
Reclaiming Body Reclaiming Self; An Approach to The Handmaid's tale

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Abstract

History has been witness that in the patriarchy, men have always been in power; and have cherished the dominance over women. Men have always controlled manipulated and constructed women's identity in accordance with their own will. Women have remained marginalized in the patriarchal setup. They have been defined and differentiated with reference to men and not with reference to themselves; they have been incidental, the inessential as opposed to essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute whereas she is the 'other.' Through the politics of 'otherness,' women have been oppressed and reduced to the position of mere objects by the subjects. The woman's side, thus, has been reduced to be merely the 'other' side, which has been ruled and constructed in the male-dominated society. This study discusses how Canadian author Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* uses the female body to demonstrate women's power, and reconstructs women's identity in form of a subject position. It also aims to explore how men use female body to construct her identity as an object; and how women's resistance through the very female body helps them reconstruct their identity in the subject position.

Key Words: Body, Identity, Construct, Reclaim, Narration, Resistance

“Woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male ‘Other’, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey Laura.834)

Laura Mulvey, in her text, “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*” asserts that films do not portray women as individual beings rather they are displayed as an image or object of men's desires and stimulus. Woman is described, characterized and identified in relation to men. She is assumed to have no identity of her own. Unlike men women is considered to be secondary and redundant. Men is considered to be the subject and complete whole where as women are considered to be the 'other'. She has been reduced to an object of subjection by men. Thus female identity is either ignored or constructed through male gaze (male perception). The present study discusses how Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* uncovers women's subjugation in discourse with respect to their sexual autonomy. The study also explore the way Atwood uses the female body to demonstrate women's power, and reconstructs women's subjective identity. The study aims to delineate how men uses female body to construct her identity as object and how women's resistance through her body helps her reconstruct her identity as subject.

The fictional world (Gilead) imagined by Margaret Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is extremely misogynistic in its theocracy and practise. Gilead enforces a new social order in which women are, at best, commodities. In response to declining birth rates, Gilead practices using concubines (Handmaids). Handmaids are servant women who are assigned to bear children for infertile couples of elite class. They are forced to provide children by proxy for infertile wives of commanders.

In Gilead women are seen as a sexual object void of sexual autonomy. The male gaze in Gilead state has attempted to thwart women's subjective identity by enforcing various modus operandi to oppress women, such

as imposing of an official language which had no words rather it was symbol based or pictorial, implementing a specific dress code based on the task assigned and fertility of a woman, continuous monitoring and complete liquidation of media as magazines and film. Gilead enforces extreme gender roles; women are de-named and re-named, banned from reading and writing, owning property, earning money and they are relegated to specific functions based upon their social class and fertility. According to Aunt Lydia men prey upon women sexually because 'God made them that way'. While women who in contrast have no sexual urges themselves, are responsible for curbing male sexual behaviour (HT: 45). All the women in Gilead wear costume and name that signify their role in relation to men. The novel is the conflict between the protagonist namely Offred and a world that sees her as a sexual object void of sexual autonomy.

Offred, the protagonist of the novel, is one such handmaid and the story in the novel is being narrated her perception. Offred's narrative does not unfold in a linear fashion, but weaves through past and present as she recalls her former life with her husband and daughter, the swift takeover of the Gilead regime, her indoctrination at The Reche and Leah Centre, and her present situation as a handmaid in the house of Commander, an important political and military figure in Gilead. The epilogue of the novel reveals that some male historians have composed Offred's story by compiling the recordings of the tape recovered from excavation. The tape recordings are apparently made by Offred as an attempt to escape from Gilead through 'The Underground Femaleroad'. It is indeed shocking that the novel in question ends up with a complex note; Offred's fate as well as many other questions about her life, ultimately, remains unknown.

Offred, endeavors to retain her individuality. She re-evaluates the potential of her body and reconstructs her identity by recording the oral narration of her story. Throughout the story Offred continuously reflects, retrospects and compares her past with present. Thus we see two different Offred's in the novel: the one who narrates ie the narrator Offred and the other one who is being narrated ie the narrated Offred. However it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Apparently she seems to be be quiet, introvert, passive and pessimistic; but fundamentally she is desirous and clever. Offred is not as quiet as she appears, a great tumult reflects her within. Her potential to reassess the language portrays more of the narrating Offred with a stronger sense of identity. Her recitation of her story empowers her to move beyond her somatic restrictions and retrieve her potential and ultimately enables her to reclaim her vocself. Unlike the narrating Offred the narrated Offred is merely a child bearing machine and remains national property to generate babies in the Gilead regime. Yet, Offred privately repairs her identity by regaining her power through a renewed relation with her body.

The study focuses on how Atwood manipulates the female body to exhibit its potential and enables women to subvert patriarchy. Atwood in her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* thermalizes women's resistance through her body which echoes through the act of narration (language). Though the basic rights of language and knowledge along with her real identity i.e. her name are withdrawn from Offred in the Gilead regime, yet, she dares to retain her identity and self-autonomy by redefining her body potential. Even though she can only construct her subjective identity by narrating her story and even though her story is recompiled by some male historians yet, her identity in the novel is when she ironically can only use her voice to construct her subjectivity by narrating her story and reflecting on her past, even when her story gets reconstructed by some male historians, her identity in the novel is completely encapsulated in language.

The study presents the discussion in three sections: The first section, examines the construction of female identity as an object by Gilead norms such as women are identified only in terms of their reproductive capabilities, categorizing of women on the bases of their fertility. Further women in Gilead are under an unending monitoring of their movements, knowledge, language and thinking. Gileadian norms advocate female subjugation and constructs female identity as per the male desire and motivations. The second section analyses the female bodily consciousness awakened by re-emulation of her body, which ultimately triggers Offred to not only resist but subvert the Gileadean control. Further, the study argues how amid authoritarian restrictions of mind and body, Offred retains her bodily consciousness and reconstructs her autonomous identity. The textual analysis of the novel submits that Offred's past memory, bodily acts, and, finally, self-narration that enables her to reconstruct her subjective identity.

I .Female identity as constructed in the regime of Gilead (Male Gaze)

Gilead is exceptionally a male supremacist political system based on patriarchal ideology. The name of the state itself suggests the identity of a woman as constructed from a male's perspective. The name Gilead "originally comes from a religious story that concerns women's childbearing capacities" (Bal 36).

In the regime of Gilead female identity is constructed through male gaze that is articulated by imposing various norms to reduce women's identity only to the role of child bearing machines. To restrict women's individual identity women in Gilead are banned from any kind of freedom and literacy. They are being directed, instructed and observed right from their names to walking, talking and even eating.

Reflecting upon this male gaze I now discuss the norms practised in Gilead to construct female identity merely as an object to male desire.

Female body as national property and child bearing machines:

The female body in *The Handmaid's Tale* is deemed as public property , women's bodies are anticipated to be functional and is hegomonized by male dominance, which is evident from Gilead's treatment of female body for certain specific functions. The women in Gilead are given identity according to their colour of dress, which is assigned to them as per their reproductive capability. There are seven categories of women dressed in different colours:

the wives dressed in blues , and always seen in cars, the aunts dressed in khaki with electronic cattle pod on their leather belts, the handmaids in red, as Offred describes, "everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us ; Martha's in dull green, functioning as cooks; the eco-wives in the striped dresses composed of the colour red, blue and green, and among them widows dressed in all black; the unwomen, who are to be starved to death or catch unknown diseases in the colonies, are in grey overall (HT: 8) .

Women are relegated to the realm of body and ruled by men. In her analysis of Atwood's novel, Madonne Miner goes as far to say that within Gilead, "Women and flesh are inter changeable" (153). This reduction of 'woman' to 'body' is referred by Offred, she describes herself and her fellow Handmaids as 'two-legged wombs' and 'ambulatory chalices' (HT: 136). The bodies to which women have been reduced are devoid of identity and autonomy, and this reductive redefinition of female difference in terms of corporeality ironically creates an experience of disembodiment that Offred describes throughout her narrative:

I used to think of my body as an instrument....an implement for the accomplishment of my will....Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am. (HT: 73-4)

The above quotation describes offred's plight that how the Gilead regime has fundamentally altered her relationship with her own body; what used to be an integrated part of herself, an 'instrument' animated by her desires and will, has been fully subjected to the authoritative discourse of Gilead regime. The enunciation of the female body as flesh, valuable only through fertility, alters Offred's sense of her own bodily experience: " I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does" (HT:104)

Besides being categorized by colours of dress and reproduction capabilities, women are treated as public property and child bearing is considered to be their duty towards nation. Women is awarded to men in authority and their foreignguests as an object of appreciation. For instance Haindmaidsare fertile women who as a object of prize is presented to commanders with the duty to bear child for the commander to whom they are gifted. After delivery a child for one household, just like a commodity she is redistributed to another household for the same purpose. As Offredretrospect's, "I wait, washed, brushed, and fed, like a prize pig. Sometime in the eighties they invented pig balls, for pigs who were being fattened in pens" (HT: 69). She visualizes herself as an object that has no autonomy. She feels herself to be the puppet in the hands of the commander and his household as she is not allowed to doing anything without the permission from the authority. She is an example of how female as an object is awarded to the men in power, such as the commanders and the Angels. Similarly the Virgins in the regime are gifted as brides to the Angels and the prostitutes at jezebel are used to entertain the commanders and their guests privately.

Spatial Constraint:

Women in Gilead are under strict spatial control. They are not allowed to move freely. Women of all status are restricted their restricted space. It is only in the times of sickness that the wives in the state get the opportunity to go out and visit each other. Though women from all the strata of the state are restricted of the spatial freedom, however, the hierarchically lower status women are much more confined to their allotted spaces. Marthas are cramped in the household. As Offred is allowed to move out from her commander's household just for collecting or delivering somethings on behalf of commander's wife, therefore she feels that she is looked at by other handmaids with hope as well as envy. The unwoman who are condemned to the highly poisonous environment are the ones who are worst of all. They go unregistered in real life as well as in the documentary. They die of fatal diseases as they are confined within the margins of Colonies and clean the highly chemical waste.

Thus women in Gilead regime are strictly confined to the margins allotted to them as per their designation. The wives and Marthas are confined to the household, prostitutes like Moira are privately confined in underground cells called jezebels and are used by men in power for their sexual gratification. In the later part the novel, during one of Offred's private meetings with the commander, she is taken to Jezebel by her commander, where she learns that the female body is not only oppressed by men in Gilead regime but under the strict hegemony female body is also displayed and garnished to satisfy the lust of commanders and their foreign guests. It is only when Offred visits jezebel that she discovers that Gilead regime not only manifests female body but also abuses the female body by stressing female sexuality. Whereas they are assured by Aunts for their sexual security. At the jezebels Offred meets her friend Moria who was once a handmaid like her at the training centre. She finds Moria dressed in a bunny suit just like a playgirl. Her dress stressed the figurative shape of her body. Moria tells Offred her mother being exploited in the Colony and the life of the women in Jezebel. Moira's confession implies her to contemplate about the extent to which a female body can be exploited. She observes that female bodies which are infertile are considered useless and are therefore sent to colonies to die naturally due to poisonous environment and female bodies like Moira who are fertile but rebellious are punished by taken away their viable ovaries and are then sent to jezebels to sexually entertain commanders and their guests. Moira tells Offred what she feels about her body:

Well, shit, nobody but a nun would pick the Colonies. I mean, I'm not a martyr. If I'd had my tubes tied years ago, I wouldn't even have needed the operation. Nobody in here with

Viable ovaries either, you can see what kind of problems it would cause (HT: 249).

Offred is surprised and feels sorry to see Moira's indifferent and sceptical attitude as once when Offred met her for first time in training centre she was completely a different person. Moira used to motivate Offred to get over all the plight. Offred fears the callousness in Moira's speech and broods:

Have they really done it to her then, taken away something – what? – That used to be so central to her? And how can I expect her to go on, with my idea of her courage, live it through, act it out, when I myself do not?"

I don't want her to be like me. Give in; go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat something I lack. (HT: 249)

The optimism and valour that once Moira displayed vitalizes Offred to rebel against Gilead's prescribed norms. With Moira's surrender, Offred becomes much more desirous to liberate herself from the clutches of Gilead's subjugation. Offred wants to be "off-red," Unlike Moira Offred wants to reclaim her identity and subjectivity.

Surveillance:

Women in Gilead are physically and ideologically under surveillance. To restrict women from any kind of freedom Gilead has an entire network of surveillance which mainly constituted of men employed as 'Eyes' (spies) and partly of handmaids as they are also directed to spy on each other to assure that all women are under surveillance. The rebellious women's are penalized and re-trained till the time they learn to obey the dictates of authority. In order to implement and assure complete surveillance, first handmaids are identified

trained and brainwashed and then conditioned with Gileadian norms. In this process women those who do not cooperate are punished as per their reproductive capabilities as the rebellious infertile women are sent to colonies to die painfully and the rebellious women who are fertile are operated off their ovaries and sent to Jezebels a night club where rebellious women are used for entertainment and pleasure. For instance Moira is punished due to her rebel against Gilead society, she was sent to Jezebel. Women in Gilead are organized and disciplined spatially corresponding to their physical capability and the role and dress assigned to them. Whether they are walking, eating or resting they are always under the surveillance of the 'Eyes'. Gilead is well equipped with posts, Guardians and machines like the scanners to control and supervise everyone; no one is allowed to move freely in the city without passes. While closing schools, churches and libraries, the national machine provides the 'wall,' the dead bodies as "zeroes" on the wall, as well as the ceremony of public execution, as a means of education and a warning sign against any possible violation of rules and disloyalty. Thus Gilead weaves a carcel texture to control female and their bodies both spatially and physically.

De-naming and Re-naming:

The de-naming and re-naming of the Handmaids in Gilead also reflects the constructed identity of female through male gaze. Gilead obliterates the real names of women and tag them with new names that serve as a label that signifies their relationship to a specific men. As the protagonist of the novel is labelled as Offred that implies that she is associated with Commander Fred and thus her label becomes Of-Fed. If she were to be placed under any other master, her name would change to reflect new ownership. When Offred's shopping partner and confidant, Ofglen, fails to appear and is replaced by another Handmaid, Offred fails to trace Ofglen's whereabouts, as Ofglen is now nameless, having been replaced by new Ofglen who acquired the name. In Gilead women's name do not signify a women's identity rather it signifies her owner. Thus handmaids are wiped off their permanent identity rather their identity changes with the change of male power and desire. As Offerd laments that it is not merely space and time, but her very self that is empty: "I am a blank, here, between parentheses" (HT: 228).

Time and again Offred expresses her own paralysis, her lack of becoming, under Gilead's enforced ideals. For the Handmaids, any potential becoming is reduced to reproduction and necessitates the obliteration of individual identity.

In Gilead, women are not allowed to conceive subjectivity in their own terms; they are constructed by the ruling discourse and restricted to male-defined horizon of procreation. For instance the Handmaid's veils serve as blinders, and within this uniform (ity), it is nearly impossible to get a 'full view' of 'anything' (HT: 30). Thus the Handmaids learn to see the surroundings 'in gaps' (HT: 30), because, as Staels notes, their eyes 'are not allowed to move beyond the prescribed edges' (Staels.457). Offred realizes her loss of individual perception as an autonomous subject, as she says: "what I need is perspective.... Time's trap, I'm caught in it. I must forget about my secret name and all ways back" (HT: 143). Thus Offred loses her real self and is left only with the manipulated identity that is ascribed to her by the dominating patriarchy. With this unstable identity, Offred surrenders to her manipulative identity as a handmaid. For example Offred describes her existence as characterized by 'blank time' and 'long parentheses of nothing'; her life is now 'a space to be filled' (HT: 69, 70, 224). Throughout the novel Offred expresses her own paralysis, her lack of individuality, under Gilead's enforced ideals.

Ideological Control:

Handmaids are not only subjected to physical, spatial constraints they are even confined psychologically. They are brainwashed and trained in Gileadian ideologies which are actually male dominated. Handmaid's bodies are rigidly indoctrinated to retain their utility. For instance Offred realizes that her concept of "the body" has changed, earlier she used to enjoy but now it has become an object of that was enjoyable in the past has become an object that is dictated. As, Jannie when asserts her experience of her gang rape, she is blamed of being seductive body as Aunt Helena asks:

But whose fault was it?

Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in union.

Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us.

She did. She did. She did.

Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen? Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. Teach her a lesson. (HT: 72)

This instance epitomize that how the physical abuse inflicted on Janine is manipulated as a lesson for collective body of the handmaids. Handmaids are denied of any sign of sexuality. In order to control the sexual desire of women Gilead implements the punitive strategy to show pornographic films to the handmaids during their training sessions to terrorize them and feed their minds with the fact that their body is more secure and well treated in Gilead. Through the pornographic films the Aunts at training centre used to demonstrate handmaids that how the female body was manipulated during the pre-Gilead time. Various sorts of sexual abuse on different female body parts are shown in these movies. The Aunts advocate the norms of Gileadian society stating that the state makes the female body useful with their intelligible traits. On one hand Aunts show the abuse on female body in the old times and boosts of Gilead's security of women and on the other hand Aunts are the only ones who exercise abusive physical punishment on the bodies of rebellious women in Gilead. Offred recollects the incident when of Moira tried to escape from the red Centre, how she was dragged back to the centre and how badly she was beaten with steel wire: "It was the feet they'd do, for a first offense. [] After that the hands. They didn't care what they did to your feet or your hands, even if it was permanent" (HT: 92).

The rules, regulations and punishment in Gilead are basically fabricated to subjugate and manipulate women's bodies according to patriarchal hegemony. She is just treated as a child bearing vessel and an object of male pleasure. Handmaids are conditioned to maintain their feminity and follow the directions of the authority. At Gilead, femininity is defined and characterized with qualities like self-controlled, morality and passive. As Aunt Lydia reminds all the Handmaids, "The Republic of Gilead knows no bound. Gilead is within you" (HT: 23). Thus it is evident that how women is conditioned to imbibe the teachings and act accordingly. They are compelled to think that: "The posture of the body is important, here and now: minor discomforts are instructive" (HT: 79).

Controlled Eating:

Besides being submissive, passive and self-controlling, the Handmaids are also checked and oppressed in their eating habits. Handmaids are not allowed to take anything of their choice and are kept on strict diet plan as they have their existence in Gilead because of their bodies and moreover Gilead wants them to be productive. As compare to other women in Gilead handmaids are privileged to move around a bit but they are strictly controlled when it comes to eating and thinking. For example Offred fully depends on the command of Martha for food and bath **Language:**

Irigaray said that the patriarchal foundations of our culture are "marked in the deep economy of language and that sexual difference cannot therefore be reduced to a simple, extra-linguistic fact of nature" (20). She writes that because women are debarred in the 'patriarchal linguistic order', they cannot 'be women and speak in a sensible, coherent manner' (20).

The Handmaid's Tale resonates the above mentioned view of Irigaray by portraying how Gilead restricts the use of personal language and enforces an official language. In Gilead, women are restricted from all forms of written language and reduced to their supposed natural function of childbearing. Reading is considered sinful for women and is punished by the severing of a hand.

The most effective control tactic of the Gilead regime is the enforcement of an official language where words are replaced by symbols. Words are replaced by pictorial symbols at public places. Even the words spoken by women are strictly checked and controlled. Gilead suppresses the desire for language through the official

language. For instance at the Rachel and Leah training centre handmaids are denied free communication with each other therefore, Offred and her mates learnt each other's real names by exchanging gestures:

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking and touched each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, and watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma, Jaine,Dolores, Moira, June (14)

Offred describes this in her words as, "we learnt to lip read watching each other's mouth"(14). Free access to reading, writing and speaking is banned in Gilead. To avoid using personal language public boards and hoardings have been restored with symbols and pictures instead of words as, these are considered more safe than actual words: "Red hexagons mean stop" (HT: 27); "a huge golden lily is the sign for the Lilies of the field shop" (HT: 33); milk and honey store has a sign with three eggs, a bee, and a cow"(HT:34) ; "a pork chop sign directs shoppers to the entrance of All Flesh"(HT:36) ; a fish with a smile and eyelashes is painted on a sign for the Loaves and Fishes store" (HT:212). These pictorial representation on the sign boards clearly indicate that the free use of language was banned in the state. Moreover any kind of private conversation has been censored in the Gilead regime. The Aunts instruct the handmaids to avoid speaking to the commander's wives unless it's necessary. Even the commander's wife don't speak to Offred: She doesn't speak to me, unless she can't avoid it.I am a reproach to her; and a necessity" (21). Commander's wife also instructs her, "Don't call me Ma'am, she said irritably. You're not a Martha" (HT: 21).The caretakers and even doctore of the household are not allowed to speak casually to handmaids. Therefore, when the guardian Nick complements Offred "Nice walk"(60).She couldn't withhold it and felt nervous. The language in Gilead is so profoundly controlled that even, the salutations that handmaids share depicts the authoritative control exercised on women's language as the greetings too are expressed in words that focuses their child bearing functions and subversive nature .The fact that they are always under observation clearly reflects in their good bye messages: "Under his Eye" . The greetings portray the extent to which handmaids have imbibed the enforced law of being sexual objects:

Blessed be the fruit

May the God open

Think of yourself as seeds (HT: 19)

Likewise, in order to emphasize and assure handmaids of their reproductive function their desires, appearance and food is controlled by greetings like ,"Modesty is invisibility" (HT: 28), "Waste not, want not" (HT: 7).

There is no individual identity of women in Gilead. Woman is treated just as a body whose function is restricted that of childbearing, hence Gilead treats the female body as one collective body. Therefore a woman is considered replicable by anyone with the samefunction. This is evident from the fact that Commander mistakes Martha Cora as his wife, Serena. As Offred recollects commander's words where he thoughtfully reveals the death of the previous handmaid, he says:

She hanged herself, that's why had the light fixture removed. In your room." He pauses. "Serena found out," he says, as if this explains it. And it does. If your dog dies, get another. []

I suppose it was Cora who found her, I say. That's why she screamed. "Yes," he says. "Poor girl." He means Cora. (HT: 187) Apparently, the Handmaid's death is as meaningless and trivial as the woman that discovered it because all women can be taken as one body for the Commander, who insinuates that the female body in the old days is "the meat market" (HT:219).

Gilead appears to be a penitentiary where women are abused, subjugated and treated just as child bearing machines and object of sexual gratification for the male. Though handmaid's primarily sexual function as concubines is to bear child, the women themselves are entirely desexualized. The question of female pleasure and desire is completely disregarded. Throughout the novel Aunt Lydia an exponent of patriarchal discourse , teaches the handmaids that, unlike men, God did not design women as sexually charged and desiring beings(HT: 45). Offred describes the sexual ceremony as utterly devoid of 'passion' or 'love'; the desire and arousal of the women involved is immaterial and the goal of orgasm, for women, is no longer deemed

necessary (HT: 94). The pleasure of women is seen as irrelevant to the Handmaid's sole purpose of childbearing. The sex act itself is no longer voluntary for women, but sacralised and institutionalized, occurring under the authority of men. Through the Aunts, the Handmaids are schooled to be meek, modest and invisible, in order to become 'worthy vessel(s)' (HT: 28, 65). The definition of women's worth and roles is constructed by authority (men).

II. Reconstruction of Female Identity through Body:

Offred the protagonist in *The Handmaids Tale* realizes that her identity is defined as residing only in her body and her reproductive capability. As she encounters Gileadian society exercising excessive control over her body Offred realizes that she has become a construction and refuses to accept her status as "a two-legged womb" (HT:146). She craves for ways to regain her individual 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 bade thing, not something born (HT: 76).

This self-realization of Offred about the notion of her identity initially reveals itself, in Offred's self-examination. She discovers that it is not only her body that is confiscated rather, her own outlook towards her body has changed. She contemplates on the her concept of body, before and after the inception of Gilead regime and realizes that earlier she viewed her body as something palpable, versatile and significant, where as in the present times she feels negated as, her body is completely controlled and directed by the Gilead norms:

I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. [] There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me. Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and not more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping. [] It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, I see despair coming towards me like famine. To feel that empty, again, again (HT: 74).

The above quote from Offred's speech portray her inner transition of separating her body and herself. She is traumatized to discover the distancing of her 'body' from her 'self'. This is when Offred realizes that in Gilead her body is defined by patriarchal norms and thus the female body is materialised as an object of male desire. Offred's self-awareness drives her to harbour her past memories secretly that urges her to retain her identity and her name from the past. This in turn sparks her resistance through her body. Offred craves for her individual subjective identity within the oppressive Gilead regime: "Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech" (HT: 66). She is able to tap her body's potential that further backs her to reclaim her body and her subjectivity. She uses her body as a seductive apparatus:

They touch with their eyes instead and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It's like thumbing your nose from behind a fence and teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I'm ashamed of myself for doing it, because none of this is the fault of these men, they're too young.

Then I find I'm not ashamed after all. I enjoy the power, power of a dog bone, passive but there (HT: 22).

Offred comes to term with the power of her body and thinks herself as "a queen ant with eggs" and "the vehicle" of others hope (HT: 135). Offred redefines her objectified body to restore her subjectivity. Offred's critical examination of her body enables her to confront the Gileadian norms not only bodily but in thinking and language also. At a point in the novel, Offred discovers a message engraved in her cupboard, presumably left by the handmaid who shared the room earlier. The message reads: *Nolitebastardescarborundorum*-Don't let the bastards grind. This phase which Offred encounters accidentally turns out to be a symbol of resistance for Offred:

....it was a message, and it was in writing, forbidden by that very fact, and it hadn't yet been discovered. Except by me, for whom it was intended....It pleases me to ponder this message. It pleases me to think I'm communing with her, this unknown woman (HT: 52).

This message makes Offred happy to know that she is not only subjugated and wants to break it rather there was some another woman also who had the same fate like that of Offred. Secondly the message also makes Offred feel as if she is freely communicated to someone in the state where free communication was banned. She finds these words to be rebellious and signalling the subversive potential of language.

Offred rigorously opposes Gilead's totalitarian regime by censuring the present and re-examining. Though outwardly she appeared passive and submissive but inwardly she had been introspecting and retrospection to recreate her identity. Thus in this regard, she has been a story-teller in her mind, a composer of her body, even before she disappears from Gilead and tells her story into the tapes. The composed body thus gets converged into the written text subject. Offred is able to do all this by resisting and subverting Gilead's subjugation of women's body and language.

To retain her individual identity and to reclaim body, Offred narrates her story. Thus Offred voices her story into the tape recording and survives against the strict confinements of Gilead. Narration becomes the avenue for Offred to reclaim her body and reassert her existence as an individual. As Howells indicates, "her storytelling in a society where women are forbidden to read or write or speak freely affects a significant shift from 'history' to 'her story'" (Carol Ann Howells: 126).

Language becomes the tool of her body to resistance and to reconstruct her subjectivity. Her resistance starts with the revision of verbal control. "Offred", a tradename that signifies her as an object to the trade master is subverted in her mind into "off red," meaning getting rid of the handmaid's sign of red colour and ownership of commander. Another incident of this resistance is observed when in spite of Aunt's instructions to not to think, Offred when alone at night continuously thinks of her past and present. Offred's this secret thoughtful conversation with her own self becomes a monologue. Thus violating the rules laid down by Gilead and hence, her renewed body and language forces her to reclaim her individuality through her creativity, contemplation and confrontation. Finally she is able to reclaim her body which in turn enables her to reclaim herself.

In the regime, where access to language and thinking is considered illegal, Offred becomes ravenous for reading and writing. The commander in his personal secret meeting with Offred allows her to read and write while playing the game of scrabble. During these meetings she intensely desire to possess a pen. As Offred recall that the moment when she holds the pen in her hand appears so much seductive that she feels like stealing it against the Gileadian rule. As she says:

The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I 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 (HT: 186).

Offred's renewed relation with her body and her access to language gives her a sense of power. With this regained power Offred acknowledges the passive role she was playing as a handmaid. Offred with her continuous oscillation between her past and present gives her a sense of self-preservation through which she retains her identity and name. She develops an instinct of maintaining her own body like old times and more actively, she begins to rebel through various bodily actions and attempts. First she attempts to steal something from the sitting room, as she reveals, "I would like to steal something from this room. I would like to take some small thing,

[] secret it in my room" (HT: 80). Then she wishes further to "steal" Luke from the past into her present room because she feels like being sure of her identity and lusts for a body:

I want Luke here so badly. I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued, in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name; remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me. I want to steal something (HT: 97).

Offred comes to terms with reality and realizes that it is impossible to meet Luke so she wishes to satisfy her needs from Nick. She confesses her real name to him and satisfies her sexual desires from him. This too is Offred's bodily action of resistance against the powerful Gilead authority. Ultimately through her oral narration she is able to voice everything related to Gilead, her past and her life at Gilead. Thus offred's oral

recording turns to be a tool of resistance against patriarchal society. She reconstructs her identity by narrating her story.

Offred continuously finds her strength through language, creative ability, and memory and above all, her bodily acts and struggles to discover a technique to withhold her identity and status as a subject under the powerful patriarchal hegemony. Offred's potential to link her body and language, self-sufficiently conceptualize, characterize and express her epitome, remakes her personality against the male look. Offred's ability to reconcile body with language, realization of her corporeal autonomy and her power narrate, empowers and redefines her identity. She is able to liberate herself from the male representation of her identity

Offred gradually discovers her power through language, imagination, memory and most importantly, her bodily actions and struggles to find a way for her to withhold her identity and subjectivity under an absolute patriarchal sovereignty.

Offred's ability to reconcile body with language, autonomously conceptualize, define and express her embodiment, reconstructs her identity against the male gaze.

Oral narration of the protagonist in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a means for her to resist the patriarchal norms forced on handmaids in the Gilead regime. Offred not only resist but subverts the states hegemony by writing, thinking freely and expressing her desires, which is banned in the regime. Thus it is through her renewed relation with her body that empowers her and urges her to redefine and emancipate herself and to give voice to her silenced feeling, experience's and thoughts. It states that language is a powerful device as it is the language through which Gilead exercises its authority i.e. by banning personal language and implementing an official language and it is language only through which Offred is able to reclaim her subjective individual identity i.e. by narrating her story. Offred scorns to be viewed as only as an object of sexual pleasure and child bearing machine. she feels that as an individual she is qualified to have full autonomy over her body. Offred redesigns her lost body through the content of her tape recordings, as she envisions the story as an allegorical body.

Offred reclaims her body and reconstructs her identity through her bodily resistance embodied in narration as Howells states: The narrative serves to 'chronicle' her own 'shifts in perspective' under Gilead's influence, which eventually 'effects change in her imaginative conceptualization of herself' (Howells.1996,p.138).

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