
Regaining Agency for Gaining Identity in Margaret Atwood's Novel: The Handmaid's Tale**Dr. M. Usha Rani**

Lecturer in English, Govt Degree College (W), Srikalahasti

Abstract

Gender studies have reshaped literature with a view to provide social justice and community progress in the modern era. The main theoretical components of gender studies are performativity, embodiment and agency. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently, make choices, and influence their own lives and social structures (Butler 1990). In gender studies, agency is a central concept used to analyse how people navigate, resist, and reshape gender norms, roles, and power relations. This research article applies Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and agency to analyse Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The paper examines how the dystopian regime of Gilead enforces rigid gender roles through performative rituals, dress codes, language restrictions, and bodily controls, rendering women as commodities and relatable objects devoid of agency. Drawing on Butler's concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), the analysis reveals subversive agency in characters like Offred, Moira, and Serena Joy, who reclaim their identity through unauthorized speech, storytelling, and micro-resistances. The paper tries to answer the questions about how agency helps the subjugated women in regaining their identity by resisting the forces that pin them down consistently. The findings highlight that agency emerges not as inherent essence but as precarious reiterations against regulatory norms, offering a critique of fundamentalist power structures.

Keywords: Agency, performativity, commodities, subjugation, micro-resistances**Introduction**

Margaret Atwood is a versatile and Canadian feminist writer in the modern era. Her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in an unidentified futuristic province which becomes the centre of the Republic of Gilead. Written from a woman's point of view, the novel focuses on Atwood's most pessimistic vision of imperialistic structures of power and domination and their destructive effects on individuals, especially on women. In an interview with Schreiber (1985), Atwood highlights real-world examples of reproductive control, how various societal tools serve the purpose of women subjugation and the power structures that regulate women's bodies and mind spaces. The novel exposes political power as a symbol of exploitation, isolation and alienation, where women are reduced to objects. In the process of commodification, the first step experienced by the women is losing their agency, which reduces them to the position of moving 'things' rather than human beings. This core aspect of women's marginalized agency and their efforts to regain their agency and

identity are discussed in the paper with reference to the women characters in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

In Gilead, women are reduced to a status of performers: Aunts to the status of enforcers, wives are left to do the work of domesticity, Marthas are to do the work of service, Econowives are to be multiple taskers, through the use of color-coded robes. Their agency is restricted by scripted phrases like 'Blessed be the fruit', 'May the Lord Open', 'Praise Be' etc which are justified by biblical citations. This problem is even worse during fertility crises. Atwood exposes the dehumanizing extremes using historical examples of regressions of the 1980s, such as Saskatchewan abortion laws that needed a male signature (Schreiber interview), The paper clearly exposes how the agency of women is restricted through various societal tools for exploiting and commodification of women under patriarchal power structures.

Review of Literature

Critics like Davidson (1988) highlights Gilead's biblical distortions masking fascism, while LaCombe (1986) critiques phallogocentric scripture as totalitarian canon. Adhikari (1995) notes Aunts' intra-female oppression, akin to colonial divides. Butler-aligned scholarship, such as Malak's (1987) pre-Gilead vibrancy contrasts and Freibert's (1988) storytelling triumphs, aligns with performativity.

Butler elaborates: "There is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false... acts of gender" (*Gender Trouble, 1990*). Kauffman (1989) extends this to uniforms' uniformity.

Research gap

Despite extensive scholarship on *The Handmaid's Tale*, no study has examined the novel through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of agency, specifically exploring how Offred's narrative acts and subtle resistances enact what Butler terms "performative subversion". This presents a research gap, as such an analysis could offer new perspectives on power dynamics, narrative, and resistance in dystopian fiction.

Research questions

1. How does patriarchy subjugate women's agency?
2. Are women capable of recognising that they have lost their agency?
3. How can women use different strategies to regain their agency?

Methodology

The article uses a qualitative review of literature that is based on the poststructuralist arguments of Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). It applies close textual analysis to the interpretation of *The Handmaid Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, covering the concept of gender performativity which is not innate but rather enforced through recurring acts of stylizing behavior imposed by Gilead Regime, and the

concept of precarious agency as subversive reiteration against norms. It is an interpretive and theoretical approach, which breaks down the narrative components such as rituals, dialogue, and character action to demonstrate power dynamics.

Agency in the theory of Judith Butler (1990) is a debated and intricate concept that arises as a result of interplay between power and discourse. There is no definite or innate quality of the individual that constitutes agency, according to Butler, but is a creation of social and cultural values and the contexts within which individuals work. She claims that people are being imposed with dominant norms and discourses, which define their identities and restrict their action. There is however an additional indication by Butler that one can achieve agency by engaging in the act of performative subversion wherein people can rework and resignify the norms and discourses of dominance so that new avenues of action and identities emerge. This theory of agency underlines the significance of iteration, repetition and subversion to confront the hegemonic power systems.

In Judith Butler's theory, performativity refers to the idea that identity is not something we have, but something we act and do. According to Butler (1990), gender and other identities are produced in a repetitive way, using a performance of speech, gestures and behavior, that either follow or challenge existing societal norms. These performances are not simply expressions of an inner self, but rather, they constitute the self. According to the performativity, Butler, in her vision, assumes that people are created as subjects with definite identities, whose identities are always under the threat of re-enactment and repression. Performativity prefigures the iterability and movement of identity suggesting that change may be brought as a result of repetition and renegotiation of hegemonic norms and discourses. In turn, agency and performativity as the two concepts articulated by Butler provide a critical paradigm through which it is possible to ask the question of the oppressive gender roles depicted in the text.

The novel depicts the social isolation of women and their rigid separation into subservient gender roles as wives, wombs, workers and whores. Except wives, all other women are deprived of basic human rights such as education, employment, property, and even one's own name and speech. After the new regime gains control over the state by assassinating the President, it declares a state of emergency by claiming Islamic fundamentalists are planning to destroy the country. The constitution is suspended and the state is transformed into a pseudo-theological polity through the misinterpretation of the Bible. "A new regime would never say, [as in the past] we are socialist; we're fascist. They would say that they were serving God... You can develop any set of beliefs by using the Bible" (Davidson, 1988).

After the suspension of the constitution, all forms of media are censored. Identity cards are introduced, roads are blocked, women are barred from jobs and property ownership, and their bank accounts are transferred to male relatives. Blacks are resettled in National Homelands, while doctors, lawyers and university professors are targeted as potential troublemakers. Jews are forced to emigrate or convert. Those who oppose the regime are killed and displayed on walls with placards stating their crimes.

Gilead is a repressive, fundamentalist theocracy that interprets the Bible literally. Religion becomes a patriarchal narrative used to exploit women. Named after the Biblical land of Gilead, the regime appropriates and falsifies biblical texts to justify racist and sexist policies, legitimizing its political, social and sexual goals through biblical precedent. The social structure of Gilead focuses on child-bearing due to declining Caucasian birthrates among the ruling elite. The state becomes ferociously pro-natalist, eradicating birth control and executing abortionists. Women with viable ovaries are turned into an instant reproductive pool, carrying patriarchal power to a nightmarish extreme and other women into respective classified roles.

Women are divided into categories of Wives, Marthas, Handmaids, Aunts, Jezebels and Econowives and each of these categories is allocated a strict role in the social hierarchy. Marthas, who function as housekeepers, are forbidden to become friendly with Handmaids. The sole function of Handmaids is child bearing. Aunts are used to oppress and control Handmaids, the basic principle of colonialism, “control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (320) is adapted in Gilead. They believe that “the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves” (320). The Handmaids themselves are not supposed to talk to each other. Invigilation is a constant process to avoid the establishment of relationships between women, so that they become isolated and obedient. Among all roles assigned to women, the role of Handmaids is the most dehumanized. They are valued only as walking wombs because their only function is child bearing. They are described as national containers, two-legged wombs and sacred vessels.

Butler states that these roles are not inherent but performed through repetitive performances which make up the self. The regime creates women as a subject through repetition: Handmaids are fertile, Aunts are patriarchal. However, agency comes in subversion, when one of the Aunts is attacked in the washroom by Moira who steals the uniform and manages to escape the guards, playing the homogeneity of the role with itself. Offred is aware of this subjection, and she ironically identifies herself as an empty room, and redefines the norm by revealing its empty center.

In addition to the roles that are assigned, the repetitions that are made in color code subjection is important in reinforcing this division. The Handmaids are always dressed in red, the colour of blood, which defines their function of breeding and child bearing. The Handmaids wear long, full-sleeved red robes, closed red shoes, and a headdress with a veil and white wings which limit their vision, symbolizing restriction, control and lack of freedom (289). The Wives are dressed in blue, resembling those of the virgin. The Marthas wear robes of dull green, indicating their earthiness. The Aunts are dressed in khaki. The wives of poor men are known as Econowives wear red, blue and green striped robes. Rebels are declared Unwomen and are sent to the colonies.

These stylized acts—repetitive donning of robes—mould gender identity, as Butler describes: "constant repetition... moulds gender identity, so that: 'The actors themselves come to believe... in the mode of belief'" (Gender Trouble, 140). The separation of women

according to their functions and these colour-coded uniforms deprive them of their natural identity. Subversive agency is present when Moira makes the uniform a subversive tool, redefining khaki enforcement as escaping. The restricted wings through which Offred peeps repeat consciousness, but they are a quiet rebellion against visuality.

The women are categorized into distinct roles and compelled to wear attire designated by the ruling authorities, with colours signifying their respective positions. Subsequently, rooms are allocated to the Handmaids, which resemble confined spaces akin to prisons and is stripped of anything that could be used for suicide enforcing performative isolation. Even the right to take one's own life is denied. Mirrors, hooks and glass windowpanes are banned, and time is measured by bells. Handmaids are denied any leisure or freedom of their own and this aspect strengthens their feeling of being in prison. Offred is very anguished and bored and she cannot escape time and isolation. She compares herself to an empty room where nothing happens, reflecting her emotional desolation (52).

Rooms perform subjection by iterating barrenness, producing Handmaids as passive vessels. Butler's materialization via norms (Bodies That Matter, 12) explains this: spaces "subject" bodies to reproductive utility. Offred resists with the weapon of memory, retreats into the memories of her mother, husband, daughter and Moira, repeating pre-Gilead identity with the erasure of the room, whereby she establishes internal agency .as Amin Malak explains, "These shifting reminiscences offer glimpses of a life, though not ideal, still filled with energy, creativity, humaneness and a sense of selfhood, a life that sharply contrasts with the present alienation, slavery, and suffering under totalitarianism" (Malak 13).

Regarding ingested norms and subversive absorption, food is also strictly controlled. The Handmaids have no choice in what they eat and are allowed only food selected by the authorities to improve health and fertility. Through food control, the regime gains direct control over women's bodies. Food at the Red Centre, where women are trained, is accompanied by biblical exegesis, which strengthens ideology. During meals, there is playing of biblical verses that insist on childbearing as a duty of God. Offred gradually recognizes that food is a form of power in Gilead and attempts to assimilate this power to herself. During shopping, she learns that oranges are available (57). Initially, Offred decides not to reveal this information exercising power through withholding. Later, she chooses to disclose like an offering. Instead of eating the butter, Offred saves it and later uses it as a moisturizer. Thus, food intended to control her body becomes a means of subverting that control. Similarly, when Serena Joy gives Offred a cigarette, she decides to eat it. The cigarette represents power.

Eating recreates pro-natalist norms, making bodies national resources. Performativity creates fertility as identity using ingested discourse. This is reworked in the subversions by Offred: butter as lotion, cigarette devoured, oranges withheld/offered, subverting gender with acts that undermine the conventional performances. The Scrabble game best exemplifies the association between food, language and power. Offred expresses a desire to eat the letters. She describes the Scrabble counters as candies (149). Language,

like food, becomes something Offred longs to ingest and possess. These repetitions generate agency out of subjectivity.

Further, to deny autonomy, leisure time activities are equally restricted. Handmaids are allowed only to go shopping with another Handmaid and purchase items using tokens. Other activities such as reading, writing, smoking, stitching, listening to music or walking freely are forbidden. Writing is prohibited as Helene Cixous says, "... Writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 879). Offred plays word games in her mind. Reading is also prohibited, the only word permitted to read is FAITH, embroidered on a cushion.

Obedience is repeated in token-shopping, which results in isolated subjects. The stylized acts that Butler introduces restrict action, but Offred finds a way out through mental games, which maintain imagination over the emptiness of leisure. This repetition redefines idleness as thought that is subversive, which is connected with the general resistance.

In addition to restricting autonomy, Gilead uses scripted discourses and oral reiteration, one of the most effective methods to dominate Handmaids. They are permitted to use only fixed speech patterns such as "Blessed be the fruit," "May the Lord open," and "Praise be". (9) Another major factor the regime uses to control people is language, which it considers an instrument of power. The regime cannot tolerate language, writing, imagination and hope. To prevent Handmaids from speaking, their cots are arranged with wide gaps. Despite these restrictions, Handmaids develop alternative strategies. They learn to lip-read and exchange names. Offred has lost her language skills due to restrictions. During secret visits, Offred indulges in forbidden language by playing Scrabble and reading women's magazines. When she starts to play Scrabble, she experiences how difficult it is to spell the words as though she is playing a language she had known but almost forgotten. She actively recreates her vocabulary through these acts. Language becomes the instrument with which she questions her world and herself. The effect of storytelling generates social community.

Religious subjection is carried out by fixed phrases, making Handmaids through discourse. Lip-reading, Scrabble and magazines resignify language, as per Butler's "repetition and reworking." (Gender Trouble, 145). The oral history of the escape of Moira continues to impart oral tradition of gossip as a form of resistance. Even in a society where language and communication are controlled, the persistence of oral storytelling allows women to retain hope. After her escape from Gilead, Offred records her story on tapes. Narration becomes an effective strategy for acquiring identity. Language comes out as the best weapon.

Apart from controlling language of the people in Gilead, a deliberate and systematic attempt is made by possessory erasure by taking away women's original names. A Handmaid's name merely reflects the name of the Commander, Fred. She becomes Offred. The title of the character Offred is a combination of the preposition of, which means possess. This devastation belongs to the regime to destroy the past. Offred's real name is never revealed, as it is a link to her past and her unique self. Thus, Offred is denied her ownership

that is rightfully hers. This possessory erasure reveals how society norms and power structures can deny individual's agency, identity or even their very existence. Naming does possession, subjecting through iteration. But, Offred subverts by invoking her real name in memory, re-inscribing pre-Gilead self and reclaims her identity. Also writing plays a crucial role in identity formation. Offred discovers the Latin phrase

Nolite bastarde scar borundorum carved by a previous Handmaid. This writing turns out to be a beacon of hope and opposition. As Michelle LaCombe aptly says, "In the absence of genuine faith, the writing on the closet floor becomes the focus of buried hope and itself appears as an act of charity by the previous female tenant" (LaCombe 12). The message pleases Offred because it survived to reach her, and she repeats it to herself for encouragement. It implies that rebellion can be achieved and her own story could be delivered to the listeners in the future.

The regime also controls emotions. During shopping trips, Handmaids witness bodies hanging on the wall. Handmaids are expected to feel hatred. Public executions and 'Salvagings' (people who are unfaithful and betray rules of Gilead are publicly hanged) serve to terrorize people in Gilead to shape people's actions and identities. This terror affects how people behave, think and even feel about themselves. Salvagings reinforce Gilead's power, instill fear and suppress dissent. At executions, mandatory hatred is executed, generating terrified subjects. The insult and uncertainty of Offred reworking emotion claim agency by use of irony.

Agency is commonly associated with a rebelliousness against patriarchal or oppressive systems. Despite oppressive control, a resistance group exists, and Nick, Offred, Ofglen and others secretly become members. Another form of resistance is story telling. After her escape from Gilead, Offred records her story on tapes instead of writing it down. *The Handmaid's Tale* is thus presented not as history or "his story" but as her story, narrated orally. Through telling her story, she creates an auditor and affirms belief in the listener's existence. Storytelling produces social community and allows Offred to survive by making herself real. Similar to slave narratives, memory and narration helped her to proclaim humanity in her story telling.

Narration becomes an effective strategy for acquiring identity in a patriarchal structure. Through narration, Offred gains control over herself and her identity. Language has various connotations and alternative ways, which the regime cannot manage completely. The language turns out to be the strongest weapon of people who are oppressed. Even within political oppression, women can reclaim identity and freedom through language and storytelling. Thus, she wields language's power through oral narrative to connect with the future.

Despite her powerlessness in Gilead's hierarchy, she controls her words meticulously. She selects words to reassert her old self and reveal the regime. Lucy Freibert (1988) points out, "Atwood demonstrates through Offred that women, able to take risks and to tell stories, may transcend their conditioning, establish their identity, joyfully reclaim their bodies, find their voices, and reconstruct the social order" (Freibert, 1988). Linda Kauffman

(1989) also echoes Freibert's (1988) faith in the power of women to use language. Kauffman (1989) observes, "She (Offred) first has to reclaim herself, retrieve her voice; once she does so, she turns to re-inscribe the voices of other women" (Kauffman, 1989). Offred must first reclaim herself and then reinscribe the voices of other women. Language enables her to interrogate her identity and its position in her world.

The constraints of Gilead on its women, such as roles through division, colors of the dress code, emptiness of the rooms, ingestion of food, tokens of leisure, scripts of speech/language, possession of names, terror of emotions, are repeated to control women but, in the repetitions of Offred, there is Butlerian agency: butter subversion, Scrabble ingestion, oral tapes. Connection between women turns out to be a pivotal measure of survival. Even within political oppression, women can reclaim identity through language and storytelling (Freibert 1988; Kauffman, 1989). Offred wields language's power to connect with the future.

A close reading of the novel reveals that all main characters lose their identities. Offred loses her identity as mother, wife, daughter and friend; Serena Joy loses her independence; Offred's mother loses her role as a revolutionist; and the Aunts lose their humanity. Each character attempts to regain their identities within restricted circumstances through autonomy of thought, self-definition, reconstruction of history, creative composition, oral and written expression.

Based on the ideas of agency and performativity, women will be able to rebuild their agency and create their own identity by disrupting the most dominant discourses, which have traditionally constructed and constrained them. Since gender is a performance, women are able to reuse and redefine the norms they are subjected to, and this allows them to make their spaces of resistance and self-identification. Performative acts can be resignified many times to bring the distinguished power structures into question. Women will be able to use this performative power to oppose the rules of patriarchy, reclaim their bodies, and state their independence. By acknowledging their multiplicity and fluidity, women are able to disrupt the essentialized, fixed ideas of femininity and create new, empowering identities that resonate with their lived experiences. In so doing, women are able to redefine themselves as agents of subversion through this performative subversion, able to make their own destinies and even challenge the social forces that have largely oppressed them.

However, women should engage with issues like inequality and authoritarianism through relatable stories of resistance and transformation. Actions are controllable, but minds and thoughts cannot be controlled. Women have to not only speak up but also study how to interpret reinscribed voices critically. The sense of self-consciousness gives women subversion of social norms.

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