

Extended Essay

Title: Portrayal of Identity in The Handmaid's Tale

Research Question: How is the fragmentation of identity in the book the Handmaid's Tale portrayed?

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Introduction

Men and women have had gender roles throughout all of history in order to keep harmony in societies. In the past, these roles have been distributed between different sexes according to biological differences. Women were charged with mainly childbearing and taking care of their households; while men were responsible with working and sustaining their families. However, since the mid-20th century these gender roles have started to change along with shifts in gender stereotypes. The Industrial Revolution brought many women out of their homes, where they were responsible for looking after their kids and doing chores, to work in factories. New movements such as socialism, nationalism, world independence and women's rights began to shift the social roles of men and women. Women were no longer defined by their ability to bear a child and take care of their households, instead they were defined by their personalities, their intelligence and their inner beauties. People finally realized that women, like men, could also excel in fields like sports, arts, academics, literature etc... This provoked a new idea called feminism which challenges the inequalities women face on a daily basis. Furthermore, the book that is going to be explored in this essay *The Handmaid's Tale*, wasn't written as a "feminist novel" but as a "dystopian novel from the female point of view" according to its writer, Margaret Atwood. Therefore, this essay will be focusing on the question: "How is fragmentation of identity in the book the Handmaid's Tale portrayed?" from not by a feminist point of view but by supporting the idea of gender equality.

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer who has written award-winning poetry, short stories and novels including *The Circle Game* (1966), *The Handmaid's Tale*(1985), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake*(2003) and *The Tent*(2006). Religion, gender and identity, politics are common themes in her novels. She is perhaps known best for her recurrence to create strong, usually mysterious female characters. She likes to explore contemporary urban life and sexual politics and she tends to leave her stories open-ended. One of her most popular novels *The Handmaid's Tale* is a futuristic novel describing a woman's struggle to break free from her sole role in life that is child-bearing. It tells the daily life of Offred, a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead which is a totalitarian state that has overthrown the U.S government. To give some brief information, "Handmaids", are women who are assigned with bearing children for elite couples that cannot conceive a child. The new regime restricts the women's individuality by erasing their inborn identity, discharging from their jobs, taking away their freedom of writing, speaking, reading even thinking. Their only occupation is ovulation and insemination which is why the women in the book

are addressed as “walking wombs.” The book has been considered controversial not only because of its immense violent and sexual content but the denigration of Christianity in its storyline. When Atwood was writing the book she claims that she took inspiration from the rise of Christian rights in America during the 1970’s and 80’s, the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Atwood has said that she was inspired by some works of dystopian literature that she adored during her childhood such as George Orwell’s “1984”, and Aldous Huxley’s “*Brave New World*” while writing the *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The purpose of the book is to support gender equality and criticize the government’s control over women’s reproductive freedom. In this essay, the main aim is to explore the way the women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are stripped away from their identity all in name of their most essential role: childbirth.

1) Portrayal of Gender Roles in the Handmaid’s Tale

In the novel, gender roles carry great significance in representing personal identity. Gilead creates a system of titles where men are defined by their military rank and women are defined by their gender roles. The roles of women, whom are considered the “second sex” are divided into different identities which are meant to represent different feminine ideals. In this aspect, there are four main ranks between women: the Aunts, the Wives, the Handmaids, the Marthas. While the Aunts are the ones with the highest authority and therefore don’t represent any gender role, the Wives are responsible with keeping order in the house; the Handmaids are responsible with procreation and the Marthas are responsible with housekeeping and caregiving. By creating its own idealized versions of gender, the regime of Gilead is able to maintain its control over its citizens.

In the novel, as the society is based on a patriarchal system, men are the ruling class. Having the supreme power of a ruler, men are able to oppress women by turning toxic gender stereotypes into societal conventions. The fear of becoming outcasts puts pressure on women to carry out their oppressive roles assigned to them by patriarchy. This explains why the Wives, whom even though are the ones with the second most authority after the Aunts, are always desperate to have a child: they know that even they can be sent to the colonies if they don’t fulfill their gender roles. This limits the women’s sense of self to the social expectations of their society, stripping them way of personal development. For the case of the Handmaids, whose sole duties are procreation, their bodies are the representation of their selves, thereby they are called the “walking wombs”. They are the products of their societies where their bodies are completely under the control of the patriarchy. Their Commanders treat them as if they are their property: “*We are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important. The outside can become hard and wrinkled, for all they care, like*

the shell of a nut". (Atwood, 16) Offred finds it degrading to be valued as a fertile object and despite her efforts conserve her sense of self, she still faces a recession in her self-esteem : "*I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.*" (Atwood, 63) The fact that her body is perceived as merely a womb made her detached from her body and left her with emotions such as self-loath and self-rejection. She carries out her passiveness throughout the novel as she ultimately surrenders to the objectification of her body, extinguishing her sense of self completely : "*resign my body freely, to the use of others. They can do what they like with me. I am object*" (Atwood, 1985, p. 218) Unable to define herself, Offred lets the men in Gilead define who she is which highlights the supreme power of the patriarchal ideology in Gilead.

2) Breaking down Self-Expression

Self-expression is a way of embracing individuality. Our names, our styles, our hobbies are all components of our identity which makes us unique. In the Handmaid's tale, one of the ways that fragmentation of identity is portrayed is by the forbiddance of self-expression. Women in Gilead are forced to live by strict rules which deprive them from self-expression. For example, clothing which is normally a form of expressing individuality, is used as a tool for discrimination between women: each specific color reveals the social status of the woman wearing it. It implies that the individual identities of the women are faded away in the predetermined roles by the patriarchy. Without being given a choice of clothing, individual differences are disregarded. In the novel, the clothes of the Handmaids are highlighted: "*Everything except the wing around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us. The skirt is ankle length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the breasts, the sleeves are full. The white wings too are prescribed issue; they are to keep us from seeing, but also from being seen.*" (Atwood, 1985, p.14) The fact that their uniforms not only cover their faces and bodies from being seen but also sabotage their sights, indicate that the women in Gilead bear no importance other than their functions as "walking wombs." The uniforms of the Handmaids must be as modest as possible to not grab any attention or show difference from others. "*Modestly is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia... Never forget it. To be seen- to be seen is to be penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable.*" The deep red color of their gowns symbolizes the menstrual blood, contributing to the oppressive image associated with fertility. This effect is observed through Offred's inner monologues when she observes a couple of Japanese tourists whom are dressed "normally" : "*I used to dress like that. That was freedom.*" (Atwood, 1985, p.34) Offred remembers a time when women had the freedom to wear whatever they wanted and clothes weren't a social function but a way of expressing individuality. She yearns for the times likes this, when she was her

original self, but in a system where the society tells who she is, she is forced to hide her identity as it slowly becomes distorted.

Another case where female individuality is sabotaged is the renaming process of the Handmaids. A person's name is important in the aspect of creating a connection between the society and identity. An individual's name indicates that their existence is acknowledged by the society and therefore it has a responsibility to take care of that individual. In the Handmaid's tale, Gilead tries to take away the existing identity of their citizens by renaming them. This process is an inhuman way of trying to create completely devoted citizens to their leaders. For example, The Handmaids get new names according to the name of their Commanders to indicate which one they belong to. Offred's name, like all the other Handmaids, is made by adding "of" to the name of her Commander (Of- Fred). This process is a demonstration of assigning women as a man's property, belittling their identities as an individual. In the novel, to prevent getting pulled into an identity crisis, the Handmaids exchange their names with each other. *"We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the bed, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed."* (Atwood, 10) For the Handmaids, it is a way of reconnecting with their past and their real identity. Especially Offred, whom treasures her original name dearly and refuses to be defined by a name so belittling, never utters her real name throughout the novel. She keeps it to herself to remind herself of her individuality in the hope that one day she will reclaim her true identity.

Lastly, the bedrooms of the Handmaids carry great significance in the aspect of showing lost individuality. *"Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities. If we define possessions as things we call ours, James was saying that we are the sum of our possessions."* (Belk, 1988) The bedrooms, which the Handmaids don't have a key to, are the possessions of the society and it is used to illustrate the government's control over them. The fact that the Handmaids don't have any right to have self-possession shows they lack personal identity. The narrator's use of repetitions highlights the standardizations of the rooms and their lack of individuality. *"Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same white curtains, I wonder? Government issue?"* (Atwood, 1985, p.13) Offred complains about how she can't call her room "mine.": *"The door of the room-not my room, I refuse to say my-is not locked. In fact it doesn't shut properly."* (Atwood, 1985, p.14) However, still under these circumstances she finds hope in the little aspects of the room such as in the *"chair, sunlight, flowers"* which give her the courage to call her room as "my room" later in the novel.

3) The Role of Religion on Identity

In the *Handmaid's Tale*, the Republic of Gilead is governed by a fundamentalist Christian patriarchal theocracy where there is no distinction between the state and religion. Gilead's prime interest is to suppress women by creating harmful gender stereotypes which they claim to be in the Bible. For example, none of the stores in Gilead has a sign; instead they have images because it is illegal for women to read. If women were given the permission to read they would be able to understand that the laws were made up by the regime whom have claimed they were in the Bible. Hence, everything becomes related with the Bible, making it in an effective control mechanism. Even the name of their local grocery store "Milk and Honey" is an analogy made to the Bible. The founders of Gilead, whom are a bunch of religious fundamentalists, incorporate religious terminology and biblical references into their vocabulary to show that they act on the authority of the Bible. For example, the servants are called "Marthas" in reference to the domestics character in the New Testament or the local police are called "Commanders of the faithful" which is again a reference to the Bible. Using religious terminology to describe people, businesses and ranks covers up the political deception exerted by the regime. Ultimately, religion is inserted into the lives of the citizens, making up a great aspect of their identities. In this case, Offred's identity is a "Handmaid" which is equivalent to a bondswoman. Her job is based on the biblical precedent of Rachel and Leah in the Old Testament, where fertile servants are responsible with providing children for infertile women like the Commander's Wife. In order for this, she has to take part in obscene intercourses with her Commander and, like all the other Handmaids, she is made to participate in daily readings from the Bible where the Commander recites certain phrases to remind the Handmaids their reason for existence: *"Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the Earth...Then comes the moldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Centre. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her."* (Atwood, 95) These readings not only encourage male dominance and gender subordination but preaches the intercourse the Handmaids must take place in. In this aspect, every biblical reference in the book is an encouragement made upon fertility which takes place in the core of the identity of women, eradicating any other self-characteristics of the individual.

4) Lack of Female Solidarity

In Gilead's patriarchy there are various groups of women: the Unwomen, the Handmaids, the Econowives, Marthas, Wives and Aunts. Despite the fact that these women are victims of

Gilead's oppression and ultimately are all subordinates of men, they have no union between them. The concept of female solidarity highlights a universal gender identity for women and "*it acts a unifying force to accommodate significant difference between women...*" It not only brings a sense of belonging to women whom feel isolated and alone but it also helps them show acceptance and growth within themselves. When there is no female solidarity, like in Gilead, women have no way of existing by themselves in a strict male dominated society. Gilead turns women against women in order to maintain male supremacy and uses two main groups of women "*in oppressing and indoctrinating female obedience : the Aunts and the Wives.*" (Gayret, 115) Between these two groups of women, the Aunts are the ones with the most authority to establish dominance over the Handmaids. The method they use is gaslighting where they delude the Handmaids into believing they are "*sacred vessels*" (Atwood, 1985, p.109) and persuade them to self-sacrifice themselves for the "common good". As a consequence, the female body and its functions become more important than personality and the mind is slimmed down to the point of being unable to reason. This not only glorifies the concept of maternity but helps them recreate a new identity for the Handmaids: the walking wombs. Labelling the Handmaids as "lazy women" or "sluts" (Atwood, 1985, p.91) when they cannot bear a child, diminishes their identity as an individual and triggers feelings of unworthiness: "*Unworthy, unjust, untrue...*" (Atwood, 1985, p.117) A tragic moment in which we can see that the gaslighting method is effective is when the aunts condemn Janine who was raped by uniting the Handmaids against her: "*But whose fault it was?*" Aunt Helena says, *holding up one plum finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault...*" (Atwood, 1985, p.61) Janine whom was a victim of rape is made to believe she is guilty by public humiliation and unjust accusations: "*It is my own fault. I led them on. I deserve pain.*" (Atwood, 1985, p.61) The internalized oppression made her doubt herself, making her confess for something she didn't commit. Being invalidated, she can no longer express herself leading to damaging self-doubt and reduced self-esteem. As a result of being in doubt about her identity she is now turned in to an uncertain passive version of herself. It is an cruel but effective tactic of Gilead to derive from the benefits of lack of female solidarity to maintain male supremacy: "*the best and most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves*" (Atwood, 1985, p.232)

5) Acts of Rebellion

The identity is what personifies the self and how an individual defines themselves. Especially teenagers as they grow up and start to build their identity, they develop an ability to reason and question their surroundings. With the growing desire to become independent, rebellion

becomes a way of executing individual thought. This is similar to the situation in the Handmaid's Tale: when Gilead ceases the citizens' ability to reason, they become forced to accept their realities; losing the power to exert a change to their environments. However, this doesn't mean some individuals are completely unaware of the way they are treated. Despite the fear of being executed, every major character in the book engages in some kind of disobedience in their own way. These acts of disobedience adds complexity to the characters, depicting how they are trying to conserve their identity. Ofglen, who works as a part of an organized resistance exerts community minded rebellious acts while The Commander and the Commander's wife execute relatively smaller acts. Offred, on the other hand, in the long stretches of her isolation, elaborates herself for her own sanity which reestablish some continuity to her discredited past and her fragmented identity. The making of these selves are potential acts of her hidden resistance and survival. *"I try not to think too much, thought must be rationed. There's a lot that doesn't bear thinking about. Thinking can hurt your chances and I intend to survive."* (Atwood, 10) Offred is fully conscious of her reality and that she is being manipulated: *"Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent. I knew they made that up. I knew it was wrong, and they left things out too..."* (Atwood, 96) However, the way that the regime inflicts fear to its subjects suppresses any act of rebellion. The regime's power over the *"public transcript is used to script personae so thinly that they flatten the humanity of their objects."* (Selves, Survival and Resistance, 67) which makes individuals like Offred so paranoid that their intentions remain only as a dream.

Throughout out the book, there is always a small sense of hope in Offred to escape Gilead. She searches for ways to keep her sanity and her individuality alive. She tries to preserve her sense of self by trying to hold on to her memories of her past self-hoping to keep a piece of her true identity to herself: *"The kitchen smells of yeast...It reminds me of kitchens, kitchens that were mine. It smells of mothers...It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother."* (Atwood, 62) Furthermore, she constantly steals something-daffodils, a piece of butter-to prove that she still has rights before and after Gilead and that she won't be silenced. In this aspect when she finds a scratched message in her room *"Nolite te bastardes carborundum."* (Atwood, page 52) which is Latin for "Don't let the bastards grind you down", she discovers the liberating power of language. This phrase which was written by a previous Handmaid whom hanged herself after not being able to bear to live imprisoned in the Commander's house acts as a linguistic resistance to Gilead's oppression and a buried hope that one day women will be able to reclaim their silenced voices and regain their original identity. In a system where *"female masses are not even permitted to mingle with word because Gilead recognizes the language a death blow to oppression."* (Gayret, 114),

Offred feels empowered by this message and she “*flouts the ban on language*”(Gayret, 114) by reading magazines and playing scrabble, feeling as if for once she controls language and it does not control her. This way language becomes a significant tool in “*subverting the dehumanizing effects of language the patriarchy extorts*” and “*a female liberation to rehumanize the self.*”(Gayret,115), making an important aspect of rebellion to conserve identity.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates the impact of gender stereotypes on female individuals' identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the novel, the total violation of female rights leads to lack of independence in the female communities of Gilead. Stripped away from their identities, women lose their sense of “self” and their bodies become the objects of men which are only worth for their ability to procreate. The portrayal of gender roles in the *Handmaid's Tale* are similar to the one in the 50's in which there was an extreme dichotomy between men and women. Women are enslaved not only physically but physiologically as well: While they are trapped inside their residences which are strictly supervised, their ability to speak out or to self-express is suppressed as well. Women become defined by their bodies which in this case they are named as “walking wombs.” The rigidity of gender stereotypes, leaves no room for some women to freely, dress, speak or act. Their will to express themselves becomes suppressed by acts of violence by the regime whom claim to do them for the sake of religion which in reality is a tool of Gilead to silence its citizens. The regime ruins the solidarity between women to facilitate its control on them. The lack of solidarity leads to an increase in rivalry and hate between them. Offred's and her friends' small acts of rebellion to the regime were the only hints of conservation of identity in the novel. In a world built on loath and dispassion, their will to survive is an indication of wanting to stay true to themselves. Atwood's this way of portraying identity is an analogy made to the problems in our real world where gender discrimination, regressive force of religion and gaslighting methods of regimes are still common. However, it is important to consider that problems regarding gender are not only for women as they also concern men as well. In this aspect, a limitation to this study was the fact it didn't include men's perspective in the novel where figures like Nick experienced gender stereotyping as well. Hence, this study could have had a broader analysis of these problems by including both genders. Still, what Atwood wanted to convey was that even though identity can change and, it can never be truly destroyed because we all have an essential essence which is unique to us and something we want to hold on to.

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