

AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST STUDY OF THE HANDMAID'S TALE BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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ABSTRACT

*This study is an attempt to explore the relationship between gender identity, body troubles, and societal frameworks in the dystopian story written by Margaret Atwood from an intersectional feminist perspective. This research sheds light on the many dimensions of oppression, resistance, and identity negotiation in speculative futures by critically analyzing *The Handmaid's Tale*. The study focuses on the intricate connections between gender, race, class, and other intersecting identities in creating characters' experiences of physical issues and societal oppression, using Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional feminist paradigm. The researcher employs textual analysis as a research approach to scrutinize the significance and framework of the methodology employed in the chosen work. This analysis highlights the importance of gendered experiences in dystopian societies. It examines how characters in these societies navigate oppressive norms and defy societal expectations based on their intersecting identities. The analysis also reveals the complex struggles for bodily autonomy and agency in oppressive environments, illustrating how power structures control bodies and limit personal freedoms. Furthermore, the study rigorously examines the absence of certain information within the narratives, emphasizing the necessity for additional investigation into suppressed intersectional experiences, namely those pertaining to race and oppressed backgrounds. This research enhances feminist literary scholarship by providing a thorough intersectional examination of Atwood's dystopian work. This work exposes the intricacies of power relations, opposition, and the process of defining oneself within imagined realms, thereby facilitating more profound conversations within the realms of feminist theory, literature, and social analysis.*

Keywords: *Intersecting Identities, Gender Identity, Body Politics, Social Milieu, Dystopian Fictions*

INTRODUCTION

The research explores Margaret Atwood's dystopian landscapes to analyze through an intersectional feminist lens, the complex web of themes about gender roles, body politics, and social norms in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The study employs an intersectional feminist framework to reveal a nuanced layer of oppression, resistance, and identity negotiations, as presented in Atwood's dystopia. Atwood's dystopian landscapes are explored using a feminist approach in this study. By doing so, she attempts to unpack, analyze, and situate the woven tapestry of gender identification, body issues, and social constructs presented in her works. Atwood's works in dystopian literature are some of the most influential narrative pieces, which combine elements of gender trouble, body troubles, and social milieu within oppressive, speculative imaginings (Wilson and Sharon, 1993, p. 49). Atwood's dystopian writing encompasses seminal texts like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Testaments*. Dystopian texts by Atwood explore issues on sexuality, body problems, and society under repressive society. This research has at its core an in-depth investigation of gender interactions, a social phenomenon that informs about power relations, the regulation of bodies, and individuals' quests to assert their freedoms and rights against oppression. The study is concerned with critical interrogations on the manner gender experiences interact with macro dimensions of dominion, how authority constructs and governs bodies, as well as resistance efforts towards freedom among marginalized individuals. The intersectional feminist approach adopted in this study aims to bridge the gaps in traditional feminist

analyses, recognizing the interconnectedness of gender, race, class, and other intersecting identities in shaping characters' experiences and societal structures within Atwood's dystopian fiction. Intersectional feminism is a framework that recognizes the intersections between various forms of identity and social categorizations, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and more. In this study, the research aims to contribute to ongoing discussions within feminist theory, literature, and social critique. By foregrounding the intersections of gender identity, body issues, and societal constructs in Atwood's dystopian fiction, this study offers nuanced insights into the complexities of power, identity, and resistance in these speculative worlds. The aforementioned themes can serve as a strong foundation for research exploring the complexities of intersectional feminism and how multiple identities interact within systems of power and oppression (Stein and Margaret, 1996, p. 71). The importance of this study for feminist critics centering on the intersections involving bodily issues, social arrangements, and tales of freedom can be found in Margaret Atwood's dystopian stories. The significance is also seen in the broad understanding of gender-race-class among other identities and within dystopias, as illustrated by their implications on body autonomy, society standards, and quests for freedom. The complex and multifaceted ways by which people showcase their identities within oppressive social institutions are documented in this study. Secondly, it highlights the importance of using intersectional feminism to critically analyze the power relations, social norms, and body regulations in utopias. Atwood provides examples of the ways intersectional feminist theory affects gender relations in contemporary life. The novel in no way resembles science fiction but rather—speculative fiction: a psychologically—realistic and persuasive exploration of a counter world bearing a significant if not surreal relationship to reality. One of these fertile women—known as Handmaids—narrates the book. Essentially a Gothic story about the brutal captivity of Offred, a young lady, her changing connection with her captors, and her final release. Unlike its classic dystopian predecessors, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* stands out for the intimacy of its protagonist's voice and the compelling domestic context she is given.

The study provides insight into the images of sexual bodies, social demands, and the quest for power in literature. Further, it can be used as the starting point in dialogues around modern social issues about the intersection of identity and the quest for freedom/autonomy. It can be argued that the research, as it is based on the narratives created by one of the most influential writers in dystopian literature, has the potential to inform broader conversations on feminist theory, social norms, as well as power structure and contribute to them. The novel achieves the feat of rendering the bizarre, the ludicrous, and the improbable a sort of new quotidian as Offred moves through the prescribed routine of her essentially dull, housewifely day. The main issue faced by Atwood in this book is to make the ceremonial copulation ceremony anything more than comical, given that the Handmaid is mostly dressed and rests between the wide legs. She also has to deal with the absurdity of the position and the potency of the middle-aged man, even if they are unable to conceive. The research focuses on the body trouble's theme from an intersecting point on feminism and dystopian perspective of Atwood. The intersectional feminist analysis of Atwood's dystopian texts based on the multifaceted issues of power, identity, and resistance is the main focus of the research.

Objectives of the Research

- To unravel the complex layers of oppression and identity, consider the intersectional feminist attributes as depicted in Atwood's dystopian fiction
- To understand Atwood's narratives, which portray and challenge societal norms, power structures, and the struggle for bodily autonomy and freedom existing in her selected work

Research Questions

1. How are complexities and female identity and subjugation, considering the intersectional feminist attributes, depicted in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*?
2. How do Margaret Atwood's narratives challenge societal norms, power structures, and the struggles for bodily autonomy and freedom existing in her selected work?

This nonempirical research attempts to explore the quest for Gender Identity, Body Troubles, and Social Milieu in Margaret Atwood's works. The researcher uses the textual analysis methodology to clearly examine the meanings and structure of the methodology used for the selected novel within the theoretical framework of the intersectional feminist Kimberle Crenshaw's work, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics" introduces the concept of intersectionality and highlights the covering forms of discrimination faced by women due to their race, social status and gender.

The components of Crenshaw's argument include advocating for inclusive solutions that proposes the importance of adopting more comprehensive and intersectional approaches in antidiscrimination law and social justice movements. It also urges for strategies that acknowledge and address the exclusive discrimination faced by women by linking of race and gender (Crenshaw, 2013, p. 170). The foundation of the intersectionality framework, urging for a more inclusive approach that addresses the understandings of marginalized individuals at the intersections of various communal identities. The theory also focuses on intersectionality whereby a single category of identity is seen as insufficient to understand specific experiences of discrimination, as such experiences do not manifest themselves uniquely in either gender or ethnic lines alone. These two forms of subordination usually happen together in their lives. However, some legal and social theories may not capture these distinct categories (Crenshaw, 2013, p. 205).

Crenshaw also focuses on the legal framework and discrimination by criticizing the limitations of antidiscrimination lawsuits and the way they exclude intersectionality. In cases of employment discrimination, the Black women's experiences are overlooked as these laws typically do not focus on both race and gender together. The theoretical structure also draws attention to deficiencies of both feminist and antiracist political struggles which fail to include the black female voices. Traditional feminist theory and antiracist politics tend to ignore the multiple layers of oppression against the black women, as Crenshaw opines. The theories also focus on advocating for inclusive solutions and strategies that are essential since they will recognize and target exclusive discernment against women through the intertwining of gender and race. The intersectionality framework is rooted in Crenshaw's work emphasizing on an interplay between different marginalizing features that include class, gender, race, and several other communal identities.

According to Hegen and Shannon critics within and outside radical feminism have scrutinized its exclusions, particularly the lack of intersectionality in early intersectional feminist discourse. Black feminists like Audre Lorde and Bell Hooks emphasized the need to include race and class intersections in feminist analyses (p. 177). The aforementioned critique led to the development of intersectional feminism, incorporating multiple facets of identity and oppression.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of intersectional feminism introduced critical perspectives on gender inequality. Texts such as Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* laid the essential groundwork by critiquing the biological and social constructions of gender, calling for a reconfiguration of societal norms that perpetuated women's subjugation.

Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's work profoundly impacted intersectional feminist thought in law and sexuality. Dworkin's *Woman-hating right and left* and MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* challenged norms of sexuality, critiquing pornography and sexual violence while advocating for legal reforms to address women's subordination (p. 235).

According to Bennet and Donna the intersectional feminists like Bell Hooks and Adrienne Rich critiqued essentialist notions of womanhood. Hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* explored the intersections of race, class, and gender, challenging monolithic notions of feminism. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* questioned societal ideals of motherhood and the institutionalized constructs surrounding it, challenging traditional gender roles (p. 103).

The legacy of intersectional feminism continues to influence contemporary feminist discourses. New iterations of intersectional feminist thought explore issues of reproductive justice, gender-based violence, and the politics of care. Authors like Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* reexamine historical perspectives on capitalism, patriarchy, and women's labor.

So, Intersectional feminism, with its emphasis on systemic change, continues to provide critical insights into the structural underpinnings of women's oppression. While evolving to address intersectional concerns and contemporary challenges, intersectional feminist thought remains influential in ongoing discussions about gender, power, and societal transformation. This literature review presents a broad overview of intersectional feminist theories, key contributors, criticisms, and contemporary developments within the framework of feminist discourse.

Gender identity encompasses an individual's deeply felt sense of being male, female, something else, or somewhere along a diverse spectrum. Psychological theories, such as Sandra Bem's Gender Schema Theory, explore how societal norms and learned behaviors contribute to constructing gender identity. Judith Butler's work in *Gender Trouble* challenges the binary notion of gender, proposing that gender is performative and continually produced through repeated actions within a cultural context. This theory has significantly influenced discussions on non-binary and transgender identities, highlighting the fluidity and social construction of gender (Butler, 1986, p. 35).

Issues related to the body, particularly in feminist discourse, have been extensively analyzed. Feminist theorists like Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight*, examine how cultural ideals and societal pressures shape body image and contribute to body dissatisfaction. Intersectional perspectives, such as those offered by Bell Hooks in *Eating the Other*, critique how racial and gendered expectations impact bodies differently (p. 189). The disability rights movement and scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson emphasize the social model of disability, challenging the perception of the body as flawed and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of diverse bodies.

Critiques within feminist discourse point to the need for an intersectional approach that considers race, class, disability, and other intersecting identities in understanding body image issues. Recent works by authors like Sonya Renee Taylor's *The Body Is Not an Apology* advocate intersectional self-love and challenge oppressive beauty standards, advocating for a more inclusive and compassionate relationship with our bodies (Mellor 2007, p. 72).

The literature on gender identity and body image illuminates the intricate relationship between societal norms, gender identity, and body perceptions. It underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of diverse identities and body experiences, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality in addressing body troubles and advocating for body positivity and acceptance across gender spectra.

Susan J. Hubert analyzes the theme of body politics in Atwood's works, particularly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlights the controlling women's bodies, becomes a tool for societal dominance. Hubert focuses on the body-objectified and women commercialized by this repressive system, which links social control with the identity of gender and bodily self-determination (p. 112).

Angela Hague, one of the literary scholars who have looked at race and gender in the works by Atwood, underlined the importance of using an intersectional analysis when studying the experiences of disadvantaged people. Hague's work stresses the complexity surrounding identity within Atwood's dystopian worlds that force an examination into how these factors interact with gender identity, race, and social structures (p. 85).

Environmental feminist scholars like Emily Roach analyze Atwood's "MaddAddam" trilogy on how ecological crisis meets gendered plots. Roach examines how women's agency is illustrated within environmental degradation, focusing on Atwood's subtle approach to the intersection of social space, gender identity, and ecological matters. For instance, feminists such as Sullivan and Rosemary expound on the way that Atwood's dystopian fiction broadened the frontiers of feminist criticism by encompassing fertility issues, body ownership, as well as patriarchy. Eagleton emphasizes how Atwood's narratives question the issues of womanhood and social authority, which greatly enhances feministic thoughts (p. 93).

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a seminal work exploring the intersection of gender identity and power. Scholars such as Nancy Armstrong and Cynthia Messenger discuss how the dystopian society in the novel relegates women to predefined roles, highlighting the manipulation of gender identity within oppressive systems. The portrayal of Offred's struggles with her identity within the restrictive Gileadean regime demonstrates the complexities of gender in a controlled social environment.

Atwood's work has been studied through different approaches like feminist, dystopian, or literary criticism. The intersectionality framework is rooted in Crenshaw's work emphasizing on an interplay between different marginalizing features that include class, gender, race, and several other communal identities.

Discussion

This study progressively focuses on the exploration "Gender Identity", "Body Troubles" and "Social Milieu". The journey takes place within an interior environment that goes beyond any specific geographical or cultural boundaries, disregarding local, regional, nationalistic, or cultural considerations. The analysis of the work is constituted on the following parts:

Some women are able to restrain masculine dominance and exploitation effectively. They possess the ability to retaliate against the patriarchal subjugation. Nevertheless, they fail to surpass the limitations imposed by gender. Instead of establishing their own distinct position within society, they adopt masculine roles and dominate males as a means to avoid being victimized themselves. Atwood rejects misandry and intersectional methods for achieving female liberation and autonomy. Consequently, these characters are unequivocal disappointments in Atwood's feminist philosophy. Despite their appearance of strength and defiance, these women do not try to cultivate the capacity to transcend the gender binary upheld by the patriarchal system, resulting in their inability to attain true selfhood and genuine liberation. Atwood's feminist theory is more nuanced and practical than the prevailing stereotypes of feminism, which suggest that women must abandon their femininity and become hostile towards males.

It is evident in *The Handmaid's Tale* that, the valet of the Commander, is an outcast of gender within the patriarchal society of Gilead. Put simply, Nick lacks authority and displays

no inclination toward gender dominance. Offred readily observes his lack of social influence: “low status: he hasn’t been issued a woman, not even one. He doesn’t rate: some defect, lack of connections” (p. 27). The reason for his lack of success is attributed to a flaw and a lack of relationships. Offred believes that his lack of interest and excessive self-assurance are deliberate tactics to hide his feelings of letdown. Not unexpectedly, Nick's role in Gilead does not fit neatly into any certain functional area. Despite his official role as the Commander's chauffeur, he is purportedly an undercover agent for Eyes. Initially, Nick appears enigmatic and untrustworthy in the narrative. Offred is perplexed by his lack of tidiness: “He's too casual, he's not servile enough. It may be stupidity, but I don't think so. Smells fishy, they used to say; or, I smell a rat” (p. 27).

Nevertheless, Nick assumes a significant job in enhancing Offred's useless life in Gilead. Offred frequently observes him washing the Commander's automobile. He often gazes at her intently and emits a high-pitched sound. Offred develops a true fondness for Nick and their intimate relationship, unaffected by power dynamics, instills a sense of dignity in Offred. Indeed, Offred finds Nick's apathetic and unresponsive demeanor to be exasperating. However, Nick's role as a companion who is neither domineering nor too protective allows Offred to experience a sense of agency, which in turn provides her with solace and aids in the restoration of her identity. Nick is the one individual in Gilead who displays an inclination for observing Offred's countenance, and notably.

Despite Offred's lingering suspicion, it is he who revitalizes her sense of self and instills in her the belief that she may once again lead a psychologically balanced existence. Ultimately, Nick's act of falsely arresting someone aids in facilitating Offred's escape from Gilead, thereby leading to her emancipation from the oppressive patriarchal society.

Evidently, powerful women effectively restrain male dominance and exploitation. They possess the ability to retaliate against the male-dominated oppression. Nevertheless, despite their outward appearance of strength and defiance, these women do not actively strive to cultivate the capacity to transcend the gender binary perpetuated by the patriarchal establishment. Ainsley, Elizabeth, and Zenia come to understand their own identities (p. 67). Conversely, there exist passive female characters who yield to patriarchal influences and embrace their predetermined feminine fate. They maintain the patriarchal gender limitations through their passivity rather than through their actions. Nevertheless, according to Atwood's narrative perspective, these women who are victimized by patriarchy and lack agency serve a crucial purpose in awakening the feminist awareness of the main female characters and guiding their journey towards self-discovery.

The body in question pertains to both the physical aspect of sexuality and the realm of written works. Fiction examines the language used by writers to express societal concepts, aiming to liberate women from the oppressive male fantasies that have deprived them of agency. Atwood links marriage to death as she believes that marriage serves to justify the mistreatment and objectification of women.

The protagonist, Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, assumes the role of a Handmaid following a failed endeavor to flee Gilead alongside her daughter and spouse. Upon the declaration of the invalidity of her marriage to Luke due to his previous marital status, they endeavor to flee, but Luke is ultimately shot. The mother in the upper echelon receives her daughter as a charitable act. Offred has been apprehended. Offred retains visual contact with her daughter. Extending her arms towards me, being transported away" (p. 85). She is forever deprived of the opportunity to see her daughter again. Furthermore, she is unaware of the status of her spouse's existence. After being apprehended at the border during her attempt to cross it, she experiences memory lapses. She awakens at the Leah and Rachel Center, the training facility for Handmaids. In "The politics of body and language in the

writing of Margaret Atwood, " Massoura speaks:

in Atwood's writing, the themes of body and language have been examined. I have demonstrated via these themes that her work explores a wide range of topics, including childbearing, mental and physical illness, sexual and political violence, and historical and societal expectations of femininity and how these impact women and men alike. (p. 266)

Hence, it is quite understood that as a feminist, Atwood is interested in unraveling the hidden miseries of women's right from Woman to Penelopiad. She exhibits the sufferings and pains of women in the guise of love and marriage and also foregrounds a polemic-related female body and victimization. However, it is to be admitted that she is not a intersectional feminist as her protagonists seem to mellow down and realize their stand in the patriarchal society, which makes them accept their position and, in turn violate and victimize their psyche.

The temporal setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* is 2005, a period that is no longer our collectively uncertain future. The novel does not have any resemblance to science fiction. Instead, it can be classified as "speculative fiction," which is a psychologically authentic and compelling examination of an alternate universe that has a strong, however strange, connection to reality. The tale is narrated by a certain group of fertile women known as Handmaids. *The Handmaid's Tale*, is concerning the harsh imprisonment of Offred, to a young woman. Her developing relationship with her captors and subsequent escape becomes the main concern of the story.

The author's choice of an intimate first-person narrator, set in a domestic scene which bears resemblance to modern Britain, differentiate this work among others of the dystopian genre. This captures the odd, unimaginable, and abnormal situations come to be observed as commonplace and ordinary by Offred as a house wife. In this work, Atwood faces the formidable task of transforming the traditional copulation ceremony into something beyond ludicrous or slapstick. *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays this ceremony, which typically occurs while the participants are clothed, as taking place between open legs. The absurdity of the situation is heightened by the middle-aged man's virility, which remains intact despite the potential failure to have offspring. The patriarchal attitude to objectify woman, this sort of dualistic thinking results in hierarchy and oppression. As Simon de Beauvoir points out, man defines himself as the self and woman as the "other". Furthermore, he is the subject, the mind, the center of reason, active form and she is the object. the body, the center of emotions, mere passive matters. Offred says, "I am a refugee. from the past" (p. 213). Hence, *The Handmaids Tale* is completely objectified and are denied the power to judge and reason they have no freedom to decide their own needs and activities. Others regulate their bath; their food is chosen by the authorities based on its nutritional value.

The Handmaids Tale denied all emotions and are expected to passively perform the functions ascribed to. them. Even entertainment was showing an old pornographic film of the nineteen seventies and eighties depicting the brutalities of the pre-Gilead period and to assure them a sense of false security in their present mode of living. The handmaids, having been denied thoughts. emotions, desires, are denied individuality and are treated as impersonal and inanimate things. Coral Ann Howells comments: "Atwood's feminist concerns arc plain here but so too are her concerns for basic human rights (p. 128).

The novel is set in futuristic dystopias, politically totalitarian regime in which the individual identity is obliterated under the banner of the collective good. However, the novel as genre has always been an individual creation and cast and the form of a personalized utterance which would have no forum in the fictional world wherein it takes birth.

Hence, Atwood's work *The Handmaid's Tale*, exhibits a pronounced tendency towards introspection. Indeed, the protagonists' introspection is profound enough that the viewers are provided with less or no information regarding their bodily attributes. Offred is deliberately concealed from the readers as she refrains from describing her physical appearance in her narration. The research demonstrates the comprehension of Atwood's main characters and the feminist ideology that they represent, with Atwood's unique lexicon, which delves into the subconscious, suppressed desires, phobias, and shattered sense of self.

The female protagonists examined in *The Handmaid's Tale* first begin their adult lives adhering to traditional gender roles, where they are subordinate to their male counterparts. They completely adhere to the conventional representations of feminine conduct. They consistently prioritize the well-being of their subordinates and guide them through their unfortunate existence. The research proved the detrimental effects of imperialistic and colonizing power structures on interpersonal relationships. Atwood's works consistently convey the message that women have the power to reject victimhood and achieve liberation from a world shaped by male perspectives. She fails to offer any remedies or alternatives.

This study explores themes pertaining to the politics of gender what the writer opposes the social system, imposing gender norms on women in her imaginary universe, behind the pretenses of tradition, modernity, technology, and marriage. The perspective of this study does not merely in favor of women or men, but rather aim to illustrate the reality of unequal partnerships. The topic's uniqueness has made this study efficient and thought-provoking, but it has also given the researcher, the chance to talk about works that haven't gotten much attention, including Atwood's short stories and her more recent book *Alias Grace* (1996).

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