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Weaponising Identity: Violence, Surveillance, and Resistance in Atwood's Gilead

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Abstract— *This paper analyses Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (1985) and The Testaments (2019) to explore how authoritarian regimes weaponise identity through linguistic control, ritualised violence, surveillance, and reproductive coercion. Drawing on feminist theory, Foucauldian biopolitics, trauma studies, and postcolonial critiques, it demonstrates how Gilead reduces women to vessels of demographic utility while erasing personal histories and autonomy. Atwood's protagonists— Offred, Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy—expose the cracks within this apparatus, showing how memory, testimony, and storytelling function as forms of survival and resistance. The paper argues that identity under Gilead is not destroyed but reshaped through fracture, silence, and narrative reclamation, affirming the subversive power of language against systemic erasure.*

Keywords— ***The Handmaid's Tale; The Testaments; Identity; Feminist Theory; Biopolitics; Surveillance; Resistance***

I. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019) interrogate the intersection of power, identity, and systemic violence in dystopian regimes. The Republic of Gilead, a theocratic patriarchy, enacts identity violence—a term coined by sociologist James Gilligan to describe institutionalised practices that erase autonomy and reconstruct selfhood according to hegemonic ideologies (Gilligan 17). This essay argues that Gilead's regime

weaponises identity through linguistic control, ritualised rape, surveillance, and religious indoctrination, rendering women's bodies and minds as sites of biopolitical contestation. Drawing on feminist critiques of patriarchy (Butler), Foucauldian biopolitics (Foucault), and trauma theory (Caruth), this analysis reveals how Atwood's novels expose the fragility of identity under authoritarianism while affirming the subversive power of memory and storytelling.

By juxtaposing Offred's fragmented narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* with the polyphonic testimonies of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy in *The Testaments*, Atwood illustrates how resistance emerges even within systems designed to annihilate individuality. This paper expands on existing scholarship by integrating postcolonial critiques of naming (Spillers), psychoanalytic theories of trauma (Herman), and recent debates on reproductive justice (Ross and Solinger), offering a comprehensive examination of identity violence in Atwood's oeuvre.

II. NAMING AND THE VIOLENCE OF ERASURE

The renaming of women as property—Ofglen, Ofwarren, Ofcharles—encapsulates Gilead's strategy of symbolic domination. Hortense Spillers' concept of the "ungendering" of enslaved Black women during the transatlantic slave trade provides a vital framework here. Gilead's erasure of women's given names severs familial and historical ties, enacting a linguistic dismemberment akin to what Spillers calls "the theft of the body" (Spillers 67). In Offred's case, her "real name" is withheld from readers, rendering her subjectivity both hidden and

resistant.

Judith Butler's notion of "precarious life" underpins this dynamic. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Butler argues that subjects become intelligible through norms of recognisability. Gilead weaponises this logic by producing a regime in which women are only recognisable through their reproductive function. As Daisy later reflects in *The Testaments*, "They didn't see women. Only wombs" (Atwood 2019, 204). This epistemic violence renders female identity incoherent unless framed within state-sanctioned roles.

Furthermore, Gayatri Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—echoes throughout both novels. The Handmaids may whisper to each other, but their voices are institutionally muted. The regime's use of Biblical language distorts theological narratives to justify subjugation, replacing divine transcendence with state immanence. The command "Blessed be the fruit" becomes both greeting and surveillance cue. Language, once a tool for communion, becomes an instrument of erasure.

III. RITUALISED RAPE AND BIOPOLITICAL CONTROL

The Ceremony—a monthly state-sanctioned rape ritual—epitomises Gilead's biopolitical subjugation of women. Offred's dissociation during the act—"I am a blank here, a body merely" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 94)—illustrates Elaine Scarry's notion of pain as "world-destroying" (*The Body in Pain* 1985, 29), where language collapses under the weight of trauma. This ritual does not merely enforce reproductive labour; it enacts what Adrienne Rich terms "reproductive hostage-taking" (1980, 634), rendering women's bodies state property.

Reproductive control in Gilead reflects Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, where governance occurs through "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (*The History of Sexuality* 1978, 139). Fertility is weaponised as political currency, and women are reduced to vessels of demographic utility. Aunt Lydia's confession in *The Testaments*—that Commanders exploit the Ceremony for extramarital pleasure (Atwood 2019, 187)—further exposes the regime's patriarchal hypocrisy, echoing Susan Brownmiller's argument that rape functions as "a conscious process of intimidation" (*Against Our Will* 1975, 15).

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory illuminates Offred's fragmented narration, where nonlinear recollections become both a symptom of trauma and a mode of resistance. Her refusal to recount the Ceremony in precise chronology signifies the unspeakability of violence, turning silence into a form of testimony. Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" (2011) adds another layer, showing how Gilead peddles the ideal of redemptive motherhood as a moral cover for coercion. The promise of purpose masks the profound violation, cloaking patriarchal brutality in spiritual rhetoric.

Thus, Gilead's reproductive violence is not merely a tool of domination but a multifaceted mechanism of state control—at once physical, psychological, and symbolic. Through dissociation, fragmented memory, and subversive silence, Atwood's protagonists reveal the cracks in this totalising system, asserting their subjectivity even in conditions of erasure.

IV. SURVEILLANCE, FEAR, AND INDOCTRINATION

Gilead thrives on what Zuboff calls "behavioural surplus"—data extracted not for knowledge but control (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 2019, 8). While Gilead's surveillance is analogue—Eyes, informants, whispered suspicions—it functions similarly, dislocating the boundary between public and private. Every gesture becomes legible to the regime; even silence is interpreted as rebellion. This perpetual scrutiny recalls Bentham's Panopticon, elaborated by Foucault as a model of internalised discipline where "the gaze is alert everywhere" (*Discipline and Punish* 1977, 195).

This environment cultivates what Hannah Arendt described as "the loneliness of the totalitarian subject" (*The Origins of Totalitarianism* 1951, 476), where trust disintegrates and solidarity is rare. Aunt Lydia, though complicit, embodies a paradoxical subjectivity—both agent and captive. Her internal monologue in *The Testaments* reveals a strategic duplicity: "In order to manage the system, you must understand it from the inside" (Atwood 2019, 93). Her complicity is a calculated survival mechanism, echoing James Scott's "weapons of the weak"—small acts of resistance beneath apparent conformity (Scott 1985, 36).

Indoctrination in Gilead is most potent when it is internalised. Agnes, raised within Gilead, initially believes in the righteousness of her training. Her journey mirrors Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, wherein critical consciousness ("conscientisation") emerges from lived contradictions. As she begins to question the Aunts' teachings, her narrative reclaims agency: "There must be something wrong with the rules if they hurt this much" (Atwood 2019, 233). The turn towards resistance is epistemic—a reconstitution of the self through knowledge, memory, and dissent.

V. MEMORY, TESTIMONY, AND SUBVERSIVE STORYTELLING

If identity is fragmented under authoritarian violence, it is partially reassembled through testimony. Offred's voice—halting, hesitant, nonlinear—enacts what Judith Herman calls the "speechless terror" of trauma (*Trauma and Recovery* 1992, 34). Yet this fractured narration

becomes a political act. "When we think of the past it's the beautiful things we pick out," Offred reflects, "we want to believe it was all like that" (*The Handmaid's Tale* 30). This selective memory both shields and asserts agency.

In *The Testaments*, testimony becomes overtly juridical. The framing device—transcripts discovered in a future academic symposium—mimics *The Handmaid's Tale*'s "Historical

Notes," but with a greater plurality of voices. Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy present contrasting narratives that together form what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation"—a reconstruction of silenced histories through imaginative testimony (Hartman 2008, 11). Their testimonies do not simply recount the past; they perform resistance through narration.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is relevant here. While Gilead objectifies and controls women's bodies, Atwood's narrative strategy reverses the gaze. By centring female narrators who name, describe, and contextualise their experiences, the novels perform a narrative reappropriation. "I write these words for myself," Aunt Lydia states, "so I will understand them" (*The Testaments* 53). In doing so, she dismantles the myth of passive victimhood and reclaims

narrative sovereignty.

Storytelling, then, is both survival and subversion. Through memory and language, Atwood's protagonists re-inscribe their subjectivity against a regime designed to annihilate it. Their fragmented yet insistent voices echo beyond the page, gesturing towards a justice not yet realised but urgently imagined.

VI. CONCLUSION

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* reveal the myriad ways in which identity can be weaponised under authoritarian regimes. Through rituals, surveillance, renaming, and reproductive coercion, Gilead erases individuality while enforcing a monolithic ideology o gendered obedience. Yet even within this apparatus of control, Atwood locates fissures—moments of resistance, recollection, and narrative reassembly. Drawing on feminist, biopolitical, trauma, and postcolonial theories, this essay has shown how Atwood's novels reframe identity not as essence but as process—always vulnerable, always contested, and always capable of revolt through the radical act of remembering and telling one's own story.

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