

## The Process of Reconstruction in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

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History is under the control of people who understand and manipulate its construction, which enables those in power to shape, invert and redirect it in accordance with their own wills. As those in power have always been males, history has always been the history of “the male sex”, “written by and about males” and, as such, tends to either marginalize or co-opt women’s versions of history.’<sup>1</sup> This tendency originates from the otherness of woman: “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her, she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute –she is the Other.”<sup>2</sup> Through her otherness, woman has been oppressed and reduced to an object by the subject himself. The woman’s side, which has, thus, been the other side, is either ignored or constructed in the male-dominated society. Since she is deprived of written language and has to play the silent role, she is not able to write her story, the story of the other side, and exists only in the gaps of history.

Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* reveals a woman’s attempt to place women’s history of oppression into history. The novel portrays a dystopian state, Gilead, where women have no longer “freedom to”<sup>3</sup> do anything, but duties assigned by the society. They are relegated to several categories: Wives oversee household, Marthas clean and cook, Handmaids serve for breeding purposes, Aunts train the Handmaids, and women who refuse to obey this system are called “Unwoman” and sent to colonies where their bodies disintegrate before their eyes. As Bouson (1993) states, “Gilead regime effectively robs women of their individual identities and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallogocentric economy.”<sup>4</sup>

1. Michael Magali Cornier, “The Gap between Official Histories and Women’s Histories’ in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” *Feminism and the Postmodern Impulse: Post-World War II Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), p.167.
2. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Pan Books, 1988), p.16.
3. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), p.34.
4. B. J. Bouson, *Brutal Choreographies: Oppositional Strategies and Narrative Design in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p.137.

The novel is narrated by one of the Handmaids, Offred, whose only duty is “to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth.”<sup>5</sup> Like other women in Gilead, she is forbidden to read, write and have any leisure activity but to do her duty. She is forced to “play the virtuous, silent and submissive,<sup>6</sup> and to live in the ‘long parenthesis of nothing.’”<sup>7</sup> Her identity is defined as residing only in her body and her reproductive capability.

Offred is aware of the fact that she has become a construction and refuses to accept her status as nothing but only “a two-legged womb.”<sup>8</sup> She tries to find a way to maintain her identity, which is obviously seen in her words: “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born.”<sup>9</sup>

Offred chooses to write with her voice, and storytelling becomes her only possible way to rebel in silence and survive. As Howells (1996) indicates, her storytelling in a society where women are forbidden to read or write or speak freely effects a significant shift from ‘history’ to ‘herstory.’<sup>10</sup> Through telling her story of oppression, she challenges the official history that represents power, and she knows that she can liberate herself by reconstructing it in the way that a historian does: “If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending, to the story and real life will come after it.”<sup>11</sup> Her story makes her become “I-woman escapee,” “breaking out of the snare of silence to write herself.”<sup>12</sup> As she tells her story, she comes to the terms with what is actually happening to her. She realizes that not only her identity, but also her body and even her speech are under the patriarchal oppression.

Through her storytelling, Offred continuously makes shifts between her past and her present. In one of her memories, she remembers that she used to think of her body “as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of [her] will.”<sup>13</sup> Yet now, she does not even want to look at her body that “determines [her] so completely.”<sup>14</sup> She realizes that she has “been driven away from

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5. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.99.

6. Eleonora Rao, *Strategies for Identity: the Fiction of Margret Atwood* (New York: Lang, 1993), p.18.

7. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.79.

8. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.146.

9. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.76.

10. Carol Ann Howells, *Margaret Atwood* (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), p.126.

11. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.49.

12. Mary Evans, *Feminism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4 (London: Routledge, 2001), p.117.

13. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.83.

14. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.73.

[her] body” by the patriarchy as Evans states.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, she aims to reconstruct herself first by reclaiming her body. She no longer regards her body as a possession of Gilead the only function of which is to give birth, but she calls it her own territory. Although it is forbidden to make any contact with males, she once raises her head, and in another time she moves her hips as she walks away so that the guards can see her, which enables her to “enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there.”<sup>16</sup>

Through her body, Offred explores power and even satisfaction. Although it is first upon the command of the Wife of the Commander to meet with Nick so as to get pregnant, she often visits him without her knowing: “It wasn’t called for, there was no excuse. I did not do it for him, but for myself entirely.”<sup>17</sup> She enjoys serving just for herself, not for the Gilead society. Enjoying her body, she gains her bodily awareness. Her body is no longer “the terrain on which patriarchy is erected.”<sup>18</sup> She even begins to remember such forgotten feelings as love lack of which they die from.

While the relationship with Nick functions as a means of Offred’s physical liberty, her relationship with the Commander serves for enacting her imagination and revival of her language. Offred is commanded to make secret visits to the Commander’s office where he wants her to play Scrabble with him, and allows her to read books. Playing Scrabble with the Commander enables her to relearn the language she is about to forget: “My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I’d once known but had nearly forgotten, a language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world.”<sup>19</sup>

While practicing the language, Offred resembles herself to a patient “trying to walk without crutches.”<sup>20</sup> As she attempts to walk, she acquires power and knows how to take the next step. She develops her understanding of language, and even notices several meanings of a word, which reveals that she is regaining her ability to use the language as she used to do:

I sit in the chair and think about the word \_chair.\_ It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in \_charity.\_ It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.<sup>21</sup>

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15. Mary Evans, *Feminism*, p.112.

16. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.32.

17. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.280.

18. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976), p.55.

19. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.164.

20. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.164.

21. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, p.120.

In the Commander's office, she not only plays Scrabble with him, but also enjoys reading magazines and other books that he brings. She is so longing for language that she reads:

...quickly, voracious, almost skimming, trying to get as much into [her] head as possible before the next long starvation. If it were eating it would be the gluttony of the famished; if it was sex it would be a swift furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere.<sup>22</sup>

In one of her secret meetings, she is even let hold the medium of language, a pen. She asks the Commander the meaning of a sentence that she has seen in the closet of her room: "*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.*"<sup>23</sup> She wonders the meaning of this sentence carved by the previous handmaid having lived in the same room. As she cannot spell it properly, the Commander wants her to write it down. Now she holds the pen which they are not allowed to touch. She is quite aware of its power:

The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal.<sup>24</sup>

Offred has shifted from merely an "empty vessel" into a companion for the Commander. She receives "pleasure, happiness, increased value, enhanced self-image" for the first time:<sup>25</sup> "I am thirty-three years old. I have brown hair. I stand five seven without shoes. I have trouble remembering what I used to look like. I have viable ovaries. I have one more chance."<sup>26</sup> She gets enjoying her life although she has been longing for death in the beginning.

Through her story, she begins to win back "her womanly being, her goods and her pleasures" which have been taken from her.<sup>27</sup> She wants to win back her name that has been stolen from her, as well. She cannot bear being called as Of-fred, which reminds her that she is not a subject, but an object that belongs to someone else:

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what

22. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.194.

23. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.195.

24. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.196.

25. Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement. *The Newly Born Woman* [translated by Betsy Clement] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.87.

26. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.153.

27. Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of Medusa" in *New French Feminisms* (Cambridge: University Massachusetts Press, 1976), p.250.

I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day.<sup>28</sup>

Recalling her original identity through her story, Offred has become the speaking subject that Cixous mentions in her "*écriture féminine*":

I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation. Write! And your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising...with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed.<sup>29</sup>

Her self-seeking text transforms her from a passive, obedient and coward handmaid into a courageous woman who desires to gain her freedom, which is obvious from her saying: "I intend to last".<sup>30</sup> Although she begins her story as a nameless woman, now she longs for being called with her original name that represents her identity. From now on, she tells her story not merely to rehabilitate herself to bear what she is experiencing in Gilead, but to prove her existence and to recreate her sense of self. As she writes with her voice, she feels alive and reconstructs her identity that she has begun to recall. She is well aware of the fact that her existence is based on her narrative. As Hogsette (1997) states: "writing, or in her case speaking out, validates an individual's existence; it proves the writer-speaker was, at some point, or still may be alive."<sup>31</sup> She, thus, wants to believe the existence of someone listening to her as well as the existence of her own self: "By telling you anything at all I'm at least believing in you, I believe you're there, I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are."<sup>32</sup>

Offred realizes that she has acquired the power by penetrating into the world of males with her reconstruction despite all its uncertainty and fragmentariness. She accepts that she cannot present a complete account of what happened:

This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It's a reconstruction now, in my head...

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, it will be a reconstruction then too, at yet another remove. It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something

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28. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.94.

29. Helene Cixous, "*The Laugh of Medusa*," p.260.

30. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.17.

31. David S. Hogsette, "Margaret Atwood's Rhetorical Epilogue in *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Reader's Role in Empowering Offred's Speech Act," *Critique*, 38 (1997), p.269.

32. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.279.

out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many.<sup>33</sup>

But it is doubtless that every reconstruction including history has the same problem of fractured and paradoxical truths. This is because language itself is a discourse, which, for Foucault (1974), constructs reality and, thus, reality changes in accordance with the one who has an access to use language.<sup>34</sup> Now Offred is the one who controls language, and has authority in constructing her own story.

Now that she has language, she has power and does not have to last her passive role in Gilead. Beneath her passivity, Offred, in fact, actively resists and criticizes the patriarchy. She attempts to reconstruct her story by recalling her memories. It is her past where she finds material to fill her current emptiness since she experiences nothing but restrictions in her present. She realizes that the next generation of handmaid will not be able to recover their identities as they “will have no memories.”<sup>35</sup> Those handmaids will not dare to change their fate as she does. That is why, she becomes the voice of all other women in Gilead. She does not tell only her own story, but the stories of other women.

By the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's narration becomes not only a reconstruction of her body, speech, and identity, but a reconstruction of Gilead's history, as well. She, as a female, embodies the ability to change history, and writes her version of history, which enables her to challenge the official history of Gilead. She invades a male territory by writing with her voice, and takes over the authority of males in history. She gives voice to women's histories absent in male-dominated history, and reveals how they are marginalized by the patriarchy. In this context, Gilead is only one of the patriarchal regimes where women are repressed and forced to be silent. By challenging Gilead's history, she proves that women are able to raise their voice, tell their stories, reshape their world, and reconstruct their identity. She tells; therefore, others are heard.

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33. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.144.

34. M. Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1974), p.38.

35. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, p.127.

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