



HYPER-FEMININITY IN ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of female oppression and devaluation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, focusing on how systemic control in the male-dominated society of Gilead distorts women's identities, particularly that of the protagonist, Offred. Through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism, this research examines how Gilead enforces a rigid, hyper-feminine identity that limits women's roles to reproduction and submission. Butler's idea that gender is not innate but shaped through repeated acts helps highlight how femininity in Gilead is performative and controlled. Foucault's notion of constant surveillance supports this view, showing how internalized fear maintains order. The study argues that the women of Gilead are reduced to property, forced into roles that leave them discouraged, powerless, and humiliated. However, the research also reveals that this exaggerated femininity can serve as a subtle form of resistance. Atwood uses dystopia not only to criticize patriarchal expectations but to show how women, even under extreme oppression, find ways to assert identity and agency. Hyper-femininity, while initially a symbol of submission, becomes a space where defiance quietly takes root. The novel ultimately presents a complex picture of both control and quiet rebellion.

Keywords: *Hyper-Femininity, Performativity, Panopticism, Oppression, Gilead.*

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1. Introduction

This work majorly focuses on the complexities of feminism and hyper-femininity. Hyper-femininity is strictly enforced in Gilead society, defining rigid gender roles in which women are primarily valued for their ability to procreate (Atwood, 1985). Women are divided into several social classes, including Wives, Martha, Aunts, and Handmaids, and handmaids are only valued if they can bear children. The ruling class, known as the commanders, who represent the capitalist and patriarchal systems ingrained in society, carefully manipulate and take advantage of their bodies. If the handmaids were unable to bear children, they were deprived of their basic human rights. In some cases, they were sent to the centers, where they were shot down. By using Offred in the story, Atwood clarifies the dehumanizing effects of hyper-femininity and emphasizes the necessity of resistance against oppressive systems.

The Handmaid's Tale is the most iconic work that continues to captivate readers presenting a picture in which females serve as battlegrounds in the struggle for power and control. All around the world, the most evident thing is that society is suppressing the voice of women and treating them to be ethnically mute. The ego-centric society treats women merely as objects who are nothing more than a dumb creation. That's why they have deprived them of social, economic, cultural and political rights. Historically, the government's mentality has been snatching the freedom of speech and expression from them. The submissive and subjugated group of women is illustrated masterfully in the work. Women are lugubrious and tormented due to the imperiousness of power politics, and this marginalization is portrayed skillfully in this novel.

1.1. Overview of Novel and Novelist

This work explores themes of patriarchy, oppression, and the dangers of religious extremism through a dark portrayal of a society where women's autonomy is stripped away. *The Handmaid's Tale* delves into power, identity, and resistance, prompting readers to reflect on the fragility of personal freedoms. Atwood critiques dictatorship and power politics, showing how Gilead's leaders manipulate religion and fear to maintain control through surveillance, violence, and propaganda. The novel serves as a powerful warning against unchecked power and authoritarian rule. Widely acclaimed, it won the Governor General's Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. Other than this it was nominated for the Prometheus Award.

Margaret Atwood is a renowned Canadian writer, born on November 18, 1939. Her work often reflects Canada's bilingual, bicultural identity and the country's struggle with American influence. As a poet, novelist, essayist, critic, teacher, and inventor, Atwood

brings a strong feminist perspective to her writing. She frequently portrays women navigating patriarchal societies, exploring themes of oppression, identity, and control over women's bodies. Much of her work is driven by a deep commitment to social and political issues. Atwood gives voice to women and highlights the need for societal change through powerful story telling.

Margaret Atwood uses brief passages from the narrator's inner monologue in *The Handmaid's Tale* to highlight connections of internalized oppression and systemic injustice. The three categories of the selected book show several forms of oppression, including institutional, societal, cultural, and personal. Margaret Atwood uses the narrator's inner thoughts to show how deeply oppression is rooted in both individuals and society. Parringer compares *The Handmaid's Tale* to Atwood's previous five works, claiming that Offred is the spiritual successor to *The Edible Woman*, *Survival*, and *Lady Oracle*:

"Margaret Atwood's novels are not written to a formula. *The Handmaid's Tale*, like its five predecessors, is an unrepeatable and starkly individual performance. At the same time, it is the Science Fiction fable that this author (who is at once a poet and a primarily realistic novelist) has long hinted that she intended to write" (Parringer, 1986, p. 20).

1.2. Theorist and Theory Introduction

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps analyze the deep themes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, especially the idea of hyper-femininity. In the novel's dystopian society, women's roles are strictly controlled. Handmaids must follow rigid rules in how they act, dress, and speak. Butler argues that gender isn't something we are born with, but something we learn and perform through repeated actions. These performances create the illusion of a fixed identity. In Gilead, women are forced to perform traditional gender roles to survive. Through these performances, they not only conform but also find small ways to express identity and resist oppression.

Power politics is used as a supporting theory that is predominantly based on the excessive use of power over subalterns. Theory of power politics was given by French philosopher, writer, political activist, and historian Michael Foucault. He also explicated power politics as superiority and overweening control over the powerless. It is actually elucidated as "An explosion of innumerable and diverse techniques for attaining the subjugation of bodies and control over populations" (Foucault, 1982, p. 140). In Atwood's work, Foucault's ideas show that femininity is shaped by institutional control, not personal choice, revealing deeper links between gender, power, and resistance.

The work is notable in modern society and literature because it shows in-depth issues of power politics and hyper-femininity. These two terms are highly relevant to present societal dynamics. The work dives deeply into the intricacies of gender roles and women's enslavement. It criticizes cultural norms that limit women to restrictive positions based primarily on their reproductive abilities. Gender identity, equality, and women's rights remain key themes in contemporary public conversation. The novel's exploration of hyper-femininity is a cautionary tale and provokes us to examine and resist repressive gender standards that limit individual agency and independence.

1.3. Statement of the problem

This work addresses the problem of women identity and describe the struggle of women for her identity. This research shows the women's identity conflicts caused by their sufferings

1.4. Research Significance

This research is significant because it deals with hyper-femininity and the study of such people who thought themselves superior and subjugate women by treating them as they want. This work shows a real image of servitude and excruciating effects of political power and it will open new dimensions for researchers in future to examine the consequences of govern mentality and its lethality over the subalterns to better understand all types of power discourses.

2. Literature Review

This chapter deals with the review of literature to explicate works of critics and analysts who are predominantly influenced by the concept of performativity, feminism, power politics and its ferocity against oppressed groups. The main essence of this chapter is to unveil the hidden aspects of chronic masculine personalities and to highlight the sadist and misogynist views of men.

Labour power is a commodity, like sugar, neither more nor less. Every woman has a role in society, and although they are of various social classes, they both use their labour force to exert control over men in a world where women are the preferred commodity because women are "scarce commodities...essential to the life of the group, they became a commodity to be swapped, which made the Handmaids valued in Gilead's labour force" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 799). The Handmaids were unaware that they were made of sugar. They had no idea they could cease putting butter in their shoes and demand hand lotion. They

lost any sense of individuality and identity, that is why Offred, is not merely a name, but a tag that was imposed on her by the society.

Many works concentrate on Gilead's dystopian architecture and gendered study. Stephanie Barbe analyses the work as satire in the technology of power and female satire. It is crucial in evolution of women's writing. Despite the inherently revolutionary nature of this pairing, Hammer identifies features of Atwood's work that elevate *The Handmaid's Tale* to the level of a "textbook" satire example. "*The Handmaid's Tale*, is the clear existence of a topical political target" (Hammer, 1990, p. 39).

2.1. Dystopian Fiction

In Gilead, women are silenced and stripped of identity, especially Handmaids, who were reduced to reproductive roles. This reflects Spivak's idea of the subaltern whose voices are suppressed by dominant power structures and remain unheard. Their thoughts, desires, and autonomy are systematically erased. This enforced silence serves to maintain the power dynamics of Gilead.

The handmaids of Gilead, particularly Offred, the book's protagonist, are voiceless, and the limitations on speech that subaltern women should experience are exactly comparable. None of the handmaids can speak, and even if they could, no one would hear them just like the subaltern who, according to Morton "as female cannot be heard or read" (Morton, 2003, p. 7) The voices, experiences, and struggles of women from the Third World have been suppressed besides confined in under the technical jargon of Western civilization, much like the handmaids.

2.2. Power Politics and Performativity

It is evident in every society that, society is divided into two parts, mainly on the basis of power and status. This is the main reason out of which women are devalued and their identities are distorted. These fertile handmaids are brainwashed into being passive, obedient, mute, and sexual objects by external forces that also control and manipulate their names and identities. Offred states in the novel that after the tattoo on her ankle that she cannot avoid seeing now. It makes it clear that she feels like an object even though she was clearly receiving good treatment.

Hyper-femininity is imposed on women as a means of control and subjugation, reflecting Butler's notion of gender performance. Women experience a disconnection with their bodies as a result of patriarchal oppression. According to K. Reshmi (2002), "The handmaids have become the complete property of the state and are utilized as a national resource". Atwood raises questions about the novel's depiction of contemporary issues like

rape, toxic waste, abortion, pornography, and power politics, as well as why men are granted the ability to subjugate women?

2.3. Research Gap

This study addresses a gap by reading the book through the lens of gender performance, drawing heavily on Judith Butler's concept of gender as social performance and Michel Foucault's concept of power politics. Some of the writers worked on feministic aspects present in the work, and some unfolded objectivity, resistance and identity. It is also explored as a satire, but nobody worked on the panopticon performative aspect, which is going to be revealed in this work. As members of the culture that created gender, we are neither born with nor intrinsically free of it; rather, we act gender. Offered also finds herself enslaved by gender.

3.Theoretical Framework

This chapter deals with the current dissertation's research methodology and theoretical framework. The dynamics of this dissertation are descriptive and qualitative in nature. It is a content-based textual analysis of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. This section details the methodology and primary or secondary sources used to collect material for this research.

3.1. Theoretical framework

Paul Michel Foucault was active in politics, literature, theory, and history. The subject of his commendable thoughts include bio politics, disciplinary institutions, discourse analysis, and other related topics. His idea of bio power made him famous. Foucault's power theory is highly pertinent to Hegemony; he used the phrase "bio-power" to describe exerting dominion over other people, particularly the oppressed.

Judith Butler, a prominent gender theorist, contends that femininity is not innate but a performance shaped by society and expectations. In the seminal work of *Gender Trouble*, Butler explicates that gender is performative and constructed through repeated actions and behaviors rather than being a natural state of being. By viewing gender as a series of performative acts, he confronts the understanding of gender and emphasizes the fluidity and variability of gender identities.

Hyper-femininity, as an exaggerated performance of traditional feminine traits, serves to reinforce the gender binary and uphold patriarchal structures. In Butler's view, the exaggerated adherence to feminine norms exemplifies how gender roles are not natural but are imposed and perpetuated through repeated social performances. Feminists aim to

reveal and dismantle the power dynamics that confine and define gender roles. Butler's work considers the questions of identity and subjectivity, "tracing the processes by which we become subjects when we assume the sexed/gendered/' raced' identities which are constructed for us (and to a certain extent by us) within existing power structures" (Butler, 1990, p. 2).

Butler expands the idea of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*, which states that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (Butler, 1990, p. 12). He argues that gender identification is not a performance, in spite of performance that exists preparatory to performer, which is a crucial point to remember. The performance generates "the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (Butler, 1990, p. 173). Butler demonstrates that all gender identities are parodies and imitations of one another.

According to her, there are some basic rules and regulations to perform gender, and if someone fails to follow them, our society, culture, and families punish them for their distorted behaviour. She emphasizes that we "regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (Butler, 1990, p. 178). Stigma is attached to falling outside the binaries, which can be dangerous, too. For example, we can see in the novel that any slip-up or mistake in the performance can result not only her death, but the death of her friends and family.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, everyone who didn't conform to the expected gender roles or adheres to heteronormativity is either put to death or sent to a work camp, and the performance is also directly related to survival. As an example, Offred pretends to be sexually interested in the commander so that she can avoid or at least cope with the trauma she is experiencing. The work denies women their most fundamental freedoms while enslaving them to their nature and sexuality. This work demonstrates that women face oppression, marginalization, and social subordination. The oppression of women, their construction as man's "Other," and their lack of agency have persisted throughout history.

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher, in his book *The History of Sexuality*, has explicated that power means superiority and control over others, especially over downtrodden people. It is actually elucidated as "An explosion of innumerable and diverse techniques for attaining the subjugation of bodies and control of populations" (Foucault, 1982, p. 140). He suggests, "Where there is a power, there is a resistance" (Foucault, 1982, p. 95). Resistance is the answer to the power that the subaltern shows. According to him, "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it excludes, it represses, it censors, it abstracts, it masks, it conceals. In fact, power produces, and it produces productivity" (Foucault, 1982, p. 194). On the positive side, traditional

gender roles give power, different opportunities and privileges to the man. This provides them more courage to be strong leaders and dictators.

Michel Foucault's theory of power and politics and Judith Butler's theory of performativity intersect critically, particularly in their views on how power is exercised and manifested through social norms and identities. Foucault's conception of power is decentralized and pervasive; it is not merely held by institutions or individuals but is diffused throughout society. According to Foucault, power is productive rather than simply repressive; it produces knowledge, norms, and subjects. Judith Butler builds on Foucault's ideas, particularly in her theory of performativity, which addresses how gender identity is constructed through repeated social performances. Both theorists emphasize the role of discourse in shaping reality and the self. However, Butler extends Foucault's insights by focusing on the body and its performative acts as sites where power operates and is contested.

Hyper-feminism, a more recent and sometimes controversial extension of feminist thought, often involves a heightened awareness and critique of gender norms and power structures. It seeks to radically challenge and subvert traditional gender roles and expectations. Hyper-feminism can be seen as an application of Butler's performative theory, aiming to expose and disrupt the performative nature of gender by exaggerating or radically altering gender performances. It highlights the fluidity and constructed nature of gender, in line with Butler's assertion that gender identities are not innate but are performed through a series of repetitive acts. Foucault's theory of power and politics provides a foundation for understanding how societal norms and identities are constructed and maintained.

3.2. Textual Analysis: Research method

The theoretical framework used for the dissertation is based on the theory of performativity by Butler and power by Foucault. The method of the study ranges from textual analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* to getting a comprehensive essence and understanding of the hidden elements of the text. Textual analysis is a methodology described by Alan McKee in the book *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. He is an Austrian university professor and well-known researcher of the sexualized media. First, he has defined text as "Text is something that we make meaning from" (McKee, 2003, p. 4). He illustrates it as, "When we perform textual analysis of a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of the text" (McKee, 2003, p. 01). Textual analysis is simply a method or mode of analyzing the text, whose main purpose is to explore the hidden ideas of writing and portray it in new dimensions.

Catherine Belsey discusses in textual analysis as a research method the relationship of reader and text, that text, with the help of words, engages the reader to provide extra-textual knowledge. It provides lucidity and coherent ideas. She says, "Texts are the material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making, the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world" (Belsey, 2005, p. 15).

Textual analysis leads the researchers towards additional interpretations and elucidations of any piece of writing. Overall, the mode of the study ranges from textual analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Atwood to a comprehensive understanding of its hidden essence and kernel. The information incorporated in this study is collected from primary and secondary sources, including journals, articles and notable books of worthy writers and critics.

4. Discussion And Analysis

The work incorporates rigid roles in which women are subjugated and oppressed under the power. Their identities were exploited. By delving into the character's identity applying basic tenets of Butler's and Foucault's theory, the work endeavors to offer a comprehensive understanding of performativity and power politics leading towards hyper-femininity. Women are not only alienated but forced to contribute to their own oppression by adhering to very tight gender roles and prohibited, at the same time enforced, sexuality.

The Handmaids' major responsibility is to reproduce children to the childless spouses from upper-class homes. The Handmaids of Gilead are subject to strict regulations that restrict their freedom. *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays women's oppressed and subservient position in Gilead's patriarchal society. They are merely a tool for the male for reproduction. The work demonstrates subservient women's status and otherness in patriarchal culture, as well as how society disregards women's fundamental freedoms in this male-chauvinist setting. The dress rule for women in the Gilead theocracy clearly shows how marginalized they are; men, on the other hand, are free to wear anything they like, but women are not allowed to wear bright clothing.

The story explores the performative aspects of gender roles, emphasizing how individuals were compelled to comply with cultural expectations. Offred and the other characters manage the difficulties of their assigned roles while also deal with their needs, fears, and sense of identity. Through her complex portrayal of characters such as Serena Joy, Atwood explores how women internalize and reproduce patriarchal conventions, demonstrating the insidious nature of systematic oppression.

Power politics are crucial to Gilead's organization. The ruling elite, which consists primarily of Commanders and their spouses, wields control through persuasion, fear, and

strict religious doctrine. They use religious discourse to justify their brutal dictatorship and keep control over the populace. The handmaids, in particular, are vulnerable to their masters' whims, emphasizing power imbalances and the exploitation of women's bodies for political and social gains. Offred's story delves into her internal struggle as she wrestles with her identity, agency, and yearning for freedom in a society that attempts to deprive her of all autonomy. As we can see in the novel, Offred narrates, "I believe in the resistance as I believe there can be no light without shadow; or rather, no shadow unless there is also light" (Atwood, 1985, p. 105). The story depicts Christian religious zealots taking over America and purging those who do not adhere to the strict Puritan gender and social norms of The Republic of Gilead.

4.1. Identity and Complicity of Women

We can apply Butler's theory to the characters' performances of gender roles within Gilead's oppressive society. The Handmaids, are reduced to their reproductive functions, stripped of their individual identities and compelled to perform a specific role dictated by the regime. This performance is not only a reflection of inherent or natural femininity but is instead a repetitive and ritualized act that enforces the socially constructed norms of Gilead. Butler's theory suggests that gender identity is not pre-given but is constructed through these repetitive acts, and this is evident in how the handmaids conform to the expectations placed upon them. Serena Joy, a Wife in Gilead, also embodies Butler's performativity theory. Her adherence to the rigid gender roles of Gilead demonstrates how performing these roles becomes a means of survival in the dystopian society. Despite being part of the privileged class, Serena Joy is confined by the very gender norms she helped to establish. Her performative acts reinforce and perpetuate the oppressive system she once championed.

Moreover, the novel explores how language itself becomes performative in Gilead. The renaming of individuals, the manipulation of religious language, and the strict control of communication were all tools of the regime to enforce its power. The Ceremony, a monthly ritual where the Handmaid must perform a reproductive act, was a stark example of how language and action converge to reinforce the performativity of gender. The naming and framing of this act illustrate how power operates through language and bodily performance, aligning with Butler's ideas. Offred's internal struggles and the moments of resistance she exhibits also align with Butler's theory. While confined within a society that attempts to dictate her identity and suppress her agency, Offred's small acts of resistance highlight the performative nature of gender and the potential for subversion within these performances.

The women's roles are divided according to multiple identities and colours, which means they embody multiple feminine ideals. Their personalities were not their identities but colours. This is our society that restricts different colours to women. Moreover, Marthas were not allowed to fraternize with the handmaids. They were not allowed to touch any house object or to perform any house chores out of anger. They were not considered to perform house chores or any other house activity. They long for eating of their own choice as they are not allowed to do so. Offred once said, "I look at the oranges, longing for one. But I haven't brought any coupons for oranges" (Atwood, 1985, p. 23).

Women's identities were distorted. They were not respected in the markets until and unless they showed the name of their master. Handmaids were just a necessity for her. They were even prohibited from speaking according to their own point of view. They have to think according to their (Commanders) point of view. Aunt Lydia said, "It was best not to speak unless they asked you a direct question. Try to think of it from their point of view" (Atwood, 1985, p. 14). Women herself are involved in imposing patriarchal rules on other women. Their identities were distorted in the sense that they considered themselves dolls, having no emotions or feelings. She said she feels like a doll who only talks when a string at the back is pulled. Everyone can play with the doll according to his/her wish. Same is the case with the Handmaids. Their identities are complicit.

The work presents a horrible and inflexible image of a religious society in which women are denied even the most fundamental human rights due to the preaching of spiritual principles. In this culture, the body is a tool bent to the ruling class's will. Offred is a lady ensnared in a terrible world from which there is no quick physical release. Even suicide is off-limits. The marginalization of women as just asexual beings raises questions about the conflict between security and freedom. Women's liberation is restricted, and they are subjugated by society, which makes them fearful of security.

No woman was permitted to enter men's domain unless employed to produce items outside the home or write down information. She was only allowed to perform this one thing at a time. Poor men have Economies, which "are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can" (Atwood, 1985, p. 24). This context can be related to Foucault's power politics. Individuals having power can suppress others according to their own will. People with the power of knowledge and money are considered high in status, which gives them the courage to oppress others. Individuals having low status are obliged to follow the rules imposed on them by the oppressors.

The society vanished the identities of women to such an extent that they didn't feel any pain for others. Offred is glad when Ofglen hangs herself rather than being captured by The Eyes, as this prevents Ofglen from revealing any information about her. "She did

it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later" (Atwood, 1985, p. 298). She was not mourning the death of her fellow but happy that she would not be captured. This is what Gilead has done to the identities of the women. They forget to treat others humanely. They are just involved in making themselves free from The Eyes.

According to Barbara Hill Rigney's book, the control agency in this novel is the 'Aunts', who administer re-education centers using cattle prods, torture tactics, and brainwashing slogans (Atwood, 1985, p. 118). The Aunts have distinct aims for training the Handmaids. The handmaids' official records would have been erased upon entering the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center (Atwood, 1985, p. 387), resulting in their erasure from history. Atwood depicted the Aunts as strong female characters in a dystopian setting.

4.2. Panopticon Performativity Leading Towards Hyper-femininity

Hyper-femininity plays a crucial role. The society in the novel heavily enforces traditional gender roles and expectations, emphasizing extreme femininity for the Handmaids. These women are assigned specific roles solely based on their reproductive abilities, resulting in a portrayal of hyper-femininity. They are expected to dress and behave in a way that embodies submissive and domestic ideals. This study shows how society ignore women's basic freedoms and rights. Offred's real name is unknown, and she is only recognized by "Offred," which shows the commander's possession (of Fred). Women were used by men according to their own pleasure and will. "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices" (Atwood, 1985, p. 13).

In the Gilead society the concept of panopticon was practiced through the aunts. The society of Gilead uses different techniques to oppress and confine the women's identities. Aunts and handmaids were trapped in that cycle of oppression. Government uses different tactics to control the identities and behavior of the people. They use fear and punishment to impose their rules upon others. They instruct all women to keep an eye on each other and report to prevent rebellion. They were free to observe other to serve the male dominated society. They create a culture of fear and oppression that erases their desires and freedom.

The panopticon's emphasis on individual discipline and normalization was reflected in how Gilead indoctrinates women into their assigned roles and suppresses dissent. Handmaids were trained to internalize the regime's ideology, perpetuating their own subjugation by policing each other's behaviour and suppressing any form of resistance. As Butler puts it, the gender roles in the novel expose flaws in the gender

binary. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we see how tyranny and imposed "personas" result in losing an internal identity. Butler claims that these behaviours, expressions, and gestures that make up the "gender illusion" are only copies of a presumed "original" identity. If we want to act gender, it requires repeated performance. It means gender is something that we perform repeatedly. Society compel us to perform according to its own will.

The Gilead vividly illustrates Butler's theory of hyper-femininity. Women's identities and roles are rigidly defined and controlled by a theocratic government that enforces extreme forms of femininity. Handmaids, for example, are compelled to embody hyper-feminine roles that emphasize fertility and subservience, reducing their identities to mere reproductive functions. This enforced performance of hyper-femininity serves to maintain the regime's oppressive power dynamics. Thus, Gilead becomes a dystopian realization of Butler's theoretical insights, showcasing how the ideological imposition of gender roles can perpetuate systemic oppression and control. Two primary methods are employed by the Gilead regime to subjugate women. To begin with, they speak in a particular way to continue oppressing women. Second, they use acts of violence, which stand for a harsher and more overt kind of oppression. When these two are combined, the regime keeps women under its control.

To more easily control the handmaids, the dialogue especially the exchanges between them was frequently planned. Female friendships are viewed as "suspicious" in Gilead. Therefore, they are forbidden from speaking to each other too much or without using formal language. The discourse is made real using a preexisting script, just as the handmaids' attire gives the impression of a repeating pattern. They say, "Blessed be the fruit" (Atwood, 1985, p. 29). In the novel, we see that Offred sticks to the script, but Ofglen is more interested in breaking free from formal speech conventions.

Offred's gender performance stems from her fear of being observed, watched, and heard, as this reminder is ingrained in her. Offred becomes shy and shakes her head when the Japanese tourists approach her and want to take her picture. "I am aware that I should avoid staring directly at the interpreter. It is stated that most interpreters are Eyes (Atwood, 1985, p. 38). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, modesty is strongly enforced, as evidenced by the characters' attire and their quiet speech tones. The Gilead monitored handmaids at every step; they could not talk freely according to their own will. "Keep your head down as we walk," Ofglen says, "and lean just a little towards me. That way, I can hear you better. Don't talk when anyone is coming" (Atwood, 1985, p. 177). They have fear of being watched and punished for not playing the part Gilead has assigned them; they keep acting and portraying the modesty and conformity that Gilead wants them to play.

In the text, it is already observed that how Gilead's gender norms are forced upon those who live inside the regime; rather, they are merely performing preexisting ideals. Surveillance and panopticon are shown in the text when "A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (Atwood, 1985, p. 14). This line resonates with Foucault's concept of the panopticon, a system of surveillance where individuals modify their behavior due to the constant possibility of being observed.

Many aspects of Normalization and Bio-power are also shown in the novel. "Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some"(Atwood, 1985, p. 10) This echoes Foucault's idea of normalization, where societal norms and structures are established, often to the detriment of certain individuals or groups. These lines also highlight the power dynamics, emphasizing that resistance often requires a conscious effort to resist the imposed ideologies and norms. "Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance; you have to work at it"(Atwood, 1985, p. 10)

In applying Foucault's ideas to *The Handmaid's Tale*, these examples illustrate the mechanisms of power, discipline, and resistance within the dystopian society of Gilead, providing insights into how the characters navigate and challenge oppressive power structures. Handmaids were always seen and observed by the others. They were not allowed to walk and talk. As in the novel, Atwood says, "We learned to whisper almost without sound. We learned to lip read, our hands flat on the beds, turned sideways watching each other's mouth. In this way we exchanged names" (Atwood, 1985, p. 6). They were always keenly observed and told to perform in a particular way. Society sets some goals for them, and they must follow them without resistance.

Butler's performativity demonstrates how acute oppression is reproduced by repeated, ordinary actions. However, when people and communities become more aware of and confront oppressive norms, resistance options emerge. Extreme oppression can spark collective action as individuals and organizations unite to oppose and remove oppressive structures. Butler defines subversive performances as those that break prevailing conventions and establish counter-narratives.

Handmaids were unable to express themselves fully. They are grounded by a patriarchal system. They were bound to follow the rules imposed on them by different means. Not only men but women were also there to bring down handmaids. Oppression was unbearable for them, but they couldn't express it freely. One of the Handmaids uses the phrase "*Nolite de bastards carborundorum*" (Atwood, 1985, p. 44). In English, it means not to let bastards grind you down. It has become a rallying cry for resistance to injustice, notably for feminist and social justice groups. It is a form of resistance resulting from oppression, suppression and power dynamics. It's a reminder to be strong, tough, and

rebellious in the face of adversity, injustice, or marginalization. The government used religious fundamentalism as a means of defending and upholding this disparity in power, using a perverted reading of the Bible to dictate how women conduct their lives.

The work is a potent indictment of the elimination of women's individuality and autonomy as well as patriarchal power systems. It is explored from the novel that how women are excluded and oppressed in Gilead and questions conventional gender norms. It highlights the perils of theocratic rule by examining how religion justifies and maintains patriarchal structures. *The Handmaid's Tale* delves into the intricacies of both resistance and cooperation. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary story that challenges readers to consider the significance of women's rights, gender equality, and the perils of complacency in the face of regressive ideas. It encourages readers to aspire for a day when equality and individuality form the cornerstones of society and initiates crucial discussions about the intersections of feminism and patriarchy.

4.3. The Dystopian Society in *The Handmaid's Tale*

This work is a dystopian fiction set in North America. It follows a female heroine in a totalitarian society with tyranny, constant surveillance, and government control. The tale portrays a society in which the wrong people rose to power. The dystopian genre emerged in the nineteenth century as a contrast to utopian literature. *The Handmaid's Tale* depicts a dystopian world where rights of the women have been abolished, and they are compelled to adhere to strict gender norms and coerced sexuality.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead's birth rates have decreased due to widespread air, water, and soil pollution. Christians oppose divorce, pornography, and abortion, citing moral concerns. Women are denied the right to own property or money; all assets are transferred to their husband's name. In the story, divorced women who are fertile are punished for infidelity and delivered to Gilead authorities to create children for childless families. Gilead is, or rather becomes, a city of oppression. Christine Guess said:

The Handmaid's Tale is set in the future, in the Republic of Gilead, which occupies part of the territory of what was once the U.S.A. This dystopia takes existing patriarchal tyranny and the victimization of women to an extreme. According to Atwood, everything in the book is true and has already been accomplished in some form in some society (Guess, 1990, p. 85).

Society inflicts different standards for men and women. Society enforces them on every individual. According to the law of Gilead's society, only women are fruitful and barren. No man is infertile. The women are the only things who are infertile. The sterility of man is not included in their law or dictionary. The issue of sterility in the society was

also related to the females only because, man cannot be sterile. It is also one of the example of masculinity or the dictatorship that strives to devalue women by arguing failure to have offspring can only be attributed to the woman, never the man. If a Handmaid is unfortunate, she will be assigned a sterile commander. However, she will be condemned for not bearing children and labelled as an un woman, that is more a death sentence for her. Women are only valued if they are able to reproduce. Other than this, all other are insignificant and incidental. Handmaids know their worth in this society, and if they want to stay alive, they must bear children. Without them, they are un women and things. Once, Offred says, "I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a bade thing, not something born" (Atwood, 1985, p. 55). We can relate Butler's theory of performativity here, in which he says society builds our gender and that society inflicts rules and regulations on individuals.

Although Gilead's official discourse is full of rigid rules and restrictions, none of the characters in the book truly adhere to or believe in them. Not only do Serena Joy, Ofglen, and Moira lack complete conviction, but so do Offred's Commander and the driver, Nick. In particular, the Commander abuses his position of authority to carry out actions that were before socially unacceptable but are now prohibited. The Commander stores publications in his quarters, allowing Offred to peruse them. These are not meant to be here. His private conversations with Offred are also forbidden, and when Serena Joy learns about the previous Handmaid assigned to the Commander's home, she has her own Handmaid jailed for having the same conversations. Although Gilead has its own discourse, all of the characters are influenced by the discourse of the society that existed before and cannot fully adhere to the stringent laws and restrictions. For example, in a game, each player contributes to the "production" of Gilead. Even though no character is committed to the production, you never know who could alert the authorities to your lack of conviction and land you in jail. Therefore, if you live in Gilead, you cannot admit to having questions because you would suffer terrible consequences. However, because every character in the story seems concerned, they all become hypocrites and liars.

No leader has absolute authority; everyone must formally conform to the Gilead discourse and legislation. Nobody fully abides by the principles of Gilead's official speech. Only a few abuse these principles to pursue their own interests. Thus, Gilead is nothing more than a place where males desire power and work to prevent women from obtaining it, which is why women are suppressed there. One must adapt to the discourse of their culture, such as Gilead. It is really hard to stay the same. If we see the women of Gilead who strived to rebel against the dictatorship makes it evident that failing to accomplish this will probably lead to estrangement or possibly death. On the other hand, Offred is impacted by the Gilead discourse but does not resist. She becomes somewhat used to it,

which improves her quality of life. She knows she is doing this and doesn't want to, but she can't stop. Furthermore, Offred muses on the prospect of simply giving in to Gilead's truth.

The Handmaid's Tale is a tragedy in which no woman succeeds. Offred's mom finds herself in the colonies, Moira finds herself in a brothel, Serena Joy becomes a sad housewife, and Ofglen takes her own life. It's ironic that Offred, the character who made the least effort to change her circumstances, succeeds the most in her attempt to flee and share her tale. Offred finds herself hidden in a safe house someplace, and only two cultures she has ever known are ones in which women were oppressed in some capacity by sexual assault, language, knowledge, or authority.

The textual analysis illustrates the domains of patriarchy that are being viewed at abstract levels, including production, state, sexuality, domestic violence, cultural institutions and paid works. The text shows the state is capitalist and imperialist, giving all the advantages to the male sex, holding the foundation of power and ascendancy. We can see disciplinary power in the text: "We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (Atwood, 1985, p. 4). This work reflects Foucault's notion of disciplinary power operating in the margins, where individuals exist in spaces beyond the direct gaze of authority.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Butler's theory suggests that gender identity is not inherent but a repeated performance influenced by societal norms and expectations. By applying this theory to the novel, one can analyze how characters in the dystopian society of Gilead perform their gender roles, often under extreme oppression. At the heart of Butler's theory is that gender is not a stable or innate identity but is constructed through repetitive acts. In Gilead, the society depicted in Atwood's novel, gender roles are sharply defined, and individuals are assigned specific roles based on their fertility and social status. Offred, the protagonist, serves as a prime example of how performativity operates in this oppressive regime. Her existence as a Handmaid is defined by prescribed behaviours, rituals, and appearances, all of which contribute to performing her gender identity.

The Handmaids were not allowed any individuality in their clothing choices, underscoring the societal insistence on conforming to a predetermined gender expression. This uniformity becomes a powerful symbol of how performativity operates as a tool for maintaining control and reinforcing societal expectations. Language also plays a crucial role in the performativity of gender within Gilead. The society's leaders manipulate

language to control and restrict the thoughts and expressions of its inhabitants. The creation of such language contributes to the normalization of violence and control within society, reinforcing gender roles through the performative nature of linguistic expression. Offred's internal monologue provides further insight into the performative aspects of gender identity. Her reflections on her own thoughts and feelings reveal the internal conflict between her true self and the role she must perform. This internal struggle highlights the tension between individual identity and societal expectations, a key aspect of Butler's theory.

The character of Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, also provides a nuanced exploration of performativity. Despite occupying a position of relative privilege, Serena Joy is confined by the societal expectations placed upon her. Her inability to bear children leads to a sense of inadequacy within the prescribed gender role. This underscores how even those in positions of power are subject to the performative demands of Gilead's gender norms, emphasizing the universality of performativity as a shaping force. Butler's theory of performativity also intersects with issues of power and resistance. The Eyes, the secret police of Gilead, embody the surveillance and control mechanisms that reinforce gender performances. The fear of punishment and constant surveillance creates a coercive environment where individuals are compelled to conform to societal expectations. The Handmaids' whispered exchanges and subtle acts of rebellion become acts of resistance within the confined space allowed by the regime, highlighting the potential for subversion within the performative constraints of Gilead.

The Handmaid's Tale provides a rich tapestry of textual examples that vividly illustrate Judith Butler's theory of performativity. The Ceremony, the clothing, the linguistic constructs, internal monologue, interactions with other characters, and the dynamics of power and resistance collectively contribute to exploring how gender identity is constructed and maintained through repeated performances. The novel serves as a powerful critique of a society where performativity becomes a tool of oppression, revealing the profound impact of societal norms on individual identity. Boys are often stereotyped as powerful and fearless, while girls are seen as soft and docile. Gender stereotyping reinforces societal hierarchies, with women viewed as more reliant and faithful while males are portrayed as more possessive and qualified. While not all women and men conform to stereotypes, those who deviate from the norm may face harsh judgment. The paper concludes the discussion by saying that women must protest for their rights to confront the contentious tenets of power politics against them. The researcher must intend to spotlight the crisis of women's relegation to extreme scrutiny. The text is enriched with all the aspects of political theory, which makes the reader understand the profundity of gender and power politics that leads towards hyper-femininity.

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