

**TRIBHUVAN UNIVERSITY**

**Resisting Patriarchy in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

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## **Abstract**

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, portrays the male-dominated society in which female characters gradually resist against it. All the female characters are oppressed and victimized by the Republic of Gilead, but within these circumstances they try to rebel and resist the society. The female characters that once oppressed and victimized, hopes for the bright future and rebels silently against the regime, for example: Offred's secret involvement with Nick, her desire to play the Scrabble, recording her story in an audiotape, secretly reading the books, Moira's attempt to run away from the Red center and involvement with the Underground Femaleroad and many other factors. This leads them towards the resistance against the patriarchal society.

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## I. Resisting Patriarchy: An Introduction

Margaret Atwood, born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1939, is one of the brilliant writers in contemporary Canadian Literature. As a versatile and prolific writer, she has produced eight novels, ten books of poetry, three short stories and so forth. In late 1990s, her works have been translated into more than twenty languages and published in twenty-five countries. She also has been awarded many important international prizes. The novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has won the author Booker prize in Britain, the Governor General's Award in Canada, the Arthur C. Clarke science prize and the *Los Angeles Times* Fiction prize in the United States. Because of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood is described as "the most distinguished novelist under fifty currently writing in English" (qtd. in Howells). Atwood has become Canada's most renowned writer and one of its most profitable novelists.

For Atwood, an unabashed Canadian, literature became a means to cultural and personal self-awareness. "To know ourselves," she writes in *Survival*, "we must know our own literature; to know ourselves accurately, we need to know it as part of literature as a whole" (2). Thus, when she defines Canadian literary concerns, she relates her own as well. For Atwood, fiction grows out of this tradition. In her opinion, Canada's central reality is the act of survival: Canadian life and culture are decisively shaped by the demands of a harsh environment. Closely related to this defining act of survival, in Atwood's view, is the Canadian search for territorial identity- or, as literary theorist Northrop Frye put it, "Where is here?"

Atwood's heroines invariably discover themselves to be emotional refugees, strangers in a territory they can accurately label but one in which they are unable to feel at home. Not only are they alienated from their environment, but also they are alienated from language itself; for them, communication becomes a decoding process.

To a great degree, their feelings of estrangement extend from a culture that, having reduced everything to products, threatens to consume them. Women are particularly singled out as products, items to be decorated and sold as commodities though men are threatened as well. Atwood's characters are appropriately ambivalent. Dead or dying tradition prevent their return to a past, a past most have rejected. Their present is ephemeral at best, and their future inconceivable. Emotionally maimed, her heroines plumb their conscious and unconscious impressions, searching for a return of feelings, a means of identification with the present.

Supporting her characters ambivalence is Atwood's versatile narrative technique. Her severe prose reflects their emotional numbness; its ironic restraint reveals their wariness. Frequent contradictions suggest not only the complexity of her characters but also the antagonistic times they must survive. By skillful juxtaposition of past and present using flashbacks, Atwood evokes compelling fictional landscapes, which ironically comment on the untenable state of modern men and women. Still, there remains some hope, for her character's survival with increased understanding of their world. Despite everything, life does go on.

This research work aims to justify female's resistance against male domination in the republic of Gilead. Atwood's, *The Handmaid's Tale* narrates the story of the repressive republic of Gilead. The handmaid, in the novel inscribes both her victimization and resistance. Built on a women's desire to tell her story, the novel is provocative inquiry into the origins and meanings of resistance. The novel emphasizes the constraint and limitation Gilead impose, and the narrators growing resistance. The novel begins by describing two enclosed and silent living spaces, the 'reduction center' and the handmaid's small room, which explores silence and speech, oppression and resistance.

The novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* also analyzes human nature by presenting an internal conflict in Offred: acceptance of current social trends (victim mentality) - vs.- resistance for the sake of individual welfare and liberties (humanity). This conflict serves as a warning to society about the dangers of the general acceptance of social evils and boldly illustrates the internal struggle that rebels face in choosing to rebel.

Offred, a handmaid in a republic of Gilead seem happy. She is confused about her identity and even starts to accept the role that has been imposed upon her. It seems strange that one might accept such radical change so easily. Offred has been manipulated into believing that this sinister system was designed for her own good. Peter S. Prescott says, "Offred at first accepts assurance that the new order is for her protection" (151). She must lie on her back once a month and hope the Commander makes her pregnant because her sole purpose is to act as a vessel. She even starts to measure her self-worth by the viability of her ovaries and this negatively affects her self-image. This is how Offred characterizes the deploring act. Offred shows signs of a developing victim mentality where she accepts defeat and associates the regimes will with her own. The danger lies in her choice. She eliminates any need to rebel. This mentality provides her with a false sense of security, which will impede her ability to fight back. We can try to agree that Offred's unwillingness to resist was due to fear, but there is more to it than that. In the novel, she is afraid that spies (eyes) are everywhere and that trust is a lost luxury.

To prove the hypothesis, the first emphasis has been given to the text itself. Besides, to interpret and analyze the novel, to understand the oppression and resistance of female character's (handmaids) in the Republic of Gilead, available supportive materials have been consulted. Commentaries, articles and reviews to



thematic aspects of the play, as a secondary material has also been incorporated. Library consultations and visiting to the authentic internet sites are other assets.

Moreover, this research work describes women's oppression, victimization and resistance. The Republic of Gilead is a totalitarian state in which women are controlled and oppressed by men. It is obvious that gender is the source responsible for women's oppression in a patriarchal society like Gilead. Many critics pay attention to some feminist issues of the novel, such as the objectification of females and the values of women as merely maternal and sexual. The author indeed presents male domination and women's oppression under patriarchy in the historical context.

In *The Handmaids Tale*, Atwood's fiction turn from the realistic to speculative, though she merely takes the political bent of the 1980's to its logical and chilling conclusion. Awash in a swirl of pollution, promiscuity, pornography, and venereal disease, late twentieth century America erupts into political and religious battles. Rising from the ashes is the Republic of Gilead, a theocracy so conservative in its reactionary bent that women are channeled into roles as daughters, wives, Marathas (maid), Econowives, and Handmaids (mistress).

The narrator, Offred (referring to her status as a possession of her master), is among the first group of handmaids, fertile women assigned to high-ranking government officials. Weaving between her past and present in flat, almost emotionless prose, Offred draws a terrifying real picture of a culture retreating to fundamentalist values in the name of stability. At first, her prose seems to be accurate a report from an observer. Deeper in the story, we come to understand that Offred is numb from all that has changed in her life. Besides, she does not trust anyone, least of all herself. Still, she determines to stay alive, even if that means taking risks. Her loss of freedom and identity create new hungers in Offred: curiosity about the world, a

subversive desire for power, a longing for feeling, a need to take risk. In many ways, *The Handmaids Tale* is a novel about what loss creates; Gilead in fact is created partially in response to men's loss of feeling, according to Fred, Offred's commander. Yet Offred takes little comfort in his assurance that feeling has returned.

In *The Handmaids Tale*, Atwood addressed issues of infertility and assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). Atwood creates her own version of radical feminist Gena Corea and Andrea Dworkin's reproductive brothel. Corea and Dworkin's another form of prostitution. Atwood's reproductive brothel, however, does not result from ARTs spinning out of control, as Dworkin and Corea fear, but by the new regime's endorsement of radical feminist arguments about the sacredness of women's maternal role. *The Handmaids Tale*, also questions proponents of radical feminism that idealize lesbian and call for the censorship of pornography. She refutes the notion that women are passive dupes of ARTs through depicting both collective and individual forms of resistance.

#### Literature Review

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tale*, has become the focus of discussion among many critics because of the exploration of human nature that digs up the unfathomable parts of the human society. The novel sheds light on how the patriarchal society has oppressed the female and how the female struggle against that society. As well how the male society depends on the female. As the novel has received comments from different critics, it will be fruitful to site the relevant views.

The anonymous critics in the essay "The handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood", writes the novel as dystopic vision of American society in the period 1970-1985. He further states that:

Every aspects of *The Handmaids Tale* that makes it a dystopia could be found in recent past, or in present around the world. The man's treatment of women, the killing of babies for the good state, and racist belief and action and senseless killings of non-whites, attempts at theocracies, and religious gaining in strength, making believers out of paraphrase and outright lies: All of these are in our world, the real world. (2)

Although most people views the novel as a dystopian novel, this critique states that the ideas in the novel are not far fetch. Moreover, the exact Gilead society would never happen in the real life, it is not to say that certain society of past or even the present haven't incorporated some of the Gilead society.

Dadson, Danita J., in her essay 'We live in the blank white space' states that the novel focuses on American domestic imperialism and enslavement. She further states that "The major task of *The Handmaid's Tale* is to portray convincingly [. . .], how the abridgement of freedom evolved in the United States. Atwood suggests that an intimate and painful association with the history of this abridgement will help us attend to current global horrors" (1-2). It shows Atwood wants to portray the horror of the future in her novel. Further, the novel discusses how the development can lead us to destruction as well how it oppressed the minority people.

Likewise, Fever, Lois states that the novel's character debate the theory of 'essentialism', the notion that gender distinction denote some fundamental and crucial difference between human beings:

From this, we can say that, in this novel, the loss of identity is an ever-present threat, this submersion of the self-represented by color-coded uniforms denoting the status of the wearer, whether Inner or Outer

party member or Commander, Guardian, or Handmaids. The danger is real. (1-2)

He wants to state that this novel presents the threat of the discrimination that evolved in the world. The upcoming danger was presented in the novel.

In a similar way, ironical elements get much emphasis in the novel. Wagner, Jennifer A., in her article “From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*” attempts to reveal the ironical elements of the novel. Thus, Wagner opines:

Put in another way, Offred’s narrative is simply too ironical. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is pervaded by irony at every level, and of the multilayered irony of the novel as a whole [. . .]. Therefore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* cannot be characterized simply as hopelessly dystopian precisely because the force of irony in the novel can lead us away from the judgment. (1-10)

It shows that the novel is pervaded by irony. The characters behavior, their work and the language they use simply leads us to the ironical perspectives.

Another critics Keifer, Karen and Deborah L. Smith, looks the novel as a speculative fiction. She further states that, “Margaret Atwood describes her book *The Handmaids Tale* (1998) as speculative fiction, because the story she tells takes situation that actually exists to their logical conclusion if the cultural and political momentum of contemporary times continues on its trajectory” (1). Anyway, they mean the novel is a slight twist on the society we have now.

In fact, the novel dealt with females being unable to resolve their problems. Though some problems are unavoidable, one can overcome certain situation by being more assertive. Along with, male dominations and the laws of society, women had to

contend with other challenging and oppressing situation. Despite this, women in modern society are becoming more powerful.

This is how different critics have given their perspectives in different ways. Unlike them, being a bit different, this dissertation aims to study the text from the perspectives on resistance of female characters towards the patriarchal society.

To locate the resistance instance on action of characters, the theoretical observation is feminism. The first chapter, therefore, gives general introduction and observes the past studies of the novel. In the second chapter, feminism as the theoretical tool is widely discussed. The third chapter has been devoted to analyze the text with high focus on resistance in the Offred and handmaid's in the republic of Gilead. In addition, the findings of the study and conclusion have been given in forth chapter.

The chapter has some limitations. It does not discuss the language and theatrical devices of the novel nor does look at writers in depth biography and her work as well. The study takes shape through textual analysis. The focus has been given on the analysis of female character (esp. Offred) of the novel.

## **II. Radical Feminism: A Discussion**

### Introduction

Feminism as an organized movement, promotes equality for men and women in political, economic and social spheres. It believes that women are oppressed simply due to their sex based on the dominant ideology of patriarchy. Ridding society of patriarchy will result in liberation for women, men, minorities and guys.

The term feminist or feminism is political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women's movement, which is committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. Feminism defines women as the people who are either oppressed or suppressed or deprived of the freedom of self-expression. The growing feminist movement sought to change society's prevailing stereotypes of women as relatively weak, passive, docile and dependent individuals who are less rational and more emotional than men are. Whereas, Feminist wants to achieve greater freedom for women to work, to broaden both women's self-awareness and their opportunities to the point of equality with men.

Most of the feminists have accepted that the concept of femaleness is biological. It is related to female body and female experience, but femininity is actually and essentially a cultural product. They believe that sex is determined biologically, but gender is psychological concept, which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. As Stevi Jackson claims, "Masculinity and femininity are defined not by biology but by social, cultural and psychological attributes which are acquired through becoming a man or a woman in a particular society at a particular time" (133). The concept of femininity is actually shaped by custom and fashion.

Feminist theory seeks to analyze the conditions, which shape women's lives, and explore cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman. It was initially

guided by the political aims of the women's movement- the need to understand women's subordination and exclusion from, or marginalization with in, a variety of cultural and social arenas. Feminist refuses to accept the inequalities between women and men are natural and inevitable and insist that they should be questioned.

Feminism and feminist criticism bloomed up as a self-awakening movement in the 1960s. After two centuries struggle for women, writing used to be taken in a pejorative manner. Therefore, women related against such automatic disparagement of their work by objecting first to traditional definitions of women handed down by great philosophers, scientists, leaders and prophets. Simone de Beauvoir state in her *Reawakening* that female sex has been subordinated through our time and contends what Aristotle and St.Thomas made their definition about women, such as, "The female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (8), said Aristotle; we should regard the female nature as affiliated with natural defectiveness. Moreover, St.Thomas pronounced women to be an "imperfect man" an "incidental" being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from Bossuet called "a supernumerary bone" of Adam (9).

Simone de Beauvoir believes that biological existence of a female is socially covered as a demure creature. She views that "Femininity" is a second and cultural construction of women. In *Second Sex*, Beauvoir states that woman was not regarded, as an autonomous being. Humanity is male and male defined women. Every institution from culture through ideology to literature is all male-made standards. Therefore, feminist writer attacked the notion of patriarchy to awaken women about the discrimination imposed upon women to inferiorize them from law to religion. Troil Moi, a feminist claims, "Femininity is a cultural construct: one isn't born a woman, one becomes one" (qtd. in Jefferson and Robey 209).

The main aim of feminist movement is to develop women's personalities and to make them aware about the precarious women's existence in the patriarchal society.

Arvonne S. Fraser defines feminist, as "The object of feminism was to elevate the equal rights and human rights status of women of race, language of religion, in order to achieve equality with men in all fields of human enterprise and to eliminate all discrimination against women" (44). It, therefore, studies women as people who are either oppressed or suppressed or rejected from the freedom of personal expression. All women writers who struggle against patriarchy to contain their womanhood are generally considered feminist.

Feminists believe that the entire cultural spectrum is dominated by patriarchal values. Patriarchy is a society in which men hold formal power over public decision and policymaking. Feminists use the term 'Patriarchy' (rule of the father) to describe the cause of women's oppression. Raman Selden states, "Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male" (137). Patriarchy has determined a very large part the nature and quality of our society; its value and priorities, the place and image of women within it, and the relation between sexes. Patriarchy historically exists and sustains itself in a form of male domination through female sub-ordination by means of ideological practice. Men are always overpowered with the sense of "I am man, she is women. I am strong, she is weak. I am tough, she is tender. I am self-sufficient, she is needful" (Ruth 55). Patriarchy fosters gender-based inequalities that decides male as superior and woman as inferior, man as powerful and female as powerless. In male-made culture, women have to survive in formulated expression and discrimination based on sex, race, age, class, religion, etc. Beauvoir discloses the ambivalence of man's nature towards woman as he calls, women as a muse or Goddess on the one hand while he associates her with demon, death, cruel stepmother or the



other. Woman is the mother of God as well as Traitor of the garden. As Sheila Ruth claims, “This bifurcation of images is called the Mary/Eve dichotomy: Women are represented as being at once a manifestation of the divine and incarnation of evil” (87). She is in tender young creature man marries and protects as well as the treacherous, manipulative sneak who tricked him into a union he never sought. Explicitly or implicitly, women were represented as having dual nature, of being all that is desirable, fascinating, and wonderful, yet extremely destructive and dangerous. Actually, in patriarchy, images of women, like other conceptualizations, have been male made. The stereotypes of women, contradictory and conflicting, are male projections, and such they must understand as outward expression of male attitudes. This dichotomy in the representation of women, therefore, is a strong indication of extreme ambivalence on the part of men.

There is no harmony between men and women in relation to their status in the society. Women are silence in patriarchal ideology. Thus, feminist try to break the silence of women. There are inequalities shown by the norms created by males where women are taking plights to follow the norms created by males of their work. Maria Mies says, “Feminist are those who dare to breaking the conspiracy of silence about the oppressive, unequal man-woman relationship and who want to change it” (6). She talks in favor of women’s autonomy. For her autonomy is the feminist effort to maintain and recreate the innermost subjective human essence in women. The feminists claim autonomy means a rejection of all tendencies to subsume the women’s question and the women’s movement under some other apparently more general theme or movement. Feminists are in search of a situational leadership. There should be dynamism, diversity as well as truly humanistic environment.

The sense of alienation, powerlessness and dependency felt by women in their everyday life has encouraged the emergence of the study of women. The sense of difference have been felt by the female because of increasing self-awareness among women, changes in their relations with men, and desires to extend their social roles. Thus, these changes in consciousness led to women to search their selfhood. Troil, Moi defines feminist as, “The word feminism are political level indicating support for the aims of the new women’s movement” (135). Moi’s concept about feminism focuses it as a political movement, which aims at breaking the patriarchal boundary and hierarchy between men and women. In the same way, a prominent critic M. H. Abrams has given his view in his own way. He says, “Feminist literary criticism in our time to be closely inter-related with the movement by political feminist for social, economic, and cultural freedom and equality” (234). Abram’s view about feminism states it as women’s fight to freedom and is the search for equality in social, political, educational, and cultural aspects. Alternatively, in short, feminism is the quest for autonomous existence found by women.

Domination, suppression and inequality in every field cannot continue for long. Feminist criticism has demanded not just the recognition of women’s writing but also a radical rethinking of the concept of literary writing. Feminist criticism is international in its resource and the feminist critics cross the national boundaries. They collectively demand to change, the attitude of looking all women as inferior people and request to rethink the concept of literary studies.

Similarly, feminist theory is a body of writing that attempts to describe, explains and analyze the conditions of women’s life. According to Charlotte Bunch, feminist theory is “a way of viewing world”; it “provides a basis for understanding every area of our lives” (Bunch, 205). The basic issue that has concerned feminist theory is,

depending on the terms one prefers, women's inequality, subordination, or domination by men. At the root of these is the issue of gender asymmetry- the designation of women and things associated with women as different from, inferior to, of lesser value than men and things associated with men. Feminist theories examine and try to explain the cause and conditions in which men are more powerful and men's production, ideas and activities are seen as having greater value and status than women.

Nancy F.Cott's provides an adequate definition of feminism in her book *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. She gives her definition three-core components: First, feminism holds the belief in what is usually referred to as sex equality, but we might be more clearly expressed in the negative, as opposition to sex hierarchy. Equality is such a difficulty quantity to apply to human beings (because it is colloquially taken to mean sameness) that the point is served better by expression in terms of opposition to one sex's categorical control of the rights and opportunities of other. Secondly, feminism presupposes that women's condition is socially constructed, that is, historically shaped by human social usage rather than simply predestined by God or nature. Thirdly, Feminism posits that women perceive themselves not only as a biological sex but also as a social grouping. Related to that understanding is some level of identification with "the group called women," some awareness that one experience reflects and affects the whole.

With these three components in mind, Cott's definition follows; Feminism asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedom by mobilizing sex solidarity. It posits that women recognize their unity while it stands for diversity among women. It requires gender basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.

When we talk the history of women, we come to know that they had been excluded to marginality from the existing social structure. Monologist interpretation of society by men is still audible since the origin of human being. Therefore, the awakened women of patriarchal society raised a movement named feminism in order to awaken women about every institution of male governed society that lowered their status and degraded their humanity. The feminist did so to make women realize that they are not the secondary or complementary part of male but they are equal to men. The goal of the feminist movement is to win the equal rights between men and women.

Feminist scholars have divided feminism's history into three "waves". Each is described as dealing with different aspect of the same feminist issues. The first wave refers to the feminism movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which dealt mainly with the suffrage movement. The second wave (1960s-1980s) dealt with the inequality of laws, as well as cultural inequalities. The third wave of feminism (1990s-current), is seen as both a continuation and response to the perceived failures of the Second-wave.

Limiting the history of Feminism to the history of the modern Feminist Movement has been criticized by some authors as ignoring women's opposition to patriarchy over the course of the thousands of years. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, put forth ideas we now recognize as feminist, as an outgrowth of the enlightenment values espoused in the late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although some find the use of the term feminist prior to its coinage (sometime around 1880) "anachronistic", others prefer to see "feminism" as a self-conscious and systematic ideology beginning in the late eighteenth century.

First-Wave feminism refers to period of feminist activity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United Kingdom and the United States. It focused

primarily on gaining the right of women's suffrage. The term, "first-wave", was coined retrospectively after the term second-wave feminism began to use to describe a newer feminist movement that focused as much on fighting social and cultural inequalities as further political inequalities (18).

In Britain, the Suffragettes campaigned for the women's vote, which was eventually granted – to some women in 1918 and to all in 1928- as much because of part played by British women during the First World War, as of the efforts of Suffragettes. In the United States, leaders of this movement include Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, who each campaigned for the abolition of slavery prior to championing women's right to vote. Other important leaders include Lucey Stone, Olympia Brown, and Helen Pitts. American first-wave feminism involved a wide range of women, some belonging to Conservative Christian groups (such as Frances Willard and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union), others resembling the diversity and radicalism much of second-wave feminism (such as Matilda Joselyn Gage and the National Woman Suffrage Association). In the United States first-wave feminism is considered to have ended with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States constitution (1919), granting women the right to vote.

Second wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity beginning in the early 1960s and lasting till the late 1980s. Second wave Feminism has existed continuously since then, and continues to coexist with what some people call Third Wave Feminism. The second wave feminism saw cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked. The movement encouraged women to understand aspects of their own personal lives as deeply politicized, and reflective of a sexist structure of power. If first-wave feminism focused upon absolute rights such as suffrage, second-wave

feminism was largely concerned with other issues of equality, such as the end of discrimination.

The Third –wave feminism began in the early 1990s. The movement arose as a response to perceived failures of the second-wave. It was also a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second wave. Third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's essentialist definition of femininity, which (according to them) over-emphasized the experience of upper middle class white women. A post-structuralism interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third wave's ideology. Third wave feminism often focuses on micro politics, and challenge the second wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females.

Third wave feminism comes from a variety of backgrounds. They come from many different classes and cultures, genders, and sexualities. Some third wave feminists prefer not to call themselves feminist, as the word feminist can be misinterpreted as an exclusive term or deemed man-hating or elite by critics. Third wave feminism seeks to challenge any universal definition of femininity.

Moreover, feminism is a diverse, competing and often opposing collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies, largely motivated by or concerning the experiences of women, especially in terms of their social, political, and economical inequalities. One institutionally predominant type of feminism focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality to promote women's rights, interests, and issues in society. Another opposing type of modern feminism, with deep historical roots, focuses on earning, and establishing equity by for women, vis-à-vis men, to promote those same rights, interests, and issues, regardless of gender considerations. Thus, as with any ideology, political movement or philosophy, there is no single, universal form

of feminism that represents all feminists. The most well known types of feminism are liberal feminism, social feminism, radical feminism, and the post-modern feminism.

Liberal feminism asserts the equality of men and women through political and legal reform. It is an individualistic form of feminism and theory, which focuses on women's ability to show and maintain their equality through their own actions and choices. Liberal feminism looks at the personal interactions of men and women as the starting ground from which to transform society into a more gender-equitable place. According to liberal feminists, all women are capable of asserting their ability to achieve equality, therefore it is possible for change to happen without altering the structure of society. Issues important to liberal feminists include reproductive and abortion rights, sexual harassment, voting, education, equal pay for equal work, affordable childcare, affordable health care, and bringing to light the frequency of sexual and domestic violence against women.

Liberal feminist generally work for the eradication of institutional bias and the implementation of better laws. In the United States, liberal feminist have historically worked for the ratification of the Equal rights Amendment or Constitutional Equity Amendment, in the hopes it will ensure that men and women are treated as equals under the democratic laws that also influence important spheres of women's lives, including reproduction, work and equal pay issues.

Radical Feminism is a philosophy emphasizing the patriarchal roots of inequality between men and women, or, more specifically, social dominance of women by men. It views patriarchy as a dividing right, privileging and power primarily by gender, and as a result oppressing women and privileging men. Most radical feminist agree that women's oppression is the first, the most widespread, and the deepest form of human oppression. What oppress women is not what oppresses

men but is rather a special form of lives called patriarchy through which men takes all superior roles and keep women in subordinate and exploited position.

Only the elimination of patriarchy and destruction of male control will liberate women. Radical feminist suggest we being by eliminating gender, specifically sexual status, temperament, and social construction as they have been constructed under patriarchy. As patriarchy is organized through men's relationship with other men, unity among women is the only effective means for liberating women.

Moreover, radical feminism focuses on men as oppressor, yet says little about the possibility of women being an oppressor of other women or men. Thus, radical feminist seeks the root cause of women's oppression and their answer lie in the key word of patriarchy. They believe that the society is built upon patriarchal structure where women (but also men) are oppressed by dominant men, who have more social power over others because they are in higher hierarchical position than others are. These patriarchal structures are the cause of inequality between men and women through dividing rights, privileges and power by gender. Thus, they oppose existing political and social organization by being skeptical about any political action within the current system.

However, Kreps, Bonnie provides a useful characterization of radical feminism as tendency:

Which choose to concentrate exclusively of women as women (and not as workers, students, etc.)? This segment therefore concentrates its analysis on institutions like love, marriage, sex, masculinity, and femininity. It would be opposed specifically and centrally to sexism, rather than capitalism. (Koedt et al 1973:328)



Much of their energies were focused on discussion around gender as social construct from which pervade all forms of material and ideological female oppression. In order to explore the nature of such oppression more thoroughly, radicals concentrated on the experiences of the individual women in society, often using writing as a vehicle to communicate their own narratives of pain, and to convey their passionate belief that sexism lies at the heart of women's oppression. From their perspectives, the problem for women is quite categorically men. Even male sympathizers to the women's movement are treated with suspicion, on the grounds that they still wield the power to be potential oppressors with the privileges such power bestows whether they acknowledge it or not.

For radicals, the patriarchy is the means for articulating the way in which every aspects of women's life appears to be contaminated by male domination. It is for this reason that they are accused of failing to recognize that different men have differing degrees of access to power, and of denying the possibility that some men are sympathetic to feminist issues and do not consciously wield their potential power. Radicals largely argue that all men profit from patriarchal systems of oppression and therefore all men are answerable for its continuance-for this reason, the policy of individual acts of resistance by women in their personal lives was seen as an important precursor to collective activism.

Radical feminism sees the capitalist sexist hierarchy as the defining feature of women's oppression. Radical feminists believe that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider an inherently oppressive and dominating system. Radical feminists feel that the male-based authority and power structure are responsible for oppression and inequality, and that as long as the system and its values are in place, society will not be able to reform in any significant way.

Radical feminism sees capitalism as a barrier to ending oppression. Most radical feminists see no alternatives other than the total uprooting and reconstruction of society in order to achieve their goals.

This research work, mainly concentrate on the theories of some prominent radical feminist-Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Catherine Mackinnon and french feminist Helen Cixous, in order to invistigate the proble of gender. It is obvious that gender is the source responsible for women's opperession in a patriarchal society. As Valerie Bryson defines radical feminism, "it is essentially a theory of, by and for women; as such, it is based firmly in women's own experiences and perceptions and sees no need to comprimise with existing political perspectives and agendas" (181). Radical feminist highlight the theme of women's oppression. They even insist that women's oppression is one of the most fundamental forms of oppression in history and they claim that "it is the first, the most widespresd; and the deepest form of human oppression" (Tong, 71). Besides, unlike some earlier schools of feminists, they argue that is a patriarchy that controls and oppress women, "It is the patriarchal system that oppressess women, a system characterized by power, dominance, hiearchy, and competition, a system that cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch"(Tong 2-3). The theory of Patriarchy is radical feminists' major concern. Furthermore, they insist the male power is at the root of social construction of gender under patriarchy. However, it was Kate Millette who introduced the key concept of patriarchy into modern feminist thought. The term patriarchy is certainly not new to political theory, but the use to which Millett put it absolutely was .In *Sexual Politics*, one of the first and most influential texts of radical feminism, Millette claims that the term patriarchy derives from the Greek *patriarches*, meaning "head of the tribe;" it is central to seventeenth century debets over the extent of monarchical power (Bryson 184-5). Further, Millette compares the power

of a father with that of a king over his people and that both are sanctioned by God and nature. Thereafter, Millett's idea of patriarchy concerns a social system based on male domination and female subordination, and is regarded as a standard among current feminists. And according to Millett, the term "sexual politics" refers to women's oppression under the unbalanced power between sexes in patriarchy.

Further, Millett illuminates how and by what means the sex/gender system determines women's subordination and oppression in society. In *sexual politics*, Millett borrows Robert Stoller's perspectives to illustrate the distinction between sex and gender. Stoller, as a famous radical feminist in surveying the topic of gender, argues that gender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms of sex are male and female, the corresponding terms for gender are masculine and feminine; the latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex" (Stoller 9). Millett maintains that patriarchy always exaggerates biological difference between the sexes to make certain of men's domination, or masculine roles, and women's subordination, or feminine roles through the process of socialization (Tong 96). In *sexual Politics*, Millet claims that biology, like sex, is a crucial factor that supports the social institution of gender and determines women's subordination and oppression in patriarchy.

Like Beauvoir before them, today's radical feminists point out that women are restricted to their biological functions, and are oppressed in maternity and sexuality to take their feminine roles in patriarchal societies. Rich and MacKinnon are the two major radical feminists who demonstrate how women are controlled and oppressed biologically in maternity and sexuality within the patriarchal society of gender inequality. Rich indicates the male control of women and their bodies through socially institutionalized motherhood brings about an unfair relationship between the sexes and

the modulation of women as mere mothers. As Alexander Theroux claims, “the aim of institutionalized motherhood as [Rich’d] have it, is simply that all women shall remain ‘under male control’[. . .]. Most women in history have become mothers without choice” (qtd. In copper 305). Further, MacKinnon points out that male manipulation of the female sex abounds in a male-dominant society. MacKinnon suggests that male dominance of the female sex leads to gender inequality, and this dominance in turn results in social objectification of the female gender within the social institution of heterosexuality. Under the institution, women’s identity is reduced to an object, namely, a sexual object. Being a beautiful thing for sexual use of men delineates “women’s status as second class” people in society (MacKinnon 1989, 130). MacKinnon claims that “[her] approach identifies not just a sexuality that is shaped under conditions of gender [,] but reveals this sexuality itself to be the dynamic of the inequality of the sexes” (1989, 30).

Moreover, Cixous challenges the premises of cultural biological determinism on women, in order to explore a female sexuality that is women’s own bodily specificity, rather than on male sexuality. Cixous urges women to create their own kind of writing, in order to refute Freud’s view of female sexuality, which is said to be shaped by penis envy and Lacan’s point of “the other bisexuality” to reclaim women’s bodies and selves (NBW 84). As Cixous points out, “feminine writing” means embracing on “the passage toward more than self, toward another than the self, toward the other” (NBW 112). Cixous suggests that the purpose of feminine writing is “not to submit the subject [. . .] to the laws of cultural cowardic and habit” (qtd. In sellers 1996, 18). Cixous, as a postmodern feminist, tells the ways of showing respect for the sexual difference and the significance of emancipating female selfhood in the phallogocentric culture.

At last, we can say that, feminism is both an intellectual commitment and a political movement that seeks justice for women and the end of sexism in all forms. However, there are different kinds of feminism. Feminist disagree about what sexism consist in, and what exactly ought to be done to it, they disagree about what it means to be a women or man and what social and political implications gender has or should have. Nonetheless, motivated by the quest for the social justice, feminist inquiry provides a wide range of perspectives on social, cultural, and political phenomena. Feminism is therefore, a critique of patriarchy, on the one hand, and an ideology committed to women's emancipation on the other. This research work mainly concentrate on the radical feminist viewpoint.

### III. Resisting Patriarchy in *The Handmaid's Tale*

This Chapter mainly discusses how, under the patriarchal oppression, women struggle to find some means to resist and defy the fate of being objectified. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the specific form of female orality empowers women and provides the major route for women to resist the fate of being oppressed and victimized. This Chapter discusses on female voice into two distinct ways. It starts by analyzing how the Handmaid Offred tries to “write” with her voice to restore her body in Gilead by means of writing through her voice, it is the only way for her to preserve the symbolic, through a bit illusory, autonomy of her body and her ownself. Second, the issue of women's histories of repression will be investigated. Traditionally, women are denied any written discourses in male literacy culture, hence women's histories are buried. For example, the Handmaids, as numerous women in history have been, are bereaved of their birth names; their identities disappear like air without leaving any of their traces of life stories. In this chapter I shall also analyze the crucial theme of how women's histories are repressed. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's oral act of storytelling, to reader, may signify her resistance to reconstruct women's repressed histories.

#### I. The Oppression of women in Maternity:

The Republic of Gilead is a rigidly Patriarchal Kingdom. Immediately after the handmaid Ofglen's suicide, Offred finds out that she can "feel, for the first time, their true power" (298). The handmaid Offred's word their' actually refers to the omnipresence of male power in Gilead. The novel degree by degree reveals, through Offred's narration, the fact that women are subordinated and opposed by men in this male dominated world. Traditionally, it is through the family, the chief social institution in patriarchy that women are controlled and oppressed, the family also

encourages women's subordination to men and aggravates the unbalanced power relations between the sexes. For example, the wives, the women of the highest female class in Gilead, are deprived of the jobs and property that they once had in their pre-Gilead lives, and revert to the patriarchal prototype of the family, in which they are owned and controlled by their husbands, known as the Commanders. Furthermore, the novel suggests that women's position of subordination in the family and the maternal roles they assume (or are forced to assume) are deeply intertwined with the oppression of women. Religion is the major device for the promotion of the manipulation of women's biological functions and maternal roles in Gilead. The totalitarian state of Gilead indeed is a theocracy, in which the Bible is dominant, of which the Bible is usurped by men to control and oppress women in their roles as mothers in the families, mainly the Households in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Moreover, in the novel the oppression of women in maternity indeed results from the experience of the social institutionalized motherhood in the patriarchal society. Education is the major means by which men subordinate women as mothers within the institution of motherhood. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the Red Center is obviously manipulated by the Gilead authorities. Stated as an occasion for the school to educate the Handmaid's and to force them to accept their task as mothers. By means of the function of education, women, as the Handmaids, are trained under the "Aunt's" indoctrination to function, merely as reproductive machines for men. The author Margaret Atwood seems to provide a bleak landscape of male domination in this dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which forms the author's indictment of the baldly patriarchal regime's control over the female body and its reproductive power. Under the regime, women's biological function and maternity is usurped and exploited in Gilead, for the sole purpose of male dominance.

First, the regime of Gilead is marked by its rigid physical boundaries that confine woman's activities. The Chief female character, Offred, one of the numerous handmaids' in the novel, is permitted to travel only to the center of Gilead for grocery shopping and other errands. In addition, on her way, she is confronted with various kinds of physical barriers on the way for shopping. In the first place, she has to leave the Household through the backdoor, because the handmaid's are allowed to use the front door only on Specific occasion: such as their first visit to their new post or their ceremonial participation in a Birthday. The garden out doors also strengthens the image of boundary with its vivid "flower borders" (16). Then Offred and her shopping companion, Ofglen, proceed through a series of checkpoints defended by the Guardians of the Faith. Eventually, they may end the shopping trip within the protective boundaries of the central part of town near the ominous "Wall" (41). The wall is where any transgress act is punished. There are often bodies, male and female, hung on the wall. In addition, the wall stands for the extreme reminder of the boundary that defines women's existence in Gilead Offred says that she & Ofglen, "Stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It does not matter if we look. We've supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the wall" (42). The Handmaids have no options, but only adapt themselves to the patriarchal surroundings of Gilead, and Offred craftily compares herself to a rat during the trip. "Now and again we vary the route; there's nothing against it, as long as we stay within the barriers. A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze" (174). The handmaids are more like hares deprived of freedom in a "maze" which is like a trap.

Although Gilead is a society of male control, men do not escape categorization and strict ranking. For example, at the top are the commanders, who stand for the



high-class people and act the role of mastery of the state. Beneath the commanders are the Eyes, the spying and intelligence operatives of the regime. Male characters occupy a superior's status to that of women. The commanders are the male figure who dominate the household's and his women like the Wives and the Handmaids. Nevertheless, while men hold privileged position, there as seen as mere functionaries of the dogmatic system of Gilead. During each monthly Impregnation Ceremony, the commander is simply doing his duty to impregnate his Handmaid, Offred; there is no passion, felling, or emotion in this process as, "Below it the commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate because it would imply two people and only one in involved" (104-105). That is to say, men themselves are forbidden to go beyond their own boundaries to do anything else because of their different positions & function within Gilead's plan.

On the other hand, the seven categories of the females in Gilead are visually reinforced by different colors of attires that they wear. The handmaids are the most recognizable figure in the open field, because they wear red suits; as Offred relates, "everything except the wings around my face is red: the color of blood, which defines us" (18). Offred's scarlet, nun like uniform also represents her imprisonment in the handmaid's role; she calls herself "a sister, dipped in blood" (19). Other types of women also dressed in unique and easily recognizable uniforms. In fact, each woman wears a stigma of fixed identity, which indicates her status and function in Gilead. Further, the functional boundaries, reinforced by their different women's uniforms, legally separate women. Although, the handmaids are designated "a position of honor" by the Aunts, they shunned & despised for their inferior status, even among women themselves (23). For the handmaids, as surrogate mother are indeed the

good/bad women, the saintly prostitutes. Offred describes the distasteful feelings of the wife, Serena Joy, towards her when she enters the Household earlier; "what does she envy me? She doesn't speak to me, unless she cannot avoid it. I am a reproach to her; and a necessity"(23). Besides, when Offred sees three Ecnowives mourning for baby's death on the street, Offred points out their hatred for the Handmaids: "Beneath her veil the first one scowls at us. One of the other turns aside, spits on the sidewalk. The Ecnowives do not like us" (54). During the large ceremonies like Salvagings and parayavangazas, Offred observes, "Our area is cordoned off with a silky twisted scarlet rope, like the kind they used to use in the movie theaters to restrain the customers. This rope segregates us, marks us off, keeps the other from contamination by us, makes us a corral pen" (287). The image of being caged like an animal typifies the Handmaid's inferior position in the state.

Serena Joy plays the very tragic role of a wife. The wife, Serena Joy, is neither the gorgeous lend soprano singing in the television programmed of the Growing souls Gospel Hour before Gilead; nor is she an enthusiastic speech maker who makes speeches about "the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay at home" (55). As Offred ironically comments, "She doesn't make speeches anymore. She becomes speechless. She stays in her home, but it does not seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word" (56). All the wives to do is to be loyal to her husband and the family. Serena Joy, trapped in the role of wife, Confined to the Sanctity of the home, is neither serene nor joyous. As the wife, she seems a dying, withered flower. Offred express her chilling feelings towards Serena Joy as she meets the wife in the Household for the first time:

Her blue waist, thick end, her left hand on the ivory head of her came,  
the large diamonds on the ring finger, which must once have been fine

and was still finely kept, the fingernail at the end of the knuckly finger field to a gentle curving point. It was like an ironic Smile, on that finger; like something mocking her. (24)

Patriarchy endows the authority of men through the intuition of family. Ironically, the Handmaids are "infantilized" and the commanders own them. The Handmaids are treated as child-like figures in households. The characterization of infantilization exemplifies the total ownership of the fathers, the commanders, of the female young, the handmaids. For example, the handmaid Offred, mechanically response to Serena Joy in an inauthentic, feminine voice as the wife tries to lay out the ground rules for their relation earlier. "They used to have dolls, for little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll" (26). Further, treated like a child in the household, Offred may not be told certain things. She is permitted to watch television news on the evening of the Ceremony. She is like "a child being allowed up late with the grown-ups"(115).

The truth is apparent, through its imposition of a rigid system of hierarchical classification; the Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable object in the phallogentric economy. From the outset, the handmaid's get involved in the name game. The handmaids, as surrogate mothers, are stripped of their birth names before Gilead. However, the name game means that each handmaid's name has multiple hidden meanings in it. For example, every handmaid's name is called the possessive preposition of and the Christian name of the commander to whom she in assigned: such as of-fred, of-wareen, of-charles and so forth. While having completed a positing to bear babies, the handmaid's periodically abandon those names, assuming new ones in three different households.

The name Offred is not the real name of the handmaid. On the earlier stage, there is Rachel and Leah Center, once called the Red center: "Alma. Janine. Dolores. Maria. June"(14). In fact, a name symbolizes one's identity. Women are bereaved of their names and identities. The name, Serena Joy, is not the wife's authentic name either. Her actual name is "Pam" as Offred read in a news magazine in the pre-Gileaden life (55). The infinite interchangeability of the handmaid's new names in different household's stresses the deprivation of their self-identities in Gilead. Offred describes that terrible movement as she encounters the new Ofglen, "Ofglen, wherever she is, no longer and Ofglen. I never did know her real name. That is how you can get lost, in a sea of names" (295). The commanders are the owners of everything in their house, including women. The name game proves the general principle of male ownership toward women and women's subordination in Gilead's patriarchal society.

Actually, education is one of the most influential elements for the patriarchal ideology to run efficiently on the handmaids on mothers in Gilead. In Gilead, Offred, along with other handmaids, is constantly reminded of the Aunt's morals or teaching which deal with her maternal role, "Where I am not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or" (18). Most obviously, Aunt Lydia criticizes those women who are not prepared for engaging the sacred deed of reproduction in front of other Handmaids in the Red Center. As Offred describes it:

Of course, some women believed there would be no future, they thought they would explode. That was the excuse they used, says Aunt Lydia. They said there was no sense in breeding, Aunt Lydia's nostrils narrow; such wickedness. They were lazy women; she says they were sluts. (123)

In fact, the teachings of the Aunts embody the absolute manipulation of prevailing patriarchal ideology on the handmaid's and their bodies as mother. The seduced and magic word, pearl, is used by Aunt Lydia as a prize to the handmaids, child like figures, who are instructed to accept and fulfill their biological destinies. As Offred reveals:

A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get. We want you to be valued, girls. She is rich in pause, which she savors in her mouth think of yourselves as pearls. We, sitting in our rows, eyes down, we make her salivate morally. We are hers to define; we must suffer her adjectives [ . . . ]. All of us here will lick you into shape, says Aunt Lydia with satisfied good cheer. (124)

Furthermore, one essential lesson the Aunt teaches the handmaid to obey is about the food principle, "Healthy food. You have to get your vitamins and minerals, Said Aunt Lydia coyly. You must be worthy vessel. No coffee or tea, no alcohol. Studies have been done" (75).

In *The Handmaids Tale*, the author Atwood indeed highlights the destiny of women's bodies chiefly as reproductive instrument. The state of Gilead is actually a world of modern technology. There are compuchecks and compucounts in every corner of Gilead, So that women's identities may be easily erased. Gilead repudiates the pre-Gilead scientific and technological supports in women's birth process. On the other hand, the state insists that the handmaids should take the most natural way to give birth, as Aunt Elizabeth instructs the handmaids, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth Children" (156). In Red center, Aunt Lydia shows the handmaids a movie of an old birth in hospital. In the film, a pregnant woman in a delivering process is examined by the male doctor, and

her body is under the control by machines operated by men. However, in Gilead, all the medical machines and equipment are abandoned. They are replaced by the other handmaids, the aunts, and the wives. The other handmaids chant around the pregnant handmaid and the aunts direct the whole birth process. Above all, the wives should symbolically hold the handmaid's hand and let the handmaids lie on their legs while bearing babies. However, neither the abandonment of modern technologies promotes to liberate women from their biological limitations in Gilead. The author Atwood seems to intriguingly combine two current issues, environmental of the female body in maternity under patriarchy. Environmental pollution threatens the existence of people in the future: that is the context of the infertile Gilead. The first epigraph suggests the importance of children to women. In Gilead, the handmaids as surrogate mothers are like Bilhah, and only through their handmaid's labor, can they technologically fulfill the maternal function and become mothers.

Gender inequality can be said to cause the oppression of women in maternity. Women are supposed to take the maternal role in the patriarchal society, and are manipulated only for breeding purposes. Being surrogate mothers, what the Handmaids should do is to succumb themselves to the authority of the commanders, in order to reproduce. In Gilead, the system of surrogacy becomes a quick way to boost not only the population of the state, but also the institutionalization of motherhood under patriarchy to control and exploit women and their bodies as women accept their takes as mothers.

## II. Women's Resistance:

In story telling, Offred attempts to rehabilitate herself as an individual, since she refuses to accept her status as nothing but merely "a two-legged womb" within the reproductive system of Gilead (28). As she stresses, "I am alive, I live, I breath, I put

my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight” (18). The Gilead state employs the text of genesis in order to authorize control over female identity and to resist female body in its most threatening and powerful capabilities, that is, childbirth and sex. The Handmaid’s, in the Gileadean society, are trapped in their feminine roles in which harm their plural identity. Offred describes that she is transfigured, in a mirror on the hall wall, “I can see it as I go down the stairs, and myself in it like a distorted shadow a parody of something [ . . . ]” (19).

Therefore, Offred tries to find a possible way for her to preserve her identity by means of “writing” by the voice. Constantly, Offred is clear in her minds to re-creat her self: “I wait, I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (76). The handmaid tells the truth about her deprived self in Gilead, and all she has to do is to create herself by means of the act to “write” with her voice. On numerous nights, Offred is cixious women who is confined to the narrow room and given a deadly brainwashing. By writing herself woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. Hence, coming to terms with her body is the first crucial step as Offred regains her subjectivity and identity. Through “writing” the body, Offred articulates her appropriated and objectived body to preserve the autonomy of the female body and herself. Hence through “writing” by the voice , Offred devotes herself to “writing” her body and tries hard to resist the Patriarchal control and oppression of her female body.

Earlier the handmaid refuses to talk faithfully about her own bodily experience while taking a bath, “My nakedness is strange to me already. My body senses outdated [ . . . ]. 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 (72-73)." This is the scene in which Offred unexpectedly recalls her past and touches her "own" body in this scene. For Offred, her body is taken as different entity right now because of her object status and role in Gilead. From her past memories of her body, Offred realizes the cruel truth that her body only functions biologically as an instrument for sexuality and maternity for men. By birding the past and the present, Offred knows that her body betrayed her already. Offred fears to face her body. In addition, she avoids looking back at her past. In narrating her story, Offred oxymoronically says, "I don't want to be telling this story" (237). In fact, Offred is not willing to repeat the unfortunate physical experiences that she has undergone in her Gileaden life.

Because of the oppression of her body, Offred considers herself as a flickering ghost in the past; moreover, she points out the truth about her bereaved self: "can I be blamed for wanting a real body, to put my arms around? Without it I, too, am disembodied" (113). Many times in her tale, Offred tries to emphasize her loss of self, because of the restricted female role she plays in Gilead. During one of the nights when Offred is alone in her own room, she feels that "herself" is "shattered", imaging this action by recalling the sound made when a glass is broken (113). Further she feels that 'herself' is 'buried' when she is ordered to accompany her master, the commander, in the study room (221). Being a surrogate mother to fulfill men's needs, Offred feels depressed about losing herself; she even confesses to god: "Dear God, I think. I will do anything you like. Now that you've let me off, I'll obliterate myself, if that's what you really want; I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice" (298).

In retrieving herself, first, Offred begins to regard herself as a subject, and proclaims the female body as her own. Before the Impregnation Ceremony, Offred



becomes the explorer of her own dark, inner place, that is, her body, in a bathroom once designed for men:

I sink down into my body as into a swamp, fenland, where territory, I become the earth I set my ear against, for rumors of the future. Each twinge, each murmur of slight pain, ripples of sloughed-off matter, swellings and diminishing of tissue, the drooling of the flesh, there are signs, these are signs, these are the things I need [. . .]. I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure [. . .]. 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 am a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of pear, which is hard and more real than I am, am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. (83-84)

Within her intense mediation on her body, Offred tries to resist the control that the state of Gilead exerts over her body. When she stresses, “my own territory”, the Handmaid claims the body as her own (83). In Offred’s mind, her body remains as unconquered territory: it is which is beyond the commander’s reach, except in each sex ceremony. “Intent on his inner journey, that place he is hurrying towards, which recedes as in a dream at the same speed with which he approaches it” (105-106). With her minute attention to physical details, Offred chronicles her bodily awareness. Offred clearly points out the patriarchal oppression of her body: that her body functions only as a birth tool. Offred tries to liberate herself from having her own body exploited, reconstructing a different sort of text, to be grounded in the female body. For example, Offred regards her body as the source of “pleasure”, “transportation”, and “accomplishment of (her) will” (83). It is within her terrain of

imagination and metaphor that Offred starts to claim a space in which to write her body, in order to redefine her body and self, and thus to transgress the confines of Gilead. Further, Offred mediation offers a kind of imaginative transcendence.

In the text, the wife Serena Joy's garden is taken by Offred as an important inner space; giving Offred enough privacy for her to appropriate imaginatively. Gardens are place full of organic natural forces; as Offred remembers from her past life: "I once had a garden. I can remember the smell of the turned earth" (22). The garden can temporarily release Offred's situation of loveless isolation in Gilead, "I wish this story were different [. . .]. I have tried to put some of the good things as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?" (279). Further, from the wife's garden, Offred's narrative of feelings opens up the spaces of desire; as Offred describes, "there is something subversive about this garden of Serena's Joy's, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly, into the light; as if to point, to say; whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard, through silently" (161). When Offred faces the sensuous garden, her "silenced" body is "heard" because her body is responding, naturally, to the Handmaids "buried" or suppressed sexual desire in Gilead. However, Offred's Physical desire is transformed, by way of sublimation. The very intensity of her desire urges Offred to transcend her human limits and to enter the life of the pulsating, organic world around her, "winter is not so dangerous. I need hardness, cold, rigidity, not this heaviness, as if I'm a melon on a stem, this liquid ripeness" (162). Hence, Offred has become the very subject to constitute a feminine alternative language.

Moreover, through "writing" her body, Offred's oral constitutes such a feminine alternative language, during the game of Scrabble. While playing Scrabble with the Commander, Offred describes those tiles as candies, which she desires to put

into her mouth. Through the “writing” by the voice, Offred seems to retrieve three of her essential elements, that is, body, identity, and speech. Furthermore, Offred’s oral narrative is eventually cut short and lacks the conventional ending, “I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can’t be helped. And so I step into the darkness within; or else the light” (307). *The Handmaid’s Tale* may correspond to a piece of feminine writing which is open-ended, full of detours and concerned with pluralities and ambiguities. As Offred departs from the Commanders house and climbs into the van, the female protagonist confronts all the risk and possibilities of her future life; she seems to enter unknowingly into a process of becoming the other sex. More importantly, this ending may symbolically prove Offred’s prevalent self-searching process of becoming fluid between masculine and feminine qualities through “writing” with her voice. The ending of Offred’s storytelling signifies the very feminine textual structure of the novel and means the inscription of the Handmaid’s femininity through “writing”. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred’s role resembles that of the Medusa, whose laughter or her joyous voice, embodied in women’s own writing, demonstrates her strength. Offred’s transformation may echo the change of the Medusa’s image from an object of sexual violation to a powerful, female subject.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the Handmaid Offred’s storytelling embodies the very resistance act to reconstruct “her story” within the oppressive language system of the state of Gilead. Her tapes are unearthed and reconstructed in 2195 by a male archivist, professor Pieixton. The archivist speculates on the place of narration: it is an underground Female road that is associated with images of “the dark realm within”, “some other place”, a “cellar”, an “attic hiding place”, and an “obscure matrix” (295-311). It is on the Underground Femaleroad that the Handmaid may break through her

silence. Metaphorically, the Underground embodies the space on the margins of order and law, from which Offred may express her voice. That is to say, the Underground signifies the place where Offred will reconstruct women's repressed histories.

Moreover, the eyewitness account, related in her story, delineates the brutality and dehumanization of the Gileaden society, particularly, the limitation of language on female subject. In her story, Offred had recognized the connection between male control of language and male power. Actually, the flashback from Offred's narrative about her pre-Gileaden life describes the western cultural tradition with its extreme degree of literacy and electronic data processing. For instance, the protagonist's female friend, Moria, is employed in a feminist publishing house. Offred's mother is an ardent feminist, participating in burning of pornographic literature. As for the narrator herself, she works in a library, "transferring books to computer discs" (182), and thereby illustrating the transition from a cultural based on print technology to one focused on electronic data processing. Thereafter, under the totalitarian control of Gilead, newspapers are censored and banned. Besides, the state denies women the opportunity to read and write. Reading and writing are made punishable crimes for them. Hence, being a woman in Gilead means to become pre-literate and to obey the pre-scriptions of men.

The Commander stands for the privilege of language held in the hands of males. He has words. For example, the commander has the words of God, and he owns the power to read the Bible. However, the Commander plays a crucial role in the process of Offred's revitalization of her language. Although the Handmaids are denied the privilege to read and write, the Commander offers Offred opportunities to re-learn language. Ordered to make secret visits to the Commanders' private, book filled study, Offred discovers fertile ground where she may reacquire her linguistic

capability. The Handmaid describes, amazingly, what she encounters when she enters the Commander's study for the first time: "All around the walls there are bookcases. They are filled with books. 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. I try not to stare" (147). In fact, playing scrabble with the commander in his study embodies the first step for Offred to re-learn language. Ironically, with the aid of the commander, Offred gradually develops her understanding of language; then, she actively rebuilds her forgotten vocabulary. In addition, she even invents non-existent words. This act of inventing words is clearly shown in the deliberate word play in Offred's own narrative as well. Oftentimes, she explores the polysemy of a particular word. For instance, she contemplates on the word "chair" when the Handmaid Offwarren delivers a baby on Birthday, "I sit in the chair and I think about the word *chair*. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in *charity*. It is the French word for flesh" (120). However, as Offred continues to explain, Offwarren takes her seat in a special birthing stool, a chair that lets the wife sit behind and above the surrogate mother in the Impregnation ceremony. Thus, the word 'chair' also takes on special meaning and signification in this context.

In the commander's study, Offred indulges in a kind of permitted sin of language in the two chief routes, that in playing scrabble and reading women's magazines. Offred also regains her language capability while reading these magazines. The commander brings Offred women's magazines, which are forbidden for anybody to own and read in the state. Offred relates that the commander gives her the magazine as a present. "It was a magazine, a women's magazine looked like from the picture' I thought such magazines had all been destroyed, but here was one, left over,

in a commander's private study, where you'd least expect to find such a thing" (164). Offred expresses her yearning for reading such materials, "Staring at the magazine, as he dangled it before me like fish bait, I wanted it. I wanted it with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache" (164). In the commander's study room, the Handmaids read not only women's magazine, but also other materials, like *Reader's Digest*, and Dickens's novel *Hard Times*. Through reading, she shows her longing for language in comparing such desires to the acts of both eating and sex, which are under the manipulation of the state as well, 'I read quickly, voracious, almost skimming, trying to get as much into my head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it was sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" (194). Gradually, Offred regains words in reading. Offred constantly reveals her desire for language; more over, she has communal over the language herself:

My tongue felt thick the effort of spelling. I was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world [. . .] things. I'd read about once but had never seen It was like trying to walk without crutches [. . .]. That was the way my mind lurched and stumble among the sharp R's and T's sliding over the ovoid vowels as if on pebble.  
(164)

But Offred describes her process of re-tearing language as that of a patient who tries to walk without crutches, "Through scrabble, language is what Offred steals and stealing language means that she acquires knowledge and power" (Kauffman 229). Above all, there is a crucial scene in which Offred takes the action to "write". In the commander's study, the Handmaid asks him the meaning of the Latin graffiti found in

the closet of her room. "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*" (64). The sentence was originally written and left by the previous "Offred" as Offred finds out in her through, to at least one other person, washed itself up on the wall of my cupboard, was opened [. . .] and read by me (62). However, since Offred cannot utter it correctly to the commander, she asks if she can write it down on a piece of paper. The commander agrees, Offred is permitted to write those Latin words:

I print the phrase carefully, copying it down from inside my head, from inside my closet [. . .]. The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains [. . .]. Just holding it is envy. I envy the commander his pen. It's one more thing. I would like to steal. (196)

Since it ironically means, "Don't let the bastards grind you down." (50). Moreover, the Latin writing validates women's voice and existence. The writing serves as a piece of women's history.

Through the Latin writing, Offred is motivated by power of language to commit her act of storytelling. Particularly, the Handmaid attempts to reconstruct "her history" orally within a male culture of history. Offred realizes that not only does Gilead make use of language to construct its version of reality, but also she can similarly use language through her story telling to construct another, subversive or counter version of reality, as well to attack directly the version that the totalitarian state promotes (Hogsette 270). Through narrating her story, Offred demonstrates her resistance and subversion, to break the silence imposed by the regime, further to establish women's history. Atwood indicates that women's oral stories function as histories as in the case of Offred's tale (Michael 59). Thus, for Offred, the oral tale becomes her hope and a means of her survival.

Through her storytelling, Offred becomes more political and self-conscious to reconstruct her being or existence. "Writing" or in her case speaking out, validates an individual's existence' it proves the writer-speaker was, at some point, or still may be, alive. For Offred, to exist means to tell. Her existence lies in her struggle to narrate her history.

In order to reconstruct "her history" to prove her existence, Offred needs to tell of her past, as well as to represent a more complete picture of her life. However, the absolutist regime tries to abolish women's parts. Offred realizes that the next generation of Handmaid's will be more docile, because "they will have no memories" of the past (151). To forget a past of choices is to be enchained in the present, a process Gayle Greene defines as "the amnesia imposed by women's roles". However, Offred hoards her past memories through those night episodes. The Handmaid's most specialist narration comes in the series of chapter entitled nights, in which she seems freed from the restraint of chronology, place and narrative order. As Offred says: "The night is my time out. Where I should go?" (47). In fact, those night scenes offer Offred a safe, sub ground space, where she buries herself as much in memory and fantasy as possible. During one of those nights, Offred recalls having had a real name, her original identity, which seems to embody her individuality and physical presence:

My name isn't Offred. I have another name, which nobody uses now, because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day. I think of this name as buried. The name has an aura around it, like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant part.



I lie in my single bed at night, with my eyes closed, and the name floats there behind my eyes, not quite within reach, shining in the dark.

(94)

Besides, she pursues her personal history into the "distant past" from her memories (94). She remembers her prickly relationship with her passionate feminist mother, her marriage to Luke, the birth of their daughter, and her tendency to take "too much for granted; I trusted fate, back then" (104). Her memories are taken as materials from which Offred can compose her story, and thus she presents her identity and her existence. It is true that memory may prevent women from being pushed back to the edges, losing her idiolect; further, being silent in the society.

Atwood's novel offers the final chapter *Historical Notes* as a facsimile of "a partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth symposium on a Gileaden studies, held as a partial of the International Historical Association convention" in 2195 (311). From the final section, the tale has been appropriated by the male scholars through transcribing and editing it, they order the narrative, and affix titles to the various sections, and to the work as a whole. The main speaker, Pieixoto admits that "the arrangements are based on some guesswork" and he arranges Offred's "blocks of speech" in a Plausible order (314). However, the reconstructed version of the story now carries authority, since the male scholars have written and arranged it. The translation of thirty unnumbered cassette tapes into a written tale consisting of fifteen titled sections and forty-six chapters serves as evidence of the male scholar's manipulation of the oral story.

As Linda Kauffman claims, "in Gilead, as in all previous periods of history, women's histories are repressed; Gilead is merely one of the patriarchal regimes to suppress their voices by prohibiting them from reading, writing, or speaking"

(Kauffman, 227). In Gilead, women are deprived of the tools with which to document their history. In the text, through storytelling, Offred attempts to reconstruct "her story" and thus challenges Gilead's location of authority in a male logocentric world ironically; Pieixoto speech manipulates and effaces Offred's history.

Overall "the novel includes two competing, gendered narratives (narrative authority coded as masculine, silence as feminine which clash in power struggle within the fictional space: a masculine spoken or written discourse) and a feminine, autobiographical text" (Mahoney, 29). Pieixoto devalues Offred's oral tale by questioning its importance or relevance's as a historical document. For instance, the professor blames the narrator for not providing efficient details about the Gileaden period, because she spends too much time only on her own life story:

Many gaps remain. Some of them could have be filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the working of the Gileaden emprise had she had the instinct of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from water fords (a high-ranking commander) private computer? (322)

The professor effectively downplays the states harsh sexual polities and its victimization of women as he indicates that Gilead should be studied objectively and that the task of scholars "is not to consure but to understand" (Michael, 166). However, Offred affirms her faith in her narrative only when she can posit an imaginary listener who will understand her story and recognizes her existence.

Finally, reading the Handmaid's tale, we are drawn into complicity with her in the illegal act of narrative: our reading validates her narrative and her subjectivity, yet, at the same time, all readings also distort and change her narrative, as we shall see.

The story moves by flashback, meditation and present-tense narration as the narrator pieces together what she remembers of her past life and knows of her present situation. Through her storytelling, she grows more politically aware and self-conscious. She resists the reduction of Gilead (her reduced circumstance) by small acts of narrating her tale and of self-assertion, by fantasies of becoming visible and by the act of narrating her tale and thereby constricting a self. Moreover, through her appropriation of language, Offred constitutes herself as a subject, and makes herself visible to the reader. The Handmaid's oral tale signifies the possibilities of recuperations women's voices.

#### IV. Conclusion

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, portrays the struggle of women in the patriarchal society – The Republic of Gilead. The female characters are oppressed and victimized by the patriarchal society. Finally challenging the state tyranny and social engineering, the female characters resist against the domination and oppression.

Offred's clarification and the alternative ending of the novel demonstrate active forms of resistance portrayed as the expected response to oppression. Offred appears to comply with her new role in Gilead, she is always resisting the regime's ideologies in small way at first and then later, more blatantly, for example her secret love affair with Nick, playing Scrabble game with Commander, reading books from Commander's private library and recording her own story in audiotape.

The novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, not only reflects a male dominated social system in which women are controlled and oppressed but also shows the active form of rebellion against the system. All the female characters attempt to rebel the society such as Moira's attempt to escape from the Red center and connection with the Underground Female road-a group of safe houses used to smuggle people out of Republic, identification of women by their real name in Red Centre.

*The Handmaid's Tale* obviously portrays the power struggle between the sexes and women's sacrifice of their selfhood. In the novel, women break their silence to resist in searching their own complete self-back and reconstructing women's histories of repression. Cixous theme of writing by the voice may respond to Atwood's point that women should take action to resist their oppression, thus to restore their bodies and selves for their own survival in the novel.

Offred resist the reduction of Gilead by small acts of self-assertion by fantasies of becoming strikingly visible and by the acts of her tale and thereby

constructing a self. Offred's storytelling violates the rules of Gilead for handmaids are supposed to be not only speechless but invisible as well. Through her appropriation of language, Offred constitutes herself as a subject and makes herself visible. The act of storytelling itself is a gesture of hope of love of reaching for connection with other.

Offred may or may not be a freedom fighter out on the front line but she finds ways of thumbing her nose at the regime. She feels a sense of victory and even a perverse sense of pleasure in breaking the rules without knowing others. It gives her a sense of power. She may be scared but it's these small burst of resistance that builds up Offred's courage.

Through narrating her story, Offred demonstrates her resistance and subversion, to break the silence imposed by the regime, further to establish women's history. Her oral tale becomes her hope and a means of her survival. Through her storytelling, she grows more politically aware and self-conscious. She resists the reduction of Gilead by small acts of narrating her tale and of self-assertion, by fantasies of becoming visible and by the act of narrating her tale and thereby constricting a self.

Finally, Offred silently resist against the male dominated society. She disobeys the rules that was imposed by the Gilead, such as meeting with her lover, playing scrabble, visiting the secret female road, recording the past events as well reading and writing, where these things were forbidden to the handmaids in the Republic of Gilead. She does not directly rebel the society but indirectly resist the society. Offred is always driven by a thirst for freedom of love and be loved at last, she won. Her survivaliance in the Republic of Gilead is one of the resistances.

The handmaids have little choice regarding their role in Gilead; they are not just "passive dupes" but resist the regime in their own. Thus, the study has looked at *the Handmaids Tale* as a resistance of female character in which all female character are oppressed by the patriarchal society, the Republic of Gilead.

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