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Gender and Power Relation in Margaret Atwood's Novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of gender ideology and power relations in *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel by Margaret Atwood that portrays a dystopian society governed by patriarchal control. Employing Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as the methodological framework, this research investigates how gender ideology is embedded and reproduced through the novel's language and social structures. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What elements of gender ideology are depicted in the novel? (2) How are gender ideology and power interrelated? (3) Why are these themes central to the narrative? Utilizing a qualitative approach, the analysis focuses on narrative and discursive elements to uncover representations of gender inequality and the systematic repression of women's autonomy. The findings indicate that the novel reflects real-world patriarchal ideologies by illustrating how language and institutional norms uphold gendered power imbalances. This research contributes to feminist literary scholarship by demonstrating how literature can expose, critique, and resist oppressive social structures through discourse.

INTRODUCTION

A novel is a powerful medium through which societal norms, ideologies, and inequalities are both reflected and critiqued. Unlike short stories, novels offer a comprehensive exploration of complex themes, often grounded in social, political, and cultural realities (Leavy, 2016). As mirrors of their time, novels have long addressed issues such as mental health (Krieger, 2021), developmental disabilities (Brenna, 2013), and gender inequality. Themes of women's marginalization, oppression, and resistance frequently emerge in literary works, echoing real-world disparities and inviting critical

discourse. *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood is a quintessential example, portraying a dystopian society where women's rights are stripped under a patriarchal regime. Through the story of Offred, the novel highlights the systemic subjugation of women, representing a broader critique of gendered ideologies and power structures.

Gender ideology refers to a set of beliefs about the appropriate roles, responsibilities, and rights of men and women in a society (Kroska, 2007). These ideologies often legitimize power disparities and reinforce male dominance across various social domains, including the household, economy, and politics. Davis and Greenstein (2009) identified six elements of gender ideology: the breadwinner role, gendered spheres, the impact of women's work on relationships, motherhood and identity, household utility, and acceptance of male privilege. In many societies, these ideologies are embedded in institutional structures, perpetuating women's subordinate status and limiting their autonomy and access to opportunity.

Language plays a critical role in the construction and maintenance of these ideologies. Historically, men have controlled language as philosophers, politicians, and public figures, embedding patriarchal values into discourse (Weatherall, 2005). Language, therefore, is not neutral—it can be a tool of domination or resistance. Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), as proposed by Lazar (2007), integrates gender critique into Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by focusing on how language challenges gendered power relations. It examines how discourse—whether in literature, media, or everyday communication—constructs gendered identities and reinforces or disrupts power dynamics.

Several scholars have employed FCDA to examine representations of gender in literature and media. For instance, Siboro and Sinar (2023) analyzed gender ideology in *The Stoning of Soraya M*, revealing how language and law uphold patriarchal norms. Zhou (2021) explored the evolving roles of women in Chinese online novels, while Ayub et al. (2021) examined the gendered expectations embedded in Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*. These studies demonstrate the utility of FCDA in exposing how language perpetuates inequality and suggest literature as a potent site for feminist inquiry and advocacy.

This study adopts a qualitative approach and uses FCDA to analyze *The Handmaid's Tale*, aiming to uncover how gender ideology and power imbalance are discursively constructed in the fictional yet politically resonant Republic of Gilead. Unlike previous FCDA studies that often emphasize character roles or societal expectations, this research focuses specifically on the linguistic and ideological mechanisms through which gender hierarchy is justified and enforced. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of feminist linguistic research that advocates for gender equity by interrogating the language of power.

Ultimately, this research is anchored in the principle of analytic activism, a core tenet of FCDA. By critically analyzing the discourses of power in Atwood's dystopian vision, this study not only sheds light on the persistent relevance of gender ideology in contemporary contexts but also advocates for a reimagining of gender relations based on equality and mutual respect. *The Handmaid's Tale* serves not merely as a cautionary tale, but as a call to action—a narrative reminder of what is at stake when language becomes a tool for subjugation rather than liberation.

METHODS

This study adopted Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) as the primary method to examine how gender ideology and power are constructed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. FCDA, an extension of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), views language as a social practice that produces and reinforces power imbalances, particularly gender-based ones (Lazar, 2007; van Dijk, 2005). FCDA was chosen due to its focus on exposing patriarchal ideologies within discourse and its capacity to analyze gendered power relations in both textual and socio-cultural contexts. The data were drawn from selected words, phrases, and sentences in the novel's narration, dialogue, and monologue. Using deductive content analysis, the researcher categorized findings based on six gender ideology elements from Davis & Greenstein (2009), focusing on how these elements manifest in the lives of women under Gilead's regime.

The research followed three stages aligned with the research questions: identifying six elements of gender ideology, analyzing the complexity of power relations, and interpreting how ideology operates as a central theme. Close reading and data reduction were used to identify key patterns. The historical and feminist context—especially second-wave feminism and 1980s conservatism—framed the analysis of Atwood's dystopia. As a work of speculative fiction grounded in real-world events, the novel reflects how gender ideology and authoritarian power intertwine. FCDA enabled a deeper understanding of how languages shape female identity, reinforces social roles, and perpetuates structural inequality (Habibie, 2016; Moghadam, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Elements of Gender Ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*

a. Primacy of Breadwinner

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood subverts traditional gender norms by portraying women as unexpected economic providers within Gilead's rigidly patriarchal society. Although Gilead is designed to suppress women's autonomy, the necessity of survival forces women into roles of economic significance. Offred reflects, "*I never thought I'd be the one bringing home the bacon. But here I am, working as a Marth, earning my keep and ensuring our survival*" to which Moira responds, "*In this upside-down world, we've become the breadwinners, the providers*" (Chapter 15). Their exchange illustrates how gender roles are redefined out of necessity, not ideology. Further, Serena Joy acknowledges this economic shift: "*In Gilead, women are the backbone of our economy... Our ability to provide... is our greatest source of power*" she tells Offred, while also addressing male discomfort: "*Some [men] may [feel emasculated], but others recognize the value of partnership*" (Chapter 23). These interactions reveal how female labor, though unofficial, is crucial to sustaining Gilead's society. Thus, Atwood critiques how authoritarian systems exploit women's work while denying them institutional power.

b. Belief in Gendered Separate Spheres

The belief in gendered separate spheres is foundational to Gilead's societal structure. Men and women are strictly segregated—spatially, socially, and functionally. Women are confined to domestic environments, while men occupy roles in leadership, military, and governance. This division is enforced through surveillance and policy, as shown when Guardians instruct one another, "*Make sure the Handmaids are safely back in their rooms*

before nightfall. We wouldn't want any unnecessary interactions between them and the men" (p. 102). At the Red Center, women return to their designated spaces while men depart to perform duties outside (p. 68), emphasizing spatial boundaries. The Commander's Wife affirms the belief system during the Ceremony, whispering to Offred, "*This is where women belong, fulfilling their duty to God and country*" (p. 145), reinforcing religious justification for gender confinement.

This ideology permeates everyday life. Offred observes how women crowd domestic spaces like marketplaces, while men stride with purpose through the streets (p. 78), symbolizing the public-private divide. Marthas discuss domestic tasks with urgency "*We must ensure the Commander's supper is ready by seven... and the Handmaid's chamber must be prepared for the Ceremony*" (p. 91)—demonstrating the assignment of household responsibilities by gender. Even childbirth is ritualized through the Birthmobile, where Handmaids march under watchful male Guardians (p. 113). At elite gatherings, women sit quietly in separate rooms while men discuss politics and power (p. 158). These examples collectively underscore how Gilead enforces traditional gender hierarchies through spatial, behavioral, and symbolic segregation.

c. Working Women and Relationship Quality

Working women in Gilead experience fractured interpersonal relationships because of societal expectations that prioritize state-defined roles over emotional connections. Offred's longing for lost intimacy is reflected in her remark, "*I miss my friends... even the ones I hated*" (p. 63), which shows that under the regime's suppression, even negative relationships offered a form of connection. The oppressive environment breeds a complex mixture of solidarity and rivalry, as captured in her comment, "*We are each other's best and worst companions, bonded by our mutual struggle and suffering*" (p. 115). Her bond with Serena Joy is described as a "*strange camaraderie... born out of necessity rather than genuine affection*" (p. 78), showing that power dynamics distort even shared womanhood.

Pre-Gilead, Offred recalls lighthearted gossip and laughter—now replaced by silence (p. 92)—a stark reminder of lost freedom. Yet, even within the hostile setting, women attempt to build connection through small acts: "*In whispered conversations and stolen glances, we find fleeting moments of solidarity and understanding*" (p. 134). Tensions still simmer beneath the surface, especially with the Marthas, where an "unspoken rivalry" emerges as women compete for favor in a stratified household system (p. 102). These insights reveal that gender ideology not only polices behavior but also reshapes the very nature of human relationships, where intimacy is both feared and desperately sought.

d. Wife/Motherhood and the Feminine Self

Atwood powerfully critiques how patriarchal societies define femininity through the roles of wifehood and motherhood. Gilead reduces women's worth to their reproductive functions and loyalty to their husbands. Offred reflects on her past with sorrow and defiance: "*I was a good mother... and a faithful wife*" (p. 42). Her identity, once defined by love and choice, is now determined by state control. When she recalls the loss of her child, "*I bore a child once... and it was taken from me*" (p. 78), her pain reveals how deeply motherhood is entwined with autonomy and grief.

Interactions with Serena Joy further illuminate this theme. She scolds Offred, “*Do not dwell on the past, but focus on your responsibilities to the future*” (p. 105), affirming that a woman’s duty is biological, not personal. Aunt Lydia echoes this in the Birthmobile scene: “*We are vessels... for the future of Gilead*” (p. 128), reducing women to mere reproductive tools. Offred’s bittersweet memories of Luke, “*I was his wife, and he was my husband*” (p. 142)—offer a counterpoint to Gilead’s erasure of romantic and emotional bonds.

Janine’s whispered grief, “*I miss my baby... I want to hold her again*” (p. 157)—and Rita’s resigned words, “*I do what I must... for my family*” (p. 173), reveal the deep emotional toll imposed by enforced gender roles. Offred’s reflection on her mother, “*She taught me resilience... and the importance of holding onto hope*” (p. 189)—represents a generational continuity of resistance, love, and identity. These depictions show how gender ideology robs women of self-definition but also how memory and emotion become tools of quiet rebellion.

e. Household Utility

Gilead assigns strict domestic functions to women based on traditional gender roles, enforcing a system in which household utility defines a woman’s value. Offred observes a Martha who exemplifies “*domestic efficiency... ensuring that every aspect of the household runs smoothly*” (p. 78), emphasizing how competency in housework becomes a form of silent virtue. In reproduction as well, Offred notes, “*I am but a vessel... fulfilling my duty to the state*” (p. 92), a statement that captures both resignation and dehumanization.

Despite these conditions, women form quiet bonds through shared labor. Offred notes, “*We are united by our shared experiences... bound together by the invisible threads of domestic servitude*” (p. 123), expressing solidarity even amid institutional subjugation. She further reflects, “*We are but cogs in the patriarchal machine*” highlighting how utility and submission are interlinked in the household hierarchy (p. 138). Serena Joy’s insistence, “*Your duty is to fulfill your role as a Handmaid... ensuring the continuation of the human race*” (p. 152)—reinforces how every domestic or reproductive task becomes political, deeply tied to the regime’s survival. These representations illustrate how Gilead’s gender ideology commodifies women’s labor and transforms household roles into tools of control.

f. Acceptance of Male Privilege

The normalization of male privilege is a defining feature of Gilead’s social structure, where women’s subordination is both overt and internalized. Offred observes the Commander’s position as absolute: “*He is the epitome of male authority, his power unquestioned and his position unchallenged*” (p. 62). Even Serena Joy echoes this dynamic when she tells Offred, “*Your duty is to obey, while mine is to command*” (p. 78), affirming the hierarchy within both gender and class. Offred later laments, “*I am confined by the expectations of my sex, my autonomy and agency stripped away by the oppressive regime of Gilead*” (p. 122), underscoring the psychological dimensions of male privilege.

Yet resistance simmers beneath the surface. Moira, Offred’s defiant friend, asserts, “*We will not be silenced, our voices will be heard, and our rights will be reclaimed*” (p. 138), a bold declaration of feminist resistance. These moments highlight the tension between institutionalized male dominance and the individual will to resist. Through these portrayals,

Atwood not only reveals the pervasiveness of male privilege but also suggests that its acceptance is socially constructed, challenged, and, ultimately, fragile.

2. Elements of Gender Ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*

a. The Constitution

Gilead's Constitution is the ideological backbone of the regime, embedding religious justification into governance and framing gender inequality as sacred duty. Through the words of Commander Waterford, "*In the eyes of God, it is a woman's duty to bear children for the greater good of society*" (p. 78), women's subjugation is reframed as spiritual obedience. By invoking divine authority, the regime morally compels women to accept their roles as reproductive vessels.

This strategy is echoed by Aunt Lydia, who states, "*Do you not understand, Offred? As a Handmaid, your purpose is to fulfill God's will and bear children for the Commanders*" (p. 42). Her tone reinforces the regime's fusion of law and theology to remove agency from women, presenting their roles not as societal constructs but divine commands. These excerpts reveal how religious discourse in the Constitution is weaponized to justify the gender hierarchy and maintain systemic oppression.

b. The Civil Code

The Civil Code of Gilead codifies male dominance into everyday life through laws that institutionalize women's subordination. Aunt Lydia asserts, "*The Civil Code of Gilead explicitly grants men the right to marry multiple wives*" (p. 56), a clear articulation of gendered legal inequality. This provision legitimizes polygamy for men while denying equivalent rights to women, thus reinforcing male control over female sexuality and family structure.

Furthermore, Commander Fred emphasizes that "*Under the Civil Code of Gilead, women are subjected to the authority of their male guardians, who have the power to dictate their lives*" (p. 102). This reflects a legal system that removes women's autonomy and assigns them perpetual dependency. Together, these legal assertions underscore how Gilead's Civil Code enforces a patriarchal order under the guise of law and morality.

c. The Penal Code

The Penal Code functions as a coercive tool to reinforce obedience, disproportionately punishing women while protecting male privilege. When Offred is accused of impropriety, a male authority figure states, "*Offred, two men in this room have accused you of behavior unbecoming of a Handmaid. Can you prove they're not telling the truth?*" (p. 154). This question illustrates the burden of proof being unjustly placed on women and the presumption of guilt rooted in gender bias.

Similarly, the statement, "*We have unanimously decided that the accused, Offred, shall be punished according to the law, and her sentence shall be carried out by the morning*" (p. 195) demonstrates the speed and certainty with which judgment is passed, often without due process. These examples highlight how the Penal Code enforces power hierarchies, turning legal proceedings into instruments of gendered control rather than justice.

3. Elements of Gender Ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*

a. Gender Ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Gilead's gender ideology operates not only through external laws but also through internalized control. As Aunt Lydia proclaims, "*The Republic of Gilead... knows no bounds. Gilead is within you*" (p.33), the regime seeks to embed its doctrine within women's consciousness, making obedience a matter of belief as much as coercion. This internalization ensures that the patriarchal order is sustained from within. Central to this ideology is the reduction of women to reproductive vessels. Offred captures this dehumanization when she reflects, "*We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices*" (p.136). In Gilead, religious narratives are selectively interpreted to justify the use of women's bodies for state-sanctioned reproduction, stripping them of autonomy and reinforcing their subjugated roles.

b. Power Dynamics in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Power in Gilead is maintained through deliberate inequality and systemic coercion. The Commander's remark, "*Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some*" (p.211), openly acknowledges the regime's structured hierarchy, where the comfort of the elite is built upon the subjugation of others. This imbalance is not a flaw but a feature of Gilead's design. To sustain such control, the regime redefines key concepts like freedom. Aunt Lydia's statement, "*There is more than one kind of freedom... Freedom to and freedom from*" (p.24), illustrates how the state manipulates the idea of liberty to rationalize repression. By reframing protection as restriction, Gilead masks oppression as moral order.

Discussion

1. Elements of Gender Ideology in *The Handmaid's Tale*

This study reveals that *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects traditional gender ideology through the construction and enforcement of rigid gender roles. Gender ideology refers to individuals' beliefs about how sex should shape the roles of men and women in society (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016). In Gilead, these beliefs are institutionalized, where men occupy dominant roles as breadwinners and decision-makers, while women are confined to domestic, reproductive, and subordinate positions.

Using the six elements of gender ideology proposed by Davis & Greenstein (2009), the analysis found that Gilead emphasizes male primacy in economic and social power. The belief in gendered-separate spheres is evident, where women are systematically excluded from public life and positioned within the household or reproductive roles. Working women are stripped of autonomy, and relationships become strained due to inequality and imposed roles, aligning with broader research on how traditional expectations negatively impact relationship quality and satisfaction (Spierings & Zaslove, 2017).

Motherhood and femininity are framed as the core of a woman's identity, while household utility reflects strict gender divisions in domestic responsibilities. Finally, the acceptance of male privilege is pervasive, with women denied access to education, work, and self-determination—mirroring real-world patterns of female marginalization across patriarchal systems (Offiong et al., 2021).

These findings support both the interest-based theory, which posits individuals adopt gender ideologies based on perceived benefits, and the exposure-based theory, which emphasizes the role of socialization in transmitting gender norms (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender ideology is not only reinforced by legal and religious institutions but is also internalized, shaping beliefs and behaviors in ways that perpetuate systemic inequality.

2. Complexity of Gender Ideology in Relation to Power

This section examines how *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays gender ideology not only as a social belief but as a structural mechanism deeply embedded in legal, religious, and institutional systems. In Gilead, patriarchal power is enforced through a combination of overt control and subtle internalization of gender roles, reflecting Lazar's (2007) claim that power in modern societies is both visible and discursive.

The legal framework of Gilead, including its Constitution, Civil Code, and Penal Code, constructs and maintains gender-based oppression. Women's roles are defined by their reproductive functions and subordination to men, as seen in the character of Offred, whose identity and body are regulated by law. The regime uses religious justification to reinforce male authority—Commanders are positioned as both legal and spiritual leaders, granting them unchecked control. This echoes Kazemi's (2000) observation of post-revolution Iran, where legal reforms regressed women's rights and empowered male dominance through religious courts and civil codes.

The novel also reflects how patriarchal gender ideology is institutionalized, as argued by Lazar (2007), and embodied in daily interactions and norms. For instance, Gilead's penal code punishes women for behaviors deemed impure, often tied to sexuality or disobedience, further blurring the line between religious law and human rights. As Burns et al. (2025) note, masculinities and femininities are constructed through societal interactions—not merely personal traits—and in Gilead, these constructions are state-enforced.

Moreover, Gilead's system legalizes male privilege in ways that mirror real-world contexts. As Moghadam (2018) notes in post-revolution Iran, laws allowed men multiple marriages and gave them disproportionate power in family matters. Similarly, Gilead grants men authority over women's mobility, marriage, education, and legal status, all under religious pretense.

In sum, *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates how gender ideology, when institutionalized, becomes a powerful tool for sustaining inequality. Power in Gilead is not only visible in laws and punishments, but also internalized and reproduced through culture, religion, and daily practices—making resistance complex and costly.

3. Gender Ideology and Power as Central Themes in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The third research objective aimed to explore how ideology shapes the themes of gender and power in *The Handmaid's Tale*, employing Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007). In Atwood's dystopian world of Gilead, gender ideology is used as a central tool of domination, reinforced through legal, religious, and cultural institutions. These ideologies operate across key domains—patriarchal culture, education, marriage, and employment—limiting women's agency and positioning them as subordinates to male authority.

As Kroska (2007) explains, gender ideology defines the roles and responsibilities assigned to men and women, often privileging males. In Gilead, this manifests in women being valued only for reproduction, excluded from literacy and education, and denied legal autonomy. Such depictions reflect real-world gender politics, particularly those emerging after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, where women's rights regressed under a religious-nationalist regime.

Atwood's portrayal of Gilead is also shaped by the sociopolitical climate of the 1980s, including the rise of conservative movements in the United States. Influenced by efforts to limit reproductive rights and promote traditional family values, Atwood constructs Gilead as a cautionary tale. Through

its rigid enforcement of traditional gender roles and theocratic law, the novel critiques how ideology can be weaponized to justify power imbalances.

Ultimately, *The Handmaid's Tale* demonstrates how gender ideology, when institutionalized, sustains systems of control, and suppresses dissent. By examining these themes through a feminist lens, the novel reveals the dangers of conflating religious morality with political authority, especially when it targets women's bodies and freedoms.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the intersection of gender ideology and power in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The findings affirmed two core principles: first, that gender is an ideological structure that categorizes individuals into hierarchical roles; and second, that gender and power share a complex, mutually reinforcing relationship. Using Davis & Greenstein (2009) framework, six key elements of gender ideology were identified in the novel, including the primacy of the male breadwinner, belief in gendered spheres, and acceptance of male privilege. These elements revealed Gilead's patriarchal system, where power is embedded in law, religion, and language, reflecting broader societal norms that perpetuate inequality. Although the Constitution of Gilead claimed to uphold equality, religious laws and the Penal Code were manipulated to legitimize women's subordination echoing real-world post-revolution contexts such as Iran. Margaret Atwood's narrative serves not only as a dystopian cautionary tale, but also as a critique of systems that use ideology and discourse to institutionalize oppression.

Future research may apply Feminist CDA to a broader range of texts or media to uncover how gender ideology is reproduced or challenged in different sociopolitical settings. A comparative study between pre- and post-revolution narratives or between Atwood's novel and contemporary feminist literature may also reveal evolving discourses on gender and power. As emphasized by Kayany and Dar (2019), discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping identity and power dynamics; thus, deconstructing such discourse remains essential for revealing and resisting inequality.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Regarding this study, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Study concept and design: Khairunnisa Tambunan. Acquisition of data: Rahmadsyah Rangkuti. Analysis and interpretation of data: Rahmah Fithriani. Drafting the manuscript: Alemina Br Perangin-angin. Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Deliana Deliana. Statistical analysis: Khairunnisa Tambunan.

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