

INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE

EXTENDED ESSAY

ENGLISH B, CATEGORY 3: LITERATURE

Title:

Analysis Of Margaret Memory and Inner Voice as Resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Research Question:

How does Margaret Atwood use Offred's memories and inner voice to explore the effects of patriarchy on female identity in *The Handmaid's Tale*?

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was written in 1985, represents a strong vision of a theocracy built on patriarchy in the Republic of Gilead.

In this book, in the totalitarian world, women do not have sufficient authority or influence in society as much as men have. Women are measured only by their reproductive abilities and sufficiency instead of their identities, and their emotions. Therefore their identities are stripped away from them. Atwood displays how power operates through social and physical ways to subjugate women by the character called Offred who is a handmaid and her body is controlled by the society. A narratological study argues that Offred's first-person narration, shaped by remembering her past, functions as resistance because it helps her create or retrieve a sense of subjecthood (Haghi, Ghorban Sabbagh, and Taebi 2). This dystopian atmosphere in the novel is a mirror of the historical events, when women were under pressure and also a warning for how easy it is for individual freedom and human rights to disappear.

The effort of trying to preserve individuality under a strong and all-encompassing regime lies in the centre of Atwood's narrative. Since Offred is deprived of her individuality, her own freedom and even her own name, she endures her life in The Republic of Gilead by two important attempts of survival: through her inner voice and her memories from the past. Even though the system tries to erase the self-sense, remembering and holding onto her memories of her husband Luke, her child and the freedom of her past life serves Offred a self-sense. Meanwhile Offred's inner voice, thoughts, and silent acts of reflection helps her to build a private space in her mind where the system can't reach out and is untouched by the patriarchal control. These narrative techniques that Atwood uses demonstrate how the act of remembering and thinking becomes a quiet form of resistance towards patriarchal control.

Thus, Atwood using Offred's memories and inner voice is an example of how Gilead can control women's bodies but not their minds.

In this essay the psychological effects of patriarchy on female identity will be explored by Offred's memories and inner voices which Margaret Atwood uses. When the selected passages are closely read it can be seen that Atwood uses Offred's inner world not only as the fragments of individuality but also as a symbol of resistance and humanity. Basically, The Handmaid's Tale demonstrates that although the body can be controlled by some external forces, the mind cannot be controlled since it is shaped by emotions, memories and inner voices.

To analyse this argument in a more systematic way, this essay will respond to the following research question: How does Margaret Atwood use the memories and inner voice of Offred to describe resistance to the control of patriarchy in the Republic of Gilead? To respond to this question, the analysis will be based on close reading of the selected passages in the novel with the emphasis on the instances when Offred recalls her past and describes her current experience. This essay will examine how Atwood creates psychological resistance in a system that is meant to destroy individuality through textual analysis of language, imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure. Examining the idea of memory and internal narration as a narrative technique, the discussion will demonstrate how the inner world of consciousness of Offred is the location that cannot be entirely controlled by the regime. In this perspective, the resistance in the novel of Atwood does not end at the physical opposition; it proceeds to the inner world, a psychological and emotional denial of giving up identity.

Patriarchal Control and Female Oppression in Gilead

The Handmaid Tale by Margaret Atwood depicts Gilead as a patriarchal society that is strict in its control. Power is not just political, it is entrenched in the control of the bodies of women, language and even the identity of the self. Religion prevails in this structure. The regime exploits religion to oppress individuals with a biased and misinterpreted version of the biblical scripture. It is not just a system that is comparable to a traditional hierarchy. It is permeated into the mundane. Women are degraded to the level that is virtually lowered to their reproductive role. Loss of legal rights is not the sole one in Gilead. Women lose their names. The handmaids are renamed after their masters. Offred, which means Offred. Of-Fred. The change may appear linguistic, but it is a sign of something further: identity is property. Language as such becomes a mechanism. of control. Repeated religious phrases and carefully restricted speech shape how women think and speak. When Handmaids greet each other with “Blessed be the fruit” (*Atwood, p.15*), the words replace genuine communication and quietly reinforce the belief that a woman’s value lies in her ability to bear children. The formulaic greetings in Gilead function as a restrictive discourse that blocks authentic communication and reduces Handmaids to procreation (Gayret 115).

Margaret Atwood fictionalizes Gilead as the community in which female body is transformed into the territory of control in which sexuality and reproduction is legalized. The ceremony which happens monthly, concretizes the violence. The violence is described with cold and detached terms which exposes its nature; “my arms are raised she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being.” (*Atwood, p.81*) In here, the language Atwood uses has a deprivation of passion and humanity, so it shows how the act of proximity is emptied. While Offred’s body is becoming a part of the regime’s reproductive agenda, her emotions are being acquiescence under ritualized

obedience. By this scene we can see Atwood exaggerates how the patriarchal control extends physical domination, invading the meaning and experience and recomposing what it means by being a woman.

In the republic of Gilead, Hierarchies reinforce the male authority, the dominance of them through institutional structures and fear. The women are divided into groups, and became against with each other. There is a strict class distinction in Gilead between women, between handmaids, wives, and marthas. Because of this hierarchal division, women begin to resent each other and see one another as opponents. The wives are jealous of the handmaids because they are fertile, while the handmaids are jealous of the wives because of their higher status and freedom. This deliberate separation prevents women from uniting with each other and without unity, the male created authority can continue more easily. Even the aunts who teach handmaids in submission act as a part of the patriarchal system. They help for the system to work and continue and by this they make the males job easier. That's why Atwood calls this "woman complicity" which means women unwillingly serving their own oppression. Gilead assigns women different positions of privilege and powerlessness, which enables varying degrees of complicity that help sustain patriarchal oppression (Keck 12). Consequently, women are opposed to each other rather than unite, which only reinforces the patriarchal system. The most unpleasant aspect of Gilead can be its psychological aspect of control. Power is not imposed by the obvious use of force but rather it is internalized so that obedience becomes a natural thing.

"We lived in the gaps between the stories" (*Atwood, p.49*). This implies that Gilead does not just dictate the facts, but the narratives, silencing the real experiences of women and rewriting their pasts into reality. Women are deprived of their real identities and voices and live in the imposed versions of reality. Such erasure causes loss of self as well as deep psychological oppression. Patriarchy in Gilead is on a very personal level. In the case of Offred, this

domination is applied in all spheres of her life her body, her name, her clothes, the ritualized violence she is subjected to, and even in her emotional life. Re-naming deprives her of personality; the dressing code reminds her of subordination all the time; and the ceremonies she is repeatedly subjected to pervert her relationship with her own body. In such a manner, patriarchy is no longer a political structure but a kind of psychological torture.

She is in a contradictory place: on the one hand, she is a participant in the system, and on the other, a prisoner of the system. Even though she adheres to the rules she is being subjected to, this obedience does not make her powerful, on the contrary, it makes her even less free. She seems to play her designated role on the surface but underneath the surface she is trapped. The air of being under constant watch renders rebellion almost impossible. Under Gilead's daily surveillance Handmaids internalize its rules, echoing Aunt Lydia's warning that "Gilead is within you". (*Atwood, p.20*) (Zargarzadeh and Avestan 258) Control goes beyond the language; it controls the way people talk and indirectly the way they think. In these circumstances, resistance can hardly be expressed visibly. Nevertheless, according to Atwood, rebellion does not fade away; it moves inwards. The thoughts, memories and personal thoughts of Offred are turned into small rebellions. She defends a fragment of herself that cannot be wholly controlled by the regime by critically examining what is around her and keeping her experiences in her head. This inner resistance is essential since it is impossible to rebel physically.

The pressure that Gilead has been exerting is its strength. It is effective because it combines religious ideology with the control of women bodies. Oppression is morally justified when it is combined with the state authority and religion. Language, sexuality and identity are all controlled making women little more than their reproduction role. Their worth is quantified by their fruitfulness and not by their uniqueness. Atwood reveals that these systems are not only meant to ensure obedience, but to destroy the self through the experiences of Offred. But

even under this tremendous pressure, Offred is still conscious. She is not under full control of her mind.

The body of a woman can be controlled but the mind cannot be fully controlled. Clothing, sexuality, fertility and actions are visible and can be controlled but thoughts are not visible and only in our minds hence cannot be easily controlled like the woman body. This is the reason why the mind becomes the only place that the system cannot access. Even the smallest fragments of awareness and consciousness will develop in the future and create the foundation of resistance. They are not that large or strong, but they will become something stronger. As Offred reflects, “Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent.” (*Atwood, p.77*) The fact that she is conscious of the fact that the regime is using religious language to manipulate people goes to show that her mind is not yet convinced. Atwood cautions through Gilead that patriarchy is not the most dangerous when it is practiced in the open, but when it becomes ordinary and routine. Once it becomes a routine, the society will no longer think of fighting it. The terror of everyday control, which is silent, might appear insignificant, yet it is even more frightening than violence as it is an ordinary thing. That is why the act of remembering and the internal narrative of Offred is so significant in the future. Her opposition is not free, but a slave.

Memory as Resistance

Though Gilead has been able to tightly control the bodies of women, it cannot totally control the mind. In the case of Offred, memory is the last place where she still has her identity. Her body is controlled by the state but her thoughts are hers. By remembering, she is able to keep pieces of the life that once characterized her. Her mother, her daughter, her husband Luke and the world prior to the red dresses and ritualized ceremonies all serve as reminders of who she was. Such memories form a personal inner world one that the regime cannot completely enter.

In this way, memory is not just nostalgic reflection, it turns out to be silent but constant resistance. Offred does not forget, which is a way of revolting against the complete erasure that Gilead is trying to perform. The recurring back to the good memories of her past can be interpreted as a resistance that assists Offred to escape the psychological breakdown in the face of the oppression of Gilead (Akı 14).

The most obvious manifestation of this psychological survival is in the recollections of Luke by Offred. Although Gilead has physical control, remembering Luke makes her emotionally and mentally awake. When she thinks, as though we could retain everything that was slipping away, the word slipping is used to show a slow and almost imperceptible loss. The disappearance of freedom does not occur suddenly, but gradually. In such memories, Offred comes to face with the reality of what has been stolen away and, in the process, she does not lose consciousness. The very fact that we are aware is a minor resistance. The holding hands in the scene symbolizes unity, back then the women had freedom but now the regime took all the individuality and the relationships from them. Offred remembers how she held Luke's hand during the attempted escape which became a symbolic in hindsight. The hands they cling to represent the life they are holding onto. Even though the escape fails it still remains as a memory. That memory prevents the identity from losing itself. Remembering Luke does not change the situation but it keeps her from losing her mind mentally. As she reflects inward, she acknowledges that "It's possible to go so far in, so far down and back, they could never get you out." (*Atwood, p.202*) Gilead wants to turn her into a reproductive tool but when she remembers a person she once loved in the past, her emotions does not disappear, awareness still survives.

Remembering Luke was powerful, yet her daughter is even stronger, deeper, more painful. The smell of her hair, the warmth of her skin the way she slept against Offred's body shot that

remembering is not only mental but also sensorial. She does not forget her motherhood; memory becomes a method of identity preservation. When Offred says “She comes back to me at different ages... This is how I know she’s not a ghost” (*Atwood, p.54*) it shows that the past is still alive. The regime took her daughter from Offred but her memory is still raising her daughter. They took her in a physical way but as a mother her identity has not been erased. Her grief itself is a form of resistance. Gilead wants to destroy humanity. Feeling sadness or emotions is a sign of humanity. This means suffering is not to surrender.

Ultimately, the one thing prevents Offred from collapsing mentally is remembering. Her mother daughter and Luke keeps her stay vigorous. Which means memory keeps the integrity of the identity. Resistance does not always begin with actions yet sometimes begins with remembrance. Offred can live and think freely since she remembered and held on her memories.

Inner Voice as Resistance

In the case that memory holds the past of Offred, her inner voice holds her present. As Gilead tries to silence women outside, the inner monologue of Offred turns into the realm of intellectual freedom. Digressions from Offred’ inner voice create a “double consciousness” that challenges the state’s monologic discourse. (Jeffers 56) She might not be allowed to speak freely, but she is always thinking, watching, asking, and analyzing. This unspoken remark turns her into something more than a passive victim; she is a witness of her own oppression.

Throughout the novel, Offred shows that she understands the artificial nature of the system. She does not just buy into the ideology of Gilead, she dissects it. As an example, as she ponders on the evolving position of women prior to the regime consolidating power

completely, she observes how the freedoms were lost without a protest. Her inner thoughts reveal the process of normalization of control. Through critical thinking, she does not submit to the full psychological submission. The regime is able to determine her dressing, her actions, and her reproduction, but not everything about her interpretation of reality.

Storytelling becomes a political action. Offred counters Gilead's authoritarian speech with a personal, poetic narration that "resists the reduction of ... individuals to reined objects" (Staels 460). Offred accepts that she is telling a story even she admits that she reconstructs some moments in different ways. This statement shows that narration is an agency. Through the construction of her own narrative, she takes back representation. She even says, I tell, therefore you are. This sentence is a reversal of the power logic: existence is not determined by the recognition of politics, but by narration. Through narrating her story, she is certain of her existence, as well as the existence of those who see it.

Language becomes a hidden weapon too. Offred is playing with forbidden words, repeats Latin phrases like "Nolite te bastardest carborundorum" (*Atwood, p.45*) and reflects about the meaning of common phrases. These incidences in language prove that thought cannot be totally policed. Even in the speech regulation case, internal language is fluid. Her pun is an eye opener of the cracks in the authoritarian system and it shows that the authority of words is not the authority of mind.

These incidences in language prove that thought cannot be totally policed. Even in the speech regulation case, internal language is fluid. Her pun is an eye opener of the cracks in the authoritarian system and it shows that the authority of words is not the authority of mind. This two-layered narration enables her to live without giving up psychologically. She does compliance on the outside and retains resistance on the inside. Therefore, the inner voice of

Offred is a rebellion that is silent and constant. It does not allow her to be the blank slate that Gilead wants her to be. In the case that memory safeguards who she was, narration safeguards who she remains. When women are not allowed to speak, think, and tell stories, it becomes resistance and survival in a society that does not allow women to speak.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed the research question of how Margaret Atwood uses memory and inner voice as a way of resistance to patriarchal control in *The Handmaid Tale*. By taking a closer look at the chosen passages, it has become clear that Atwood develops resistance not as a political revolt that occurs instantly, but as a psychological process that is based on the consciousness. The Republic of Gilead is a place where women are controlled by their bodies, language, religion, and reproduction. Women are re-named, classified and degraded to biological functions. However, even with this elaborate system of control, the inner world of Offred is somehow beyond the reach of the regime.

The discussion of memory in the novel shows that memory is an identity preservation. Offred does not allow ideological erasure by remembering her past, her relationship with Luke, her motherhood, and her connection to the activism of her own mother. The identity that is forced on her is not internalized by her because of memory. It enables her to maintain emotional richness, historical consciousness, and personal continuity. By doing so, Atwood implies that memory is not just recollection; it is opposition to the forced narratives.

At the same time, the inner voice of Offred supports this opposition in the present. Her self-awareness, silent commentary and narration make her a subject instead of a passive one in the interpretation of her oppression. Even though Gilead can regulate speech and open expression, it cannot fully control perception and thought. Offred takes back power through

narration to represent herself. Through narrating her story, however, only in her mind, she claims that she exists outside of the role given to her. The regime can punish the body, but not entirely colonize consciousness.

Memory and inner voice constitute a two-fold system of survival when taken as a whole. The memory safeguards the identity of who Offred used to be; narration preserves who she is. These processes show that totalitarian regimes do not use physical force only, but also psychological obedience. Atwood eventually reveals the vulnerability of these systems: as long as people do not forget and keep perceiving their reality critically, they cannot be totally subdued. Resistance need not necessarily be dramatic. Sometimes it starts small with something in the mind that cannot be forgotten or something in the memory that cannot be forgotten. In *The Handmaid Tale*, the power of control affects the everyday behavior and limits the speech to the point of the most basic spheres of life. but there is one thing it cannot quite possess. The body can be disciplined by Gilead, but the mind is a little harder to predict. Atwood focuses on the boundaries of power by making the inner life of Offred the central point of the story. Offred is not entirely deprived of her identity as long as she is able to remember and interpret her own past. The resistance is a place that is maintained in that precarious place of thought, however tiny.

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