Chapter V

Search for a Vision of Life in

The Handmaid’s Tale
In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Atwood wants to show how power operates. The novel is about power and the society created by her is an exposure of power politics at its worst: “who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it.”(169) It is a society where every body knows the rules “Rules that were never spelled out.” (30) The novel is a dystopia and according to Eric Fromm:

The irrationality and futility of the First World War, the failure of the socialist Utopia, the insanity of the Second World War and use of nuclear weapons seem to confirm the ideas of Sigmund Freud about the brutality and irrationality in each one of us. The realization that the mind of man is the most dangerous weapon on earth has resulted in the emergence of negative Utopias, also called dystopia.¹

The novel projects a critique of brutalisation and Atwood is concerned with dismantling the system of society that oppress feelings and emotions of human beings. In an interview before the appearance of the *Hand Maids Tale* Atwood said:

The political to me is a part of life, “it’s a part of every bodies life” what the writer means by political here is “how people relate to a power structure and vice versa and this is really all we mean by it we may mean also some idea of participating in the structure or changing it. But the first

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thing we mean is how this individual in society is? How do the forces of society interact with this person?\(^2\)

The novel depicts deprivation of basic human rights as Howells says “Atwood’s feminist concerns are plain here, but so are her concerns for basic human rights.”\(^3\)

The confinement called Gilead is named after the Biblical land where Jacob went into the hand maid Billah because his wife Rachel was infertile. The commanders regard themselves as later day Jacobs and use a section of women who are called Handmaids in the similar manner in this Gilead. The *Bible* is used by this regime as authority for their laws. The polygamy of the old Testaments provides them with the sanction of Hand Maid. In this way the republic of Gilead justifies its “sexist policies with the socio-biological theory of natural polygamy and legitimizes its racist and sexist policies as having Biblical precedent.”\(^4\) The churches in Gilead are converted into museums with pictures of “stiff-backed, unsmiling, puritanical men and women and *Bible* is kept under lock” (108) and no one reads them “there were *Bibles* in the dresser drawers, put there by some charitable society, though… no one read them.” (63)

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The only ones to say prayers in Gilead are the soulless soul scroll machines which say prayers while printing them. The citizens of Gilead who allude to God like commanders, Aunts and others are hollow men and women as spiritually arid as T.S. Eliot’s Waste Landers. The Regime justifies its sexist policies with the socio-biological theory of natural polygamy which helps them to legitimize its racist and sexist policies by having biblical precedent. Atwood remarks:

A new regime would never say, “we are socialists, we are fascist” they would say they were serving God… you can develop any set of belief by using the Bible.  

Atwood believes that “greed is a fairly limited emotion but people’s spiritual dedication can take them anywhere.”

In Republic of Gilead the Biblical injunctions are required to be recited by the Hand Maids which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness. Biblical and Marxist teachings are blended and distorted in an effort to brain wash the Hand Maid’s. All seems in Gilead like a big masquerade, a pageant, a performance and every one in this society is constantly, “on show”— the ‘soul scrolls’ epitomizes all of Gilead hollow empty vessels. The so-called soul scrolls or Holy rollers print out prayers

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as they say them, they are kept in stores with shatter proof glass which no one ever enters. People phone to order prayers and pay via their credit cards. Their prayers are not of any use, as they are not spoken by anyone who could give them meaning, and no one listens to them. The printed paper gets shredded up and recycled immediately after the print. It is merely the fact of ordering them that counts because it shows loyalty to the system and can help promotion.

As a theocratic nation Gilead engages in battles with other groups, like Baptists, who are perceived as different and thus are threatening to the ideological and geographic security of the state’s identity. Gilead’s military activities do not only take place at the edges of the state, but also within it. The front lines at the edges of the state “are not lives, really the war seems to be going on in many places at once.” (101) The protagonist is at the centre of Gilead in the sense that she is at the heart of its political and ideological power-base, but it also has internal edges. Gilead specialises its division of the population into favoured and oppressed groups, moving black people, “the children of Ham” into “National Homelands” deporting Jews from the nation, and moving homosexuals and infertile women to “the colonies” as slave labour. In Gilead there are multiple displacements the Gilead’s regime displaces the story out of its Biblical time and context, using it as a justification for pragmatic and
repressive social practices, which displace the family structures inherited from the past by its citizens. The only space within Gilead in which gender is unmarked is the colonies, where politically undesirable people are exiled to work on the land or in toxic waste zones. Given a choice, however, the characters of the novel prefer not to go to colonies, because even in these colonies gender is used to determine status, men are apparently forced to wear dresses, depriving them even of the ideological superiority over women which are given by Gilead to males. In Gilead personal identity is determined by functions especially gender functions. Within the borders of Gilead, in the colonies, un-women and other undesirables are forced to carryout functions which are not gender-differentiated. In other words, the life in Gilead is without any purpose or direction, a life without coherence. In this society facts and events remain as disparate items and do not connect to make a whole. In general a ‘minimalist’ life prevails for the Hand Maids: “I pick the egg out of the cup and finger it for a moment. It’s warm, women used to carry such eggs between their breasts, to incubate them… The minimalist pleasure is an egg.”(137)

Atwood has created horrifying bleak and disoriented psychic and moral world of Gilead to made readers experience how this dystopia can be considered as a code for the colonized and enslaved state. The
characters created in this novel are more terrifying and alienated than that of other female characters created by Atwood. The protagonist compares her life to that of pigs cooped up in Pens, rolling coloured balls around in order “to have something to think about… I wish I had a pig ball.” (86) According to Margaret Atwood:

> The most lethal weapon in the world’s arsenals is not the neutron bomb or chemical warfare, but the human mind.

In Gilead, personal identity is determined by functions and especially gender functions. To be a person is to inhabit one of the functions and the differences between people are given hierarchical depending upon their function in the society. Male infertility in Gilead is unthinkable as the protagonist says: “there are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law.” (75) In this society women are divided into groups: a group of women who are recruited for ‘breeding purposes’ are called “Hand Maids” and these hand maids, are according to Rigney, “personification of a religious sacrifice, temple prostitutes doomed to a kind of Purdah in perpetuity.”

> These Hand Maids are not allowed to knit, smoke, read, write, listen to music or go for walk.(85) They are in total social isolation, women with viable ovaries. Mario Klarer rightly states:

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In Gilead, being women means to become pre-literate and to follow the
pre-scriptions of men.  

The women who can conceive and bear children are being educated in
“Rachel and Leah centres,” where they are taught to become self denying.
If these Hand Maids do not succeed by the end of two years, they are
declared as un-women and are shipped off to the colonies.

The novel, therefore, depicts the separation of women into rigid,
subservient gender roles and deprivation of basic Human rights. Carole
Pateman argues that the notion of “ownership” of one’s body can lead to
a variety of “social relations of subordination” including prostitution and
surrogate motherhood. Accordingly, the Hand Maid is de-sexed and
dehumanized by Gilead’s oppressive ideology of contract and property.
Amin Malak aptly states that:

the dictates of state policy in Gilead thus relegates sex to a saleable
commodity exchange for mere minimal survival.

The Dress, the behaviour, the language, the aim in life all is exactly the
same for hand maids because it is prescribed. All of them are like frozen
appearances: “like Dutch milkmaids on a wallpaper frieze, like a shakers,

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9 Mario Klarer, “Orality and literacy as Gender-supporting structures in Margaret
Atwood’s The Hand Maid’s Tale” Mosaic (SPI, “Media Matters: Technologies of


11 Amin Malak, “Margaret Atwood and the Dystopian Tradition”, Canadian Literature
112 (Spring, 1987). p. 9.
like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation”.(128) The predicament of Hand maid illustrates Simon de Beavoir’s assertion about man’s marginalization of women.

For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute — she is the other.12

This view corroborates Michel Foucault’s observation about the “power-sex”13 correlative. According to this observation, the regime assigns roles of Hand Maids and decrees after social, religious and cosmic concepts convenient to the interests and desires of ruling elite.

The Hand Maids are not permitted to own property, receive education or form friendships; they are reduced to the status of slaves by simple tactic of declaring all second marriages and non-marital liaisons adulterous. The very first step of the new regime of Gilead had been to freeze women’s credit cards and bank accounts and take away their jobs and property rights, thus destroying the financial independence of these women which is a primary requisite in any true liberation of women.

deliberate and systematic attempt is made to obliterate all sense of individuality and identity in women, by taking away their names from them: the Hand Maids have lost their original individuating name; their name indicates merely the male to whom she is assigned. This destruction of the individual name is part of the attempt to destroy the past and force women to live in their present moment alone.

Another group of women in Gilead are the “wives of commanders of the faith”, as they are so-called. They act as social secretaries and functionaries to their husbands during the ‘insemination’ known as ‘Ceremony’ and are in charge of household discipline and deciding what T.V programmes the members of the household should be shown. “Marthas” are domestic slaves who cook and clean; and “appear to resonate the most simple-minded Christian belief in the righteousness of the existing hierarchy.”14 The “Aunts” are the police women in Gilead, who train the Hand Maids. The regime through these ‘Aunts’ is trying to control what goes into the heads of the Hand Maids, they are instructed by these Aunts to “Create a poverty of spirit”. The “Econowives” are wives of poor men, they perform diverse roles and are women who live normal life but are from lower ranking families. In short, the segregation

of women in groups is done in Gilead according to their functions which promote their fragmentation.

Republic of Gilead offers its own state sponsored brand of “sex prostitutes” called the “Jezebels” whose sole function is to entertain men. This system of prostitution in Gilead is justified as being dictated to by Nature.(298) The cruellest of the labels or names given to women are those of “un-womens” and “un-babies” denoting that these persons have no worth left whatsoever, no worth for society and thus no worth in society. Women who are declared un-women are shipped off to the colonies they are rebels, feminists, intellectuals and infertile Hand Maids or women who on the ground of some accusation or other undesirables are send to colonies to clean up toxic waste or to do other hard labour. These women are forced to carry out functions which are not gender-differentiated till they die. Thus Gilead’s systems of functional differentiation by gender is enforced by the threat of being declared engendered and send to the unmarked colony territories. The threat of this ‘internalized outside’ this ‘incorporated otherness’ guarantees the stability of the regime’s logic of disorientation and has nothing to do with the reality proceeding from biology or behaviour. Even for men there are catagories in Republic of Gilead called by such names as “Commanders of faith,” “Eyes,” “spies”, “security” and “Angels” There is also another
named group of men, the poor and powerless ones who have no name probably because they are of no significance to the state.

To make a person publically known and to reveal what he is valued for, the people of the place have their specific dress code, this device is stronger for women than for men. All men wear more or less the same uniforms of dark colours like black, grey or green and the differences between their functions are rather expressed in “accessories” like crests, guns, brief cases etc than in uniforms as such. The difference between the classes of women is evident through a distinction in colours that hurt our eyes. Aunts in Gilead are clad in Paramilitary brown uniforms, with these Khaki uniforms “cattle Prods slug on throngs from their leather belts.”(4) Marthas wear robes of dull green— since green is a colour of hope, colour of nature, nurture, growing things—for being occupied with kitchen and caring for food. The colour of ‘wives’ is blue, resembling those of virgins, colour of spirituality and things which are not bound to earth. Similarly, the colour of sky cold and distant because these commander’s wives are detached cold and unapproachable. Un-women are dressed in grey signifying non-descript shade of death to some. The econowives wear red, blue and green striped skimpy robes: thus they wear three colours of the function that they unite. Women at jezebels are dressed in feathers and sequins. Hand Maids are to wear Red dress, Red
colour of intense warning and, as Atwood argues in her poem “The Red Shirt” the colour red is highly significant:

  young girls should not wear red
  in some countries it is the colour
  of death; in others passion,
  in others war, in other anger,
  in others the sacrifice
  of shed blood…

  Dancing red shoes will kill you.\(^{15}\)

In historical notes narrator says we assume red might have been a “borrowing from the uniforms of German prisoners of war in Canadian “P.O.W.” campus of the second world war era.”\(^{(382)}\) This coincides with L. York’s view that:

  the uniforms are … merely variations of the pre-Gilead part…. Rather than heralding the advent of a new regime, uniforms more often drag us back into the night mares of history from which we are trying to awake.\(^{16}\)

Thus we can say in Gilead “a whole society — a society which one day took off its old clothing of individuality and diversity and assumed the uniformity of a theological dictatorship.”\(^{17}\)

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The authority of the totalitarian regime is dependent upon the enforcement of internal borders, as a result of which the freedom of movement within the space of the nation is replaced by restricted movements allotted to particular groups for particular activities. In other words, ‘freedom to move’ and ‘constrains on movement’ are a part of a system of control, which expresses social hierarchies. It is apparently evident in the road blocks and divisions between the districts of the city which the protagonist encounters. She exists in a compound patrolled by guards and swept by search lights and the social limits imposed on her as physically represented by these spatial limits. She describes the restrictions in terms of laboratory experiments: “A rat in a maze is free to go anywhere as long as it stays inside the maze.” (206) Her dehumanization and subjection before the states control are experienced as spatial confinement and disorientation. Jonathan Bignell believes that:

The identity of Gilead, physically, and ideologically depends on the colonization of physical space and the subjection of the physical body, where the status control of the body and of space are metaphors for each other.  


Language is yet another a strong device for individual to express self, and it is through language that an individual inspires and invokes thoughts and feelings. Even the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage; they want to control the structure of language. In her lecture “An End to Audience” delivered in 1980 Atwood articulates thoughts which become central issue of the novel, *The Hand Maid’s Tale*:

In any totalitarian take over, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers and journalists are the first to be suppressed… the aim of all such suppression is to silence the voice, abolish the word, so that the only voices and word left are those of the one in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that’s why so much trouble is taken to silence it.\(^{19}\)

The ruling class knows that language is a device of power as “Powerlessness and silence go together.”\(^{20}\) The only communication among each other consists of phrases which are preset by the regime and accepted by the people. Gileadean women are forbidden to read and write: they have banished reading and writing as only the ruling class have access to books. Klarer believes:

Women from all classes of society… are excluded from any kind of written discourse. These measures aim at giving the male leadership all the

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\(^{19}\) Margaret Atwood, *Second Words*. p. 350.  
\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 396.
advantages of a highly developed text-processing culture and of using these advantages purposefully against the women who are condemned to orality.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus words are forbidden in a society so that the thinking too is controlled by the state. The principle used in Gilead is that “the best and the most cost effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes were through women themselves.” (383)

The inscriptions on stores and public institutions are removed and replaced by pictographs. The shops are identified by pictures rather than names. As Klarer argues, it is virtually a:

form of enslavement, the men of Gilead use pictographs and visual signs as a means of documenting their claims to ownership and power.\textsuperscript{22}

A Hand Maid can go to shopping with the neighbouring hand maid and can buy those things for which she has been given tokens because “even conversation is treasonous stock phrases and rituals of greeting are permitted, but discussion is punishable offence.”\textsuperscript{23} Barbara Hill Rigney believes:


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. p.137.

By remaining uninvolved, by maintaining innocence, the people of a nation have forfeited human rights and become slaves in the near future society of Gilead… Big Brother… is not simply an embodiment of patriarchy, nor of God, but rather of ideology, in general; Gilead has permitted itself to be poisoned with radio activity and with a far more precisions entity: fanaticism that is political, religious and moral.  

The novel is built from the extra-potations of current attitudes, trends and events. Atwood did not want to write a piece of fantastical literature and:

made a rule to myself that I would put nothing in the book that hasn’t already been done in some form or another that isn’t already happening now or for which we do not have the technology.

Before writing The Hand Maid’s Tale she kept clipping file of Newspapers and Magazines which include reports of atrocities in Iran, Philippines and Latin America. David Coward believes:

The Republic of Gilead exists at the same period as the regime of Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini an old man in poor health, when the Hand Maid’s Tale first appeared.

In these clippings is found information regarding new reproductive technologies, surrogate motherhood and forms of institutionalized birth control from Nazi Germany to Ceausescu’s Romania. Accordingly, the

Hand Maids in the novel are shown to undergo pregnancy tests every month like women in Romania under Ceausescu where all forms of birth control had been abolished. Romanian women were forced into pregnancy tests every month and their wages were likewise linked to fertility. Similarly, the women in Gilead dress the way women do in fundamentalist societies like Iran and are forced to carry passes like the blacks in South Africa. Sharon Rose Wilson is therefore very right in arguing:

The book implicitly satirizes aspects of Islam, Puritanism, Mormonism and Christianity, particularly the contemporary fundamentalism represented by Pat Robert Son.²⁷

The clippings file had a lot of material on ‘New Right’ which warns about the Birth Death and anti-feminism. Coral Ann believes that:

by coincidence one of the best-known New Right studies is the collection of seminar papers. The New Right at Harvard, edited by Howard Phillips which includes papers on family issues, abortion and pornography. These refer to the desirability of building a coalition, ‘a small dedicated corps’ to ‘resist the liberal democracy with its libertarian positions’ so that the

militaristic rhetoric of Gilead could already be heard at Harvard three years before the Hand Maid’s Tale was published.\textsuperscript{28}

In Gilead, Executions are termed as ‘Salvagings’ which is the Philippine expression for state sponsored murders and the place where the Hand Maids are trained is termed as re-education centre which is from the Cambodian and Vietnam take over. Even the name Hand Maid refers to a catholic sect in New Jersey. Racial, intolerance of the kind demonstrated by Neo-Nazi groups in Germany and the imperialists in the African countries is an ugly fact of our so-called democratic age. Coral Ann Howells believes:

Gilead is a totalitarian regime running on patriarchal lines derived from the Old Testament and Seventeenth-century American Puritanism plus a strong infusion of the American New Right ideology of the 1980’s. Individual freedom of choice has been out-lawed and everyone has been drafted into the service of the state, classified according to prescribed roles.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} Coral Ann Howells, Modern Novelists: Margaret Atwood. p. 130
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
The republic of Gilead, therefore, is “a world both bizarre and chillingly possible” for the dystopia is firmly rooted in the reality of the twentieth century.30

The novel, The Hand Maid’s Tale is a horrifying “criticism of life” and also of moral values which societies have lost, mechanization of life and it is too complex a novel to be viewed literally as pertaining only to United States of American or to any other country.31 Repressive Governments, like the republic of Gilead come into being with the sudden upsurge of what Jungian psychologists call the “collective shadow”32 Such an upsurge can occur anywhere in the world at any time because evil is inherent in all human beings. Hence Karen F. Slein is right in pointing out that:

A complex and many layered political satire, the novel [Handmaid’s Tale] joins a long tradition of dystopian fictions that point out dangerous tendencies in hopes that readers will act to forestall the outcomes they depict.33

32  The term “Collective Shadow” refers to the dark often evil side of human being which lies in the collective unconscious. The collective shadow corresponds to a negative expression of the ‘old wise man’ archetype.
33  Karan F. Stein, Margaret Atwood Revisited. p. 78.
Margaret didn’t want to write a piece of fantastical literature in which alien from Mars appear, but “just wanted to show the effect of these kinds of ideas on an ordinary person who actually acted out.” Atwood’s concerns are wide ranging, she has shown historical and humanitarian interests in this novel.

In the republic of Gilead the Tyranny is stifling to both the oppressors and the oppressed; and even the ‘commanders of the faith’ known to be the law makers of Gilead, are pathetically human. We are even told that Hand Maids have learned to develop their own devices to circumvent the restrictions inflicted upon them by the Gileadean society. They by-pass rules of their regime and developed a whispering voice. When they face danger of being caught, they exchange information between each other in “clipped whispers.”(252) They have developed a sort of secret language between each other. The wife of Commander Serena joy falls into whispers and unknowingly adopts the voice of Hand Maids which is low and conspiratorial: “odd to hear her whispering, as if she is one of us. Usually wives do not lower their voices.” (326) Her whisper is a sign of disobedience and conspiracy. For Hand Maids there is something powerful in the whispering of obscenities about those in

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34 Coomi. S. Vevaina, “Daring to be Human: A conversation with Margaret Atwood”, Margaret Atwood the shape shifter. New Delhi: Creative Books, p. 152.
There’s something delightful about it, something naughty, secretive, forbidden and thrilling. Gilead has been aptly described as a document written over a previous inscribed page, rendering the writing underneath invisible or hard to read.

The protagonist records an epoch in which Gilead’s rewriting over the pages of the U.S is still incomplete. The time is set in-between what is still a temporal border region between the wholeness and self-sufficiency of Gilead’s identity and the U.S states which is erasing and rewriting differently. The half readable marks of the previous order are there: the elite’s sexual desire for the past are contained in the guarded space of jezebels, the Aunts indoctrinate the Hand Maid’s into the belief that because of its sanctioning of sexual desires, the U.S had allowed freedom to commit crimes against reproduction and to exploit women as sexual commodities, whereas Gilead offers a freedom which denies desire and which is enforced by terror and patrolled by secret police. Gilead constructs an ideological territory but inside it the desire for the past is allowed expression with in a particular internal and protected space.

The novel is also concerned with psychological exploration of an intensely traumatized protagonist who directly faces the social reality of
Gilead. Atwood reveals her acute psychological insights as well as her humanistic concerns while exploring her protagonist’s psychic limitations and strengths. She has created intensely self-enclosed world and explored the nature of the individual’s relationship with the world, the predicament of the essentially solitary individual who has to live within the society for survival. Offred who was a well educated, complacent and a political person with a male partner Luke and loving daughter, a house, a cat, a lesbian friend Moira, a feminist mother and a name of her own has suddenly lost control over many aspects of her life, including her own self. She is completely the ‘other’ because the regime regards women as things and name is the only component that makes a person unique but with the loss of name, Offred has lost her identity also. She has been labelled according to the name of her commander, a tag that she wears to signify that she is handmaid of Fred. The name “Offred” is composed of the preposition ‘of’ indicating possession and the name of her commander. It is Gileadean variation of the contemporary patronymic “Mrs. Fred.”  

She tries to believe that name “name is like a telephone numbers, useful only to other.” (104) According to her “My name isn’t

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Offred I have another name, which nobody uses now because it is forbidden” (104) Bignell believes:

The same social space had been occupied in the past by at least one other Hand Maid who would also have been named offered. Offred is the name of a position, in Gilead’s social territory, a legal, social and political position.36

Thus ‘names’ of “Handmaid’s” have no value because a change of Hand Maid in the house implies no change of names because their names are constructed in relation to the commander’s names. Jessie Givner says

Indeed, the desire of Gilead regime to remove name is as strong as the desire to remove faces, just as the rulers of Gilead try to eliminate mirrors, reflections of faces, so they attempt to erase names.37

The state cancels the original names of Hand Maids to erase her former identity which is metaphoric of due silencing of women by the state that has given them two names:

The destruction of the individual name is part of the attempt to destroy the past and force women to live in the present moment alone.38

37 Jessie Givni “Name and signature in Margaret Atwood’s cats eye and the Hand maids Tale” Canadian literature 133 (Summer, 1992). p. 58.
Sharon Rose Wilson believes:

Reflecting the bizarre custom… not confined to Gilead… of giving a women the name of the man who “commands” her, Off red’s name also suggests “off-red” as a secret rebel, the “of-fred” in a blood sacrifice and, especially, the “red” figure who goes “off” the path to immerse herself in nature.39

Offred’s mind is trained to think of herself only in connection with her womb because she is defined solely through her body and her functioning ovary. Offred is “the fate of women in Gilead who are seen and used as mere means of procreation.”40 as she herself says: “we are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important.” (119) Sharon Rose Wilson believes:

Offred…… has been captured, violated and debased. Despite her patriarchal society’s ironic “worship” of the fertility… she is forced to be “the eternal fucking machine” rather than being honored as the bearer of life.41

Actually, in Gilead Hand Maid’s are reduced to incubators which mirror the theory by Aristotle that “the female provided only matter, while the

41 Sharon Ross. Wilson, Margaret Atwood’s Fairy Tale Sexual Politics. p. 281.
active principle was attributed to the male semen.”42 They call it very tactfully and cunningly, “Ceremony”.

Since appearances are unimportant, Offred is not given face cream or Hand lotion and she resorts to the use of butter stolen from her food tray as a substitute. The commander who does his duty, ‘ceremony’ as they call it by attempting to impregnate her once a month is not supposed to be concerned with her appearances. Offred only has to act as surrogate wife and is treated as “unintelligent matter in reproduction process which is, like everything else in this dystopia dominated by men.”43 She regards herself as a failure when her function is not fulfilled: she has already failed at two previous postings and is obsessed with the need to conceive at her third posting. She experiences anguished disappointment at the outset of menstruation because of her failure to conceive: “It’s up to me to repay the team, justify my food and keep, like a queen ant with eggs.”(169)

Even the basic freedom to bathe and eat is regulated by others. Around the copulation time, on the night before ceremony, she is given a bath by Martha for which she feels dehumanized: “I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig.” (85) Every month Offred is forced into

pregnancy tests and is fed only what authorities regard as healthy food: the food she eats is not chosen by her but brought to her in a tray by household Martha. Offred forces the blend and unappetizing food down her gullet as she cannot afford to fall ill with out running the risk of being declared unfit to bear a child and shipped off to colonies. As Emma parker says: “One of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food” and Sarah Seats believes that restriction on diet:

is in keeping with the puritan ethos, a restricted diet, though restrictions have as much to do with the power of restricters as absolute health considerations for potential mothers.

Offred imagines herself existing in a state of suspended animation like the women in the nineteenth Century paintings depicting Harems. (85) Her soul-killing boredom of dead routine is brought out in the delicately elegiac lives; she would rather do anything they want her to do than nothing at all. David Cowart believes:

Hand Maid echoes the damned Mephistopheles in Marlow’s Dr. Faustus “this is the time, nor am I out of it”… the substitute of “time” for hell reminds one that hell is timeless.

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44 Emma Parker, “You are what you eat: The politics of eating in the novels of Margaret Atwood”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (Fall, 1995). p. 354.
Offred is fully aware of the oppression she is facing in the society which denys her individuality, nurturance and autonomy. Her life turns into a painfully prolonged prison term: A rat in a maze is free to go any where as long as it stays inside the maze.” (206) As a part of their Re-education in submission, Offred and other hand Maids are made to watch old Pornographic films of the seventies and Eighties in which women appear in various forms of submission, brutalization and grotesque mutilation. In order to keep their obedience to the regime, they are required to recite the Biblical inunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness and an effort to brain wash the Hand Maids.(146) As Patria Goldbatt said:

Every step, every mouthful of food, every move is observed, reported, circumvented or approved for the sake of the child she might carry to term. Her only worth resides in her biological function. Her dreams and desires are unimportant. Her goal is survival. 47

Offred is confined to an enslaved state, like a prisoner in solitary upstairs room in attic and no companion or friend is allowed to meet her. Her room is a bare nun’s cell with a chair, a table, a lamp, a framed picture without the glass, a single window that can open only partially and a

narrow-bed: “Nothing takes place in the bed but sleep, or no sleep.” (8) Her life in Gilead is like the empty room where Offred sits in and the room becomes a symbol of her empty inner self: “I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does.” (104) Her career is turned into a life without coherence, where facts and events remain as disparate items and do not connect to make a whole. All that this society has given her is that she has been left in “fragments, like a body caught in cross fire or pulled apart by force.” (333) Her life is one without purpose or direction and she compares her life to that of pigs cooped up in pens, rolling coloured balls around in order “to have something to think about… ” (86) Offred expresses herself in metaphors, which reflect the deeper feeling of hers — that her state of being is that of an “animalistic, victimized, unprivileged being having nothing to keep them busy with.” (85) Offred craves to get out of her reality and, like other women in Gilead, considers suicide as an attempt to escape from intolerable oppression; her predecessor had hanged herself from the light fixture. (168) However, Offred is aware of the fact that she neither has any control over her life nor is she free to die. Gileadean administration has taken preventive measures to block this particular escape-route. The sparsely furnished waiting-cum-bed room in which she lives does not offer an opportunity for committing suicide in their rooms: “They have
removed anything you could tie a rope to.”(7) In the bathroom razors are removed, framed pictures have no glass, no chandeliers and the window pane-glass is shatter proof so that there is no “cutting-edge.” At times she decides to end up her life by hanging: “I could noose the bedsheet round my neck, hook in the closet… throw my weight forward, choke myself off.”(364) but she considers suicide, a timid action.

The cushion on which word “FAITH” is embroidered is an image that reveals Offred’s profound faith in her life as woman. She knows and declares that battle against society takes place in mind and what she needs is not just physical survival but mental and psychic survival as well. She has the power to rethink her thoughts and create a new reality for herself and the sense of hope. Besides, she has the power to refuse things: “the difference between resistance and submission is also in her mind”.(130)

In other words, the novel does not advocate renunciation to transcend the problematic nature of existence, but considers facing the challenges of life positively as the best way of surviving in the world. According to Atwood, living in society and maintaining one’s individual identity is a challenging task through which an individual reveals his potential. Offred realizes the availability of the limited perspective in the society in which she lives and commits herself positively to changed perceptions, accepting the multidimensional nature of existence and
capability of integrating herself with the main stream of society in which she founds herself. She manages to reclaim her lost identity by resistance through language. Atwood focuses on possibilities for constructing a forum of discourse in which to accommodate women’s representations of their own gendered identity while still acknowledging the power of the male space within their society which they cannot avoid operating. Offred’s treasonable act of speaking out in a society where women are forbidden to read, write or speak freely is very important in this context: “Words are forbidden in a society governed by Biblical words.”

It is believed by some critics that woman’s experiences is something that cannot be put into words and therefore cannot be represented. According to Mary Jacobus, a compromise between using the existing language to represent our female identity and completely abandoning it, would be either to accept “the dominant discourse as a neutral tool” or to “invent a separate language outside our present discourse in order for women to be heard, even to exist.” Offred develops her own devices to circumvent the restrictions inflicted upon her. Like other Hand Maids, she sets-up her own code, a secret language.

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Despite being constantly warned against the evils of talking and advantages of silence, Offred joins other Hand Maids to communicate in different ways and defy the vigilant Aunts. Hand Maid’s develop a power of whispering voice and when the danger of being caught seems reasonable, they exchange information between each other in “clipped whispers, projected through the funnels of our white wings, it’s more like a telegram, a verbal semaphore. Amputated speech.”(252)

The whispering voice of the Hand Maid’s becomes a sign of disobedience and conspiracy against the patriarchal society of Gilead. Offred learns to weigh every word that she speaks so that it could not be interpreted as in subordination and could subsequently lead to her death. In Gileadean society, we are told every word carried meaning so it is important to get it right for inner and outer survival. By knowing and contrasting different cultural relativities, in language in particular Offred gains insight into her cultural surroundings, increasing thereby knowledge and power. Offered uses all these methods in order to survive in Gilead. Coral Ann Howells very rightly states that Offred speaks out “with the voice of late twentieth Century feminist individualism, resisting the cultural identity imposed on her.”

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Offred realizes the centrality of language to the process of self-realization and the struggle for equality or what Carol Beran calls “Offred’s Power is in language.” She realizes that the survival in her society is possible only through communication with the outer world that is denied to her: “If only we could talk to them, something could be exchanged.” Though writing and reading is prohibited to Offred, one of the major resistances to the regime offered by Offred is writing on the interior of her wardrobe, which the handmaid before her had scratched.

The Gilead’s prohibition against reading printed matter forces Offred to hunt out alternate reading material. She finds coded messages everywhere and explores the meaning of the embroidered words on cushions. She identifies herself with other women in her position and explores the possibility of using language a powerful weapon to wrench female space within the existing structure of Gilead. Thus Offred’s true power lies in her language that helps her to stay alive and same. Throughout the novel Offred has been very good at detecting underlying structures to things, and is constantly trying to read behind the lines as well as behind the people’s mind: “You do that first, in your head, and

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them you make it real. So that’s how they do it, I thought. I summed near to have known that before.”(241)

Offred keeps up a play fullness with language throughout searching for multiple meanings behind words, following them up to their roots and giving them new meanings. Offred says: “The commander is the head of the house hold. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow.”(99) She experiences the hollowness of the concept of family in Gilead by word association. Commander who has power over Offred seems to play with her mind she feels by playing with words when he says: “I have a little surprise for you”. On the night he takes her out she notices he sniggers which makes Offred aware the commander after uses word ‘little’ as ‘if’ he wishes to diminish things, myself included.(287) Verbal language is made impersonal to such an extent that one can give meaning to it: “let there be a reminder to us says Ofglen… I say nothing at first because I am trying to make out what she means.”(354) “Kiss him as if I meant it” (180) does not have any significance for commander as it did for her. She is the only one of the long line of Hand Maid’s who have been seduced with that invitation. She is an object for him that is to be read.
Offred plays language games by which Atwood ties to breathe new life into the existing patriarchal language: “I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean the mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is French word for flesh. None of these facts has connection with any other fact: “These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself.”(136) It helps her to give herself a valuable unity and a form. In other words, language, as W.F. Garrett-Petts suggests, “becomes both her refuge and a way to preserve sanity.”52 When talking about her husband Luke Offred imagines three possibilities — that “he is dead, he is captured and alive, that he has escaped as well.”(131) This pluralism in belief is reflected in the multiple layers of language perceived by Offred and this perception can be related to the feminist rejection of the either or binary opposition which typifies patriarchy. Offred even attacks Biblical language which she believes is a language of patriarchy, more subtly she refers to the bible as an “incendiary device” (108) because, like other weapons, it is available only to the ruling class men in Gilead. Offred attempts her own version of the lord’s prayers and finally concludes “I feel as if I am talking to a wall.”(244)

Offred accomplished her goals by taking the “old language and making new patterns with it,” thus attempting to establish the fact that there is no need for a new language. Offred brings and succeeds in bringing multiple meanings even into single words, in and otherwise foreboding context. She condemns the Gilead for “its intolerant prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human violation.”

The only word Offred is permitted to read is “FAITH. It’s the only thing they’ve given me to read.” (71) The word faith is embroidered on her cushion. Klarer says:

Women from all classes of society are excluded from any kind of written discourse. These measures aim at giving the male leadership all the advantages of a highly developed text processing culture and of using these advantages purposefully against the women who are condemned to Orality.

But Offred breaks all the barriers and her communicatory skill becomes multi-dimensional. She also realizes the power of “Pen” as she says “the

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54 Mario Klarer, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
pen between my fingers is conscious, alive almost I can feel its power.”(234) Vewaayen rightly says:

The strange wording “pen is Envy” reduces Friends infamous doctrine of Penis Envy to pen Envy, truncating castrating penis to pen, a subversion/resistance at the literary level which further removes the biologically sanctioned locus of power in Gilead to the realm of discursive construction to the erection of discursive practices. Biology need not be destiny because the scripts can be rewritten, voiced over.\(^5\)

Offred takes us on tour to Gilead by narrating her story, and thus recreates history as her story validates her own existence and gives her a sense of control over her life: “It’s a story I’m telling then I have control over the ending.” (50) Inside her prison-like state, Offred maintains, adopts, and develops her own voice which helps her to survive and make triumph over Gilead. The way she does it, however, is remarkable particularly considering the situation she is in. Offred succeeds in counter-acting Gilead’s victimization through linguistic playfulness and inventiveness. In order to gain the necessary completion of her story, through which she earns a reflection, a body and a self, she desperately needs a recipient, a mirror, or a receptor in order to be reassured of her own existence with all its value and depth: “But if it’s a story even in my

head, I must be telling it to some one.’” (50) While narrating her story she explicates her “full self” and explicitly “connects” sexuality and textuality” in her tale. Offred contrasts the freedom of women in the pre-Gilead life and oppression of women in her present Gilead life to highlight her stubborn survival in the midst of heartless people of a repressive and anarchic society. As Howells rightly argues, the art of story telling is the:

only possible gesture of resistance to imprisonment in silence, just as it becomes the primary means for her psychological survival. In the process of reconstructing herself into an individual, Offred becomes the most important historian of Gilead. Offred fights by breaking the imposed codes of silence. The very thing that is denied to Offred becomes for her freedom to speak up, speak out, be heard and becomes medium through which she defines herself. Offred, as Ver Waayen comments, “acts through the power of her words, through her memory and voice which resists the ideology of repression.”


58 Verwaaren, op. cit., p. 46.
breaking the imposed codes of silence she inscribes herself in history which is, according to Cixous:

an act that will be marked by women’s sizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering into entry history, which has always been based in suppression.\(^{59}\)

Atwood reminds frequently that the narrative is an Oral reconstruction by Offred, after the events, and as such can only be an approximation to reality and never the actual happenings, as is true of all narration and all history. Judieth Butler in her book *Body’s that Matter* discusses in detail the important link between gender and the body. The body, she argues, is given where as there would be no mind if there were no body. An individual is born with a body and consequently with a gender and “one who decides in its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided by gender.”\(^{60}\) Thus a person is gendered by his or her body and this biological categorization is based primarily on reproductive potential and in Gilead because of male domination they wield power over their bodies over their reproductive capacity. In a beijing declaration it was said: “The explicit recognition and reaffirmation of the right of all women to control all aspects of their

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health, in particular their own fertility is basic to their empowerment”\(^{61}\) but in Gilead Offred experiences the most severe corporeal violation of her bodily integrity. Her life in Gilead depends completely on her reproductive capacity; and she is persistently made conscious of the fact that if she fails to get pregnant a death will be her certain fate. She is confused about the ‘ceremony’ because only her body is involved and the absurdity of this situation makes her wish that she is “crazy and this is some new kind of therapy, I wish it were true; then I would get better and this would go away.”(116)

For offered narration is validating existence, and she tells her story to herself lying on her bed and later to another on tape so as to be able to claim therefore “I am”. Thus Atwood tells the tale with the sense of commitment to expose how dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies like republic of Gilead. She also suggests the ways and means to surmount the barriers to women’s individuality and autonomy. She articulates silence by carefully selecting symbolic and meaningful names of places, characters and coins new words to signify the ceremonies. Though the society of Gilead very meticulously schemes to deprive women of imagination, the power of communication and hope, the creative writer helps to articulate women’s

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silent discourse to decipher the coded language and liberate the imagination of women. The very fact of writing or recording is, for Atwood as well as for her heroines, the final and irrevocable commitment to one’s society and to one’s own humanity. As Atwood once said:

Far from thinking of writers as totally isolated individuals, I see them as inescapably connected with their society. The nature of the connection will vary… the writer may unconsciously reflect the society, he may consciously examine it and project ways of changing it, and the connection between the writer and society will increase in intensity as the society… becomes the subject of the writer.  

Society is indeed the subject of Atwood and she uses language a “revolutionary potential” as “subversive weapon” to raise her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal society and thus to demolish absolute authority of the Republic of Gilead. Thus Hand Maid is designed to illustrate how orality can be deliberately cultivated to question the authoritarian power structures. The subversive potential of her narration offers “the possibility of a multiply constructed subjectivity even for those of future generations.”

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63 Caminero-Santangelo, “Feminism/Postmoderism: Margaret Atwood’s fiction”, M. Prabhakar, The Hand Maids Tale: Language as Subversive-weapon. p. 95
Atwood gives women character the voice and, as Coral Ann says, “Offred’s voice doubles and multiplies to become the voices of women.” Although she warns her readers in an interview that “the reader should regard everything my heroine says as the utterance of a fictional character.” Atwood, through her female characters, offers some insight into the social and psychological position of women. For example in the final section which consists in the introduction to a seminar by a group of scientists, professor gives a talk on findings but lacks ability to decode Offred’s language. However, as Howells suggests, that Offred already has the reader’s support and sympathy and therefore “his story (meaning Professor Pieixoto’s story) does not succeed in undermining her story after all.” The fact that the professor makes no attempt to disclose Offred’s name is a sufficient proof to substantiate that he denies her identity and thus her ‘own’ voice.

Atwood places Offred in the throes of mental dilemma that permeates her inner and outer reality and she seeks ways, and means to comprehend the disillusioning and transcribing life in Gilead. Atwood’s delineation of Offred’s unhappiness and her implicit philosophical

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64 Coral Ann Howells Modern Novelist Margaret Atwood “science fiction in the feminine: The Hand Maid’s Tale”. p. 133
65 Caminero-Santagelo Feminism/Postmoderism: Margaret Atwood’s fiction. p. 95.
approach for counteracting this deep-seated despair shows Atwood’s affirmative vision and also an ‘ideal approach’ for tackling the inevitable vicissitudes of life. Offred explicates that challenges constitute the essential nature of existence and human life gains value in its ability to cope with these challenges. Many kinds of crises and conflict result from changes in identity, but these are potentially constructive transitions rather than destructive occurrences. If we fear or resist change, crises and conflict become destructive for us and others.\(^{67}\)

Commander’s intercourse with her is a “Journey into darkness that is composed of Women, a woman.” (109) Coral Ann believes female body is the Dark Continent… Cixous assets that the Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplicable and Offred answers that challenge using similar images of immense bodily territories volcanic upheavals.\(^{68}\) Offred is aware that she is nothing more in Gilead than a breeding machine serving the state though it is not rape: nothing is going on here that I haven’t signed up for.

Atwood, through Offred, attempts to show that the reciprocity between society and women’s position in society, as well as between women’s

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thought women’s body are also constricted by social boundaries. Ann-Janine Morey argues:

Atwood’s heroines, only one of whom is situated with in traditional religious boundaries, live in a problematic and destructive relationship to their bodies.\footnote{Ann-Janine Morey, \textit{Religion and Sexuality in American Literature}. New York: Cambridge University, 1992. p. 203.}

In Offred’s society every part of body has significance and it takes even the smallest things like body exposure, body-posture and even eye contact to convey a meaning. Her “refusal to believe in biological reductionism as an adequate definition of humanness….gives her the power to resist Gileadean ideology.”\footnote{Coral Ann Howells, \textit{Private and Fictional worlds: Canadian women Novelists}. London: Methuen and Co Ltd., 1987. p. 66.}

Offred uses signals and body language to show how that the perception of the world depends on an individual’s socio-cultural setting. Since Offred is held in a different social position she perceives the world around her differently. Susan Bordo suggests:

Because we are embodical, our thought is perspectival the only way for the mind to comprehend things, as “they really are by attainment of a disembodied view from no where.”\footnote{Susan Bordo, \textit{Unbearable Weight: Feminism Western Culture, and the Body}. Berkeley: University of California, 1993. p. 4.}
Offred is socially conditioned and her thoughts and perceptions are to be considered in her socio-cultural settings. In Offred we find a total divorce between thought and speech. The role Offred is playing is a form of acting which she must unfortunately perform against herself in order to survive. Atwood’s interest revolves around the conflict between her ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ selves and Offred is able to find strength, courage and imagination to protect it through her detachment. Christine Gomez believes:

Creativity is both a strategy and the process by which an individual acquires and asserts autonomy; creative activity of any kind gives a sense of control over one’s own life, validates one’s existence and enables one to come out of the situation of victimization.  

_offred is capable of one more ebullient gesture of resistance that is her secret outburst of laughter and ironic statements. As Bousan says Offred defines Serena joy by making “mean-minded bitter jokes.” She manages to see things from different perspective through irony, for example, she says: “Even at her age she still feels the urge to wreath herself in flowers no use for you, I think at her …. You’re withered. They are genial organs of plants.” (100)When commander expresses his desire to play scrabble with her, Offred says: “I want to laugh, sheikh with laughter, fall off my

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72 Christine Gomez, op. cit., p. 92.
chair.” (176) Thus commander’s forlorn request is followed by Offred’s paroxysm her own laughter. As Rigney says “the heroines of Atwood…..pretend their own innocence and attempt a withdrawal from circumstances.”

Offred’s position is closer to the traditionally feminine role of women, for though she resists the brutal imposition of male power in Gilead, she does the very traditional thing of becoming pregnant through her love making with Nick and not through state regulated sex with the commander. All these incidents and situations explicitly prove to be symptomatic of Offred’s non-confrontational role. Though she finally rejects the commander’s assurance of male superiority, she herself is not in a commanding position at the end. As Arnold E. David Son points out:

“she is essentially passive and in need of rescue by a man.”

Offred even, within the restrictive circumstances of Gilead, yearns to fall in love again, she remembers the delights of hetero-sexual love and knows that she would be shot if she and Nick were discovered together. But she says: “I snatch at it, this offer. It’s all I’m left with.” (366) Offred’s response to Nick is overwhelmingly sexual, for the first time his boot touches her

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shoe when they are sitting in commander’s wife’s sitting room —
ironically enough in the first night of the monthly ceremony — and she
says: “I feel my shoe soften, blood flows into it, it grows warm, it
becomes a skin.”(100)

Falling in love, it is important to point out, flouts all the rules of
sexual conduct in patriarchal Gilead. Love is a transforming power of
sexual desire as under Nick’s touch and gaze she feels released into
marvellous text of herself. Thus both of them have crossed over into the
territory of passion and instinct as the imagery used by Atwood suggests.
Offered finds in Nick’s room a place of security where like a primitive
cave-dweller they cling together in their shared private space. Although
she is aware that there is nothing more than the state of mind of two
people in love — “Being here with him in safety, it’s a cave where we
huddle together while the storm goes on out side. This is a delusion …
this room is one of the most dangerous places.”(336) As it is an illicit
space according to Gileadean rule, Offred is not bothered about that
because love gives her a purpose, a future, a companion and an identity.
“I tell him my name and feel I am known” (337) she no longer even
wants to escape or cross the border to freedom: “I want to be here with
Nick” (338) because of having found out that “the way out of Gilead is
within Gilead itself.”(139) As Kelly rightly points out:
Events do not tell us what to do, nor do they carry their meaning engraved upon their backs for us to discover. For better or worse we ourselves create the only meanings they will convey during our lifetime.\textsuperscript{76}

And even Rigney says:

Offred’s lover Nick redeems all men by his act of saving offered, although it may mean his own death. He is a kind of Orpheus to her Eurydice, as he brings her out of the world of the death.\textsuperscript{77}

Towards the end offered escapes along with the underground May day resistance group to the female road to tell her tale and she is aided by Nick who is commander’s chauffer and it is he who is the liberating agent of Offred.

Atwood displays a great skill in building up certain perspectives and then turning them around so as to provide new insights into a given situation. Her writing achieves what Wolfgang Iser, the reception theorist, regards as the essential function of literacy work:

Rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgress these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes of understanding.\textsuperscript{78}


Atwood shows the fragmented psyche of Offred seeking a link to harmonize her life, and in an interview pointed out about *The Handmaid's Tale*:

I have a hope … that people will … think through the consequences of any action that is proposed to them. Think not just in the abstract, not what it will look like in general terms but how it would be moved and lived out on the everyday physical level.\footnote{Daring to be Human “A conversation with Margaret Atwood”, *Margaret Atwood the shape shifter: In memory of Iqbal Kaur*, Coomi. S. Vevaina. Coral Ann Howells (eds.). New Delhi: Creative Books, 1998. p. 155}

Offred uses her objectivity to remind herself of her reality: whenever she is in danger of slipping too far, Offred knows that she is in danger which she has got to avoid.