



RECLAIMING BODY AND MIND IN MARGRET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper normalizes the recalcitrant nature of women through analyzing Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. A nature that can be related to the consequences of exercising power without liberty. Usually, the exercise of male power needs a degree of liberty for the subjects, otherwise, the power will face its inevitable fate, which is women's resistance or recalcitrant nature. It is normal for any form of power to face a form of resistance, because when power is misled, recalcitrant nature comes to refine the power. In this way, it is too normal for having a form of resistance for each form of power. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the absolute power of males removes liberty in the society, and thereby, enslaves women. At this time, women realize that a kind of restructuring of roles in the society is necessary. After they lose their bodies and minds due to the male exercise of power, their recalcitrant natures come to refine the exercise of power in order to reclaim their bodies and minds. So, this paper presents various forms of resistance by women in *The Handmaid's Tale* that come as a reaction to the male power.

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INTRODUCTION

Mitchel Foucault his book *The History of Sexuality* discusses the idea of resistance, and examines its concept by stating that "where there is power there is resistance" (97). He argues that;

The exercise of power requires a degree of freedom on the part of its subjects is to say, first, that the effective exercise of power need not imply the removal of liberty. On the contrary, where this is no possibility of resistance there can be no relations of power. It follows that the exercise of power will normally be at risk from the recalcitrance of its subjects: it will always involve costs and its outcome will often be far from certain. Resistance, evasion and

the costs of dealing with them may provoke refinement or modification of the techniques of power – and these, in turn, will provide conditions under which new forms of resistance and evasion may be developed. (46)

Foucault wants to say that when someone wants to exercise an effective power, must give some kind of freedom otherwise his power faces "recalcitrance from its subjects" (46). He normalizes the idea of resistance by stating that resistance appears when power is practiced, when power is increased, resistance increases too, therefore, it is normal for a form of power to face resistance because resistance is a part of every power. Therefore, resistance can

be considered as a “counter-stroke” to the one who exercises power (Nicholls, 47).

Foucault sees resistance as a hidden power that aims at refining the exercise of power. It has various forms such as resistance through imagination, body, and language. It appears in the site of exercising power. For instance, when power is exercised upon the body, bodily resistance appears.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, when women see the patriarchal and social norms that oppress and deprive them from their rights, they “realize that a conscious reassessment of roles is necessary” (Newell, 16). Therefore, women try to reclaim their bodies and minds through reconstruction of the past, sexuality, language, and night. They use reconstruction of the past to reclaim their minds, while they use sexuality, language, and night to reclaim their bodies.

Reconstructing the Past

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, since Offred is trapped in the Red Center as well as in the Commander's house, therefore, it is impossible to escape physically from her confinement. Thus, she chooses mental journey instead of physical journey to reclaim her mind, ease her pain, and remain alive. This journey manifests itself in getting her memories back that represents her lack of freedom, passion, and love. The elements that aids her to reconstruct her past are; remembering, her senses and mirror.

Hilde Staels in his work Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale: Resistance through Narrating* argues that:

Offred through her memory moves back through layers of history, opens the wounds and retraces the loss. Pain is still possible because of memory, and memory is what the narrator tries to keep alive. Her memory of the past brings back to life the excluded pole in Gilead, such as the existence of love and humanity, and at the same time, it is an act of survival that saves her from despair and that resurrects the missing part of herself. (230)

Offred starts her resistance by observation in order to understand her surroundings, “the more she observes her surroundings in her own space, the

more she remembers the past” (Hsieh, 20). Remembering allows her to activate her mind, and search for the reasons behind women's condition. Offred's critical thinking and awareness appear as she goes into her room in the Commander's house in which she finds a piece of writing that refers to the former handmaid. In the first reading, Offred cannot understand the writing, but after she tells Serena Joy about it, she reveals that this handmaid committed suicide, therefore, Offred starts to think about the reasons behind her suicide, as she says:

I knelt to examine the floor, and there it was, in tiny writing, I didn't know what it meant, but still it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, quite fresh it seemed, scratched with a pin or maybe just a fingernail, it pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman. (Atwood, 45).

The above speech reveals that the former handmaid has committed suicide as a result of the patriarchal oppression of her society; she was confined in a prison-like room, and prevented from language and pen to express her feelings. Since this handmaid couldn't get access to pen and paper, therefore, she used her fingernail to deliver her message to the next handmaid. Although Offred cannot decode the message completely, but she understands the woman's intension of resistance since she used a prohibited method for delivering her message which was writing.

Offred considers the message as if written for all women, and she considers the woman as liberator that wants to awake women from their sleep to defend themselves, as she says “You don't tell a story only to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one. A story is like a letter. Dear You, I'll say. Just you, without a name, you can mean more than one. You can mean thousands, I'll pretend you can hear me” (Atwood, 34). The written message reinforces Offred's critical thinking about her present condition, and makes her go on with her thinking to discover her surroundings more, as she says:

I know why the glass in the window is shatterproof, and why they took down the

chandelier. I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me, but there wasn't room. I looked up at the blind plaster eye in the ceiling. I wanted to feel Luke lying beside me. What is to be done, what is to be done, I thought. There is nothing to be done. (Atwood, 44)

Through her remembering, Offred reveals the cruelty of Gileadean society toward women. She compares her previous life with her present condition to discover how women are manipulated and controlled. Now, Offred understands that the windows are locked for preventing them from escaping their conditions.

Thinking about her condition demonstrates Offred's intention for reclaiming her body and mind just like her former life. She uses thinking as a way to calm herself down, and at the same time to find a solution for her problems, as she says, "I used to think of my body, as an instrument, of pleasure or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons, of one sort or another, make things happen." (Atwood, 74). It can be said that Offred uses her thinking and imagination as a way to survive and amuse herself, while she is oppressed and deprived from her rights. She thinks in order to know how she was valued in the pre-Gilead society in which she had a family, and she could take pills.

After Offred reveals her miserable condition, she goes to other groups of women to understand how they are also controlled and manipulated. She starts with the Commander's wife in which Offred remembers that she was in a better condition than now, as she says, "she was making speeches. She was good at it. She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (Atwood, 45). Here, Offred criticizes the regime for dehumanizing women through their patriarchal rules, and gives the history of Serena Joy as an example, "Serena was making speeches" but now "she has become speechless," because she is confined in the house without job. Offred is sure that Serena does not agree with her present condition, but since she is a woman, she cannot utter a word. Offred through presenting

Serena Joy's conditions before and after Gilead reveals the reality of Gilead's ideology about women; the society says that in the pre-Gilead society women were exploited, while in Gilead they are valued. Thus, through her memories, Offred "makes her thoughts and her body a functioning whole again" (Loigu, 57).

When Offred goes to Nick's room to be impregnated instead of the Commander, she wants to make an alliance with him in order to be saved from the hell of Gilead, but she does not dare to discuss this issue in the first meeting because she does not trust him, as she says "we looked at each other, with the same kind of hunger that I cannot indulge, they cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other, Luke for Nick" (Atwood, 171). Her speech proves that although both of them seem to love each other, but Offred does not dare to make an alliance with him, because she does not trust him. This indicates that in Gilead no one can be trusted; most of the people are reporters who report on any one that behaves or speaks negatively about the state. Offred remembers her husband's trust and love that cannot be replaced, but since she does not have choice, she must not skip this chance in order to end her suffering.

In addition of remembering, Offred also uses her senses to reclaim her mind, and get her memory back, and thereby, reveal and resist the cruelty of Gileadean society against women. For instance, when Offred hears the word Mayday from Ofglen, she immediately remembers her husband Luke who told her about it, as she says, "It was Luke who told me about mayday, though. Mayday, a long time ago, in one of those wars we studied in high school, I kept getting them mixed up, but you could tell them apart by the airplanes if you paid attention." (Atwood, 36). Offred here remembers her romantic time with Luke when he was telling the story of May Day to her; therefore, her memory shows something that Offred lacks in Gilead. Offred remembers that this phrase or code was used by French pilots in emergency cases, but now it has become a vital code for women in Gilead to resist the patriarchal control.

When Offred feels the shampoo smell in the bathroom, she remembers the time when she was bathing with her daughter, she remembers her roles and responsibilities as a mother in pre-Gilead society. Offred shows longing to her previous condition, and therefore, her memory about her daughters urges her to search for her under any condition. Therefore, being haunted by her former life, Offred struggles for reclaiming her body and mind to get her daughter back. Therefore, the shampoo's smell reminds her the glorious life that she had comparing to her life in Gilead.

Smell of the kitchen in the Commander's house also reminds Offred of her mother and former life, as she says "the kitchen smell of yeast, a nostalgic smell. It reminds me of other kitchens, kitchens that were mine, it smells of mothers; although my mother did not make bread. It smells of me, in former times, when I was a mother" (Atwood, 39). Offred through the smell of the kitchen remember her former life when she was making bread, and eating the food she was preferring, but now she eats according to schedules that are put by the totalitarian regime that prevents her from some kind of food and drinks such as cigarette and alcohol. Here, Offred through her memories demonstrates how the authoritative power in Gilead destroys her life, dismembers her family, kills her husband, and kidnaps her daughter.

Due to the suppressive use of language in Gilead, women in this society are forced to depend on other abilities to express their feelings with each other. Touch sense in this story is used as a type of language by the handmaids to express their solidarity to each other. Touch sense aids Offred to resist by reminding her past things that she lost, as she says, "I wandered through the house, from room to room. I remember touching things, not even consciously, just placing my fingers on them" (Atwood, 229). Through her sense, Offred remembers that she was wandering from one place to another because she had freedom of movement, but now she has lost control over her touch sense because she is now confined in a prison-like house, and the male-dominated misuses the handmaids' hand or touch sense by obliging them to participate in executing the decedent handmaids.

Mirror in this story is also aids the handmaids to get their memories back because while they look at themselves in the mirror, they understand how they are manipulated and oppressed by this society, because mirror reflects their reality. Since mirror is prohibited in Gilead, therefore, the handmaids invest any chance to get access to it in order to know what happened to them. When the Commander takes Offred to the night club, she feels stupid about her condition in Gilead, as she says, "I feel stupid; I want to see myself in a mirror" (Atwood, 208). When Offred looks at herself in the mirror, she realizes that she is like the Commander's pet. The mirror reflects her situation to her, how she is manipulated, abused, and controlled.

Language

Michel Foucault in his book *The History of Sexuality* argues that language "can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (67). Foucault here explains that language is an important element that can be used to strengthen power, and at the same time to resist it. Therefore, language is a multifunctional element that aids those who are in power, and at the same time, those who are subjected to it. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women try to take advantage of it to manipulate the tyrant, society and reclaim their bodies and minds. They use language to communicate and counter the patriarchal language in order to gain things and achieve a certain kind of freedom.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, language plays an important role in the handmaids' resistance to the patriarchal language of Gilead. Offred without language use will not be able to make alliance with other handmaids and show her solidarity, will not be able to connect with the Commander, and finally will not be able to make alliance with Nick and escape from Gilead. Therefore, through language, Offred succeeds in manipulating the patriarchal system, and reclaims her body and mind. According to Julia Hsieh, Offred "uses her mouth as a weapon of rebellion that resists the severe control of the totalitarian Gilead regime, and she attempts to use

language to mock Gilead society and vents her dissatisfaction of the restricted reality" (22).

Through language, the handmaids establish alliances with each other and set the "Mayday" code to be their sign in emergency cases (Atwood, 134). It can be said that the handmaids not only use language that is prohibited in Gilead, but instead they establish their own codes to be their own language in case of emergency. Therefore, the handmaids by this act commit an act of resistance that contradicts with the rules of Gilead that prevent them from speaking or using language. Offred who could not understand anything about Gilead, gets a lot of information from Ofglen through verbal communication, and this encourages her to search for more, as she says, "I can feel speech backing up inside me, it's so long since I have really talked with anyone. The terse, whispered exchange with Ofglen, on our walk today, hardly counts; but it was a tease, I want more" (Atwood, 239). Offred here demonstrates that she begins to communicate in order to understand what is going on in this society. Beside her whisper with Ofglen, Offred needs more to understand the truth about this new formed state.

In the Commander's room, Offred sees things that were available for her in pre-Gilead society, such as, books, magazines, radio, television, pen, paper, drinks, and foods, as she says, "Books and books and books, right out in plain view, no locks, no boxes. No wonder we can't come in here. It's an oasis of the forbidden" (Atwood, 177). Offred realizes that in this forbidden room everything is allowed, Gileadean society prevents women from these things, while the Commanders have them all in their rooms. Offred understands that "what is happening in this room is a normal life", that is why, she is allowed to act, behave, read, write, and drink freely as her previous life (Atwood, 121). These things bewilders Offred, and thereby, encourages her to communicate and ask the Commander some forbidden questions, as she says, "why do you have this? Why show it to me? How about your wife?" (Atwood, 166). It shows that how Offred's language takes a new turn, she does not only use language in front of the Commander, but she uses it for asking him private questions that can be considered as a

crime according the rules of Gilead. So, Offred through language asks the commander for an interpretation about these contradictions she sees in his room.

Offred continues in using her language in the Commander's office in away, she makes him confess some information about Gilead's reality, as it appears in the Commander's speech, "we thought we would do better, everyone's human after all" (Atwood, 222-248). This speech reveals that the handmaids are not the only group who does not agree with the present situation of Gilead, even those who established this system also do not agree with it. Offred through her communication skill, makes the commander take responsibility of women's hell in Gilead, and the commander's confession shows her triumph over the Commander. Therefore, language becomes an effective tool for Offred to confront and defeat the patriarchal language of her society.

When Offred makes the Commander confess, the balance of power changes, Offred no longer listens to him, but instead, she uses language to direct him and order him to get things such as hand lotion, and when the Commander tries to touch Offred's breast in one of the ceremonies, Offred comes to his Office and tells him, "don't that again" (Atwood, 171). Here, Offred demonstrates her complete control over language in the story because when something is put into language it becomes real. Offred put her control over the commander into her language, therefore, her language demonstrates her superiority over the Commander that makes him express his apology, as he says, "I am sorry, I didn't mean to. But I find it .What? I said, when he didn't go" (Atwood, 171). Here it appears that the commander is completely surrendered to the language ability of Offred. According to LembiLoigu, Offred's language "shows that she has not given up fight and the circumstances have not broken her will-power" (70). From this point Offred no longer believes in the Commander's speech, and this can be observed clearly in the Commander's word "trust me" (Atwood, 261).

These changes indicate that Offred has reached into a new level of awareness, she is no

longer following the patriarchal rules of Gilead, as she says, "we play two games. I hold the glossy counters with their smooth edges, finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom, an eye blink of it" (Atwood, 149). This indicates that Offred now has completely controlled the circumstance in the Commander's office, she is not afraid of anything that is why she feels free about it. According to Fredrik Patterson, Offred "uses the word freedom, as if to say that for an instance she is uncontrolled. In other words, for the moment, she controls language, language does not control her" (7).

Offred also uses language to create relations with other characters in the story such as Nick to get knowledge and discusses her plan to escape from Gilead. Therefore, Offred uses language as a tool for getting knowledge about this newly formed state in order to escape from Gilead. After she become aware of the weaknesses of this society through getting knowledge from Nick and the Commander, language takes a new turn in which Offred uses it as her only way to escape for Gilead. For this reason, Offred manipulates the Commander as well as his wife, and makes a relation with Nick who helps her to escape from Gilead.

At the end of the story, and after she escapes from Gilead, Offred uses language or narration to compose herself, as she says, "My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech" (Atwood, 86). Through narration, Offred gets her body back and composes it as she composed her language, and at the same time, communicates with readers of next generations, as she says, "If it's a story, even in my head, I must be telling it to someone" (Atwood, 52). Offred does not only resist the system through speaking which is prohibited, but she speaks to share her ideas and thinking concerning the newly formed state with others that may go against the male-dominated society. According to Hsieh, through her narration, Offred "turns her mouth into a tool of resistance because narration can be taken as an act of reconstruction and imagination, which indeed occurs once in a while when she tells the story" (22).

Sexuality

Michel Foucault in his book, *The History of Sexuality* argues that "sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality; useful for greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies" (108). Foucault explains that although sexuality does not produce power directly like language, but it can support it for various strategies, therefore, women use it as a tool for resisting the patriarchal rules of their societies. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, sexuality aids Offred to go to the Commander's office and gain knowledge about the state. Offred also through her sexuality creates an alliance with Nick in order to help her escape from Gilead. Therefore, Offred uses her sexuality to achieve control over other characters in the story, and to gain what she wants and needs.

The first example of Offred's awareness of her sexuality appears when she goes for shopping with a partner, as she says, "As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me, I enjoy the power of a dog bone, passive but there" (Atwood, 30). Here, Offred realizes the power of her sexuality, therefore, she tries to use it to manipulate the guards through making her body appears attractive to them. She takes advantage from the guards' lack of sexual relation to make them be busy with watching her body instead of observing her behaviors.

When the Commander calls Offred to his office for a romantic meeting, she invests this chance by using her sexuality as a tool for gaining what she needs, such as, magazine, paper, pen, radio, and hand lotion. From this point, Offred discovers the power lies behind her sexuality as says, "It's difficult for me to believe I have power over him, of any sort, but I do; although it's of an equivocal kind" (Atwood, 272). After she recognizes the power of her sexuality, Offred starts to use it to know her daughter's place, therefore, this indicates her superiority over the Commander's wife, although she is not as valuable as Serena, but she

makes herself valuable for the commander through her fertility.

In her meeting with Nick, Offred will get a passionate time with Nick that is different from her time or meeting with the Commander during the ceremonies, as says, "whether it is or not we are touching, two shapes of leather. I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it becomes a skin" (Atwood, 81). Beside her romantic relation with him, Offred discusses serious issues with Nick like finding her daughter and planning to escape from Gilead, therefore, Offred learns how to use her sexuality and fertility against the regime in order to survive. According to Hilde Staels, Offred through her sexuality "regenerate subjectivity and undo frozen dichotomies in the object world. She wishes to resuscitate the life of the soul or the heart" (234). Offred uses her sexuality as a weapon against the regime to reclaim her body, mind, and identity, therefore, it becomes her effective tool that aids her escape from Gilead.

Night

In the tyrant societies night can be considered as an essential element that aids women's resistance because it gives them free time and space to go, think, and speak. Women find in night the absence of authority that empowers them to break the rules that imposed upon them at daytime.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women consider the night as an absence time of the tyrant society of Gilead, therefore, women's activeness can be observed clearly in this novel at night, in which they break rules through speaking to each other, plan to escape, and move according to their desires. The handmaid's awareness about the importance of night appears at the beginning of the story when they pronounce their real name with each other, while they are in their beds, as Offred narrates:

We learned to whisper without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hand across space. We learned to lip-read, our hands flat on the beds, turning sideways, watching each other's mouth. In this way we exchange

names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Moira. June. (Atwood, 2)

It is reasonable to say that the handmaids consider night as their time since they possess a limited kind of freedom which they use it to reclaim their real names. Besides pronouncing their names, the handmaids learn to touch each other's hand at night in order to show their solidarity to each other, and at the same time they learn a technique for communication at night that Offred calls it "lip-read" communication (Atwood, 2).

Moira at night turns her dream for escaping into practice, as she plans with Offred to escape from the Red Center. When night comes, both of them go to the bathroom and call the Aunt to the bath room, in there, they capture and disarm the Aunt, and then Moira escapes. This act demonstrates that the handmaids at night reclaim their bodies, and resist the rules of the male-dominated society even in a disciplinary place like the Red Center.

Offred also considers night as her own time as she says, "the night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quite" (Atwood, 31). Offred at night thinks, speaks, and moves as she wishes. She thinks about her problems, thereby, turns her thoughts and dreams into action to end her suffering. At night, Offred cuts off herself from the male-dominated society, and goes to the Commander's office to gain things that are prevented from her in daytimes. At night, she meets with Nick to have a romantic time, and to discuss her plan for escaping from Gilead, and eventually at night Offred kills the Commander and escapes with Nick from Gilead. So at night, women in this story reclaim their bodies and minds, think of their conditions, find solutions, plan, and escape from Gilead.

Conclusion

The paper normalized the idea of having resistance for each form of control through analyzing Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. It theorized that when power is misused, resistance will appear. Since in this story, the male government removes liberty on the part of women, therefore, one must expect resistance for the sake of refining the exercise of power. After Offred loses her mind

and body as a consequence of the male power, she reclaims them through various forms of resistance including reconstruction of the past, her senses, language skills, sexuality, and night. In this way, this paper proves that men cannot produce women's docile bodies.

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