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## Female Identity In The Context Of Patriarchal Society In The Handmaid's Tale

Throughout the novel "The Handmaid's Tale" readers can chart the increasing limitations the patriarchy places on the female identity through the experiences of the protagonist and the first-person narration Offred delivers along with her flashbacks to the society that preceded, conveying both the initial lack of opposition in the past and providing context to, the increasing support of the patriarchy due to fear, and reinforcement of the limitations on female identity imposed by Gilead in the present by females themselves. Much like Offred initially the factors affecting the female identity can go unnoticed by readers as we fail to question the impact of the measures taken to dominate the body, sexuality and language of women within the theocratic and typically dystopic government of Gilead.

However, Offred, in providing flashbacks to the society that precedes Gilead, we can identify brief moments and efforts of resistance to the regime in the present and can appreciate the extent to which the female identity has actually been affected in both the public and private sphere. In addition to this the flashbacks provide us with an explanation for the emergence of Gilead itself.

As detailed above, the foremost aim of this essay is to explain the ways in which, and assess the extent to which, the female identity is affected by the patriarchal society of Gilead. Secondly, I aim to identify moments of resistance from characters within Atwood's novel toward their imposed identity and assess their success in contrast to the absolute control maintained by the patriarchy itself and agents employed by the patriarchy to further the success of its doctrines and instil fear in its subjects. Something that is achieved through constant surveillance of its subjects, destructive gender relations, distrust of others and severe punishment so that any opposition or resistance, although extremely rare and weak within the novel, will not hinder the growth of, or undermine the control of the totalitarian state and thus will be rendered insignificant.

The body is used by Atwood to characterise the dystopian female identity in the patriarchal society of Gilead and show how it can become a site of resistance with varying success. Offred is a handmaid and hence her worth to society is equated to her reproductive ability. However, on occasions within the novel we can observe Offred's character resists this purely reproductive perspective of female identity enforced within Gileadean society, and instead recognises that her body can reinforce her female identity and sexuality. This is made evident in her encounter with two 'Guardians':

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As we walk away I know they're watching, these two men who aren't yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me.

Offred states 'I know they're watching' although she cannot physically see whether the 'Guardians' are hence, it is valid to say that her resistance is internal and therefore her actions that follow cannot necessarily be trusted; this is reinforced by the overt certainty of her actions conveyed within the confident 'I know'. The verb 'watching' is significant in conveying how Offred is crippled by her fears but also how due to her rare ability to breed, Offred is constantly under watch of 'The Eyes' of Gilead reflecting its way of enforcing patriarchal regulation. This is reflected in Michael Foucault's book – "Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison" as Gileadean control via "the Eyes" is an extreme form of what Foucault calls a "carceral texture of society with its capture of the body and its perpetual observation". Hence, we can understand how whilst on the surface it may seem like Offred successfully resists the identity imposed on her by the agents of the patriarchal society of Gilead, in reality she only reinforces the disintegration of her identity as her feelings of power in this moment actually undermines her resistance. This is revealed through Atwood's use of the adverb 'yet' as it proves how Offred's feeling of power is transient much like the action of flirting itself.

We can understand that eventually the 'Guardians' will have more control over the female body than the handmaids themselves as only they have the ability to impregnate and thus give the female body a purpose and meaning within the patriarchal Gilead; as in becoming handmaids, the women have lost control of their bodies and as a result their identities. We see that the consequence of maintaining an identity both on an individual and on a female basis is to become an "unwoman". Atwood's use of irony here is therefore key in aiding the disintegration of the female identity but also in getting readers to question the ideals imposed by the patriarchy depicted in the novel thus far. Further still, Offred's use of poetic language when describing this encounter adds to the sense that her actions are actually idealised as 'feeling the full red skirt sway around me' reinforces the view held by Peter G. Stillman in his critical essay 'Identity, Complicity and Resistance in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale' that, 'No amount of verbal ... reconstruction seems able to help Offred understand, communicate, or resist.'

Another key detail about this particular interaction is that the 'Guardian' is 'the one that turns away' hence we can actually observe that the resistance Offred feels is actually permitted by men and thus even her resistance to her patriarchal identity, is monitored by the patriarchy and, as can be seen later, permitted by the patriarchy also. However, Olivia Rook suggests in her critical essay, 'Surveillance, Regulation and Selfhood in George Orwell's 1984 (1949) and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985)' that 'Offred uses the Guardian's gaze to empower herself' hence, with this view in mind, Offred's body successfully becomes a site of

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resistance to the patriarchy as the control she clearly feels in instigating the prohibited interaction can almost be seen as a catalyst for further resistance. This point is reinforced further by Rook as she states, 'Atwood's simile reveals the vulnerability of the young soldier, his "exposed face", "like the skin under a scab", demonstrates how Offred's look ... physically penetrates this protective exterior'.

Here we see the idea that through Offred's actions her female identity is restored momentarily both at the sight of the 'Guardian's' weakness and but also the vulnerability of the patriarchy when faced with the female sexual identity which actually allows Offred to resist the purely reproductive identity she normally accepts. Hence, although what we see is a reclamation of female identity for Offred, once again this resistance is undermined by the fact that it would be permitted once again by the patriarchy; had the guard actually turned around, yet we cannot say whether he did or not.

We can observe that Aunt Lydia acts on behalf of the patriarchy and takes her role in aiding the continuation of Gilead, within the capacity of an Aunt in the Red-centre, very seriously. We observe the sadistic pleasure she obtains in stripping the handmaids of a female identity through the language she uses and the punishments she enacts. She believes that 'to be seen- is to be .... penetrated' reflecting the lack of authority the handmaids actually have over their own bodies. Their body is almost viewed as a commodity by the patriarchy and something that can be traded from officer to officer, as in many ways handmaids are viewed by Gilead as the currency on which it must survive. Yet this phrase also reflects the price women like Serena Joy have to pay in order to have a child. In addition to this the quote conveys how life as a handmaid is devoid of love, through the verb 'penetrated' in particular, Atwood suggests the female body is almost a possession of the patriarchy itself.

However, the verb could also be indicative of Aunt Lydia's teachings that 'penetrate' the minds of the handmaids replacing their resistance towards their newfound identity with fear and ultimate submission. Hence this quote reveals her true role in facilitating the ideals of the patriarchy, in accordance to the patriarchy's proposed use of the handmaids' bodies. The almost masculine language used by Aunt Lydia throughout the novel allows her this level of control over the actions of the handmaids. However, it undermines her also, as in order to feel the power she craves and thrives on, she has to succumb to the language of the patriarchy itself; therefore, undermining her power further.

Lastly Atwood's use of repetition here can reveal the intense nature of the re-education process for the handmaids. It reflects the constant reinforcement of such ideas wearing away at handmaids' sense of self as 'to be seen' or acknowledged by the patriarchy is to be submissive. It could also indicate that resistance is a means of being seen also. The former reading applies even to women in Aunt Lydia's position, as it is made quite clear within the

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novel that her power is limited to controlling women, not men, and her limits of control seemingly do not expand further than the Red-Centre. After all, she is obliged to wear a uniform like the handmaids, just a different colour.

It is only through the character of Moira that readers can appreciate the effort and consequences of resistance, revealing the power of the patriarchy through Moira's need of meticulous planning just to escape the red-centre, only to be found once again by the agents of Gilead shortly afterward. Here, Atwood allows readers to appreciate the consequences of resistance, as in Gilead, the only way to gain autonomy over the body is to remove the only purpose it serves in the eyes of the patriarchy. Conversely, we see that Moira actually obtains freedom from the sterilisation she receives as punishment for fleeing the 'Red-centre' and the clutches of Aunt Lydia. Therefore, she embodies the ultimate figure of resistance in the eyes of Offred however, what Offred fails to recognise is that Moira is now condemned to working as a prostitute in 'Jezebel's'. Whilst due to the fact that she is no longer a handmaid it would seem she has more bodily autonomy, as she has successfully rejected her purely reproductive identity, however what we actually see is further disintegration of the female identity.

Now Moira is seen purely for her sexual identity as she is now forced to be submissive to several men as opposed to one. What's more, her body can never again be regarded as having a purpose in the eyes of the patriarchal Gilead as her punishment has rendered her infertile. The fact that Moira is a lesbian and is condemned to serve the commanders as a prostitute highlights how unsuccessful she was in her resistance, and reveals once again the extent of power Gilead has over the female identity as although Moira is now instead recognised for her recreational worth rather than her pro-creational worth, something viewed by Offred as a triumph of resistance, on a deeper level both purposes for the female identity exist in Gilead as both serve the patriarchy but with different outcomes. Hence Offred, through her continued optimism and gullible belief that Moira had been successful in her escape, makes it clear to see both her own and Moira's continued subordination to the theocratic regime. This also highlights the utilization of the female body by the patriarchal society of Gilead within this dystopic novel to represent "the desires of the individual bodies with the needs of the body politic".

This control extends to Offred's view of her body even in privacy as in certain circumstances we see how the naked body provokes a feeling of autonomy for Offred as in shedding the restrictive clothing and therefore the oppressed version of her own female identity imposed by Gilead, Offred can obtain a momentary sense of freedom.

However, the autonomy her naked frame allows her is undermined once again by the patriarchy as, as succinctly put by Margaret J. Daniels and Heather E. Bowen, "they the handmaids have no choice regarding the treatment of their bodies" and hence, how their bodies are viewed by society. Although the clothes are restrictive her failure to conceive is something her uniform

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conceals. Hence in some ways the shedding of her uniform, although marked as a moment of resistance by Offred, can be viewed as Offred shedding her resistance and therefore becoming vulnerable to the intentions and restrictions of the regime. In shedding her uniform Offred is forced to accept the reality that she is not pregnant and is therefore one step closer to becoming an 'unwoman' in the colonies.

We see Offred experience the shame associated with this actuality reinforcing how the teachings of Aunt Lydia have completely consumed her as she states that "we are containers, it's only the insides of our bodies that are important". Hence Offred proves her recognition that her female identity has been oppressed in order for her body to fulfil its purpose to the regime. This conveys how she is forced to become nothing more than a "vessel" that forms the basis on which the very regime that oppresses her will continue to be built, therefore it can be said that Offred herself is an agent of Gilead as she works toward the continuation of the regime.

This is something that Offred understands but does not seem to resist as for her, being a handmaid is better than wasting away in the colonies like her mother. Her understanding is proven when Offred observes that identity within Gilead is "a made thing, not something born". This is reflected by her name itself within the novel as it is based on that of the commander she serves, automatically making him dominant in the proxy-relationship and her "Of ... Fred". Furthermore, Offred's comment that identity is "not something born" is likely a contextual allusion from Atwood to the time before where women could establish an identity for themselves allowing readers to question why Offred is not allowed the same opportunity to do so now. However this question is answered later on in the novel by Aunt Lydia as Gilead has seemingly replaced "freedom to with freedom from".

Offred's comment on identity reflects how in conforming to the expectations of the collective body of the Gileadean regime, unlike her mother and Moira, Offred has in fact severed the human ties of birth from herself as proven when she sees her mother in a video of the colonies as she'd "been thinking of her as dead". Even though we get the impression that Offred has only been subject to the regime for under a decade she is eager to disown her human identity in order to show her allegiance, therefore Offred is unable to resist Gilead as she is under a compulsion to preserve herself, believing she is preserving her female identity of the time before, but is actually failing to recognise she is only preserving the identity Gilead allow her to.

Therefore, Offred can be seen as a metaphor of her continual servitude and allegiance to the Gileadean regime. This is made evident in her reaction to Moira's choice to work as a prostitute rather than go to the colonies as the only reason Offred can think of why she wouldn't like to go there is the fact that after "Everything considered, she liked this outfit better". This reflects how the ideologies of the regime have completely consumed her and the fact that Atwood makes this reason appear very childish to readers indicates the re-education of the women and how

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they accept these new teachings without question. Whatsmore, this quote is quite ironic from Offred as it makes her seem in control of her identity due to her adhering to the teachings of the Aunts, however we recognise as readers that this is all an illusion. Thus, this quote proves the effects of the patriarchal society on the female identity in contrast to the time before Gilead whereby the insurgence of second wave feminism was taken for granted by those like Offred as she was, according to Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, “politically complacent before the takeover”. Now those who fought for the rights of female autonomy like, Offred’s mother and Moira, are being condemned for their actions whilst those like Offred contemplate why the regime has succeeded and how they can reclaim their female identity without opposing the state.

The sexual power struggle that remains prevalent throughout the novel is intrinsic to the female character’s sense of identity in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This is something that is convincingly portrayed by Atwood through biblical allusions as “handmaids” in Hebrew can also be translated as “slave girl” conveying how the handmaids are slaves to the continuation of the regime, the commanders in the sexual sense and the wives of the commanders, as their bodies are used as birth surrogates. Hence, it can be said that the handmaids fully embody the role like the biblical “slave girl” and are symbols of ownership as a result. This is represented within the biblical scripture of Genesis, handmaids are the property of the mistresses who engineered the exploitation of their fertility for their own personal gain, a situation that was not only allowed but celebrated and deemed a holy sacrament within the Bible, as can be seen when the women of Shiloh were raped for the sake of building a nation and rescuing the Benjaminites from extinction , one cannot help but draw parallels.

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