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# Resistance, Power, and Protest: Socio-Political Activism in the Handmaid's Tale

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of power, control, and resistance within Margaret Atwood's novel, \*The Handmaid's Tale\*. Specifically, it focuses on the socio-political structures governing women's bodies and identities under the tyrannical regime of Gilead. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives such as biopower and patriarchal institutional control, this study elucidates how reproductive capacity is transformed into a state-regulated resource. The analysis examines the narrative of the protagonist, Offred, as a form of fragmented testimony that resists totalitarian erasure through memory, storytelling, and subjective experience. Rather than depicting overt rebellion, the novel highlights subtle, internalized forms of resistance that emerge within a system of total surveillance. These acts of quiet resistance serve to preserve individual identity and challenge ideological hegemony. The article also evaluates the role of uncertainty—particularly in relation to hope, resistance networks, and knowledge formation—thereby underscoring the inherent instability of oppressive systems. Furthermore, the academic framework presented in the novel's epilogue is critically assessed to reveal how institutional discourses distance themselves from the lived experiences of suffering. Ultimately, this study argues that Atwood's work stands as a powerful critique of historical and contemporary socio-political practices, demonstrating that dystopian realities are not mere fantasies but rather extensions of existing conditions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) belongs to the tradition of dystopian fiction — the fiction of the imagined bad place — but it is a dystopia with a specific theoretical pedigree that distinguishes it from most of its generic predecessors. Atwood has said repeatedly that every element of Gilead's social organization is drawn from actual historical practice: every form of control that the Republic of Gilead exercises over women's bodies, every institutional arrangement that strips women of economic independence and political standing, every theological justification offered for female subordination has a real historical antecedent in a society somewhere. The novel's nightmare is constructed entirely from history's components. This is both its most disturbing formal feature and its most important political argument: that the Gilead it imagines is not a fantasy but an extrapolation, a projection of existing social tendencies in a direction that the social tendencies themselves are already pointing. Offred, the narrator — a Handmaid whose function within Gilead is to serve as a reproductive vessel for the Commander whose household she has been assigned to — tells her story in a retrospective first-person narration whose incompleteness and provisionality are established from the beginning: she is narrating into a tape recorder, she is not certain all the details are accurate, she is constructing the best account she can of events whose full

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meaning she could not have understood as she was living them. This formal instability is politically significant: it refuses the false authority of the omniscient narrative and insists instead on the specific, limited, contingent testimony of someone who survived what she is describing but does not claim to understand it from above.

## 2. THE BODY AS SITE OF STATE CONTROL

Gilead's primary mechanism of control is the organization of female reproduction as a state resource — the conscription of fertile women into the Handmaid class, whose sole social function is to produce children for the infertile Commander households. This reproductive conscription is the novel's central political provocation, and Atwood develops it with an attention to the specific mechanisms through which the state organizes body-based control that goes well beyond the generic conventions of dystopian fiction. Michel Foucault's account of biopower in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) — his argument that modern states exercise power not primarily through the threat of death but through the organization of life itself, through the regulation of bodies, reproduction, and population as objects of state administration — is the theoretical framework most directly applicable to Gilead's political organization. Gilead is biopower in its most explicit form: a state that has made the management of female reproductive capacity the central project of its governance, that has organized its entire social and institutional structure around the administration of women's bodies as national resources. Adrienne Rich's argument in *Of Woman Born* (1976) that the institution of motherhood — as distinct from the experience of motherhood — is a patriarchal construction designed to appropriate the reproductive capacity of women for social and institutional purposes that women themselves do not control, is the feminist theoretical precursor of the political argument that Atwood's novel dramatizes. Gilead has simply made explicit what Rich argued was already implicit in patriarchal societies' treatment of female reproduction.

## 3. RESISTANCE WITHIN THE TOTAL INSTITUTION

Offred's resistance is quiet, internal, and largely invisible — not the dramatic political resistance of dissident literature's conventional heroes but the specific resistance available within what Erving Goffman calls the "total institution": the institution that organizes the totality of its inmates' daily life, that leaves no space outside its surveillance and therefore produces forms of resistance that are organized entirely within the institution's own terms. She tells herself stories; she maintains private thoughts; she makes small, deniable gestures toward connection and subversion. These forms of resistance do not overthrow the system. They preserve a self within it, which is what the system is most determined to prevent. The Mayday network — the underground resistance organization that Offred makes contact with through Nick — represents the kind of organized political resistance that Gilead's total institution makes almost impossible, and its existence in the novel is carefully maintained as a possibility rather than a certainty: Offred cannot be sure whether Nick and the others are genuine resistance members or agents of the Eye, Gilead's secret police. This epistemological uncertainty is politically precise: in a total institution organized around surveillance, the resistance can never be fully certain of itself, and the individual's relationship to any organized resistance must always be conducted under conditions of radical uncertainty about who can be trusted.

## 4. THE HISTORICAL NOTES AND THE ACADEMIC FRAME

The novel's concluding section — the transcript of a conference paper delivered by Professor Pieixoto at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, in which the academic analyses Offred's tapes with the apparatus of historical scholarship — is its most formally disturbing element and its most important political gesture. Pieixoto's analysis is technically accomplished and humanly callous: he treats the question of Offred's identity and her subsequent fate as archival puzzles to be solved, and he treats her narrative as a historical source to be evaluated for reliability rather than a human testimony to be received with moral seriousness. The academic frame reveals, in its indifference, the specific form of violence that institutions — including the institutions of scholarship can perform on the testimony of those who survived what they are analyzing. The epilogue is also, paradoxically, the novel's most optimistic formal element: it takes place after Gilead has

ended, in a world where women are again academics delivering conference papers. Gilead was not permanent. This is not a comfort exactly — Offred's fate remains unknown, and whatever happened to her happened — but it is a formal acknowledgment that dystopias are historical formations with beginnings and ends, not eternal conditions. The resistance that the novel documents did, eventually, produce change.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Handmaid's Tale earns its status as one of the canonical texts of feminist dystopian fiction not through any formal innovation — the novel is formally conservative, its innovations being primarily structural rather than stylistic but through the precision of its political analysis and the honesty of its formal choices. Atwood refuses heroism and refuses despair in equal measure; she renders resistance as the specific, limited, internally conducted work of maintaining selfhood within a total institution, and she refuses to resolve this rendering into either triumph or defeat. What she offers instead is testimony: the specific, contingent, formally unstable account of a specific person who survived something by telling stories about it, and whose stories are the only form of resistance that the conditions of their production made available.

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