life under authoritarian rule but also performs a subtle critique of patriarchal epistemology. In this context, Offred represents what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) terms the “*subaltern subject*,” whose voice is structurally excluded from hegemonic discourse. Though Offred’s narration is fragmented and contingent, it asserts an alternative epistemology through memory, irony, and subversive speech acts.

The prohibition against literacy for women in Gilead is emblematic of what Spivak (1988) identifies as epistemic violence, a mode of silencing subaltern voices by denying them access to institutional forms of knowledge (p. 287). “*I cannot read the sign*,” Offred notes early on, “*I must not look too long at the lettering*” (Atwood, 1985, p. 18). This censorship is not merely punitive but ontological; it dismantles female agency by stripping language itself from the feminine subject. As Kaye (2022) argues, “*Offred’s inability to read is symbolic of the larger erasure of female subjectivity in patriarchal theocracies*” (p. 61).

The rise of Gilead, from the ashes of a democratic United States, is rendered through Offred’s shocked recollections: “*I was stunned. The entire government, gone like that. How did they get in, how did it happen?*” (Atwood, 1985, p. 174). This abrupt transition dramatizes the fragility of democratic structures. It exemplifies what scholars like Baccolini and Moylan (2013) call “*dystopian nostalgia*,” the longing for a lost past that was itself complicit in the seeds of present oppression (p. 11). Gilead is not an alien order imposed from without, but an exacerbation of patriarchal ideologies latent within liberal modernity.

One of the most chilling dimensions of Gilead is its appropriation of feminist rhetoric to rationalize gender apartheid. Offred bitterly reflects, *"Mother... you wanted a woman's culture. Well, now there is one. It is not what you meant, but it exists"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 137). This ideological inversion is consistent with what Fraser (2021) describes as the co-optation of feminism by reactionary movements, where feminist critiques of sexual commodification are weaponized to enforce biopolitical control over reproduction (p. 203).

Gilead's fusion of Puritan fundamentalism with antifeminist strands of radical critique thus constitutes what Whitfield (2020) refers to as *"instrumentalized feminism,"* where language typically associated with empowerment is repurposed to justify surveillance, obedience, and reproductive exploitation (p. 109). Offred's erasure of personal identity is exemplified by her assigned name, which marks her as the property of Fred. *"We are two-legged wombs,"* she notes, *"sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 136). The language here mirrors the clinical dehumanization of enslaved subjects and reflects Michel Foucault's (1977) theory of biopower, where bodies become sites of political control. According to Gilbert and Gubar (2021), *"Offred's body is no longer her own; it is nationalized, stripped of autonomy, and deployed as a resource of the state"* (p. 92).

Offred's memory becomes another battleground. Her longing for her daughter, her feminist mother, and her partner Luke is both a form of resistance and of grief. *"I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 123). As Sara Ahmed (2019) suggests, memory in patriarchal regimes functions as a *"killjoy"*, an affective stance that refuses to align with the state's enforced happiness and normative order (p. 67).

Even within the regime's mechanisms of indoctrination, particularly at the Red Center, Offred finds fissures in the ideological fabric. Her clandestine relationship with the Commander, which includes Scrabble games and illicit reading, seems to grant her temporary agency. However, as she recognizes, *"A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze"* (Atwood, 1985, p. 165). These small permissions do not liberate her but further entrench her within patriarchal structures of control. As Kamal (2021) argues, *"the semblance of agency granted to Handmaids functions as a mechanism of subjugation, sustaining obedience through the illusion of empowerment"* (p. 62).

Moira, in contrast, resists openly. After an attempted escape and eventual recapture, she is forced to work at Jezebel's, yet retains her defiance. *"You look like the whore of Babylon,"* she quips to Offred (Atwood, 1985, p. 250). Moira's defiance, even in degradation, exemplifies what hooks (2021) terms *"the oppositional gaze"*, a refusal to

internalize dominant codes of morality or shame (p. 134). Moira, despite her failure to escape, remains a disruptive presence.

Gilead's atomization of women, through surveillance, religious doctrine, and forced reproduction, is occasionally undermined by spontaneous acts of solidarity. During Ofwarren's (Janine's) birthing ceremony, Offred notes: "*We are one flesh, one being. The chanting envelops us like a flame*" (Atwood, 1985, p. 114). These communal rituals, though orchestrated by the regime, occasionally generate what sociologist Judith Butler (2020) would call "*moments of embodied resistance*", where collective presence contests the logics of isolation and control (p. 48).

Even women like Serena Joy, who appear privileged within the Gileadean order, are ultimately constrained by it. Her decision to orchestrate Offred's sexual union with Nick to produce a child illustrates the contradictions within Gilead's hierarchy. "*What he is fucking is the lower part of my body,*" Offred reflects. "*I do not say making love, because this is not what he is doing*" (Atwood, 1985, p. 94). As Rowe (2022) points out, "*Serena's complicity is born of coercion; elite women are also captives of a system they help enforce*" (p. 144).

The Republic of Gilead enforces conformity through ritualized terror: public executions, body displays on the Wall, and moral policing. However, resistance festers beneath its surface. The Underground Femaleroad, a covert network modeled on the historical Underground Railroad, facilitates women's escape. "*They have got a network going, like an underground railway... Mayday*" (Atwood, 1985, p. 192). Scholars like Simonsen (2024) view this as a counterpublic formation, where subjugated voices form shadow networks that challenge dominant discourse (p. 30).

Offred's final act, recording her story on cassette tapes, represents a subversive assertion of agency. "*If it is a story I am telling, then I have control over the ending*" (Atwood, 1985, p. 49). While academic interpreters mediate her voice in the novel's epilogue, it survives. According to White (2020), "*narration becomes Offred's rebellion, an epistemological act that restores her subjecthood*" (p. 89). Though she may not escape Gilead physically, her narrative ruptures the silence imposed upon the subaltern.

Offred stands as a quintessential subaltern subject, her identity constrained, her voice silenced, and her body regulated. However, she asserts fragmented yet persistent forms of agency through memory, speech, and narrative. The Handmaid's Tale dramatizes the brutality of patriarchal theocracy and the subtle, persistent resistance of those caught within it. As Spivak (1988) notes, the subaltern may not "speak" within dominant discourse—but fiction like Atwood's creates space where her voice can begin to emerge.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents a complex narrative that continues to invite critical engagement through diverse postcolonial lenses. Central to these readings are themes of trafficking, especially sex trafficking, modern slavery, subalternity, and the use of religious authority in shaping female identity. The novel has remained a vital site for feminist and postcolonial critique, evidenced by its global acclaim, adaptations for stage and screen, and the publication of its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), which collectively underscore its enduring relevance amid ongoing global debates concerning gender, power, environmental crisis, and reproductive politics.

Atwood's portrayal of the protagonist Offred as a state-controlled reproductive surrogate highlights the dehumanizing nature of Gilead's theocratic regime. Her ritualized sexual servitude, legally and theologically mandated, underscores how biopolitical control over women's bodies is institutionalized through both ideological and physical coercion. Scholars have drawn parallels between Offred's condition and the exploitation faced by trafficked sex workers, drawing attention to systemic sexual violence and the erasure of female agency.

Building upon such interpretations, this analysis revisits the depiction of state-sanctioned brothels like "*Jezebels*" to examine how sexual subjugation is not only normalized but made structurally invisible. These representations illuminate how women are reduced to subaltern figures, socially marginalized and politically voiceless within Gilead's caste hierarchy. Laura Barberán Reinares (2019) argues that their disposability reflects a deeper epistemic exclusion (p.12).

Drawing on Gayle Rubin's (1984, p. 149) critique of the binary between forced and voluntary sex, the study highlights how structural inequalities render autonomy an illusion within Gilead's sexual economy. In tandem with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) seminal theory of subaltern silence, the analysis posits that women subjected to ritual or illicit sexual labor in Gilead embody the very conditions of voicelessness and political erasure Spivak describes (82). These women, while hyper-visible as sexualized bodies, remain excluded from recognition and resistance.

Reconceptualizing their roles as a form of slavery, rather than mere labor within a dystopian framework, this analysis offers a more precise understanding of their material and symbolic realities. This reading affirms the necessity of an intersectional approach, integrating feminist, postcolonial, and labor-focused critiques to fully grasp Atwood's portrayal of gendered oppression in authoritarian religious regimes.

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