Chapter V
Surviving Theocracy: *The Handmaid’s Tale*

It is a known fact that Atwood deals with women’s experience in a male-dominated culture. Her novels present women caught in oppressive stereotypes from which some women struggle to escape. This is done through autonomy of thought, through self-definition and self-reconstruction of one’s own history, through creative composition and through a refusal to take up the victim position or the role of subjugation.

*The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) is Margaret Atwood’s international award-winning best seller. It was made into a movie by Harold Pinter starring Faye Dunaway and Robert Duvall. It is a critique of female brutalization, a cautionary and poignant tale that dramatizes a futuristic, bleak, totalitarian society where women are denied the basic rights. The novel is a kind of anti-utopia of the not-too-distant future as reflected through the voice of Offred, a Handmaid, one of the victims in the theocracy.

In form the book is a dystopia, a cognate of *A Clockwork Orange*, 1984, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*, a troubling cautionary vision of mankind’s potentially dismal future. *The Handmaid’s Tale* paints a picture of what can happen if people fall into indifference trusting that things will remain the same. Atwood states:

> Every book is a sort of mushroom cloud thrown up by a large substance of material that has been accumulating for a lifetime.
I had long been interested in the histories of totalitarian regimes and the different forms they have taken in various societies. This is a book about what happens when certain casually held attitudes about women are taken to their logical conclusions. The root of the book goes back to my study of the American Puritans. The society they founded in America was not a democracy as we know it, but a theocracy.¹

All of the things that Atwood has written about have – as noted in the “Historical Notes” at the end – been done before, more than once. History proves that what we have been in the past, we could be again.

Atwood argues for the possibility of the creation of her imagined Republic of Gilead. She asks:

If you were going to take over the United States, how would you do it? Would you say, “I’m a socialist and we’re all going to be equal?” No, you would not because it wouldn’t work. Would you say, “I’m a liberal and we are going to have a society of multiple toleration?” You probably wouldn’t say that if you wanted mass support. You would be much more likely to say, “I have the word from God and this is the way we should run things”.²

Atwood’s novel reflects the form and style of the early puritan society and addresses the dynamics that bring about such a situation.
Offred, the protagonist in *The Handmaid’s Tale* escapes from the Republic of Gilead to the underground Female road to tell her tale of victimization. The novel takes the form of a memoir, where the memories combine to build an extraordinary portrait of an ordinary woman in extraordinary circumstances. Freedom of speech is a capital offence in Gilead. Hence Offred uses ‘language’ as a means of communication to unlock her inner feelings and bitter experiences, as well as a ‘subversive weapon’ to tell her tale. Her tale addresses itself to the marginalization of women. She tells her tale with a sense of commitment to expose how the dignity and autonomy of women are negated by anarchic and repressive societies like the Republic of Gilead. She also suggests the ways and means to surmount the barriers to woman’s individuality and autonomy.

The manuscript of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a reconstruction from voice recordings of Offred on cassette tapes. Offred uses language to demolish absolute authority of the Republic of Gilead. She rebels against male hegemony on the one hand and cruelty of the State on the other. Atwood explains the use of the tape recording as a device: “I had to do it that way. The paper and pencil supply would have been quite limited. It also allowed for the discontinuous, episodic nature of the narrative”.³

To comprehend the tale of Offred, a Handmaid, it is important to evaluate the background that has led to the establishment of the class of handmaids in Gilead. The Republic of Gilead is governed by a Fundamentalist
Christian theocracy. The so-called church-state regime, Gilead, legitimizes and enforces the class of Handmaids out of the dire necessity to overcome a fertility crisis among the ruling elite. Due to AIDS, Syphilis and environmental toxics, many of them are sterile, their wives barren and the children mostly wretched mutants called ‘unbabies’. Thus, the birth rate, which is dangerously low among the ruling elite, has led them to establish the class of Handmaids whose ‘domestic’ duties form a degraded obscene, version of the ‘flurry of sexual activity’.

The Bible is used by the regime as an authority for their laws. Atwood says that the “mind-set of Gilead is really close to that of the seventeenth-century Puritans”. The polygamy of the Old Testament provides them with the sanction of Handmaids. They regard themselves as latter-day Jacobs and use their Handmaids in a similar way in this new Gilead. 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”. Offred, the narrator is one of the several ‘Handmaids’ who, because of their “viable ovaries” (HT 135) are to be recruited for ‘breeding purposes’ by the ‘Commanders of the Faith’ who are childless as a result of their wives’ infertility. The Republic of Gilead is openly misogynistic in both its theory and practice. The state reduces the Handmaids to the slavery status of being mere ‘breeders’. As Offred says: “We are two legged wombs, that’s all; sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (HT 128). If a Handmaid becomes pregnant, the
child she bears will be regarded as that of the Commander and his wife. After
the delivery, the Handmaid has to surrender the child to the Commander’s
mistress. So the Handmaid must act as surrogate mother and bear a child for the
aging Commander with the collusion of his barren wife – a device invented by
Rachel in the Bible. In this way, the Handmaid is desexed and dehumanized.

The Handmaid is proclaimed an unwoman if she does not succeed by the
end of her third two-year posting. The dire alternative for her is the punishment
of being banished to the Colonies, where women clean up radioactive waste as
slave labourers. Thus, the dictates of state policy in Gilead “relegate sex to a
saleable commodity exchanged for mere minimal survival”.

In contrast, male sterility in Gilead is unthinkable. As Offred says: “There are only women who
are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law” (HT 57). So, women are
judged by double standards of morality in respect of infertility.

Moreover, the state cancels the original names of the Handmaids in order
to erase their former identity and labels them according to the names of their
Commanders. The state given names are a metaphoric suppression of women’s
identities. Hence, ‘Offred’, the narrator’s relational naming is not a name but
a tag that she wears to signify that she is the Handmaid ‘of Fred’. As Offred
says: “My name isn’t Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses because
its forbidden [...] name is like your telephone number, useful only to others”
(HT 79-80). Similarly, other Handmaids’ names are Ofglen, Ofwayne, and
Ofwarren. They are doomed to wear the scarlet robes signifying their adultery.
Thus a deliberate and systematic attempt is made in Gilead to obliterate all sense of individuality and identity in women, by taking away their names from them. A Handmaid’s name indicates merely the male to whom she is assigned. The name “Offred” is composed of the preposition ‘of’, indicating possession and the name of her Commander. It is the Gileadean variation of the contemporary patronymic “Mrs. Fred”.

The destruction of the individual name is part of the attempt to destroy a woman’s past and force her to live in the present moment alone, in a two-dimensional existence. But Offred carves a free space for herself in her flashbacks, contrasting her free and casual style of life in the past with her present regimentation, her past friendship with other women like Moira and her own mother with her present enforced isolation. She often recalls the views and actions of her mother, a militant feminist who believed that “A man is just a woman’s strategy for making other women” (HT 130-31) and spoke of ‘networking’ or forging ties with other women. She often recalls vignettes of her life with her husband Luke and their daughter, perhaps to convince herself of the objective reality of the former state of affairs before Gilead. As narrator, Offred apologizes for her frequent flashbacks: “You’ll have to forgive me. I’m a refugee from the past and like other refugees I go over the customs and habits of being I’ve left or been forced to leave behind me” (HT 239).

Offred’s willed excursions into the “distant past” (HT 94) – along with her nightmares – flesh out the narrative. In these sequences, one learns
something of her personal history – her prickly relationship with her ardently 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” (HT 37).

One also gets fragments of knowledge about the coup and the changes gradually instituted in the months following. Women were let go from their jobs, denied employment, and – with the regime in command of all the computer data banks – their money and property were transferred to the control of husbands or male relations. “There were marches, of course”, Offred recalls, “a lot of women and some men”. But when it was known that the police, or the army, or whoever they were, would open fire almost as soon as any of the marches even started, the marches stopped. For her part, the narrator attempted withdrawal into domesticity, “doing more housework, more baking”. Too often though, she found herself crying “without warning” (HT 189).

When Luke remained insistently reassuring, she realized – to her horror – that “he doesn’t mind this […]. He doesn’t mind it at all. May be he even likes it? We are not each other’s anymore. Instead I am his” (HT 191). Only when their marriage is decreed invalid – because of Luke’s prior marriage and divorce – does Luke attempt escape. But their forged documents are detected at the Canadian border and a desperate run into the woods is quickly thwarted.

Luke is shot, the narrator captured, and their five-year-old daughter taken away. In the worst of her nightmares, Offred can still “see her […] holding out her arms to me, being carried away” (HT 85). Except for a small
Polaroid photograph purloined by her Commander’s wife, Offred never sees her daughter again; nor does she know what has become of Luke, whether he is alive or dead.

Following the capture at the border, her memory lapses. “There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn’t have lost that much time without help” (HT 49). When the narrator regains full consciousness, she is at the Leah and Rachel Centre, formerly a high school, now converted for the training of Handmaids. Here – in a flashback sequence – the novel opens.

The present time of the plot, however, covers the period from Offred’s arrival at the home of the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy, to her final escape from Gilead in a black van. Thus, in what is by now a familiar pattern in Atwood’s longer fictions, the events of the present are set against the episodes of the past, with the past requiring the reader’s active reconstruction.

If the narrative structure is familiar, the narrative voice is not. Offred’s is the most anguished voice in Atwood’s fictions to date, and the most self-conscious. She struggles with the process of telling, trying out different versions, inventing – then recanting – scenarios that might show her in a better light, and agonizing over missed opportunities in a past she can never recover. “I wish this story were different” is her repeated refrain.

Everything she has suffered and her attempt to bear witness to that suffering are rendered meaningless without a recipient who will honour her survival by learning its lessons. Offred, therefore, has no choice but to take a
leap of faith and will her audience into being: “By telling you anything at all I’m at least believing in you. I believe you’re there. I believe you into being [...]. I tell, therefore you are” (HT 279).

Gilead’s aim is the total annihilation of woman as a person. Offred discovers later when she is able to procure a photograph of her daughter that even the memory of her has been erased from her daughter’s mind, as if she had never existed: “I have been obliterated for her [...]. You can see it in her eyes: I am not there. I can’t bear it, to have been erased like that” (HT 240). Her ‘Being-for-others’ has been destroyed.

Offred recalls her visceral connections to the husband and daughter from whom she has been so abruptly separated. She mourns her loss of a holistic love for them:

Nobody dies from lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from.

There’s nobody here I can love, all the people I could love are dead or elsewhere [...] where they are or what their names are now? They might as well be nowhere, as I am for them. I too am a missing person. From time to time I can see their faces, against the dark, flickering like the images of saints [...]. I can conjure them (HT 97).

She hopes she will receive a message from her daughter to keep her alive.

Gilead is a highly alienating society, especially for women. Women are prohibited from communicating with one another, under the ‘Divide and Rule’
policy of patriarchy. Women are separated according to their functions, as Wives, Marthas (house keepers), Handmaids (child bearers), Aunts (disciplinarians), and Jezebels (prostitutes), and kept apart. Marthas are forbidden to become friendly with Handmaids, Wives regard Handmaids with hostility and envy; Aunts are used to oppress Handmaids; and Handmaids are not supposed to talk with each other. There is constant invigilation to prevent the forging of relationships among women.

In Gilead, women are alienated from their own bodies by the elaborate clothes that have to be worn by them at all times, covering them fully in many layers. The Handmaid’s clothes are specially designed to hide bodily contours and the wings and veils are meant to prevent her “from seeing and also from being seen” (HT 18). She is not even allowed to bathe by herself. Around her ovulation time, on the night before the ‘Ceremony’, she is given a bath by a Martha. After the bath, she waits for the Ceremony, feeling completely dehumanized: “I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig” (HT 79).

The separation of women according to their functions in Gilead, promotes their fragmentation. The Wives are mainly decorative in function and are dressed in blue. The Marthas are the middle-aged housekeepers, and they are dressed in green. When they become weak and sick and cease working, they are deported to the Colonies. The Handmaids, dressed in red, are young women in their twenties or thirties and serve as child-bearers to elderly childless Commanders. The Biblical precedent of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah, who served
Abraham and Jacob as handmaids is quoted in support of the practice.

Prostitution continues in Gilead, though its presence was assiduously denied by the Establishment. These women are dressed in feathers and sequins and the system of prostitution is justified as being dictated to by Nature: “Nature demands variety for men. It stands to reason; it’s part of the Procreational strategy” (HT 249).

Of all these functional roles assigned to women in Gilead, the Handmaids’ role is the most dehumanized. Handmaids are valued only as walking wombs, for their child-bearing function, all other personal traits having been annihilated. They are a “national resource,” (HT 75), “containers” (HT 107), “two-legged wombs”, “sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (HT 146). In the case of most of the Handmaids, Gilead succeeds in reducing woman’s perception of herself to a mere function. Offred experiences anguished disappointment because of her failure to conceive: “I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own” (HT 83). She herself thinks of herself only as a womb, that is, only in the child-bearing context and regards herself as a failure when that function is not fulfilled.

Offred, the Handmaid, in her “reduced circumstances,” (HT 99) obeys orders, accepts ‘ritualized subjugation’ to the ruling elite because she knows what the statement “Give a child, or else [...] die” (Genesis) means. She is compelled to discharge her duties as a Handmaid knowing fully well the consequences. Under the pressure of terrifying alternatives, Offred feels: “I
resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (HT 268). Offred is forced into pregnancy tests every month. The doctor who examines her and other Handmaids periodically for signs of pregnancy never even sees their faces. The Commanders, who attempt to impregnate them once a month, are indifferent to their appearances. As appearance is unimportant for them, the Handmaids are not given face cream. Their bath is regulated by others. Their food is not chosen by them. For minor offences like reading, their arms and legs which are seen as inessential for reproduction are ruthlessly chopped off.

As part of their ‘re-education’ in submission, Offred and other Handmaids are made to watch pornography films from the seventies and eighties in which women appear in various attitudes of submission, brutalization, and grotesque mutilation. To keep them obedient to the regime, the Handmaids are ordered to listen and utter the prayers which Soul Scroll machines recite while printing them. They are also taught by the ‘Aunts’, the thought-police of Gilead, to walk with their heads bent down low. So, silence and powerlessness go together in the lives of Offred and other Handmaids.

The Gileadean social structure with its focus on child-bearing is devised because of the decline in Caucasian birth-rates, due to the conglomeration of causes in our own age—widespread birth disorders like “stillbirths, miscarriages, and genetic deformities due to nuclear plant accidents, shutdowns, sabotage, leakage from chemical and biological warfare, stockpiles
and toxic waste disposal sites and uncontrolled use of chemical insecticides, herbicides and sprays" (HT 316-17).

When Gilead had first come into being, the very first step of the new regime was to freeze women’s credit cards and bank accounts and take away their jobs and property rights, thus destroying their financial independence, which is the primary requisite in any true liberation of women. With the loss of her job, the protagonist had felt stripped of her independence and individuality, perceiving herself as “a doll - wife, her husband’s possession” (HT 191).

In the separation of women into functions, Wives become ornaments. Serena Joys’ way of creating female space in this context is through gardening. This is a device resorted to by many Wives in Gilead, reminding one of Alice Walker’s discovery about her mother’s garden. Many of the Wives have such gardens, it’s something for them “to order and maintain and care for” (HT 22). That it is a subversive device and a symbol is made clear: “There is something subversive about this garden of Serena’s, a sense of buried things bursting upwards, wordlessly into the light, as if to point, to say : “whatever is silenced, will clamour to be heard, though silently” (HT 161). The Aunts in Gilead are rigid, middle- aged women who have internalized patriarchal values and are used to impose them on other women. The basic principle of colonialism, “Control of the indigenous by members of their own group” (HT 320) is adapted in Gilead to the control of women, for it is believed that “The best and
most cost-effective way to control women for reproductive and other purposes was through women themselves” (HT 320).

In Gilead, only the women of the poorer classes, called Econo- wives, wearing striped dresses in red, blue and green, are not separated into functions: “They have to do everything, if they can” (HT 34), i.e., wiving, housekeeping and child-bearing. This is looked down upon as an existence that is inferior to the fragmented, functionalized one of the Wives, Marthas and Handmaids.

In addition to the Handmaids, the Republic of Gilead offers its own state-sponsored brand of sex prostitutes called the Jezebels whose sole function is to entertain foreign delegates. The Aunts, the police women of Gilead, who are clad in paramilitary khaki, train the Handmaids. Thus, women are completely controlled by men and are arranged in a hierarchy of value in Gilead. Therefore, Offred’s The Handmaid’s Tale posits a “future culture in which … feminist dreams have been replaced by fundamentalist patriarchy that divides women into rigid categories based on function”. 8

Gileadean women are alienated from the universe around them by the severe restriction on their freedom of movement. They are forbidden to read and write, for that is a man’s prerogative in Gilead. By thus being denied self-expression through writing and speaking and being denied perception of reality around them through reading, they are isolated from the world around them. However, they try to keep in touch with the world through furtive reading,
whenever possible, and through a secret exchange of oral information with one another.

Women try to overcome this externally imposed interpersonal alienation by reaching out to one another secretly. The bonding among women and the slow forging of a caring sisterhood is a strategy by which female space is acquired in the novel. As Olivia Frey points out: “The ethic of care and relationships is most commonly at the center of women’s lives; it provides us with ‘space’ to think differently, another model for doing things”. Despite the strict regimentation in their training centre, the Handmaids communicate with one another through whispers, lip reading and touch. Despite being constantly warned against the evils of talking and reassured by the advantages of silence, the handmaids communicate, in different ways and defy the vigilance of Aunts:

We learn to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch our arms, when the aunts were not looking and touch each other’s hands across space we leaned to lip read [...].

In this way we exchanged names from bed to bed; Alma, Janine, Dolores, Moira, June (HT 13).

These soldiers of revolution, apparently passive, voiceless, erased, circumscribed, assert their identity by exhuming their names from the pit of obscurity with the help of a new mode of speech. Their new code language is carried to the other with the movement of “silent lips, looks, smiles, whistles, and winks” (HT 18), or Ofglen’s “MayDay” message or Moira’s conversation
with Offred through the “wooden holes” in the “wooden stalls” (HT83). “Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently” (HT 161), comments Offred, and her statement is accurate.

The protagonist manages to communicate with her former friend Moira who also arrives at the same training centre. Later, the Handmaids Offred and Ofglen discover joyfully that they are both “non-believers”. The discovery makes Offred “delirious with joy” (HT 177). Despite the ban on all communication between the Handmaids and the Marthas, one of the housekeepers, Cora, develops a liking for Offred and is even willing to lie for her once. For Offred that is a triumph in itself, a subversive way of survival. “It pleased me that she was willing to lie for me, even in such a small thing, even for her own advantage. It was a link between us” (HT 160).

When Offred first arrives at Serena’s house as a Handmaid, she wants to turn her into “an older sister, a motherly figure, someone who would understand and protect her” (HT 25-26). But Serena, the Commander’s wife, was hostile at first, though she later offers to help Offred and arranges clandestine meetings between Offred and Nick and gets a photograph of Offred’s daughter to be seen by her. Serena’s offer of a cigarette to Offred (HT 216), Rita’s gift of an ice cube to her (HT 219) and Offred’s compliments to Rita on her vegetable-carving (HT 219) for the dinner table, all are examples of the growing goodwill among the women in Gilead, under restricted circumstances.
The importance of the oral tradition among women is indirectly suggested in the novel by the manner in which Moira’s story is pieced together from what others have said, a story passed from woman to woman, by word of mouth: “Part of it I can fill in myself, part of it I heard from Alma, who heard it from Dolores, who heard it from Janine. Janine heard it from Aunt Lydia” (HT 139). This is not gossip. The reason for the spread of Moira’s story is that Moira’s daring escape served as a positive role model for all Handmaids: “Moira was our fantasy. We hugged her to us. She was with us in secret, a giggle” (HT 143). When Offred records Moira’s story on tape it becomes the oral narration of an oral narrative: “I’ve tried to make it sound as much like her as I can. It’s a way of keeping her alive” (HT 256). In a way, narration confirms existence.

In Offred’s room, the previous occupant had stealthily scratched a coded message in a cupboard: “Nolite te bastardes carborundarum” (let not the bastards crush you). The language is foreign to her yet the message is carried: “It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think that I am communicating with her […] They give me a small joy” (HT 62). Despite the restrictions and the impossibility of the situation, Offred communicates with the unknown inscriber and demolishes the barriers of death. The speech of the oppressed metamorphoses into a rallying cry for liberty.

Suicide is one of the ways in which the women in Gilead attempt to escape from their intolerable oppression. Offred’s predecessor had hanged
herself from the light fixture. The Gilead administration therefore takes preventive measures to block this particular escape-route. In the Handmaid’s room, “They’ve removed anything you could tie a rope to” (HT 17). In the bathroom razors are removed; framed pictures have no glass and “the window-pane-glass is shatterproof so that there is no cutting edge” (HT 18).

There are other ways of maneuvering survival in Gilead. Moira adopts defiance and rebellion. Ofglen joins a subversive group with the password ‘Mayday’ and indulges in sabotage activities. Playing games with Man in a show of acquiescence or compromise, but with the ulterior motive of wheedling privileges out of patriarchy, is yet another subversive method of creating female space. In return for clandestinely playing Scrabble with her Commander, Offred gets precious hand-lotion for her face and hands. But more valuable than that is the intangible gain that she is no longer just an object to him after that: “To him I’m no longer merely a usable body” (HT 172).

Offred finds herself preferred by the Commander. Once in a while, when his wife is safely elsewhere, the Commander sends for Offred to come to his study. Offred wonders what he could want of her, perhaps something perverted. She is right, this man to whom she is a bonded slave sexually, wants to do something forbidden with her – play Scrabble. Playing Scrabble has all the excitement of a forbidden pleasure. So also the notion of meeting a Handmaid under circumstances other than those designed for procreation.
Her stealing into her Commander's study to play illicit games of Scrabble makes her discover that there can be freedom even within the prison house of language. She is able to ask the Commander questions, to criticize and even to condescend to him. She gives him an insight into the real living conditions and situation of Handmaids. Offred imagines stabbing the Commander when he asks her to kiss him. She says: “I think about the blood coming out of him, hot as soup [...] over my hand” (HT 131). She realizes the power of the ‘pen’. As she says: “The pen between my finger 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” (HT 174).

Offred and her Commander meet several times in the greatest secrecy and do many forbidden things together; he lets her look at a magazine; she reads Dickens in his room; finally he even takes her out one night. The outing is to a kind of playboy club, the sort of thing supposedly rooted out of the theocratic State. The play- boy club incident where she does not fall in with the Commander’s wishes is an instance of her continuing to exercise an option, an assertion of individuality.

When the Commander in the new found intimacy of Scrabble and reading asks Offred what she wants, she answers: “I would like to know”. The Commander smuggles her out so that she could know at least a fraction of what goes on. Unfortunately, what she learns of the leisure pastimes of the
Gileadean elite is not very edifying. Offred learns other things as well, but without the Commander’s connivance but with that of his wife; she has a brief interlude of love with Nick, the Commander’s driver. The wife who is the Rachel of the novel (Biblical original who conceived the notion of begetting by proxy) believes that if she is to bear children, the Biblical arrangement is not good enough but a further refinement is necessary. It is not enough for a Rachel to have her obliging Bilhah but a counterpart of Bilhah has to be found for her barren husband also.

The choice is Nick, who is not averse to Offred, for aversion is a free man’s prerogative and Nick lives in Gilead where all rights have been abolished to accommodate one paramount duty which is to be fruitful and multiply. Offred’s interlude with a man with procreative potential takes on other dimensions; under the circumstances, it acquires a tinge of romance. The curious, pathetic thing about it is that even in Gilead, under the bestial conditions of breeding in captivity a human relationship sprouts, though Nick makes a joke of the dehumanized, clinical need that bring Offred to him, the necessity to prove herself fertile so that she may not be classified as dispensable and shipped off to the colonies.

Offred, who witnesses the bloody ‘salvagings’, the ritual slaughter and dismemberment of women, begins to feel shock, outrage, nausea and considers them as barbarous. She is alert and seems to be put in jeopardy. She feels her stay as if it were a jail sentence and she would like to scratch marks on the wall.
She is filled with lassitude in Gilead. She would like to repent, abdicate, renounce and sacrifice her life in Gilead. She feels her body is no longer suited for pleasure. She does not wish to be a doll hung up on the wall. She occupies herself with nostalgic memories of her husband and daughter, and strongly desires to escape from her present claustrophobic environment. She is not even free to die in Gilead. Ultimately, Offred decides to end her life by hanging herself: “I could noose the bed sheet round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off” (HT 274), but she considers suicide an idle thing, a timid action. The cushion on which the word “Faith” (HT 274) is embroidered is an image that reveals Offred’s profound faith in her life as a woman. Although she lives in man’s tyrannical world in Gilead, she feels a sense of pride for having been born a woman. As Offred says: “Oh God, king of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man” (HT 182).

Offred’s gradual development of feminist consciousness toward initiating risky but assertive schemes breaks the slavery syndrome completely. As Offred says: “I’m tired of this melodrama, I’m tired of keeping silent” (HT 275). It is through Nick, the Commander’s chauffeur, that Offred associates with underground network which shifts her from “being helpless victim to being a sly, subversive survivor”. Ultimately, Offred is rescued by Nick, the Private Eye and the Underground May Day resistance group who have come in the ‘black van’. Nick calls her by her real name and says: “It’s May Day. Go with
them" (HT 275). She escapes via the “Underground Female road” or “Frail road” (HT 313) to Canada and thence to England or elsewhere.

Offred’s lover, Nick, redeems all men by his act of saving Offred, 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 dead. This is a novel about survival because one learns from the novel’s appendix which is set in a further and presumably better future in which women again participate as human beings in an apparently benevolent society.

Offred’s ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ conducts one on a miniature tour of the Republic of Gilead. Offred escapes along with the underground May Day resistance group to the Underground Female road to tell her tale. She tells most of her tale in the present tense, giving it the immediacy of direct experience. Her voice on cassette tapes serves as a record of an emergence from silence. Atwood’s strong point is satire, often hilarious, often very pointed. Humour is in short supply in this novel, but it is a satire nonetheless. Atwood’s love for language play becomes a major characteristic of the protagonist of the novel. Her jokes are dark and bitter, but they are pervasive.

Offred is initially silenced by Gileadean culture, but she eventually works her way to freedom through language. The very thing that is denied Offred – the freedom to speak up, speak out, be heard – becomes the medium through which she defines herself. Offred realizes the centrality of language to the process of self-realization and the struggle for equality. Language – the
ability to speak, to tell one’s own story is at the heart of Offred. So language is initially an intimidating silence for Offred but ultimately she converts it into a liberating phenomenon. Language enables Offred to survive in Gilead and to raise her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal society.

The Handmaid’s Tale is not presented as history or his story, i.e. a story from a man’s point of view, but as her story, the story of Offred, narrated by herself orally. The story is narrated off and on, not chronologically, into a recording machine and preserved in tapes. Annis Pratts’ generalization about women’s fiction could perhaps be applied to Offred’s narrative: “Women’s fiction manifests alienation from normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persons on the margins of day-to-day life inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology”.

Though “Goddesses like Saraswathi in India, Brigid in Britain and Nidaba in Sumer were credited with the invention of the alphabet and the creation of language and writing,” women in general are connected with the oral tradition and language. The entire novel, except for the Epilogue, is supposed to be orally narrated by Offred. The oral element of the narration is often emphasized: “It’s also a story I’m telling in my head as I go along. “Tell, rather than write, because I have nothing to write with and writing is in any case forbidden” (HT 49).

For Offred, narrating her own story validates existence and makes her exist, in a certain sense: “I don’t want to be telling this story [...] I don’t have
to tell it. I don’t have to tell anything to myself or to anyone else. I could just sit here peacefully. I could withdraw” (HT 237). And yet she does not do so. She tells her story to herself lying on her bed, and later to another, on tape. Atwood concentrates on the problem of woman’s survival in a hostile male dominated world through Offred’s refusal to be a silent victim.

Atwood frequently reminds the reader 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 happening itself. Of course, this is true of all narration and of all history too, though one does not think of it as such: “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you can say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, riders, cross currents, nuances” (HT 144).

According to Offred, the reconstruction of one’s own life as a story gives a sense of control over the events in the story, and hence a sense of control over one’s own life: “I would like to believe this is a story I am telling”. Narrating a story thus becomes an effective strategy of survival for oneself and others in a patriarchal universe. “I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized […]. I’m sorry there is so much pain in the story […]. This is the story then” (HT 278). Story telling presupposes the presence of speech, a speaker and an audience.

In the hands of Atwood, language becomes a powerful weapon to wrench female space within the existing structures. She exposes the
shortcomings of conventional patriarchal language and the encoded sexism in it. For example, after declaring: “The Marthas are not supposed to fraternize with us” (HT 21), Offred adds: “There was no corresponding word that meant to behave like a sister, though one may coin “sororize.” While the word “fraternize” exists, which means “to behave like a brother,” there is no corresponding word for women. It was as if language in collusion with patriarchy conspired to deny sisterhood to women.

According to Offred, language in the Republic of Gilead is officially forbidden because the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead, only the ruling class recognizes the power of words as weapons that can free the people from bondage. In Gilead, only the ruling class has access to books. As part of their training, the handmaids are required to recite the Biblical injunctions which are distorted to reinforce their submissiveness. “From each”, says the slogan, “according to ‘her ability’; to each according to ‘his needs.” Offred questions the authority of this patriarchal language which comes from the reservoir of male discourse.

Language has always been acknowledged as a powerful weapon at the disposal of those under subjection. A strategy, by which those under subjection try to survive, is by using language to debunk the wielders of power. This is the motivation behind all ironic fables and satiric narratives which are obliquely directed at the powers that be, whether the power is colonial or patriarchal.
Patriarchy and colonialism are both power structures which operate on similar principles. Colonialism may well be seen as a paradigm of patriarchy in feminist literary criticism. This is because gender relations provide the "blue print for all other power relationships" and are "the model for power relations between generations, socio-economic classes, relations, racial and ethnic groups as well as between imperial powers and their colonies".13

Both in patriarchy and colonialism, various subversive tactics may be resorted to by the dominated group -- open rebellion, secret revolt, formation of defiant groups, outward submission accompanied by a slow carving out of inner independent space, acts of subversion and sabotage and the creation of free space through written or oral language composition.

According to Northrop Frye, Canada is "the only country left in the world which is a pure colony, colonial in psychology, as well as mercantile economics".14 Margaret Atwood says : "Canada as a whole is a victim or an 'oppressed minority' or 'exploited', a colony for someone else's profit".15 Just as colonial power structure seems to be built into the collective unconscious of Canada, patriarchal power-structures too have left their impact on the female psyche. A sensitive and consciously self-aware writer like Atwood exposes these power-structures and their effects on both those who exercise power and those who are subjected to it.

While colonial domination is a recurrent theme with the Canadian male writer, women writers may see colonialism as a metaphor of the gender power
struggle. In Linda Hutcheon's opinion: "In all her writing, Atwood shows herself to be the tireless explorer and exposé of cultural clichés and stereotypes, in particular of those that affect women".\textsuperscript{16} The Handmaid's Tale carries patriarchal power to its logical and nightmarish extreme and shows how women live such a situation and create female space for themselves through various strategies – bonding with other women and forging a sisterhood, defiance, sabotage, compromise, maintaining autonomy of thought, holding on to the objective reality of the past through flashbacks, keeping the oral reconstruction of one's own history, physical flight and as a last resort, suicide.

Offred uses language in her tale with a sense of commitment to demolish the totalitarian society in the so-called church state regime, Gilead. She condemns Gilead for "its intolerant, prescriptive set of values that projects a tunnel vision on reality and eliminates human volition".\textsuperscript{17} She rejects the male misogynous mentality of the totalitarian society. In short, she raises her voice against the marginalization of women in anarchic or repressive societies.

Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale is a challenge to traditional values. It can be taken as a warning about the danger of a patriarchal society and the dogma of the religious right. It is also a recognition that the structures that cause and perpetuate women's oppression are arbitrary. Therefore, any kind of oppression is subject to change. In this way, Offred tells the reader in her cautionary tale something one needs to know about the human capacity for survival.
At the conclusion of this grim saga, the fate of the heroine is left essentially unknown. But the very fact that the question remains unanswered gives one reason to believe that this compelling fictional character was meant to ultimately triumph. It is this hope that transforms what could have been an abrupt, unsatisfying end into a reason for optimism about the human condition.

The ‘man, sometime in the future’ who takes charge of Offreds’ narrative turns out to be the exegate Offred had tried to guard against. In “Historical Notes,” which follows as an appendix, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto, Director of the Twentieth and Twenty-first century Archives at Cambridge University, England, addresses an academic conference in the nation of Nunavit (a nation carved out of what was once northern Canada by the native people). The date is 25 June 2195. Gilead no longer exists, but in its wake the map of North America has been radically redrawn. Pieixoto’s subject is the provenance of the Tale and the problems he has had, as a historian, in authenticating it. The narrative we have just read, it turns out, is Pieixoto’s (and his collaborator, Professor Knotly Wade’s) arrangement and transcription of some thirty tape cassettes ‘unearthed on the site of what was once the city of Bangor’, Maine. The cassettes are of the type that became obsolete sometime in the eighties or nineties with the advent of the compact disc. Offred is presumed to have made the tapes while hiding out at a “way-station” en route to Canada on “The Underground Female road” that operated secretly in Gilead (HT 313).
Pieixoto opens his remarks with a series of sexist puns. He then details the discovery and transcription of the tapes, briefly digressing to what he terms ‘an editorial aside’ before launching into his main subject. The editorial aside is a caution against “passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans” (HT 314). His main subject is the attempt to “establish an identity for the narrator” (HT 315) or for any of the personages mentioned by Offred. Bringing his remarks to a close, Pieixoto registers disappointment at the “gaps” (HT 322) of information within the narrative and reiterates his contention that voices from the past are “imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come” (HT 324).

The reader who has been moved by Offred’s rendering of the dailiness of suffering in Gilead is unprepared for this kind of discourse. Because of the subject matter of the Handmaid’s testament, what jolts us in Pieixoto’s remarks are both his delight in salacious puns – especially those “having to do with the archaic vulgar signification of the word ‘tail’ (HT 313) – and his “editorial aside” against “passing moral judgement”. Pieixoto subscribes to the relativist argument that all “such judgements are of necessity culture – specific” (HT 314). As a congress of historians, he states: “our job is not to censure but to understand” (HT 315).

The implied objectivity of this stance has the effect of repressing moral valuation because it flattens the uniqueness of Offred and her telling into a domesticating matrix. She has been consigned safely to history. As Pieixoto
puts it: “Our author […] was one of many, and must be seen within the broad outlines of the moment in history of which she was a part” (HT 317). By telling his audience that “Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise” (HT 315), Pieixoto has not really explained racist and sexist policies that led to a virtual reign of terror.

The “Historical Notes” was an inspired device. Pieixoto’s analysis of the history and ideological underpinnings of Gilead, along with his pursuit of the identity of Offred’s Commander, provides Atwood a mechanism for offering information to which her first person narrator could not have had access. At the same time, the “Notes” section provides Atwood with a mechanism for posing profound questions about what should constitute the narrative of history. Atwood puts forward two opposed narrative possibilities: Offred’s halting reconstruction of her own “limping and mutilated story” (HT 279) followed by Pieixoto’s orderly excavation of identifiable personages, relationships, and motivations that might be derived from it. The two stand opposed not because of content – both are incomplete attempts at accurate reconstruction – but because the single response demanded by the primary document is the same response that its interpreter categorically refuses.

Offred bears witness that lessons may be learned, judgements made, future atrocities avoided. Her recollections are an admonition. “There were stories in the newspapers of course, that gave clues to a right-wing takeover in the offing”, Offred remembers, “but most people lived, as usual, by ignoring”
Pieixoto records past social and cultural practices ‘for their own sake’. “He does not read The Handmaid’s Tale as we have been reading it: that is, as a call to critical awareness of the praxis current in one’s own society”. Thus Pieixoto is able to congratulate his era for being “happily more free of the adverse demographic and environmental factors to which Gilead reacted” (HT 315), but he is oblivious to the Gileadean echoes in his own sexist jokes.

By engaging the reader first in an empathetic identification with Offred, Atwood has ensured that Pieixoto’s putative objectivity will not be ours. In so doing, Atwood places us in the peculiar position of rejecting one kind of formal historical narrative – Pieixoto’s – about a past – Offred’s – that has not yet occurred but might be our future.

Because The Handmaid’s Tale is a dystopia set in an invented future, there is some temptation to regard it as a romance fantasy. Atwood herself, however, insisted that she had projected only “a slight twist on the society we now have”. In the widely publicized CBC interview, she explained:

There isn’t anything in the book that isn’t based on something that hasn’t already happened in history or in another country or for which the materials are not already available. Futuristic though it is, then, in its ‘fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable’, The Handmaid’s Tale adheres to Hawthorne’s definition of a novel”.19
It could be warning about the future, but it is also certainly a cry to the injustices of the past; it offers a perspective of a possible world that is utopia for some and a nightmare for others.

Not wanting to write a piece of fantastical literature, Atwood writes about a dystopia firmly rooted in the reality of the Eighties. Women in Gilead dress the way women do in Islamic Fundamentalist societies like Iran and are forced to carry passes like the Blacks in South Africa. The Handmaids need to undergo pregnancy tests every month like women in Rumania under Ceacescu where all forms of birth control had been abolished. Rumanian women were forced into pregnancy tests every month and their wages and promotions were likewise linked to fertility. Canada too attempted to pass an anti-abortion law which required a woman to get the signed consent of her husband or nearest male relative before undergoing an abortion. The practice of government terror against its adversaries is something which Atwood is all too familiar with as a member of the Amnesty International.

Executions in Gilead are termed “salvagings” which is the Philippine expression for state-sponsored murders and the place where the Handmaids are trained is termed “re-education centres” which is from the Cambodian and Vietnam takeovers. Further more, a Catholic sect in New Jersey actually refers to women as handmaidens. Racial intolerance of the kind demonstrated by the Neo-Nazi groups in Germany and the imperialists in the African countries is an ugly fact of our so-called democratic age. Therefore Atwood’s vision is
essentially panoramic because journalistic fragments are transformed into a synthetic whole by her artistic imagination.

Atwood feels that in an age such as ours, writers cannot and should not live ivory-tower existences oblivious to the still sad music of humanity and keep feeding readers with escapist literature. According to her, writers must create social and political awareness among the readers. For, repressive governments like the Republics of Gilead come into being with a sudden upsurge. Such an upsurge can occur anywhere in the world at any time, as evil is inherent in all human beings.

Offred’s “time out” is the time we live. Ours is the world she attempts to conserve in memory. When we find fault with Pieixoto’s commentary, we become the appropriately responsive audience whom Offred has willed into existence. In effect, we are the alternate possibility brooding over Gilead, “ours the realm of potential interpenetration” (HT 109). We can both rewrite Pieixoto’s narrative and unwrite Offred’s only if we attend to the warnings in her tale and guard against Gileadean impulses. To recognize these obligations is to recognize that we are Offred’s ultimate fantasy of escape. To do otherwise is to measure Offred’s future suffering in the magnitude of our present complacency. The alienation and torment of the victims of repressive regimes and their struggle to survive as live human beings therefore cause so much of unease in our minds that we cannot just ignore it, but think seriously about our political responsibility to survive in inhuman and inhibiting conditions.