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Intersectionality of Gender Subordination, Ideology and Language in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale through the Lens of Judith Butler and Bell Hooks

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper examines the intersection of gender, ideology, and language in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, drawing on the theoretical insights of Judith Butler and bell hooks. It investigates how Atwood's dystopian world exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal power is naturalized and sustained through discourse. The analysis is grounded in Butler's concept of gender as performative and hooks's critique of patriarchy as an interlocking system intertwined with race, class, and religion. These frameworks illuminate how Gilead's theocratic regime transforms gendered oppression into sacred law, embedding ideological control within both language and ritual.

Methods: Through a close textual analysis of The Handmaid's Tale, the paper explores how linguistic repetition, ritualized speech, and narrative fragmentation reflect the dynamics of ideological reproduction and resistance. Offred's narration is treated as both an act of storytelling and a mode of survival.

Results: The study finds that Atwood's depiction of language in Gilead demonstrates how ideology operates not merely through explicit commands but through habits of speech, silence, and repetition. Even within systems of total control, language retains a subversive potential: Offred's fragmented, hesitant storytelling becomes an act of defiance against imposed narratives.

Conclusions: Read through the lenses of Butler and hooks, The Handmaid's Tale emerges as more than a dystopian cautionary tale—it is a meditation on performance, power, and resistance. The novel reveals how domination and defiance coexist within the same gestures, suggesting that ideology's strongest instruments may also harbor the seeds of its undoing.

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Introduction

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale (1985)* still feels unsettlingly close to home. It's one of those novels that seems less invented than excavated from the darker corners of history. Atwood herself once said she would not put into this book anything that humankind had not already done (In Other Worlds, 89), and that's exactly what gives it its power, the way it blurs the line between imagined horror and remembered fact. Gilead isn't conjured from thin air; it's pieced together from the familiar debris of religion, politics, and culture. As Coral Ann Howells puts it, Atwood's kind of speculative realism doesn't predict the future, it holds up a mirror to the present, reflecting its quiet anxieties and loud hypocrisies (The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood, 4).

Her word ustopia, a splice of utopia and dystopia, captures that uneasy duality. "Each contains a latent version of the other," she writes (In Other Worlds, 69), and Gilead is the proof. For the Commanders, its paradise restored; for the Handmaids, it's a cage sanctified by ritual. Offred says it best: "Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse, for some" (The Handmaid's Tale, 211). And the instrument of that control is, quite literally, language. The regime's greetings, "Blessed be the fruit," "May the Lord open", sound like prayer but function as surveillance. Even ordinary words are corrupted: "Salvaging," "Unwoman," "Particicution." The vocabulary itself becomes complicit in violence. Yet within that silence, something small and defiant survives. When Offred whispers the forbidden names, Alma, Janine Dolores, Moira, June (The Handmaid's Tale, 6), it's not just a list; it's a quiet resurrection. She can't write, but she remembers, and that remembering becomes its own form of speech.

To untangle the power structures that sustain Gilead, the research leans on Judith Butler and bell hooks, two thinkers who meet exactly where language and gender collide. Butler, following Simone de Beauvoir's old but still bracing reminder that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (The Second Sex, 283), argues in Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies That Matter (1993) that gender isn't a stable truth but a performance, something we keep enacting until it feels natural. Hooks, meanwhile, in Feminist Theory (1984) and teaching to transgress (1994), reminds us that patriarchy isn't sustained only by men; it's a network of learned behaviors, loyalties, and fears that cross lines of class and race. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality helps to clarify this web, showing how multiple systems of oppression overlap rather than simply coexist (Mapping the Margins, 1241). And Fiona Tolan perhaps captures Atwood's balancing act most succinctly:

her fiction resists tidy feminist slogans, instead dramatizing "the instability of identity itself" (Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction, 21)—a kind of productive unease that both Butler and hooks would recognize.

Theoretical Framework

The study grows out of a conversation, an uneasy, yet deeply productive one, between Judith Butler and bell hooks, two thinkers who continually question how gender, ideology, and language intertwine with power. Butler's work examines how gender is done, how identity hardens through repetition until performance begins to resemble truth. Hooks, meanwhile, argues that patriarchy never stands alone; it survives through culture itself, sustained by the quiet, everyday gestures of compliance that pass as normal life. Viewed through their lenses, *The Handmaid's Tale* no longer appears as a nightmare conjured from nothing but as a magnified reflection of the world already known, a world where belief and language cooperate to keep order intact.

In Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies That Matter (1993), Butler argues that gender isn't something we are but something we do, "an identity tenuously constituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Gender Trouble, 179). It's the repetition—the doing again and again—that creates the illusion of stability. Yet, because no act can ever be perfectly repeated, there's always a fissure, a small chance for the script to slip. In Gilead, the Handmaids' ritual greetings, "Blessed be the fruit", capture that strange duality. They're meant to discipline, to remind the speaker of her place, and yet the words themselves tremble with the potential to mean otherwise. Language, here, is both the instrument of control and the tool that can quietly unmake it.

Hooks enters the same terrain from another direction. In Ain't I a Woman (1981) and Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center (1984), she shows how patriarchy never stands alone; it's entangled with race, class, and faith, reinforced by the very people it harms. "Patriarchy has no gender," she writes (The Will to Change, xviii), and it's hard not to think of Serena Joy or the Aunts when reading that line. They uphold Gilead's order with a kind of grim conviction, convinced they're defending morality, when in truth they're reinforcing the very system that confines them. They uphold Gilead's order with a kind of grim conviction, convinced they're defending morality, when in truth they're reinforcing the very system that confines them. Hooks helps cast them not as outliers, but as echoes of the everyday world, where loyalty, fear, and the longing to belong can keep power standing long after force has done its work.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality hovers at the edges of this discussion, a reminder that hierarchies never operate on a single axis. Gilead's careful divisions, Wives, Marthas and Handmaids, make visible how gender and class intersect to determine who gets to speak, who gets seen, and who becomes invisible.

Taken together, Butler and hooks offer a way of seeing Atwood's world as choreography of power. Butler shows how ideology works through repetition, through the body learning its lines; hooks remind us that the audience, the community, keeps the play running. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, domination isn't only commanded; it's performed, believed, rehearsed. And in the gaps of that performance, in Offred's faltering voice, her half-told story, something fragile but alive resists.

Material and Methods

The orientation here is interpretive rather than empirical, drawing from poststructuralist thought and its understanding of language as a producer of power. Michel Foucault once noted that discourse "produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (The History of Sexuality, 1978). In that sense, words don't just describe reality, they build it. Within Gilead, language disciplines, corrects, and controls; its carefully rehearsed phrases and its silences are both tools of subordination.

Butler's view of gender as "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Gender Trouble, p. 191) guides this analysis of how ideology becomes habit and how words and rituals settle into the body until belief and behavior can no longer be easily separated. Alongside this, hooks's account of intersectional patriarchy keeps the discussion grounded in social texture. Her reminder that "women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices" complicates Butler's linguistic focus by insisting that discourse alone cannot explain subordination; it must also be traced through material hierarchies and collective complicity (Feminist Theory, p. 44).

Analytical Framework

It is important to note that the interpretive process occurs in several, interlocking phases, not in a strictly linear order.

1) Interpellation sites: Basing this examination on Louis Althusser's theorization that ideology hails us as subjects, we can first locate language moments where women are disciplined into their

functions, Handmaid, Wife, Martha, Unwoman. These scenes will be considered as ‘‘rituals of recognition,’’ through which identity is enforced and interiorized: subjected to repetition (LP, p. 175).

2) Mapping performativity: The theory of Judith Butler can be handy to discern how sexuality is performed through dress, salutation and gesture. The Handmaids’ red uniforms, the scripted greetings, “Blessed be the fruit,” “May the Lord open” , and even the enforced illiteracy are all of a piece as rehearsal for performance that renders compulsion to appear as moral duty.

3) Following Repetition and Slippage: If repetition involves a disobedience to the essence of that from which it repeats, slippages are always inescapable. It is Offred’s reluctance to speak, her half-hushed memories of names (shadows in the dark), and her piecemeal storytelling that transform silence into speech. It is here that Butler’s theory of subversive repetition meets with bell hooks’s proposition that, oftentimes, resistance begins “as a seeking enlightenment: it is the quiet knowing that one can do things differently” (23); where one comes to an awareness that obedience can take many forms.

4) Finding intersectional hierarchies: Hooks’s perspective is useful in describing how power in Gilead depends on the internal subordination of women. It is the Aunts’ zeal, the Wives’ purity and the racial and class erasures perpetuated by the regime that suggest a system that lives not just by domination from above but also complicity from within.

Research Scope and Limitations

The focus remains on *The Handmaid’s Tale* as the central text, supplemented by Atwood’s critical essays, In Other Worlds (2011) and In Search of Alias Grace (1998), which clarify her ideas about speculative fiction and moral imagination. Butler’s and hooks’s theories are used as interpretive companions rather than as systems to be proven or exhausted. Their concepts act as lenses through which the novel’s language and structure can be read afresh.

Like most interpretive work, this approach leans on inference and context more than on anything that can be counted or proved. Its force comes from the density of Atwood’s symbolism and from the clarity of the theories that frame it. Limiting the focus to a single novel may appear restrictive at first, yet *The Handmaid’s Tale* earns that focus; its layers of meaning make it an exemplary case for tracing how ideology, gender, and belief fold into one another within the cultural imagination.

Expected Contribution

Bringing Butler and hooks together allows this methodology to trace how Atwood's fiction turns language into both an instrument of power and a possible site of its undoing. Reading Gilead as a performative system reveals how authority embeds itself in ritual and how, even there, small deviations create space for resistance. The novel, in this light, becomes less prophecy than diagnosis, a dramatization of how subordination is naturalized and how language begins to fracture that illusion when pushed to its limits. Ultimately, the applied approach aims to move past thematic feminism toward a critical and discursive analysis of how domination and defiance coexist in language. The Handmaid's Tale stands not only as a cautionary story but as a living illustration of Butler's performativity and hooks's intersectional critique.

Results

Language as Ideological Instrument

In Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* language isn't just a way to communicate, it's the weapon. The Republic of Gilead is ruled more through symbols, and by controlling words, silences, than brute force. In the Republic of Gilead truth is ordered not just by laws or weapons, but by manipulation of language. The state's vocabulary resanctifies mundane speech into ritualized obedience, greetings like "Blessed be the fruit" and responses, "May the Lord open," cover surveillance with a veneer of piety.

Atwood's treatment of language in Alias Grace confirms this emphasis: "What I've said about fictional characters is, of course, also true of every real human being" (In Search of Alias Grace, 1504), and her assertion that language shapes both fictional and real subjecthood. But within Gilead, this structuring takes religious precedence. Select lines from the Bible are paraphrased in service of justifying violence; competing interpretations don't exist. The much-referenced tale of Jacob and Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpachase feels like this sort of licensing. Redefining words becomes an exercise in ideological possession. "Salvaging" (public execution), Particicution (ritual murder) and Unwoman (the disposable): These are terms by which Gilead renames violence as virtue. The denial of literacy completes this cycle; when women are forbidden to read or write, they are also forbidden to interpret. As hooks reminds us, "To name one's own reality is an act of resistance" (Teaching to Transgress, 1), and Atwood's women are denied precisely that act. Yet

within this regime of silence, subversive speech persists. Offred's whispered exchanges, "We learned to whisper almost without sound... In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June" (The Handmaid's Tale, 6), preserve individuality against linguistic erasure.

Thus, language in Gilead functions doubly: it disciplines and it exposes. As Butler asserts, discourse "not only acts upon the subject but forms the subject's very condition of possibility" (Excitable Speech, 2). Through that logic, Atwood dramatizes how ideology colonizes language and, simultaneously, how the subject reclaims fragments of agency within the same discursive field.

Gender Subordination and Performativity

The concept of performativity, as formulated by Judith Butler, provides an essential key to Gilead's distortion of identity. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, gender is not the work of nature or outward morphology but an assemblage of sanctioned gestures, scripts, and practices that are ideological through and through. As Butler says, "Gender is an identity constituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Gender Trouble, 191). In Atwood's dystopia, this repetition becomes a form of control: the color-coded costumes (red for Handmaids, blue for Wives, green for Marthas) and ritualized behaviors turn social performance into theological requirement.

The bodies of the Handmaids themselves bear ideological weight. As your chapter holds, "The Handmaid's red outfit, the ritualized greetings and the practice of [being renamed 'Of-[Commander]']) all perform acts that produce subordination as if by magic." To this end Offred's realization "Gilead is within you" (The Handmaid's Tale, 33) corresponds with Althusser's notion of interpellation, how ideology is internalized as the self. What Gilead is really good at, the source of its power in the world, and therefore as a fictional entity, is recasting women's self-perception into weapons for the state.

Nevertheless, Butler's concept of resignification allows for forms of resistance within this iteration. For her, "Performativity is not a one-time act but a repetition that can be re-signified" (Bodies That Matter 12). Offred's narrative voice can be taken as one instance of this resignification; she outwardly acts in obedience, but inwardly reclaims it through storytelling. Her hidden telling turns indirect speech into non-complicit language, demonstrating Butler's claim that

"speech itself becomes a form of resistance to the disciplinary matrix of power" (Excitable Speech, 14).

Gilead's performativity of domination also includes a practice of ritualized violence, such as the one performed in "The Ceremony," which expresses Butler's contention that the body "is not only matter but a continual materializing" (Bodies That Matter: 9). The Ceremony re-territorializes the reproductive body as sacred possession, and thus reinforces for Butler "the compulsory practice of gender coherence" (Gender Trouble 194). By contrast, Atwood's representation of pain and fragmentation in these scenes shows that this coherence is an illusion. This isn't just a sick gender pantomime, though: Gender performance in Gilead is brutally but profoundly unstable; every repetition carries within itself the seed of failure, and every failure hint at the possibility of rebellion.

Intersectionality and Resistance

In bell hooks's model of intersectional feminism, patriarchy flourishes through notions of hierarchy within itself and women being complicit in perpetuation. Hooks Patriarchy has no gender; it is a system, which both men and women maintain (Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, 44). Atwood imagines this concept vis-à-vis the Aunts, other women who punish fellow women in an agenda that is passed off as religious. As research notes, "The Aunts represent the enforcement of the regime, but their power also comes directly from the patriarchal system that they defend."

The relationship among Aunts, Handmaids, and Wives also underscores how Gilead intersects gender with class and power. "The Wives have, of course," one character says at the novel's end, "been silenced." The Wives are privileged and insecure; they're below male authority but given some power over women; whereas the Marthas work invisibly, the Handmaids are residual citizens valued solely for their reproductive organs; and the Unwomen don't exist. This hierarchical logic is epitomized by hooks comment that power is often understood as domination and control over people or objects (83). Each of these female roles perpetuates patriarchy by mirroring its values, producing what hooks calls a "culture of domination."

Offred's small acts of remembering and retelling become forms of resistance within this culture. As hooks writes, "to transgress we must move against the grain. We cannot be merely content with denying ourselves…" (Teaching to Transgress, 5). In this way, Offred's act of storytelling is

transgressive pedagogy; it is taking voice back from passivity into self-consciousness. Her contemporary memory of Moira's resistance in the Red Center is a collective one: preserving other forms of being from ideological crushing. The act is similarly part of hooks's understanding of community as a form of resistance, where solidarity and not individual heroism contests oppression.

Intersectionality helps to explain Atwood's caution that systems of oppression are perpetuated by difference. Gilead can be seen as a system in which power is legitimized by religion, backed by historical antecedent and sustained by force." Hooks's intersectional scrutiny makes clear that such maintenance demands separation between women, among classes and between faith and reason. Atwood's fiction unveils the fact that patriarchy endures not by crushing all voices, but by transforming some into echoes of its own.

Ustopian Duality in Gilead

Atwood's self-described concept of "Ustopia" captures the dialectical structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*: every utopia harbors its dystopian underside, and every dystopia conceals a trace of utopia. As she explains, "Ustopia is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia... because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (In Other Worlds, 69). The contradiction between those two moments is captured with precision in Gilead. For the Commanders, it is a cleansed, divine society made flesh; and for the Handmaids it is this stifling place where obedience poses as faith and silence passes for virtue. But Atwood eschews simple black-and-white characterizations of Gilead. It's able to survive not only through force but because it gives meaning, gives the false impression of a purpose to those who receive its favor. This tension comes full circle in the novel's closing section, "Historical Notes." Gilead has fallen, and its crimes are now dissected by distant scholars who handle its remnants like curiosities. What first seems like liberation—the return of voice, of reason, of academic order, quickly folds back into unease. The horror becomes history, smoothed into lecture notes, its pain archived and explained away. In that final gesture, Atwood suggests that even knowledge can repeat the violence it tries to expose.

What appears at first to be a utopian ending, contains its own dystopian element; the casual reduction of suffering into academic object. The ustopian structure therefore extends beyond setting, it defines Atwood's philosophical stance. Language, ideology, and gender in *The Handmaid's Tale* exist in mutual dependence: language oppresses yet preserves, ideology

subjugates yet sustains coherence, and gender performance confines yet opens space for re-signification. This paradox situates Atwood's novel within what Baccolini and Moylan (2003) call the "critical dystopia," a mode of telling which "Opens up new spaces of contestation even within totalizing systems" (Dark Horizons 7). It is in this sense that *The Handmaid's Tale* surpasses mere dystopian despair and speaks a politics of ethical persistence. It maintains that even in a state of absolute ideological subsumption the subject carries something with it, some whisper, some name, perhaps even or especially a story itself, which resists annihilation, and that vestige, Atwood's ustopian imagination reminds us, is the very condition of hope.

Conclusion

The Handmaid's Tale, by Margaret Atwood, reveals the complex relationship among ideology, language, and gender with respect to subordination. Deploying a sweeping utopian and dystopian aesthetic, the novel teaches that mastery is not purely about violence but about discourse and ritual. Having 200 Notes themselves, the Republic of Gilead in a sense eats its own words, "Blessed be the fruit" is one way to say "I follow orders," and "Salvaged" another way to say that certain stolen lives are meaningful, thereby showing that power in fact works through those speech acts which produce subjects. But Offred's fragmented storytelling turns silence into power and shows how the same language that entangles can also free. Gender, in Gilead, is a kind of performance of ideology. The Handmaids' unique uniforms and actions inscribe subordination while, at the same time, they reveal its precariousness. A bell hooksian intersectional feminism goes even further by suggesting that patriarchy remains in power through its "divide and conquer," a system that both men and women support, an observation vindicated in the Aunts' imposition of power. There is no place for complete despair in Atwood's ustopian vision: even amidst the silence, an echo of resistance is heard. The novel implies that if ideology has language in thrall, then language retains the possibility of mutiny. In recovering her voice, in other words, Offred recovers meaning; she shows that even as nameless slaves and body parts, human beings remain speaking subjects, because to speak is the gesture through which freedom first emerges.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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