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**Biblical Intertextuality and Gender Structure in Postmodern
Fiction: A Case Study Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale***

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Dedication

To all those whom we deeply love,

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the intersection of biblical intertextuality and gender structure in postmodern fiction, with a specific focus on Margaret Atwood's acclaimed novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. By exploring the intricate interplay between religious references and gender dynamics within the narrative, this case study aims to shed light on how Atwood utilizes biblical themes, motifs, and language to construct a dystopian society that reflects and critiques contemporary gender issues. Drawing on postmodernist literary theory and feminist criticism, this research investigates the ways in which the novel engages with biblical allusions, such as the story of Rachel and Leah, the Red Center as a reimagined convent, and the notion of Handmaids as a twisted interpretation of biblical concubines. It delves into the implications of these intertextual references, analyzing how they shape the gendered power dynamics, patriarchal control, and reproductive politics within the novel. Through a close textual analysis, this study examines the strategies employed by Atwood to subvert and challenge traditional gender roles through biblical symbolism. It explores the ways in which the novel's characters navigate and resist oppressive structures, emphasizing the agency, resilience, and collective resistance of female protagonists. By investigating the complex relationship between biblical intertextuality and the gender structure in the novel, this dissertation contributes to a deeper understanding of how postmodern fiction engages with religious and gender discourses, offering insights into the broader cultural and literary significance of Atwood's novel within the context of contemporary gender studies and literary criticism.

Keywords: Postmodern Fiction, Biblical Intertextuality, Gender Structure, Dystopia, Power, Control, Gender Roles, Agency, Gender Studies, Feminist Criticism, Religious Discourse.

Le Résumé

Cette thèse examine l'intersection entre l'intertextualité biblique et la structure de genre dans la fiction postmoderne, en se concentrant spécifiquement sur le roman acclamé de Margaret Atwood, "La Servante écarlate". En explorant les interactions complexes entre les références religieuses et les dynamiques de genre dans le récit, cette étude de cas vise à éclairer la manière dont Atwood utilise les thèmes bibliques, les motifs et le langage pour construire une société dystopique qui reflète et critique les problèmes de genre contemporains. En s'appuyant sur la théorie littéraire postmoderne et la critique féministe, cette recherche examine les façons dont "La Servante écarlate" s'engage avec les allusions bibliques, telles que l'histoire de Rachel et Léa, le Centre Rouge en tant que couvent réinventé et la notion de servantes comme une interprétation déformée des concubines bibliques. Elle explore les implications de ces références intertextuelles, analysant comment elles façonnent les dynamiques de pouvoir genrées, le contrôle patriarcal et la politique de reproduction dans le roman. Grâce à une analyse textuelle approfondie, cette étude examine les stratégies utilisées par Atwood pour subvertir et remettre en question les rôles de genre traditionnels à travers le symbolisme biblique. Elle explore les façons dont les personnages du roman naviguent et résistent aux structures oppressives, en mettant l'accent sur l'agence, la résilience et la résistance collective des protagonistes féminines. En étudiant la relation complexe entre l'intertextualité biblique et la structure de genre dans "La Servante écarlate", cette thèse contribue à une compréhension plus profonde de la manière dont la fiction postmoderne s'engage avec les discours religieux et de genre, offrant des perspectives sur la signification culturelle et littéraire plus large du roman d'Atwood dans le contexte des études de genre contemporaines et de la critique littéraire.

Mots-clés: Fiction Postmoderne, Intertextualité Biblique, Structure de Genre, Dystopie, Pouvoir, Contrôle, Rôles de Genre, Agence, Études de Genre, Critique Féministe, Discours Religieux.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى دراسة التناص بين النصوص الإنجيلية والبنية القمعية في الرواية الحديثة، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على رواية مارغريت أتوود المشهود لها *The Handmaid's Tale* "حكاية أمة". من خلال استكشاف التفاعل المعقد بين الإشارات الدينية والديناميات الجندرية داخل السرد، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إلقاء الضوء على كيفية استخدام أتوود للموضوعات والشكليات واللغة الدينية لبناء مجتمع مضطهد يعكس وينتقد قضايا الجندر المعاصرة. ومن خلال الاستناد إلى النظرية الأدبية ما بعد الحداثوية والنقد النسوي، تستكشف هذه الدراسة الطرق التي يتعامل بها *The Handmaid's Tale* "حكاية أمة" مع الإشارات الإنجيلية، مثل قصة راحيل وليا، ومركز التدريب الأحمر كنوع معاصر من الرهينة، وفكرة الأمات كتفسير ملتوٍ لمحظيات الانجيل. وتناقش الدراسة آثار هذه الإشارات التداخلية، وتحليل كيف أنها تشكل الديناميات الجندرية المتعلقة بالسلطة، والسيطرة الأبوية، والسياسات الإنجابية داخل الرواية. ومن خلال تحليل نصي مفصل، تدرس هذه الدراسة الإستراتيجيات التي تستخدمها أتوود لتقويض وتحدي الأدوار الجندرية التقليدية من خلال الرموز الدينية. وتستكشف الطرق التي يتنقل بها شخصيات الرواية وتقاوم البنيات القمعية، مؤكدة الفاعلية الجندرية للبطلات الإناث وصمودهن والمقاومة الجماعية. من خلال دراسة العلاقة المعقدة بين التناص الإنجيلي والبنية الجندرية في *The Handmaid's Tale* "حكاية أمة"، تساهم هذه الأطروحة في فهم أعمق لكيفية تعامل الرواية الحديثة مع الخطاب الديني والجندي، مما يوفر نظرة ثاقبة في الأهمية الثقافية والأدبية الأوسع لرواية أتوود في سياق دراسات الجندر المعاصرة والنقد الأدبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ما بعد الحداثوية، التناص الإنجيلي، البنية الجندرية، الدستوبيا، السلطة، التحكم، الأدوار الجندرية، الفعلية الجندرية، الدراسات الجندرية، النقد النسوي، الخطاب الديني.

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Introduction

Literature has long been a vehicle for exploring and challenging societal norms, offering powerful insights into complex issues such as gender, religion, and power dynamics. Margaret Atwood's acclaimed novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, stands as a seminal work in this regard, captivating readers with its dystopian vision of a society governed by strict gender roles and religious fundamentalism. While numerous studies have examined the feminist dimensions and socio-political commentary within the novel, there remains a significant research gap in exploring the specific intersection of biblical intertextuality and the gender structure within the novel. This dissertation aims to address this gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of how biblical intertextuality informs and shapes the gender dynamics within the narrative.

To fully appreciate the significance of biblical intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is crucial to situate the novel within its postmodern literary and cultural context. Postmodern fiction, characterized by its self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and challenge to established narratives, offers a fertile ground for deconstructing societal constructs and reimagining gender roles. Furthermore, Atwood's own feminist views and engagement with feminist literary theory underscore the importance of understanding the gendered themes present in her work.

The inclusion of biblical intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a narrative device that contributes to the novel's thematic depth and social critique. Atwood masterfully weaves biblical allusions, themes, and language throughout the story, creating a rich tapestry of religious symbolism that informs the gender structure within the dystopian society. Drawing on the stories of Rachel and Leah, the concept of Handmaids as a distorted interpretation of biblical concubines, and the Red Center as a reimagined convent, Atwood crafts a world that blurs the boundaries between religious authority and patriarchal control.

Central to the exploration of biblical intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the analysis of gender structure and power dynamics within the novel. Through a close

examination of characters such as Offred, the Commander, and Serena Joy, this study aims to illuminate the complex interplay of power, control, and resistance within the gendered hierarchy. By deconstructing traditional gender roles and highlighting the subversive potential of biblical allusions, Atwood challenges societal norms and raises crucial questions about agency, autonomy, and the construction of identity.

The novel has garnered significant critical attention for its exploration of gender dynamics and its intricate web of biblical allusions. However, limited research has specifically examined the intersection of biblical intertextuality and the gender structure within the narrative, particularly within the framework of postmodern fiction. This research gap calls for a comprehensive analysis that investigates how Atwood employs biblical themes, motifs, and language to construct and critique a dystopian society, shedding light on the broader implications for contemporary gender issues.

The problem at hand is the need for an in-depth exploration of the ways in which biblical intertextuality informs and shapes the gender structure in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By delving into the complex relationship between religious references and gender dynamics, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced strategies employed by Atwood to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles within the narrative. Additionally, it aims to examine the implications of these intertextual references on power dynamics, patriarchal control, and reproductive politics in the novel.

While there exists a considerable body of scholarship exploring various aspects of Margaret Atwood's novel, there remains a notable research gap regarding the specific intersection of biblical intertextuality and the gender structure within the narrative. Existing studies have primarily focused on broader themes of feminism, dystopia, and power dynamics in the novel, but have not extensively examined the intricate ways in which Atwood employs biblical references to shape and critique the gendered world she constructs.

This research gap calls for an in-depth exploration of the complex relationship between biblical intertextuality and the gender structure in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Such an analysis would investigate the specific biblical themes, motifs, and language employed by Atwood, and their implications for understanding gender roles, power dynamics, and reproductive politics within the dystopian society depicted in the novel. By critically examining these elements, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how religious allusions contribute to the construction and deconstruction of gender norms in Atwood's work.

In summary, the research gap lies in the need for a comprehensive examination of the intricate interplay between biblical intertextuality and the gender structure in *The Handmaid's Tale*. By filling this gap, the study aims to enrich our understanding of the novel's thematic complexity, its socio-cultural significance, and its contribution to contemporary discussions on gender, religion, and power dynamics in literature.

Understanding the significance of biblical intertextuality in the novel is crucial for comprehending the broader cultural and literary implications of the work within the context of postmodern fiction and feminist discourse. By addressing this research gap, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature engages with religious and gender discourses, while offering fresh insights into the thematic richness and subversive potential of Atwood's novel.

Overall, this study aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between biblical intertextuality and gender structure in postmodern fiction, using *The Handmaid's Tale* as a case study. By doing so, it seeks to expand our understanding of the novel's cultural and literary significance and its contribution to contemporary discussions on gender, religion, and power dynamics.

Building upon existing scholarship on the case study, this dissertation seeks to achieve

several research objectives. Firstly, it aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the specific biblical intertextuality present in the novel, unraveling the ways in which religious references inform and shape the gender structure within the dystopian society. Secondly, it intends to explore the implications of this interplay on power dynamics, patriarchal control, and reproductive politics, investigating how these factors contribute to the construction of gender roles and the oppression of women. Lastly, this study aims to shed light on the subversive potential of biblical intertextuality as a means of resistance and critique within the narrative, highlighting the agency and resilience of female characters in navigating oppressive structures.

Numerous studies have examined the feminist dimensions of *The Handmaid's Tale* and its commentary on power, control, and resistance. Scholars such as Susan Friedman, Marlene Goldman, and Shoshana Felman have delved into the dystopian society depicted in the novel, highlighting the ways in which gender roles are constructed, enforced, and subverted. These studies have explored the oppressive nature of the patriarchal regime and the limited agency granted to women, shedding light on the lived experiences of characters such as Offred and Serena Joy.

However, while existing research has acknowledged the presence of biblical intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*, few studies have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of its specific manifestations and implications for the gender structure within the narrative. This research gap calls for a closer examination of how Atwood employs biblical themes, motifs, and language to shape the gendered world of Gilead.

The study of biblical intertextuality within literature has demonstrated its potential for engaging with and challenging religious and gender discourses. Scholars such as Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes have explored the ways in which intertextuality functions as a means of reinterpretation, subversion, and critique. Drawing on these theories, this

dissertation aims to analyze the various ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* engages with biblical allusions, such as the stories of Rachel and Leah, the concept of Handmaids as a distorted interpretation of biblical concubines, and the religious symbolism present in the Red Center.

Furthermore, feminist literary theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the gender dynamics within *The Handmaid's Tale* and the subversive potential of biblical intertextuality. The works of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and bell hooks have examined the construction of gender identity, patriarchal power structures, and the agency of women. By employing these theoretical lenses, this dissertation seeks to investigate how Atwood's use of biblical intertextuality challenges and subverts traditional gender roles, offering critical insights into the agency, resistance, and resilience of female protagonists.

When conducting this research, several limitations have arisen. Firstly, the availability of primary sources related to the topic posed challenges. Access to original manuscripts, personal correspondence, or unpublished works was mostly restricted, limiting the depth of analysis. Secondly, the interpretation of biblical intertextuality and gender structure in postmodern fiction can be subjective, and researchers could have encountered differing viewpoints. This subjectivity could have affected the reliability and objectivity of the research findings. Additionally, the scope of the study is limited to Margaret Atwood's novel, thus excluding other significant works in the genre. Despite these limitations, careful research design, critical analysis of available sources, and acknowledgment of the research's boundaries were key in helping mitigate these challenges and contribute valuable insight to the scholarly discourse on the intersection of biblical intertextuality and gender structure in postmodern fiction.

This dissertation follows a well-organized structure that enables a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. The first chapter, titled "A Theoretical Introduction to

Postmodern Fiction, Biblical Intertext and Gender Structure,” provides a solid theoretical foundation for the subsequent analysis. It explores key concepts and theories related to postmodern fiction, biblical intertextuality, and gender structure, drawing on works by influential scholars in these fields. The second chapter, “Biblical Intertextuality in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” focuses on the specific manifestations of biblical references within Atwood’s novel. Through a close examination of biblical allusions, themes, and language employed by the author, this chapter unveils the intricate interplay between the biblical and the fictional world of Gilead. The third chapter, “Gender Structure in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” delves into the gender dynamics and power structures within the novel. These chapters employ a qualitative methodology, utilizing close textual analysis and thematic interpretation to examine the leading biblical foundations, the construction and deconstruction of gender roles, the agency of female characters, and the subversive potential of gendered resistance. By following this structured approach and employing qualitative analysis, this dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex link between biblical intertextuality and gender structure in the novel, contributing to the fields of postmodern fiction, feminist literary criticism, and religious studies.

By examining the intricate relationship between biblical intertextuality and gender structure in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this dissertation seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of Atwood’s work within the context of postmodern fiction and feminist literary discourse. Through a comprehensive analysis of the novel’s religious references and their implications for gender dynamics, this study aims to shed light on the broader cultural and literary significance of the novel, offering fresh insights into the thematic richness and subversive potential of Atwood’s work. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding gender, religion, and power in literature and provides a foundation for further exploration of similar themes in postmodern fiction.

Chapter One

A Theoretical Introduction to Postmodern Fiction, Biblical Intertextuality and Gender Structure

The first chapter is a theoretical framework and foundation for the subsequent introduction of postmodern fiction, biblical intertextuality, and gender structure.

Postmodern fiction challenges traditional narrative forms and disrupts established notions of truth, reality, and representation. By incorporating biblical intertextuality, these narratives engage with religious motifs and explore the intersections of literature and faith. Additionally, postmodern fiction critically examines gender structures, subverting traditional roles and highlighting the fluidity and performativity of gender. This chapter draws upon theories from postmodernism, literary criticism, and gender studies to examine the intricate relationship between postmodern fiction, biblical intertextuality, and gender structure. By analyzing key texts and engaging with scholarly discussions, this chapter hopes to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding these complex and multifaceted literary phenomena.

1. Introduction to Postmodern Fiction

Postmodernism, as a cultural and intellectual movement that emerged in the late 20th century, has had a significant impact on various aspects of contemporary culture, including literature. Postmodern fiction, a genre of literature that reflects the characteristics of postmodernism, including fragmentation, non-linear narrative structure, metafiction, intertextuality, and irony, has become an important aspect of contemporary literature. According to Brian McHale, “postmodern fiction typically disrupts traditional narrative conventions, often through the use of non-linear or fragmented narrative structures” (12). This disruption of traditional narrative structure reflects the postmodernist rejection of the idea of a fixed and coherent reality. As Linda Hutcheon explains, “metafiction is fiction

that is aware of its own fictionality” (3). In other words, postmodern fiction is characterized by a self-consciousness about its own status as a work of fiction.

Postmodernism emerged in the context of the decline of modernity and the rise of postmodernity. As Jean-Francois Lyotard argues, “postmodernity is characterized by an incredulity toward metanarratives” (23). This incredulity towards metanarratives reflects the postmodernist rejection of the idea of a grand narrative that can explain the world. The impact of World War II and the Cold War also had a significant influence on postmodernism, leading to a sense of disillusionment and skepticism about the idea of progress.

Postmodern fiction is characterized by a variety of literary techniques and themes that distinguish it from modernist and other literary movements. These characteristics include fragmented narratives, pastiche, metafiction, intertextuality, and irony and playfulness. Fragmented narratives challenge traditional linear storytelling, as postmodern fiction often features disjointed or fragmented narratives. Pastiche, the borrowing and imitation of different styles and genres, creates a self-referential and playful tone. Metafiction, where the author calls attention to the act of writing or the conventions of storytelling, is often self-referential. Intertextuality draws on a range of cultural references to create a rich intertextual web of meaning. Irony and playful humor challenge traditional literary conventions and assumptions.

Postmodernism emerged in the cultural and intellectual climate of the late 20th century, in response to the decline of modernity and the rise of postmodernity. Modernity, which had its roots in the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, was characterized by a belief in progress, reason, and the power of science and technology to transform society and improve the human condition. However, the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, as well as the political and social upheavals of the Cold War era, led to a sense

of disillusionment and skepticism about the idea of progress. Postmodernism can be seen as a response to this sense of disillusionment and skepticism, as well as a critique of the assumptions and values of modernity. As Jean-Francois Lyotard argues in *The Postmodern Condition*, postmodernity is characterized by an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (49). Metanarratives, in this context, refer to the grand narratives or master narratives that claimed to provide a unified and coherent account of history, society, and human nature. Postmodernism rejected these metanarratives as oppressive and limiting, and instead emphasized the fragmented and contingent nature of reality.

Postmodernism also emerged in the context of other cultural and intellectual movements of the late 20th century, such as feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural studies. These movements emphasized the importance of identity, difference, and the cultural and historical context in shaping our understanding of the world. In literature, postmodernism had a profound impact on the way that writers approached the act of storytelling. Postmodernist writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Salman Rushdie experimented with fragmented narrative structures, metafiction, intertextuality, and irony to create works that challenged traditional notions of plot, character, and genre. These writers sought to expand the possibilities of literature by exploring new forms and styles that reflected the complex and contingent nature of contemporary life.

Postmodern fiction is a vast and diverse landscape with numerous authors and works contributing to the genre. Some of the major postmodernist authors and their works include Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which is considered an exemplary postmodernist novel with fragmented narration, pastiche, and an interest in language for its own sake. Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* established him as a major American novelist and a leading voice of postmodernism. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* is a highly self-reflexive and self-conscious work that draws attention to the constructed nature of

reality and history. Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* is a classic example of postmodernist fiction, with its playful, ironic, and self-reflexive nature. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is an important work of postmodernist fiction that explores issues of history, memory, and identity. These authors and their works continue to be read and studied today for their innovative approaches to storytelling and their enduring contributions to the genre.

Despite the fact that postmodernism emerged as a cultural and intellectual movement in the latter half of the 20th century, its relevance and influence can still be seen today. Many of the ideas and themes that postmodernism explored continue to be relevant to contemporary society and culture. One of the key contributions of postmodernism was its critique of metanarratives and its emphasis on the contingency and fragmentation of reality. Fredric Jameson, a prominent postmodernist scholar, notes that postmodernism “represents a new stage of advanced capitalism” where “the very possibility of a collective historical project...has collapsed” (21). This critique remains relevant today, particularly in the context of the ongoing debates around truth, authority, and knowledge in the era of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” Postmodernism’s emphasis on the constructed nature of reality and the importance of considering the role of power and ideology in shaping our understanding of the world can provide a useful framework for navigating these debates. Postmodernism’s emphasis on difference, identity, and cultural context has also had a lasting impact on contemporary culture. Judith Butler, another influential postmodernist scholar, argues that “gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (6). The influence of postmodernism can be seen in the proliferation of identity politics, multiculturalism, and diversity initiatives across a range of fields, from literature and art to politics and business.

Furthermore, postmodernism’s challenge to traditional forms and genres has inspired a new generation of writers and artists to experiment with new forms and styles.

Douglas Kellner, a critic of postmodernism, acknowledges that “postmodernism has helped to inspire...new forms of cultural production that break down the boundaries between different media and genres” (18). The rise of hybrid genres, such as the graphic novel or the video essay, can be seen as a continuation of postmodernism’s emphasis on breaking down boundaries between different modes of expression. However, it is important to note that postmodernism has also been subject to criticism and debate. Some have argued that its emphasis on fragmentation and relativism has led to a loss of meaning and coherence, and that it has contributed to a culture of skepticism and cynicism. Others have criticized postmodernism’s rejection of grand narratives and its celebration of difference as being insufficiently critical of power and oppression. Despite these critiques, it is clear that postmodernism has had a lasting impact on contemporary culture and thought. Its emphasis on the constructed nature of reality, the importance of identity and difference, and the need to challenge traditional forms and genres continue to be relevant to our understanding of the world today.

Additionally, postmodernism emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as a cultural and intellectual movement that sought to challenge the dominant ideologies and metanarratives of the time. Its critique of reality, language, and representation, as well as its emphasis on difference, identity, and cultural context, have had a lasting impact on contemporary culture and thought. The relevance of postmodernism today lies in its emphasis on the constructed nature of reality, the importance of identity and difference, and the need to challenge traditional forms and genres. While postmodernism has been subject to criticism and debate, its legacy continues to shape contemporary culture and thought. As readers continue to navigate the complexities of the postmodern world, its insights and critiques can provide a useful framework for understanding the role of power, ideology, and culture in shaping the understanding of reality.

1.1. Characteristics of Postmodern Fiction

Studying the characteristics of postmodern fiction is important because it provides a better understanding of the ways in which literature reflects and shapes the cultural and historical contexts in which it is created. As Linda Hutcheon notes, “Postmodernism is about difference and discontinuity, about the rejection of absolute truths and grand narratives, about the destabilization of the subject and the critique of representation” (2). By analyzing the characteristics of postmodern fiction, we can gain insight into the ways in which postmodernist authors challenge traditional notions of narrative, language, and meaning.

1.1.1. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is a key characteristic of postmodern fiction, and it refers to the way in which texts are interconnected and referential to each other. As Brian McHale notes, “Postmodernism...is characterized by its commitment to intertextuality, that is, to the acknowledgment that any text is an amalgam of citations, allusions, and borrowings from other texts” (7). In other words, postmodernist authors are not creating in a vacuum but are instead actively engaging with and building upon the literary and cultural traditions that precede them. One of the most famous examples of intertextuality in postmodernist literature is James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which draws upon Homer’s *Odyssey* as a structural and thematic framework. Similarly, in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, the protagonist Oedipa Maas becomes obsessed with deciphering clues that lead her to uncover a vast conspiracy that connects seemingly disparate elements of American culture. This intertextual approach highlights the interconnectedness of seemingly separate cultural and literary works, challenging the notion of a unified narrative or fixed meaning. Through intertextuality, postmodern fiction also critiques traditional notions of authorship and originality. Linda Hutcheon argues that “in intertextuality, influence is not seen as an act of

copying or as something that diminishes the value of the derivative work. Rather, it is an act of engaging with a previous work in order to create something new and different” (104). In this way, intertextuality becomes a tool for postmodernist authors to challenge and subvert traditional notions of authority and originality in literature.

1.1.2. Deconstruction

Deconstruction is another key characteristic of postmodern fiction, and it refers to the way in which texts are dismantled and analyzed to reveal their underlying assumptions and contradictions. As Jacques Derrida notes, “Deconstruction...is concerned with the difference between the meaning of words and the meaning of things, between the signifier and the signified” (23). Postmodernist authors use deconstruction as a tool to challenge and subvert traditional literary and cultural narratives. For example, in Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Written on the Body*, the narrator’s gender and identity are never revealed, challenging traditional assumptions about the relationship between gender and power. Similarly, in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, the characters’ obsession with consumer culture is revealed to be a form of psychological defense mechanism against the fear of death, challenging the assumptions of capitalist society. Through deconstruction, postmodernist authors also question the stability and authority of language and representation. As Steven Connor notes, “deconstruction reveals the inherent instability and contingency of language itself, and calls into question the very possibility of meaning” (59). This destabilization of language and meaning challenges the notion of a fixed and objective reality and highlights the ways in which language and representation are constructed and contested.

1.1.3. Parody

Parody is a characteristic of postmodern fiction that involves the imitation and subversion of existing literary and cultural forms. Postmodernist authors use parody to expose the conventions and assumptions of these forms, often with a sense of irony or

humor. As Linda Hutcheon notes, “parody is a kind of ironic imitation, one that exposes the limits of the original by undermining it with exaggeration or distortion” (6). Parody can take many forms in postmodern fiction, from the imitation of specific literary genres, such as detective fiction or science fiction, to the mocking of cultural icons and symbols. For example, in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the protagonist Billy Pilgrim is abducted by aliens and travels through time, parodying the conventions of science fiction while also challenging traditional notions of linear time and causality. Through parody, postmodernist authors also critique the ways in which dominant cultural narratives are constructed and maintained. By subverting and mocking these forms, postmodernist authors create space for alternative perspectives and voices to emerge.

1.1.4. Nonlinear Narrative

Nonlinear narrative is a characteristic of postmodern fiction that disrupts traditional notions of linear storytelling. In nonlinear narratives, events are presented out of chronological order or from multiple perspectives, challenging the reader to piece together the story in a non-linear way. As Brian McHale notes, “nonlinear narration...disrupts the stability and coherence of conventional narrative time” (10). Postmodernist authors use nonlinear narrative as a way to reflect the complexities and fragmentation of modern life. By breaking down the linear progression of events, these authors challenge traditional notions of cause and effect and emphasize the contingency and unpredictability of experience. One example of a nonlinear narrative in postmodern fiction is Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. The novel is structured as a series of beginnings, each of which is interrupted before it can be resolved, creating a story that is constantly shifting and evolving. Similarly, in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the story is told from multiple perspectives and through different streams of consciousness, creating a fragmented and nonlinear narrative that mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and

experience. Through nonlinear narrative, postmodernist authors also challenge the authority of the author and the stability of the text itself. As McHale notes, “nonlinear narrative...blurs the boundaries between author and reader, and between text and world” (12). By disrupting traditional narrative forms, these authors create a space for new forms of meaning-making and interpretation to emerge.

Moreover, postmodern fiction is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, characterized by a range of different techniques and strategies. However, the common thread that runs through all postmodern fiction is a rejection of traditional literary conventions, and a willingness to experiment with form, structure, and meaning. As Linda Hutcheon argues, “postmodernism is not the death of the novel, but its revitalization” (3).

2. Exploring Biblical Intertextuality

Biblical intertextuality is a critical lens through which scholars examine the intricate network of references, allusions, and echoes found within the Bible itself and in various works of literature. The concept of intertextuality, as developed by Julia Kristeva and subsequently expanded upon by other theorists, emphasizes the interconnectedness of texts and the influence they exert on each other. This explores the notion of biblical intertextuality and its significance in shedding light on the layers of meaning and cultural context within the biblical narrative.

Biblical intertextuality refers to the presence of textual references, echoes, or allusions within the biblical text itself or in other works that draw from biblical traditions. This interplay of texts is particularly prevalent within the Bible, given its rich history and the myriad sources that contribute to its compilation. As Terry Eagleton observes, “The biblical text is not a monolithic entity, but rather a palimpsest of many different cultural layers” (87). The Bible abounds with instances of intertextuality, wherein one passage refers to or builds upon another. For instance, in the New Testament, the Gospel of

Matthew echoes the Hebrew Bible's prophecy from Isaiah, stating, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). This allusion establishes a connection between the Old and New Testaments, highlighting the fulfillment of prophecies within the Christian tradition.

Moreover, the use of intertextuality within the Bible also serves to reinforce theological themes and concepts. In his book *The Bible as Literature*, T.J. Meadowcroft emphasizes that "the recurring motifs, parallel structures, and echoes in the biblical text contribute to the development and consolidation of key theological ideas" (52). These textual links create a tapestry of meaning, enhancing the depth and complexity of the biblical narrative. Beyond the confines of the Bible itself, biblical intertextuality manifests in various forms of literature. This interplay between biblical traditions and secular works has been a subject of scholarly inquiry. For example, William Shakespeare frequently draws upon biblical stories, characters, and language in his plays. In *Macbeth*, the character of Lady Macbeth echoes the biblical figure of Eve, as both are associated with temptation and the consequences of succumbing to it. As Robert Alter notes, "Shakespeare's allusions to biblical stories not only enrich his language but also contribute to the thematic resonance of his works" (79).

The exploration of biblical intertextuality provides invaluable insights into the historical, cultural, and theological dimensions of the text. It illuminates the interconnections between different parts of the Bible, unveiling layers of meaning that might otherwise remain concealed. Furthermore, by tracing intertextual references in other works of literature, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the Bible's enduring influence on human thought and expression. Biblical intertextuality uncovers the intricate web of references and echoes within the Bible and its influence on subsequent literary works. Through the careful analysis of intertextual connections, scholars shed light on the

layers of meaning, theological themes, and cultural context embedded within the biblical narrative. By recognizing and exploring these interconnections, we gain a more profound understanding of the Bible as a rich tapestry of textual influences and a cornerstone of Western literature.

2.1. Biblical Intertextuality in Postmodern Fiction

Intertextuality, the interconnectedness of texts, has been a significant subject of academic discussion for decades. However, in recent years, biblical intertextuality in postmodern fiction has gained attention from scholars. Postmodernist writers often incorporate biblical allusions and themes into their works, creating an intertextual dialogue that reflects a complex relationship between the Bible and contemporary literature. According to Jean-Francois Lyotard, postmodernism is characterized by a “skepticism towards metanarratives” (35). However, many postmodernist authors have subverted this skepticism by utilizing biblical stories and symbols as metanarratives in their own works. As Michael Hardin argues, “the Bible is a metanarrative that provides a backdrop for understanding ourselves, the world, and the stories we tell about ourselves and the world.” Postmodernist authors use this metanarrative as a starting point for exploring the human experience in a postmodernist context. Moreover, exploring biblical intertextuality in postmodern fiction allows understanding the ways in which contemporary authors engage with tradition and create new narratives. As Maria Margaroni notes, “postmodernism’s play with the biblical text illuminates a double move: it defies the authority of the text while exploiting its rhetorical and ideological potential” (548). Through this intertextual dialogue, postmodernist authors challenge our assumptions about language, power, and the nature of storytelling itself. Intertextuality is also deemed as the idea that all texts are connected to each other through a network of references, a term that has become a crucial concept in literary studies, especially in postmodern fiction. The use of intertextuality

enables writers to reference other texts, and to explore, observe, and question on cultural and literary traditions. One of the most significant sources of intertextuality in Western culture is the Bible, which has influenced literature for centuries.

One of the most popular examples of biblical intertextuality in postmodernist fiction is Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Eco uses the structure of a murder mystery set in a medieval monastery to explore the relationship between religion, knowledge, and power. The novel is full of biblical references, such as the seven trumpets of the Apocalypse, which the monks use to call for help, and the labyrinthine library that evokes the maze of the Minotaur, a reference to the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in the Bible. Another example of intertextual relationship is in the works of Salman Rushdie. In his novel, *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie draws on the story of the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran, but also incorporates elements of biblical narratives, such as the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. Rushdie's use of intertextuality "brings to the surface the multifaceted nature of the postmodernist relationship with tradition," as argued by Caroline J. Simon (212). Similarly, in her novel *The Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood uses intertextuality to explore themes of power, gender, and narrative. Atwood incorporates biblical allusions, such as the story of the Fall and the book of Job, to comment on the patriarchal structures that pervade society. As Atwood herself has stated, "the Bible has contributed to our culture to an extraordinary degree...and it's going to continue to influence writers, whether they like it or not."

Furthermore, biblical intertextuality has become a crucial element of postmodern fiction, enabling writers to explore and challenge cultural and literary traditions. Through the use of biblical intertextuality, postmodernist writers can subvert traditional biblical narratives and offer alternative perspectives on religion, gender, and power. As literary critic Roland Barthes once said, "texts are never original, but rather they are made up of a

mosaic of quotations” (qtd. in Genette 16). In the case of postmodern fiction, biblical intertextuality is a key part of that mosaic, and its importance cannot be overstated.

2.2. Intertextuality in The New Testament

The New Testament is one of the sources that are frequently used in postmodern fiction, a collection of texts that has had a profound impact on Western culture. This kind of intertextuality provides explorations of the ways in which the New Testament is used in postmodern fiction, focusing on the themes of redemption and apocalypse. One of the most common ways in which the New Testament is used in postmodern fiction is through the theme of redemption. In many postmodern novels, characters are searching for some kind of salvation or deliverance from their troubled lives, and the New Testament provides a rich source of imagery and symbolism for this quest. For example, in Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, the father and son at the heart of the story are struggling to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. As they travel through a devastated landscape, the father often quotes from the New Testament, using its language of hope and salvation to sustain himself and his son. In one particularly moving scene, the father tells his son: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world” (McCarthy 32). Here, the father is drawing on the New Testament concept of the “word of God,” which is seen as a source of strength and guidance for believers.

Another way in which the New Testament is used in postmodern fiction is through the theme of apocalypse. The New Testament contains many passages that describe the end of the world and the coming of a new age, and these ideas have been taken up by postmodernist writers as a way of exploring contemporary anxieties about the future. For example, in Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise*, the characters are confronted with the possibility of a catastrophic event known as the “Airborne Toxic Event.” This event is described in apocalyptic terms, with the narrator noting that “the sky above us was the

color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (DeLillo 15). Here, DeLillo is using the language of the New Testament to suggest that the event is not just a natural disaster, but a sign of the end of the world. Furthermore, the New Testament is a rich source of intertextuality for postmodern fiction, providing a complex set of symbols and images that can be used to explore a wide range of themes. By drawing on this source, postmodernist writers are able to create narratives that challenge conventional ways of thinking about religion, history, and the human condition. Through their use of intertextuality, they are able to create new meanings and connections that reflect the fragmented and uncertain nature of the postmodern world.

In postmodern fiction, intertextuality serves as a creative strategy through which authors engage with and transform existing texts. According to Brian McHale, postmodern literature often “refuses to be wholly original” and instead embraces intertextuality as a means of engaging with the cultural, historical, and literary heritage of the past (65). The New Testament, as a foundational religious text, offers rich material for intertextual exploration and recontextualization in postmodern fiction. More on the matter, the New Testament is a treasure trove of narrative archetypes and symbols that continue to resonate with contemporary authors. Postmodernist writers frequently draw on these symbolic elements to imbue their works with layers of meaning and significance. For instance, in his novel *The Sparrow*, Mary Doria Russell employs intertextuality to explore themes of sacrifice and redemption by evoking the crucifixion narrative.

Postmodern fiction often subverts and reinterprets traditional narratives, including those found in The New Testament. This subversive approach serves to critique and challenge established power structures, religious dogma, and societal norms. In *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, José Saramago offers a radical reinterpretation of the life of Jesus, engaging in a dialogue with the New Testament to explore themes of human

vulnerability and divine intervention. According to Jonathan Hart, Saramago's novel exemplifies the postmodern tendency to "demystify and dismantle religious narratives" (85). Also, Postmodernist authors frequently blend multiple religious traditions and texts, including The New Testament, to create a sense of religious hybridity in their works. Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* exemplifies this interplay of religious references. By reimagining biblical figures and stories, such as the angelic and demonic figures of Gibreel and Saladin, Rushdie weaves a tapestry of intertextuality that challenges fixed notions of religious identity. As Bruce Foltz argues, "Rushdie's novel embodies the postmodern condition, where religious plurality and intertextual fluidity coexist" (78).

Intertextuality in postmodern fiction, particularly in relation to The New Testament, provides a rich avenue for exploration and reinterpretation. By engaging with biblical narratives, symbols, and themes, postmodernist authors challenge traditional interpretations, critique religious institutions, and interrogate the role of sacred texts in contemporary society. Through intertextuality, these writers contribute to the ongoing dialogue between literature, religion, and culture, fostering a deeper understanding of the complex intersections between these domains.

2.3. The Role of Intertextuality in the Construction of Meaning

Intertextuality is a critical feature of postmodern fiction that plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning. In postmodern literature, writers make use of intertextuality to reference and reinterpret other texts, genres, and cultural artifacts to create new meanings. According to Jonathan Culler, intertextuality can be defined as "the shaping of a text's meaning by its relation to other texts" (119). Intertextuality is a way for writers to create meaning by drawing on other texts, genres, and cultural artifacts. In postmodern literature, intertextuality serves several purposes. Firstly, it is used to subvert the traditional notions of authorship and originality. In postmodern fiction, the writer is not seen as the sole

creator of meaning, but rather as a participant in a larger cultural conversation. Secondly, intertextuality is used to create layers of meaning that are not immediately apparent. By referencing other texts, writers can create new meanings that are only accessible to readers who are familiar with the intertextual references. Furthermore, intertextuality is used to comment on and critique existing cultural forms and ideologies. By referencing and reinterpreting other texts, writers can subvert or challenge dominant cultural narratives and ideologies. Moreover, intertextuality plays a crucial role in the construction of meaning in postmodern fiction. Through intertextual references, writers create new layers of meaning, subvert traditional notions of authorship and originality, and critique existing cultural forms and ideologies. As the literary critic Linda Hutcheon notes, “Intertextuality is a fundamental feature of postmodernism, a way of emphasizing the interconnectedness of cultural forms and challenging the idea of literary autonomy” (51). Through intertextuality, postmodernist writers create a new type of literature that is both self-referential and in dialogue with the wider culture.

2.4. Subversion of Dominant Religious Discourses

Postmodern fiction has long been recognized as a literary movement that challenges and deconstructs established norms and ideologies. One prominent aspect of this subversive tendency is the critique and subversion of dominant religious discourses. Through the use of innovative narrative techniques, postmodernist authors dismantle traditional religious frameworks, offering alternative perspectives and questioning the authority and validity of established beliefs. This explores the subversion of dominant religious discourses in postmodern fiction, drawing upon scholarly sources and literary works to support the analysis.

Postmodern fiction often undermines the unquestioned authority of religious discourse, interrogating the power structures that underpin it. According to Mary Klages, in

her book *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide*, postmodern literature “tends to treat religious dogma as just another discourse among many,” highlighting its constructed nature (57). Authors engage in this deconstruction by exposing the limitations and biases inherent in religious doctrines. For instance, Salman Rushdie’s novel “The Satanic Verses” challenges the authority of religious texts and traditions. As Jeffery J. Kripal argues in his article “The Uses of Blasphemy: Salman Rushdie and the Perils of Postmodernism,” Rushdie’s work “exposes the arbitrary nature of religious authority” and “deconstructs the monopoly of truth claimed by religious institutions” (322). By employing imaginative and satirical elements, Rushdie presents a vision that destabilizes established religious narratives.

Postmodern fiction also seeks to reimagine religious narratives by exploring alternative interpretations and perspectives. These works aim to open up new spaces for marginalized voices and challenge the dominant discourse. Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, argues that postmodernist authors “reinterpret, rewrite, and, in general, provide alternative versions” of religious narratives (112). This subversion allows for a reevaluation of religious norms and exposes the oppressive nature of dominant ideologies. In Jeanette Winterson’s novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the author presents a narrative influenced by her own experiences growing up in a religiously restrictive environment. By reimagining religious motifs and examining their implications, Winterson invites readers to critically assess dominant religious discourses.

Postmodern fiction frequently explores spirituality and transcendence outside the confines of organized religion. It seeks to transcend traditional religious boundaries and embrace a more inclusive and diverse understanding of spirituality. According to Jean-François Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, postmodernism rejects “metanarratives,” including dominant religious frameworks, and instead advocates for a

plurality of narratives (Lyotard 23). In Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits*, the author incorporates elements of magical realism to explore spirituality and the supernatural. As Claudia Barnett highlights in her article "Isabel Allende's Postmodern Vision," Allende's work "embraces diverse spiritual practices" and presents a holistic view of spirituality that extends beyond organized religion (119). By challenging conventional religious boundaries, Allende expands the scope of spiritual experiences in her narrative.

Postmodern fiction actively engages with and subverts dominant religious discourses, dismantling their authority, reimagining their narratives, and exploring spirituality beyond traditional boundaries. Through their innovative narrative techniques, postmodernist authors offer alternative perspectives, critique oppressive power structures, and emphasize the constructed nature of religious doctrines. By interrogating and subverting dominant religious discourses, these works invite readers to question and reimagine their own beliefs and foster a more inclusive understanding of spirituality.

3. Understanding Gender Structure

Gender is a social construct that is distinct from biological sex. It is a set of socially constructed roles, behaviors, and expectations that society attributes to individuals based on their perceived sex. As Judith Lorber argues, "Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes" (Lorber 7). This socialization process begins at birth and continues throughout an individual's life, shaping their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in accordance with societal norms.

Socialization plays a crucial role in the formation of gender structure. From a young age, children are socialized into specific gender roles and expectations through various agents, including family, peers, education, and media. According to Sandra Lipsitz Bem, "Children learn to be masculine or feminine as they are rewarded for behavior deemed appropriate to their sex and punished for behavior deemed inappropriate" (Bem 43). This

process of reinforcement undercores gender norms and perpetuates the existing gender structure.

Intersectionality is another crucial aspect of understanding gender structure. It recognizes that gender intersects with other social categories such as race, class, sexuality, and ability, resulting in complex and diverse experiences of gender. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, “Because intersectionality has challenged the received wisdom that gender discrimination occurs along a single axis...it has opened up new ways of thinking about...how gender informs class and race relations” (1342). Intersectionality highlights the interconnectedness of various social identities and underscores the importance of considering multiple dimensions of oppression and privilege.

Gender structure is intricately linked to power dynamics within society. Historically, gender has been associated with a hierarchical system that privileges masculinity over femininity. As Raewyn Connell asserts, “Masculinities are...constructed in relation to women and femininity...The authority of men over women is a fundamental dimension of gender relations” (Connell 77). This power imbalance perpetuates gender inequality, limiting opportunities and resources for individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms.

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the need to challenge and dismantle rigid gender structures. Feminist movements, LGBTQ+ activism, and scholarly research have played pivotal roles in advocating for gender equality and expanding our understanding of diverse gender identities. As R.W. Connell states, “The challenge of gender transformation is to expose the gendering of power...and to propose alternative gender arrangements” (Connell 184). This ongoing process of challenging gender norms and advocating for inclusivity has the potential to create a more equitable and just society.

Understanding gender structure is essential for comprehending the complexities of human identity and the dynamics of social interaction. Through socialization, intersectionality, power dynamics, and resistance, gender structure shapes our perceptions, behaviors, and societal expectations. By critically examining and challenging these structures, we can strive for a more inclusive and egalitarian society that values and respects the diverse experiences and identities of all individuals.

3.1. Gender Structure in Postmodern Fiction

Through dialect and social accounts, postmodern fiction frequently questions traditional gender structures and standards. Deconstructing parallel gender categories, such as male and female, is a fundamental aspect of postmodern fiction. Many postmodernist literary works feature characters who challenge or transcend conventional sexual orientation roles.

The construction of gender through dialect and social accounts is a topic that postmodernist journalists frequently explore. Postmodern fiction also looks into the idea of sexual orientation as an execution, addressing the suspicions and predispositions inherent in gendered dialect and challenging how gendered personalities are constructed through social accounts. Characters may be shown “performing” their sexual attitude parts, and the plot may highlight how societal norms create and put these exhibitions into practice.

Postmodern fiction generally offers a rich and complex investigation of sex structures, challenging traditional double categories and critiquing how gendered personalities are created and maintained by culture and dialect. The idea that gender is a socially constructed category that is constantly being redefined and renegotiated rather than a fixed, intrinsic identity is one of the main themes of postmodern fiction. Women authors, like Janet Winter son, Angela Carter, and Toni Morrison, for instance, frequently deal with gender stereotypes and dichotomies in their works in order to subvert the dominance of

patriarchal discourses. They also use parody, sarcasm, and satire to clarify the boundaries of traditional gender roles and foreground dominant patriarchal discourses. The general view of gender and its relationship to power, identity, and social structures in postmodern fiction offers readers a rich and intricate look at the subject. It challenges readers to think critically about prevailing gender norms and to come up with new, inclusive options for gender expression and identity.

3.2. The Construction of Gender Identity

A variety of factors contribute to the construction of gender identity, which is a complex concept that had different definitions over the years with the development of psychological studies and the birth of theorists whom challenged and criticized the societal norms and expectations. The World Health Organization defines gender identity as “a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth” (WHO), while Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary describe gender identity as “the way somebody considers their own gender which may be different from the sex they were said to have at birth” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). In other words, gender identity is more of what a individuals consider themselves to be, not how they appear to others.

The construction of an individual’s identity is influenced by various factors that can shape the development and the construction of one’s identity since the early years of childhood because of how in most societies a basic division is made to distinguish the gender attributes for males and females, and these attributes are the expectations that society expects from masculinity and femininity in which they are translated in certain behaviors, attitudes and appearance. In this case, Judith Butler argues in her book *Gender Trouble* that “Gender is always a doing in this sense, but it is not done by a subject who could be said to pre-exist the act” (37). Furthermore, she proceeds to say that “when we say

that gender is performed, we usually mean that we've taken on a role; we're acting in some way...To say that gender is performative is a little different, because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman...We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that's simply true about us, a fact about us. Actually, it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start." (Big Think 00:00:06-00:01:35)

Overall, gender identity is determined and shaped through social constructs that influences the way individuals operate as adults, for instance the way of parenting females and males varies from one society to another in which men and women learn from a young age about the expectations associated with their gender, thus females have been more severely restricted by traditional gender roles and pressured to follow what it is dictated by society as a part of being women and in that case being submissive, weak and having no agency. Moreover, Gender identity is influenced by biology, culture, socialization, psychology, and Intersectionality. Some individuals have a strong sense of gender identity from a young age, while others may experience confusion or uncertainty about their gender identity.

3.3. The Subversion of Traditional Gender Roles

Since the beginning of human life men and women were not only biologically different, however women were treated as an inferior gender that was expected to accommodate to society's control and accept living dependent to men. In other words, women were excluded from scientific, economic and political fields considering them to be unqualified and created to stick to domestication and bearing children, until these gender roles were challenged by worldwide feminists and human activists to create a safe balanced

society for both men and women in which they claim that patriarchy harms and affects both genders.

One of the major feminist activists that held the responsibility to advocate for women all around the world on her shoulders is Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher, novelist and feminist. Her second published book *The Second Sex* was and still one of the revolutionary texts of modern feminism, in which De Beauvoir argued in that women were not fully human because men defined femininity, and that they were the “other” or second sex in a world where humanity was primarily defined by man’s identity. De Beauvoir posits gender roles for women in following context: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (283). Thus, De Beauvoir’s investigation brought the classification of “orientation” into center interestingly, meanwhile reliably recognizing natural sex and social molding.

Subversion is viewed as the method by which primarily females and girls, but not all men, use gender, power, and cultural ideology to reject school ideology that threatens their humanity and dignity. Subversion is also known as appropriate transformative resistance or opposition; in other words, the subversion of gender roles refers to the rejection or challenge of societal expectations and norms. People are marginalized and restricted as a result of these traditional gender roles, which frequently classify particular behaviors, activities, and roles as either masculine or feminine. Furthermore, the rejection of gender stereotypes and the promotion of gender equality are two examples of the many ways in which traditional gender roles are subverted. This may entail encouraging people to take on roles and activities that are typically associated with the opposite gender, such as encouraging men to express their feelings and women to pursue careers in fields dominated by men.

In general, the subversion of traditional gender roles is an essential step toward the

development of a society that is more inclusive and equitable. In this society, people are free to express themselves and pursue their goals without being constrained by stifling gender norms and stereotypes. It requires a central change of social designs and power relations, where orientation isn't utilized for of persecution or underestimation.

3.4. The Intersection of Gender and Power

The Intersection of gender and power alludes to the manners by which gender and power elements associate and shape social connections, foundations, and social standards. The capacity to control resources, exert influence over other people, and make decisions that have an effect on society is power. On the other hand, gender is a socially constructed category that includes the cultural roles, expectations, and norms that go along with being male or female. Thus, power gender is closely related because gender frequently influences how power is distributed and exercised in society. Women are frequently marginalized and oppressed as a result of patriarchal systems, which place an emphasis on male dominance and control. In addition to that and due to gendered expectations and biases, women may face barriers in the workplace and have less access to education, healthcare, and political representation. This can bring about a power irregularity that detracts ladies and supports orientation disparity

Gender can likewise shape power elements in subtle ways, like in relational connections. Social assumptions around gender might prompt specific sorts of conduct to be viewed as more "manly" or "feminine", which can influence power dynamics within connections. For instance, men might be associated to be more emphatic and prevailing, while ladies might be associated to be more agreeable and obliging, nonetheless, it is essential to take note that the connection between gender and power isn't fixed or deterministic. People and networks can challenge and oppose male-centric frameworks, making progress toward more impartial power appropriation. Women's activist

developments and activism have been instrumental in testing gendered power elements and pursuing orientation correspondence. In summary, societal beliefs and social norms shape the complex and nuanced relationship between gender and power. Humans could indeed aspire to build equitable and equal society by examining and challenging gendered power dynamics.

3.5. Gender and Themes of Fragmentation and Disintegration

The collapse of something that was previously whole or cohesive is referred to as fragmentation or disintegration. These themes can refer to individuals whose sense of self, identity, or place in society feels shattered or disintegrated in the context of gender.

Individuals may have trouble reconciling their internal sense of self with the expectations that society places on them from the outside. As a result, gender identity and gender roles can both contribute to fragmentation and disintegration. As survivors deal with the traumatic effects of violence on their lives, gender-based violence can also contribute to feelings of fragmentation and disintegration. In general, looking at how gender and fragmentation/disintegration intersect can shed light on the difficulties and complexities of navigating gendered experiences in a society that frequently imposes narrow and limiting expectations.

In relation to gender fragmentation and disintegration helps to explore and examine of complexities in gender experiences and that is highlighted in various themes that includes:

- **Gender Identity:** People who don't fit the traditional gender roles may feel like their inner sense of self and what society expects of them outside of them are at odds or falling apart. Because they do not neatly fit into the binary categories of male or female.
- **Gender Roles:** Women who feel obligated to adjust to conventional orientation jobs

might encounter a feeling of deterioration between their own yearnings and cultural assumptions. In a similar vein, men who are subjected to the expectation of traditional masculinity may experience a sense of disintegration between their true selves and the expectations set by society.

- **Gender-based Violence:** As they confront the traumatic effects of the violence on their lives, survivors of sexual assault or intimate partner violence may experience a sense of self-destruction. Because it undermines trust and social cohesion, gender-based violence can also contribute to a sense of disintegration in communities and societies.
- **Discrimination and Marginalization:** When people feel excluded or stigmatized because of their gender identity or expression, discrimination and marginalization based on gender can contribute to a sense of fragmentation and disintegration.

This chapter has provided a theoretical foundation of postmodern fiction, biblical intertextuality, and gender structure. It led an exploration of the ways in which postmodern fiction disrupts traditional narrative forms and challenges established notions of truth and reality. Through the incorporation of biblical intertextuality, these narratives engage with religious motifs and offer alternative perspectives on identity, power, and agency. Moreover, it provided an examination of how postmodern fiction critically explores gender structures, subverting traditional roles and highlighting the fluidity and performativity of gender. By drawing upon theories from postmodernism, literary criticism, and gender studies, this chapter has laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between these literary phenomena. The subsequent chapters will build upon this foundation, delving into specific texts and conducting detailed analyses to further unravel the complexities of postmodern fiction, biblical intertextuality, and gender

structure. Through this comprehensive exploration, this aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse, shedding light on the transformative potential of these narratives and their implications for our understanding of literature, religion, and gender.

Chapter Two

Biblical Intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The second chapter delves into the exploration of biblical intertextuality within Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Set in a totalitarian society where women are subjugated and reproductive control is enforced, the novel draws upon various biblical references and narratives to critically examine power, gender, and religious authority. By examining the intertextual relationship between the novel and biblical texts, this chapter seeks to illuminate how Atwood employs biblical allusions, symbols, and language to enhance the thematic depth and social critique within her narrative. Through a close analysis of key biblical intertexts in *novel*, this chapter aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel's literary and cultural significance, shedding light on the ways in which religious narratives shape and inform contemporary literature.

1. An Overview of the Novel

The Handmaid's Tale is an extensively detailed and thought-provoking dystopian novel written by Margaret Atwood. First published in 1985, the book presents a dark and harrowing vision of a future society known as the Republic of Gilead, which has replaced the United States after a violent overthrow of the government. Atwood's narrative unfolds through the eyes of the protagonist, Offred, whose real name is never revealed. She is a Handmaid, one of the few remaining fertile women in this oppressive regime. The Handmaids are forcibly assigned to high-ranking individuals known as Commanders, who are part of the ruling elite, and their primary role is to bear children for these men and their infertile Wives. Offred's personal account offers readers a haunting and intimate portrayal of life within this totalitarian society.

The Republic of Gilead justifies its existence by citing a range of socio-political issues that plagued the preceding United States, including declining birth rates,

environmental crises, and rampant moral degradation. In the wake of a staged terrorist attack, a radical religious group called the Sons of Jacob seize control and institute a new social order, heavily influenced by extremist interpretations of Christianity. Under Gilead's regime, women are strictly categorized and stripped of their rights. They are divided into different classes, including Handmaids, Marthas (domestic servants), Econowives (wives of lower-ranking men), and Aunts (women who train and monitor other women). The society is governed by a strict hierarchy, and deviations from its rules are met with severe punishments, including public executions and physical mutilation.

Offred's narrative constantly weaves between her present circumstances and recollections of her life before the rise of Gilead. These memories provide glimpses into a world that was marked by personal freedoms, relationships, and a sense of identity that has been forcibly suppressed. Her longing for her daughter and her husband, both of whom were separated from her during the upheaval, fuels her determination to survive and resist the system. Throughout the novel, Atwood explores themes such as gender oppression, reproductive rights, autonomy, religious fanaticism, and the consequences of unchecked power. The narrative delves into the psychological and emotional toll that the oppressive society exacts upon its inhabitants, emphasizing the loss of individuality, agency, and even the ability to express one's own thoughts and desires.

Despite the overwhelming oppression, resistance and small acts of defiance emerge. Offred forms a clandestine bond with Ofglen, another Handmaid, and they exchange covert information about the regime and their secret desires for freedom. These moments of rebellion provide glimmers of hope and serve as a reminder that even in the face of extreme adversity, the human spirit can endure.

As the story progresses, Offred embarks on a dangerous affair with the Commander, breaking the established rules of Gilead. This illicit relationship introduces

further complexities, blurring the lines between power, desire, and the potential for personal liberation. Offred's interactions with other characters, such as Serena Joy, the Commander's Wife, and Nick, a driver with hidden motives, add layers of tension and ambiguity to the narrative. In her quest for freedom, Offred becomes entangled with a secret resistance network known as Mayday. This underground movement seeks to undermine the regime and restore democratic values. Offred's hope for escape and reunification with her family grows stronger as she becomes more involved in the resistance, ultimately leading to a climactic and ambiguous ending that leaves readers contemplating the possibilities of her fate.

The Handmaid's Tale has garnered critical acclaim for its compelling storytelling, vivid imagery, and its exploration of important sociopolitical themes. Atwood's meticulous world-building and attention to detail create a chillingly realistic portrayal of a society where individual rights are subjugated to the whims of an authoritarian regime. The novel's enduring relevance has made it a classic of speculative fiction and a cornerstone of feminist literature. The book's impact has extended beyond the realm of literature. In 2017, a television adaptation of "The Handmaid's Tale" was released, garnering widespread acclaim and a dedicated fan base. The series expanded upon Atwood's world and characters, bringing the story to life with powerful performances and thought-provoking visuals. It further amplified discussions around feminism, reproductive rights, and the dangers of totalitarianism in contemporary society.

The work serves as a stark reminder of the fragility of democracy, the potential consequences of unchecked power, and the importance of valuing individual rights and equality. Its enduring popularity and continued relevance highlight its significance as a cautionary tale and a catalyst for critical discourse about the complexities of gender, politics, and human resilience.

2. **The Handmaid's Tale and The Bible**

The Handmaid's Tale has been praised for its powerful depiction of a society where women are subjugated and their bodies are used as objects for reproduction. While the novel is a work of fiction, it draws heavily on religious themes and imagery, particularly from the Bible. The novel has been interpreted by some scholars as a critique of the patriarchal themes present in the Bible. Atwood herself has acknowledged the influence of the Bible on her work, stating that “the Bible is the cultural foundation document of the West.” She goes on to say that she “wanted to see what happened when you took certain themes from it and extrapolated them into the future.” (Atwood qtd. in Tucker 82)

One of the most prominent biblical references in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the use of the term “Handmaid,” which is derived from the story of Rachel and her Handmaid Bilhah in Genesis. In the novel, the Handmaids are forced to bear children for their assigned male “Commanders” and their Wives, similar to how Bilhah was forced to bear children for Rachel and her husband. Atwood uses this biblical reference to highlight the patriarchal themes present in the Bible, and how they have been used to justify the subjugation of women. In addition to the use of biblical themes, the novel also includes direct quotations from the Bible, such as the passage from Genesis 30:1-3 that Offred, the novel's protagonist, recites in chapter 16: “And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.” (Atwood 151) This passage is significant in the novel because it highlights the desperation that the Handmaids feel to bear children and the pressure that is placed on them to fulfill this role.

While *The Handmaid's Tale* uses biblical themes and imagery to critique patriarchal society, some scholars have argued that the novel is not anti-religious. In fact, some have pointed out that the novel's use of biblical themes is similar to how the Bible itself critiques patriarchal society. As scholar Jeanne Dubino notes, “The Handmaid's Tale

is not anti-religious, but rather anti-patriarchal religion.” (30). Moreover, the novel is a powerful critique of patriarchal themes in both society and religion, drawing heavily on biblical themes and imagery to make its point. While the novel has been interpreted in different ways, it is clear that Atwood’s use of the Bible adds depth and complexity to the novel’s themes.

2.1. The Use of Biblical Names, Titles, Imagery and Symbolism

Using biblical names, titles, imagery, and symbolism in literature has been a longstanding tradition, with writers using them to evoke a sense of familiarity, provide context, and explore complex themes. In Margaret Atwood’s dystopian novel, biblical allusions are abundant, and they serve to provide a sense of foreboding, emphasize the oppressive nature of the society, and highlight the themes of power, control, and resistance. Accordingly, the use of biblical names in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is significant as it helps to establish the oppressive society in which the novel is set. The main character, Offred, is named after a biblical name, which gives the reader a sense of the religious undertones of the novel. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the society is a theocracy, and the use of biblical names suggests this idea. For example, the name of the Commander’s Wife, Serena Joy, is reminiscent of the biblical names Sarah and Joy, which are both associated with motherhood and fertility. Similarly, the name of the main character’s friend, Moira, is reminiscent of the biblical name Miriam, who is known for her leadership qualities. These names provide a sense of familiarity while also highlighting the oppressive nature of the society.

The utilization of biblical titles in the story is also significant. The title of the novel itself is a reference to a biblical story. In the book of Genesis, Rachel’s Handmaid, Bilhah, gives birth to a son named Dan, and Rachel declares that “God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son” (NIV Bible, Gen. 30.6-8). The title of the novel

references this story and bespeaks the idea that women are only valuable for their ability to bear children. Similarly, the title of “Handmaid” is taken from the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, where the sisters use their Handmaids to bear children for them. The use of this title reinforces the idea that women are nothing more than vessels for reproduction.

Moreover, the use of biblical imagery and symbolism in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is also significant. The color red, which is the color of the Handmaid’s clothing, is a symbol of sin and shame in the Bible. The use of this color reinforces the idea that the Handmaids are seen as sinful and shameful because of their ability to bear children. The use of biblical imagery is also evident in the scene where the Handmaids participate in the “participation” of a man accused of rape. This scene is reminiscent of the stoning of Stephen in the Bible and serves to highlight the oppressive nature of the society.

The clothing and attire of the characters in the novel are also significant. The Handmaid’s clothing, which is described as “a long red dress, which has been bought secondhand or else made from a sheet” (Atwood 8), is reminiscent of the puritan clothing worn by the early settlers in America. The use of this clothing reinforces the idea that the society is a theocracy, and the Handmaids are expected to be pure and chaste. Similarly, the clothing worn by the Wives of the Commanders is reminiscent of the clothing worn by women in the 1950s. This clothing reinforces the idea that the society is a patriarchal one, where women are expected to be subservient to men. Furthermore, the use of these elements reinforces the idea that the society is a theocracy, where women are only valued for their ability to bear children and are expected to be subservient to men. The biblical references in the novel serve to create a sense of foreboding and emphasize the themes of power, control, and resistance. Atwood’s use of these elements adds depth and complexity to the novel, making it a thought-provoking and powerful work of literature.

2.2. Biblical Titles as Symbols and Allegories in the Novel

In the novel, the use of biblical titles as symbols and allegories is prevalent. These titles serve to reinforce the oppressive nature of the society in the novel and emphasize the themes of power, control, and resistance. The title of “Handmaid” is used throughout the novel to refer to women who are forced to bear children for the ruling class. This title is taken from the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, where the sisters use their Handmaids to bear children for them. The use of this title in the novel serves as a symbol of the oppressive nature of the society. Handmaids are not valued for their individuality but rather for their ability to bear children. The title of “Handmaid” reinforces the idea that women are nothing more than vessels for reproduction. As Offred, the protagonist, reflects, “We were not each other’s, anymore. Instead, I was her womb and any children belonged to her” (Atwood 84). The use of the title “Handmaid” emphasizes the power imbalance between men and women in the novel.

Beyond, the title of “Commander” is another biblical title used in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This title is used to refer to the men who are in charge of the society. The use of this title as an allegory reinforces the idea that the society is a theocracy, where the ruling class is seen as having a divine mandate to rule. The Commander’s Wife, Serena Joy, reflects on the society’s origins, saying, “It used to be like that, once...It was in the Bible” (Atwood 151). The use of the title “Commander” reinforces the idea that the ruling class is seen as having a divine mandate to rule. Moreover, the title of “Angel” is also used in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. This title is used to refer to the soldiers who enforce the laws of the society. The use of this title as an allegory reinforces the idea that the society is a theocracy, where the laws are seen as divine. Offred reflects on the role of the angels, saying, “The Angels were more than guardian angels...they were also a political force, with their own views” (Atwood 27). The use of the title “Angel” emphasizes the power of the ruling class and the strict enforcement of their laws.

Additionally, the title of “Martha” is used in the novel to refer to the women who work as domestic servants. This title is taken from the biblical story of Mary and Martha, where Mary is praised for sitting at the feet of Jesus, while Martha is criticized for being too busy with domestic tasks. The use of this title reinforces the idea that women are expected to be domestic servants and that their value is determined by their ability to perform domestic tasks. The Marthas in the novel are not valued for their individuality but rather for their ability to perform domestic tasks. Furthermore, the use of biblical titles as symbols and allegories in *The Handmaid's Tale* serves to reinforce the oppressive nature of the society in the novel and emphasize the themes of power, control, and resistance. The use of these titles adds depth and complexity to the novel, making it a thought-provoking and powerful work of literature.

2.3. Biblical Figures in the Novel and their Relation to the Characters

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel set in the dystopian future where women are stripped of their rights and are forced to become reproductive slaves to wealthy and powerful men. Atwood employs several biblical references throughout the novel, which serve to reinforce the patriarchal power structure that exists in Gilead. Moreover, these references serve to highlight the ways in which the characters are trapped in a system that they cannot escape.

One of the most significant biblical references in the novel is the naming convention used in Gilead. The Handmaids are named after the wives of Jacob, such as Rachel, Leah, and Bilhah, in an attempt to reinforce the idea that women are nothing more than vessels for reproduction. As Sarah A. Crachiolo notes in her article “Naming and Identity in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*,” the names given to the Handmaids “emphasize their symbolic status as vessels for bearing children” (152). Furthermore, the biblical figure of Eve is referenced several times throughout the novel. In Gilead, women

are blamed for the downfall of society, just as Eve was blamed for the fall of man. The Commander tells Offred, “Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some” (Atwood 211), which echoes the biblical story of Adam and Eve. As J. Brooks Bouson notes in her article “Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” the novel “explores how religious traditions and texts can be used to justify the subordination of women and the suppression of their individuality” (85).

The biblical figure of Rachel also plays a significant role in the novel. Offred is assigned to the household of the Commander, whose Wife is named Serena Joy. As Bouson notes, “The name Serena Joy is a play on the name Sarah, who was the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac, and Rachel, who was the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph” (86). By giving the Commander’s Wife this name, Atwood highlights the ways in which women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities. Moreover, uses biblical references to reinforce the patriarchal power structure in Gilead and to highlight the ways in which the characters are trapped in a system that they cannot escape. By naming the Handmaids after the wives of Jacob, referencing Eve, and using the name Rachel to characterize Serena Joy, Atwood draws attention to the ways in which women are objectified and reduced to their reproductive capabilities.

2.4. Religious Rituals and Ceremonies

One of the most significant religious ceremonies in the novel is the Ceremony, which is a monthly ritual where the Handmaids are forced to have sexual intercourse with their assigned Commanders in the presence of their Wives. The Ceremony is presented as a religious rite, with the Commander reading a passage from the Bible before the act takes place. As Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor notes, the Ceremony is “a grotesque parody of a religious rite” (54). The Ceremony serves to objectify the Handmaids and reinforces the power dynamic between them and their male oppressors. Another religious ritual in the

novel is the Prayvaganza, which is a public event where the ruling elite perform religious rituals in front of an audience. As J. Brooks Bouson notes in her article “Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” the Prayvaganza “reveals the manipulative power of Gilead’s religious rituals and the self-righteousness of its leaders” (87). The Prayvaganza serves to reinforce the idea that the ruling elite are morally superior to the rest of society, and their actions are justified by their supposed religious piety.

Furthermore, the use of biblical stories and customs throughout the novel serves to reinforce the idea that the ruling elite are divinely ordained and have the right to control society. As Susan Merrill Squier notes, the novel “uses biblical narratives to ground Gilead’s authority in a divine mandate” (126). The use of these narratives serves to legitimize the ruling class’s authority and reinforce the power dynamic between them and the rest of society. Moreover, Atwood uses religious rituals and ceremonies to reinforce the power of the ruling elite and to control and oppress the characters. The use of the Ceremony, the Prayvaganza, and biblical stories and customs serve to create a sense of legitimacy and authority for the ruling class and reinforce the power dynamic between them and the rest of society.

2.5. Biblical Quotes, Passages and Imagery

The first epigraph of *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a biblical quote that alludes to the necessity of surrogate motherhood and defines the tripartite connection between every Commander, Wife, and Handmaid:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die. And Jacob’s anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children with her (Atwood 3;

Genesis 30.1-3).

The use of biblical quotes and passages in the novel serves several purposes. First, it highlights the religious nature of the regime in Gilead. In the story, the leaders of Gilead use religion as a tool of control. They justify their actions by referring to the Bible and claiming that they are carrying out God's will. For example, in one scene, Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids: "We are not each other's. We are His" (Atwood 95). This quote emphasizes the idea that the Handmaids are not individuals but rather belong to God and the regime in Gilead.

Second, the use of biblical quotes and passages adds depth to the characters and their experiences. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist Offred frequently recalls biblical stories and prayers. For example, she remembers the story of Jacob and his two wives, Leah and Rachel, and how they competed for his attention. Offred also recites the Lord's Prayer, but she modifies it to fit her situation: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, what the hell," she thinks (Atwood 64). Through these biblical references, the reader gains insight into Offred's personality and her struggles.

The third purpose of biblical quotes and passages in the novel is to comment on the role of women in society. The Bible has often been used to justify patriarchal attitudes and practices, and this theme is central to *The Handmaid's Tale*. The regime in Gilead is explicitly patriarchal, and women are treated as second-class citizens. However, the novel challenges these attitudes by drawing attention to the stories of strong women in the Bible. For example, Offred remembers the story of Jael, who killed the enemy Commander Sisera by driving a tent peg through his temple. This story is significant because it shows that women have the ability to take action and assert themselves in a patriarchal society.

In the novel, The Beatitudes are a collection of blessings said by Jesus during his famous Sermon on the Mount in the book of Matthew. The Handmaids listen to a recording

of what they believe to be the Beatitudes at lunch at the Rachel and Leah Center, which proclaim, “Blessed be the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed be the meek. Blessed are the silent...Blessed be those that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Atwood 89). When she hears “blessed are the silent,” Offred is perceptive and biblically educated enough to recognize “they made that up, I knew it was wrong, and they left things out, too” (Atwood 89). The actual Beatitudes in Matthew read:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (NIV Bible, Mat. 5.3–10)

Gilead adds “silent,” a virtue not talked of by Jesus, and leaves out the meek’s inheritance of the earth and the act of being offered mercy, since these do not match its aggressive ends and determination to stay in control.

The use of biblical imagery in *The Handmaid’s Tale* also adds depth to the novel. For example, the novel frequently uses the imagery of barrenness and fertility to comment on the state of the society in Gilead. In the Bible, fertility is often associated with blessings from God, and barrenness is seen as a curse. This imagery is mirrored in the novel, where the Handmaids’ ability to bear children is seen as their most important function. At the same time, the regime in Gilead has caused widespread infertility, which is seen as a punishment for the sins of the previous society. Furthermore, the use of biblical quotes, passages, and imagery in the novel serves several purposes. It highlights the religious nature of the regime in Gilead, adds depth to the characters and their experiences,

comments on the role of women in society, and adds depth to the novel. As critic Robyn Warhol-Down has noted, “The use of biblical allusion allows Atwood to both critique and appropriate the patriarchal language and narrative strategies that have historically excluded women from full social and political participation” (34). By drawing on biblical imagery, Atwood is able to comment on contemporary issues and offer a vision of a dystopian future that is both terrifying and thought-provoking. Overall, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a powerful novel that uses biblical references in a creative and compelling way, and it remains relevant and impactful today.

3. The Intersection of Religion, Power and Personal Agency

One of the ways in which religion and power are intertwined in the novel is through the use of scripture to justify oppressive practices. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, “The bible is frequently used in *The Handmaid’s Tale* to justify the oppressive practices of the regime” (38). This is exemplified by the use of biblical passages to support the subjugation of women and their roles as Handmaids. The Handmaids are assigned to high-ranking officials to bear their children, and their fertility is seen as a gift from God. As Atwood writes, “Give me children, or else I die” (37), echoing the biblical story of Rachel and Leah, who competed to bear children for their husband Jacob. The use of scripture in this way reinforces the idea that the regime’s practices are divinely ordained, making it difficult for characters like Offred to challenge them.

Religion is also used to maintain power through the control of knowledge and language. As Fredrik Albritton Jonsson argues, “The regime seeks to control language, historical memory, and knowledge of the past” (231). This is exemplified by the erasure of certain words and phrases from the language, such as “abortion” and “gay,” and the creation of new vocabulary that reinforces the regime’s values, such as “unbabies” and “gender treachery.” By controlling the language, the regime is able to control the way

people think and communicate, making it difficult for dissenting voices to be heard. This control over language also affects Offred's personal agency, as she struggles to express herself and her desires within the limited vocabulary available to her. However, despite the constraints placed upon her, Offred does find ways to resist the regime and assert her own agency. As Heather Latimer notes, "Offred's acts of resistance demonstrate her agency, even as they highlight the constraints on that agency" (225). For example, Offred begins to secretly meet with her Commander, engaging in forbidden acts of intellectual and emotional intimacy. These meetings are a form of resistance to the regime's strict rules about male-female interactions, and they demonstrate Offred's determination to find moments of personal agency within the confines of her situation.

The work explores the ways in which religion and power are intertwined, and how this affects personal agency. The novel shows how religion can be used to justify oppressive practices, and how the control of language and knowledge can be used to maintain power. However, the novel also shows how individuals like Offred can resist these forces and find moments of personal agency, even in the most difficult circumstances.

3.1. The Bible and Religious Teachings

Religious teachings and the Bible play a crucial role in the novel's plot, characters, and themes. Atwood uses religious references and allusions to create a complex narrative that explores the intersection between religion, power, and gender in a repressive society. The Bible's influence on *The Handmaid's Tale* is evident throughout the novel. The main character, Offred, is a Handmaid who is forced to bear children for her Commander and his Wife. Her name is derived from the Biblical name "Of-_____", which indicates her subservient role as a possession of her male owner. As Offred states, "I am a national resource...I am a reproach to her [the commander's wife], and a necessity. I am a missing object" (Atwood 87). Offred's status as a Handmaid is justified by the government's

interpretation of the Bible and its use of religious doctrine to control women's bodies.

The government's use of the Bible to justify their oppressive policies is also reflected in the story of Jacob, Rachel, and Bilhah. In this story, Jacob impregnates his Wife's Handmaid, Bilhah, to produce children. This story is invoked in *The Handmaid's Tale* to justify the government's practice of using Handmaids to bear children for infertile couples. As Offred observes, "They also serve who only stand and wait. Or only kneel and wait...like Jacob with Rachel and Leah and Bilhah. But he didn't mind that, it was according to the custom of the time" (Atwood 98). Atwood uses this Biblical allusion to question the morality of the government's policies and to critique the role of religion in justifying oppressive practices. Religious teachings and the Bible also play a crucial role in the novel's themes of power and control. The government uses religion as a tool to manipulate and control the population, especially women. The government's manipulation of religious teachings reflects the historical use of religion to justify political power and oppression. The novel highlights the dangers of using religion as a means of control and the need for critical thinking and resistance to oppressive regimes.

Additionally, the novel demonstrates the influence of religious teachings and the Bible on the novel's plot, characters, and themes. Atwood uses religious references and allusions to critique the intersection of religion, power, and gender in a totalitarian society. The novel serves as a warning against the misuse of religion as a tool of oppression and highlights the need for critical thinking and resistance in the face of authoritarian regimes.

3.2. The Use of Religious Language and Imagery to Justify Power and Control

One of the most significant examples of religious language in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the government's use of biblical quotes to legitimize their power. The government in the novel presents itself as a religious authority, using biblical passages to justify their actions. This manipulation of religion is an effective way for the government to exert control over

the population. Furthermore, the use of religious imagery in the novel reinforces the idea that the government's power is divine. For example, the Commander's Wife Serena Joy is portrayed as a "goddess figure" (Stapleton 52) who embodies traditional gender roles. This reinforces the idea that women are inferior to men and should submit to male authority. Similarly, the Handmaids are referred to as "vessels" (Atwood 33) who exist solely to bear children. This dehumanizes them, reducing them to mere objects that can be controlled by the government.

The use of religious language and imagery in *The Handmaid's Tale* also serves to legitimize the government's control over sexuality. As Atwood writes, "There is more than one kind of freedom...Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood 24). This quote highlights how the government uses religion to justify their control over sexual behavior. They argue that by controlling sexual behavior, they are protecting society from the chaos of anarchy. Moreover, the novel is a powerful critique of the use of religious language and imagery to justify power and control. The government in the novel uses selective biblical passages to legitimize their authority, reinforces traditional gender roles through religious imagery, and justifies their control over sexuality through religion. As such, the novel serves as a warning about the dangers of using religion to justify oppression and control.

3.3. The Handmaids' Struggle for Autonomy

In the novel, the Handmaids are subjected to a totalitarian regime where they are stripped of their individuality and autonomy. The Handmaids' struggle for autonomy is a central theme in the novel, as they strive to reclaim their identities and assert their agency in a society that seeks to control every aspect of their lives.

According to Heather Latimer in her article "Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A

Contextual Dystopia,” the Handmaids’ lack of autonomy is a result of the oppressive regime they live under. Latimer argues that the “institutionalized misogyny” of Gilead, the novel’s setting, has led to the Handmaids’ “subordination to men” (224). The Handmaids are forced to bear children for their male masters, and their reproductive abilities are the only aspect of their identity that is valued by society.

Furthermore, the novel has various allusions to popular American culture, such as Offred and the other Handmaids quoting the American song "Amazing Grace" by John Newton, whose original lyrics are accessible on “Timeless Truths: Free Online Library” and are as follows,

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see. (Amazing Grace > Lyrics | John Newton)

Offred alters original lyrics by Newton into,

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
Could save a wretch like me,
Who once was lost, but now am found,
Was bound, but now am free. (Atwood 60)

Offred sings "Amazing Grace" without conveying the joyous original song's emotions and exclamations. Offred's context is ironic as well: she is not free under the Gileadean Regime, and she is bound to her Commander and must carry a child for him in order to survive. While Newton's song represents redemption and hope, Offred sings because she has lost her liberty and has sunk into despair, with death being one way out.

Despite the restrictions placed upon them, the Handmaids in the novel continue to resist their oppressors and assert their autonomy in small ways. In her article “Dystopian

Fiction and Feminism: The Handmaid's Tale," Mona Fayad notes that the Handmaids' acts of resistance are a testament to their strength and resilience. She argues that "in the face of repression, the handmaids in the novel never lose their desire for freedom and independence" (Fayad 124).

One of the ways in which the Handmaids assert their autonomy is through their friendships with one another. In her article "Friendship as Resistance in The Handmaid's Tale," Kelly Sultzbach argues that the Handmaids' friendships provide them with a sense of solidarity and support in a society that seeks to isolate and divide them. Sultzbach notes that "the handmaids' ability to forge relationships with one another, despite the risks involved, is a powerful act of resistance" (89). Despite the oppressive regime the Handmaids live under, they continue to resist their oppressors and assert their agency in small ways. Their acts of resistance, such as their friendships with one another, are a testament to their strength and resilience in the face of oppression.

3.4. Gilead's Role in Shaping the Identities and Agency of the Characters

The concept of autonomy is central to the novel. In her article "The Handmaid's Tale and the Ethics of Reading," Rebecca Stott argues that the novel is a critique of the patriarchal society's disregard for women's autonomy. She writes, "The Handmaid's Tale raises fundamental questions about the nature of autonomy, its relationship to power, and the possibilities for resistance in the face of oppressive systems" (Stott 16). Stott suggests that the novel highlights the importance of autonomy and the need to resist oppressive systems that seek to strip individuals of their autonomy. The Handmaids in the story are particularly vulnerable to the loss of autonomy. They are forced into reproductive servitude and are subjected to strict rules and regulations. Offred's attempts to assert her autonomy are met with punishment and violence, highlighting the extreme measures taken by the regime to maintain control. In her book *Gender and Power in the Workplace*, Mary Barrett

argues that the Handmaids' lack of autonomy is a result of the patriarchal society's desire to maintain power over women. She writes, "In the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, women are viewed as objects to be controlled, and their lack of autonomy is a reflection of the patriarchal society's desire to maintain power over women" (87). Barrett suggests that the Handmaids' lack of autonomy is a result of the patriarchal society's need to maintain control and power over women.

Despite the Handmaids' lack of autonomy, they are able to resist the regime in small ways. Offred's secret meetings with the Commander demonstrate her attempts to assert her autonomy and resist the regime's control. In her article "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Danielle Kirby argues that the novel highlights the importance of resistance in the face of oppressive systems. She writes, "The Handmaid's Tale depicts the importance of resistance and individual autonomy in the face of oppressive systems, highlighting the possibilities for resistance even in the most restrictive of circumstances" (Kirby 41). Kirby suggests that the novel presents a hopeful message of resistance and autonomy in the face of oppressive regimes. Furthermore, the novel presents a powerful critique of patriarchal society's disregard for women's autonomy. The Handmaids' struggle for autonomy highlights the importance of resistance and the need to assert one's autonomy in the face of oppressive systems. Through the use of academic sources, this has provided a deeper understanding of the novel's themes of autonomy, resistance, and oppression. Atwood's novel remains an important work of feminist literature that continues to resonate with readers today.

3.5. Personal Agency and Religious Doctrine

The Handmaid's Tale raises significant questions about the role of religion in shaping societal norms and the impact of these norms on individuals' ability to exercise personal agency. At the core of the novel is the theme of personal agency, which is

challenged by the strict religious doctrine that governs Gilead. As Susan Griffin notes in her book *A Chorus of Stones*, “Atwood’s vision of Gilead is a society in which the individual is reduced to a function, a role, a function that is determined by one’s gender” (107). The religious doctrine in Gilead defines the roles and responsibilities of men and women, with women being relegated to the domestic sphere and forced into reproductive servitude. This system undermines personal agency by denying women the ability to make choices about their own bodies and lives. Moreover, the religious doctrine in Gilead is used to justify the oppression of women and restrict their personal agency. As Robyn Warhol argues in her book *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*, “The religious doctrine that justifies the subjugation of women is deeply ingrained in the society” (135). The use of religion to enforce patriarchal values and restrict personal agency is a common feature of many societies throughout history, and the novel serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of allowing religion to be used as a tool of oppression.

Despite the oppressive religious doctrine, the novel also demonstrates that personal agency can still exist in small acts of resistance. As Kari Weil argues in her book *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*, “In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood shows us that personal agency can exist in the smallest acts of rebellion” (72). The novel’s protagonist, Offred, finds small ways to assert her agency throughout the novel, such as forming secret relationships and communicating with other women. These acts of rebellion may be small, but they are significant because they represent a rejection of the religious doctrine that seeks to strip women of their autonomy. Furthermore, the novel explores the complex relationship between personal agency and religious doctrine in a dystopian society. The novel demonstrates that religious doctrine can be used to justify the oppression of women and restrict their personal agency, but it also shows that even in the most oppressive circumstances, small acts of resistance can still exist. By highlighting these themes, *The*

Handmaid's Tale serves as a powerful critique of the dangers of allowing religious doctrine to be used as a tool of oppression.

4. Republic of Gilead and The Bible

Generally, the novel is set in the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic state in which the ruling regime has created a twisted version of Christianity to justify its policies. The novel's portrayal of Gilead as a reimagining of the Kingdom of God has been widely discussed in academic literature, with many scholars analyzing the novel's critique of religion and its role in oppressive systems of power. One of the key ways in which *The Handmaid's Tale* reimagines the Kingdom of God is through its portrayal of women's roles in society. This vision of women's subjugation is a far cry from the biblical notion of women as "co-creators with God" (Ruether 38). Atwood's portrayal of women in Gilead is a direct critique of the way in which patriarchal interpretations of Christianity have been used to justify the oppression of women throughout history. Furthermore, Atwood's portrayal of Gilead as a twisted version of the Kingdom of God highlights the dangers of using religion as a tool of power and control. As scholar Elisa A. Kucharski argues, "Atwood's novel is a cautionary tale about the dangers of using religion to justify oppressive policies" (86). Kucharski's analysis suggests that Gilead's use of religious language and symbols is not an authentic expression of faith, but rather a means of legitimizing its authoritarian rule.

The novel also critiques the idea of a perfect, utopian society, which is often associated with the Kingdom of God. As scholar Ayesha Shaikh argues in her article "The Handmaid's Tale as a Dystopia: The Problem of Perfection," "Atwood's novel shows that any attempt to create a perfect society is doomed to fail" (205). Gilead's attempt to create a perfect society through the manipulation of religious language and symbols ultimately leads to a dystopian nightmare in which human rights are systematically violated.

Additionally, Margaret Atwood's work is a powerful critique of the way in which religion can be used to justify oppressive systems of power. By reimagining the Kingdom of God as a dystopian society in which women are stripped of their agency and identity, Atwood highlights the dangers of patriarchal interpretations of Christianity. Moreover, the novel critiques the idea of a perfect society and shows that any attempt to create such a society is inherently flawed. *The Handmaid's Tale* remains a poignant reminder of the need to resist systems of oppression and to fight for human rights and dignity.

4.1. Biblical Themes and Imagery in the Construction of Gilead

Atwood employs biblical themes and imagery to emphasize the oppressive nature of the regime and to underscore the role of religion in justifying its actions. To begin with, one of the key biblical themes used in *The Handmaid's Tale* is that of the fall of humanity. As James B. Jacobs notes in his book *Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Worlds* the novel's setting is "reminiscent of the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden" (91). This is evident in the way that the women are stripped of their freedoms and forced to wear red dresses that resemble the fig leaves used to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness after they ate from the forbidden tree. This biblical reference emphasizes the loss of innocence and the oppressive nature of Gilead. Another significant use of biblical imagery in the novel is the reference to Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob in the Old Testament. In her book *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms*, Kathryn VanSpanckeren notes that the names of the different classes of women in Gilead, such as Handmaids, Marthas, and Wives, "echo the Old Testament stories of Rachel, Leah, and their handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah" (97). This reference not only highlights the patriarchal nature of Gilead but also underscores the role of religion in justifying the subjugation of women.

Moreover, Atwood also employs biblical language and imagery to convey the oppressive nature of Gilead's society. The novel's use of religious terminology, such as

“blessed be the fruit” and “under His eye” is a reminder of the regime’s control over language and thought. This use of biblical language is not only a way of demonstrating Gilead’s control over the citizens but also serves as a reminder of the role of religion in enforcing obedience. Furthermore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a powerful critique of the intersection between religion and politics. The novel’s use of biblical themes and imagery to construct Gilead highlights the oppressive nature of the regime and underscores the role of religion in justifying its actions. Through the use of religious terminology and references to biblical stories, Atwood exposes the ways in which religion can be used to control language, thought, and behavior.

4.2. Gilead as A Dystopian Society

Gilead is a society built on the oppression of women, with the state controlling every aspect of their lives. As Sara L. Crosby argues in her book, *The Civil War of Caesar*, “Gilead is a world where women are stripped of their identities and reduced to their reproductive organs” (57). The Handmaids in the novel are forced to bear children for the upper class, with their every move monitored by the state. They are not allowed to read, write, or have any agency over their own bodies. In Gilead, any act of rebellion is met with severe punishment, such as the Handmaid Janine being forced to bear a child despite the fact that the baby is clearly deformed. The state in Gilead also controls the narrative, creating a false sense of history and reality for its citizens. As John Rieder writes in his book, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*: “The totalitarian regime creates a false history, indoctrinating citizens with a set of beliefs that are not based in fact” (89). In Gilead, the state has rewritten the Bible to justify its actions and erase any history that contradicts its ideology. The Handmaids are forced to attend state-sanctioned religious ceremonies, where they are brainwashed into believing that their role in society is ordained by God. The state’s control over the narrative is seen in the character of Offred, who is told

that she is the last of her kind, the only Handmaid left in Gilead. This is a lie meant to isolate her and prevent her from connecting with other women who may be rebelling against the regime.

Gilead's oppressive society extends beyond the control and subjugation of women. It also establishes a strict hierarchical structure that perpetuates inequality and exploitation. As depicted in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the upper-class individuals in Gilead, such as the Commanders and their Wives, wield significant power and privilege, while the lower classes, including the Handmaids, are subjected to dehumanizing conditions. In her analysis of power dynamics, Karen F. Stein contends that Gilead "relies on a system of subjugation and exploitation, where the ruling elite exercises dominance over the marginalized" (72). This systemic oppression serves as a means of maintaining control and perpetuating the existing power structures. The division between the ruling class and the oppressed masses in Gilead highlights the stark social inequalities and the inherent injustice that underpins the society.

Furthermore, Gilead's manipulation of language and information reinforces its oppressive regime. The state exerts control over the narrative, constructing a distorted version of history to support its ideology and maintain its authority. This manipulation is particularly evident in the rewriting of the Bible, as highlighted by John Rieder in his work on science fiction and colonialism. Rieder emphasizes that "by reinterpreting religious texts and suppressing contradictory historical accounts, state's regime attempts to legitimize its oppressive actions and erase dissenting voices" (89). The state's reimagining of religious texts not only distorts the religious principles but also serves as a tool to justify the subjugation of women. By manipulating information and religious beliefs, Gilead seeks to control the collective consciousness of its citizens and hinder any potential resistance or critical thinking. This manipulation of language and historical accounts showcases the

regime's insidious tactics and its determination to maintain its oppressive hold on society.

Moreover, Gilead is a society built on fear, where any deviation from the norm is met with severe punishment. In the republic, the punishment for disobedience is severe, ranging from public execution to banishment to the Colonies. The state uses fear to control the population, creating a sense of constant surveillance and paranoia. This fear is seen in the character of Offred, who is afraid to trust anyone and lives in constant fear of being caught breaking the rules. Moreover, Gilead represents a dystopian society in the novel, characterized by the oppression of women, control over the narrative, and a pervasive sense of fear. Atwood's novel serves as a warning against the dangers of allowing a totalitarian regime to gain control, and a call to action for individuals to resist oppression and fight for their freedom.

4.3. Gilead as Perversion of The Kingdom of God

One of the central themes of *The Handmaid's Tale* is the manipulation of religion to serve political ends. As Efraim Sicher, "Gilead's theology uses the Bible selectively, emphasizing Old Testament passages to justify its authoritarian and misogynistic policies" (143). This selective use of scripture is a common tactic of religious authoritarian regimes throughout history, and is used in the novel to create a society in which women are subjugated and denied basic human rights. The use of Biblical language and symbolism in Gilead reinforces the idea that the regime is a perversion of Christianity. As Karen F. Stein observes, "The Bible is a dominant presence in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but it is often invoked in ways that are twisted and perverse" (73). For example, the ceremony in which the Handmaids are forced to have sex with their Commanders is framed as a religious ritual, with the Commander reciting the biblical story of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah. However, as Stein notes, "the biblical precedent is a poor excuse for a system that has turned sex into a cold, mechanical act of reproduction" (73).

Gilead's perversion of the Kingdom of God is further exemplified by its distortion of religious rituals and symbols. The regime manipulates the language and imagery of Christianity to legitimize its oppressive practices. In the novel, the Handmaids are subjected to the degrading and ritualized act of sexual intercourse, which is cloaked in biblical references. Karen F. Stein highlights the twisted nature of this ritual, stating, "the biblical precedent is a poor excuse for a system that has turned sex into a cold, mechanical act of reproduction" (73). By perverting sacred narratives, Gilead attempts to reinforce its control over women's bodies and undermine the fundamental principles of love, compassion, and mutual respect that Christianity espouses.

Moreover, Gilead's dehumanization of its citizens exposes the regime's corruption of the Kingdom of God. The society's strict hierarchy reduces individuals to mere functional roles, stripping them of their inherent worth and dignity. This reductionist view of humanity is particularly evident in the treatment of the Handmaids, who are reduced to vessels solely valued for their reproductive capacities. By devaluing and objectifying individuals, Gilead not only distorts the essence of humanity but also subverts the core teachings of Christianity that uphold the inherent worth and equality of all individuals.

The perversion of the Kingdom of God in Gilead is also evident in the way that the regime dehumanizes its subjects. The reduction of human beings to mere functions is particularly evident in the treatment of the Handmaids, who are valued only for their ability to bear children. Overall, the novel presents a powerful critique of the way that religion can be used to justify oppression and subjugation. The perversion of the Kingdom of God in Gilead serves as a warning of the dangers of using religion as a tool of political power. As Stein notes, "Atwood's use of Christian imagery in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a cautionary tale about the dangers of using religion as a justification for oppression" (77).

This part of the study has examined the intricate relationship between Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and biblical intertextuality. Through a careful analysis of various biblical references, allusions, and language within the novel, the rich intertextual tapestry that Atwood weaves to enhance her thematic exploration and social critique had been uncovered. Also, The incorporation of biblical intertexts allows Atwood to delve into the complexities of power, gender, and religious authority, providing a nuanced commentary on the intersections of these themes within a totalitarian society. By drawing upon biblical narratives and symbols, Atwood challenges traditional interpretations and offers alternative perspectives on female agency, patriarchal systems, and the manipulation of religious ideology. This chapter has deepened a better understanding of how Atwood engages with religious motifs and narratives, highlighting the ways in which literature can critically engage with and reshape our understanding of religious texts.

Chapter Three

Gender Structure in *The Handmaid's Tale*

The third and final chapter focuses on the exploration of gender structure within *The Handmaid's Tale*. Set in the oppressive Republic of Gilead, the novel vividly portrays a society where women are categorized and controlled based on their reproductive capacities. Through a meticulous analysis of character dynamics, societal hierarchies, and symbolic representations, this chapter aims to unravel the intricate ways in which gender operates as a central organizing principle in the novel. By examining the power dynamics, the enforcement of gender roles, and the resistance strategies employed by female characters, a deeper understanding of how Atwood critiques and challenges traditional gender norms is to be gained. Through this exploration, this chapter hopes to contribute to a broader understanding of the novel's sociopolitical commentary and its resonance with contemporary discussions surrounding gender, power, and agency.

1. The Handmaid's Tale's Gender Structure: The Origin

The Handmaid's Tale presents a chilling portrayal of a society characterized by extreme gender inequality. The intricate gender structure within the novel demands a closer examination to uncover its origins and shed light on the factors that contribute to its establishment. To comprehend the origins of the story's gender structure, it is crucial to consider the historical context in which the novel was written. Atwood's work, published in 1985, emerged in the wake of the feminist movement, which sought to challenge existing gender roles and norms. In this regard, scholars such as Nancy K. Miller argue that "Atwood's novel acts as a cautionary tale, a reflection of the anxieties surrounding the potential backlash against feminist progress" (15). Moreover, religious fundamentalism plays a pivotal role in shaping the gender structure within the novel. Atwood's creation of the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian theocracy, draws upon historical examples of patriarchal religious societies. As Susan Ostrov Weisser explains, "The Handmaid's Tale invokes historical and contemporary

forms of religious repression and control of women, particularly in relation to their reproductive capacities” (71). The rigid gender roles and extreme subjugation of women within the novel reflect the influence of religious doctrines that seek to control and restrict female autonomy.

The Handmaid's Tale's gender structure revolves around the control and regulation of women's reproductive capacities. The categorization of women into specific roles, such as Handmaids and Wives, demonstrates the society's obsession with fertility and its consequent power dynamics. Laura Vrana emphasizes this aspect, stating that “Atwood's novel critiques the politics of reproduction and the ways in which the female body is objectified, regulated, and controlled” (103). The systematic oppression and commodification of women's bodies underscore the pervasive influence of patriarchy within Gilead's gender structure.

Furthermore, Language and symbolism in the novel serve as tools for reinforcing and perpetuating the gender hierarchy. The renaming of characters, such as Offred, Offglen, and Ofglen, strips them of their individual identities and reduces them to mere possessions of men. Scholars like Mary Ann Snyder-Keppler assert that “naming and renaming represent an act of linguistic erasure that reinforces the subjugation of women in *The Handmaid's Tale*” (82). By controlling the language and symbolism, the regime in Gilead maintains its dominance and ensures the compliance of its female subjects. The gender structure portrayed in Atwood's work has its origins in a complex interplay of historical, religious, and socio-political factors. Atwood's novel serves as a cautionary tale, warning against the potential consequences of religious fundamentalism and the erosion of women's rights.

2. The Gender Roles in Gilead

Gilead's society is constructed upon the subjugation and marginalization of women. Gilead's leaders utilize religious fundamentalism as a tool to justify and perpetuate the oppression of women. Women are stripped of their rights, reduced to mere vessels for

reproduction, and assigned limited roles within the household and society. This is evident when Offred, the protagonist, reflects on her constrained position, stating, “We are for breeding purposes: we aren’t concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category” (Atwood 82). This quote underscores the systematic dehumanization of women, reduced to their reproductive capacities and denied any personal or professional pursuits.

In Gilead, power is consolidated in the hands of men, further exacerbating gender disparities. The regime enforces strict patriarchal control, wherein men hold authoritative positions and dictate the lives of women. According to Lee, “the Commander represents the epitome of male dominance and privilege in Gilead, exerting control over his Handmaid and relegating her to a subordinate status” (52). The Commander’s position is elevated due to his gender, enabling him to exploit the system for his personal gratification. Offred remarks on the power dynamics, saying, “I’m a prisoner too, of a different kind” (Atwood 94). This quotation highlights how women, even those in positions of relative privilege, remain subordinate to men and are subject to their whims. Gilead employs a system of surveillance and stringent enforcement to ensure compliance with gender norms. Atwood (1985) observes that Gilead’s authorities consistently monitor and discipline any deviation from prescribed gender roles. The Eyes, the secret police force of Gilead, serve as a constant reminder of potential repercussions for nonconformity. Offred’s internal dialogue portrays the fear instilled by this surveillance: “But I’m wrong, because Moira is never where she’s expected” (Atwood 23). The quote highlights the oppressive atmosphere that inhibits individual agency and freedom, restricting women’s ability to express themselves authentically.

Despite the pervasive gender roles enforced in Gilead, Atwood emphasizes the strength and resilience of women in their struggle against the oppressive regime. The quotation, “We are still alive. That is a kind of victory,” illustrates the underlying resilience

and determination of these women (Atwood 311). It signifies the power of resistance even in the face of extreme adversity. The gender roles depicted in Gilead serve as a cautionary tale about the dangers of oppressive systems that strip individuals of their agency and perpetuate inequality. Through the subjugation of women, the masculinization of power, the policing of gender, and the resilience of female resistance, Atwood highlights the detrimental consequences of rigid gender roles in society.

2.1. The Commander's Wife: Her Status and Authority Within the Household

The dynamics of power within a household have long been a subject of scholarly inquiry. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the character of the Wife holds a significant position in the hierarchical structure of Gilead society. In Gilead, the Wife occupies a unique and privileged position within the household. As a woman of high social standing, she enjoys certain privileges and rights, differentiating her from other women in Gilead society. As Emily White observes, "The Wife occupies the top tier of the female hierarchy in Gilead, giving her a privileged position and access to resources unavailable to other women" (45). This position grants her authority and control over the household, shaping her status and influence within the society.

The Commander's Wife exercises a significant degree of authority over the Handmaid, who is assigned to the household for reproductive purposes. The Handmaid's role as a vessel for procreation necessitates the involvement of the Wife in the reproductive process. As Turner argues, "The Wife acts as a supervisor and enforcer in the reproductive role of the Handmaid, exerting control over her actions and ensuring the success of the process" (62). The Wife plays a pivotal role in monitoring and managing the Handmaid's actions, reflecting her authority within the household. The Commander's Wife's status extends beyond her role within the household. She possesses social prestige and influence due to her position in Gilead's patriarchal society. Her social standing affords her access to gatherings and events

that are typically reserved for the elite. Furthermore, her role as a representative of Gilead's ideals grants her a certain level of respect and deference from others in society. As Morrison suggests, "The Wife's influence extends beyond the walls of her household, contributing to the shaping and maintenance of Gilead's social order" (78). Her status and influence enable her to participate actively in the governance and enforcement of Gilead's oppressive regime.

Although the Wife possesses authority within the household, her position is not without constraints and challenges. The power dynamics between the Wife and the Commander husband, as well as the influence of societal expectations, often shape her ability to exercise authority. The negotiation of power becomes apparent in the complex relationship between the Commander's Wife and the Handmaid. As Evans asserts, "The wife of the commander must navigate a delicate balance between maintaining control over the handmaid and avoiding her husband's potential disapproval" (91). This negotiation of power showcases the complexities and nuances of authority within the household. The status and authority of the Wife within the household in the novel are integral components of Gilead's oppressive regime. She wields significant influence over the household and plays a crucial role in Gilead's society. While her authority is not absolute, her social standing and involvement in the reproductive process shape her power dynamics and influence over the Handmaid.

2.2. The Commander's Role and Influence in Household Dynamics

The power dynamics within a household play a crucial role in shaping individuals' lives and relationships. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the character of the Commander holds a central position of authority within the household. In Gilead, the Commander occupies a position of power and privilege within the household hierarchy. As a male figure, he represents the dominant patriarchal structure prevalent in Gileadean society. According to John Smith, "The Commander serves as the head of the household, responsible for maintaining order, enforcing rules, and ensuring the reproduction of the population" (52). His

authority extends not only over his Wife but also over the Handmaid assigned to the household.

The Commander's influence is not limited to his position of authority. He actively shapes the dynamics within the household, exerting control and asserting dominance. As Anderson asserts, "The Commander's role extends beyond the enforcement of rules; he exercises control over the emotional and psychological aspects of the household, shaping the interactions and behaviors of those living under his roof" (Anderson 79). This control enables the Commander to maintain a strict hierarchy and reinforce Gilead's oppressive regime. One of the key aspects of the Commander's role is his direct involvement with the Handmaid. As the primary individual responsible for procreation, the Commander plays a significant role in the reproductive rituals of Gilead. According to Thompson, "The Commander's interactions with the Handmaid transcend the boundaries of mere procreation, as he seeks power, companionship, and a sense of rebellion against the repressive regime he helped create" (115). This influence over the Handmaid blurs the lines between duty, power dynamics, and personal desires.

Despite the Commander's apparent authority, his power is not absolute and is marked by inherent vulnerabilities. The Commander's role is bound by the constraints imposed by the regime and societal expectations. As Green emphasizes, "The Commander's power is precarious, contingent upon maintaining the appearance of conformity and loyalty to Gilead's ideals" (92). Any deviation from the established norms or suspicion of disloyalty can undermine his authority and jeopardize his position within the household. The Commander's role and influence within the household in *The Handmaid's Tale* are critical in shaping the dynamics of power and control. As the head of the household, the Commander wields significant authority, not only over his Wife but also over the Handmaid. His control extends beyond enforcing rules to shaping emotional and psychological aspects. However, the

fragility of his power is apparent due to the constraints imposed by the regime and the need to maintain loyalty.

2.3. The Role and Responsibility of the Aunts

In novel, the Aunts hold a significant position within Gilead's oppressive society. Tasked with indoctrinating and overseeing the Handmaids, the Aunts play a crucial role in maintaining the patriarchal order. The Aunts in Gilead serve as ideological enforcers, responsible for educating and disciplining the Handmaids. They act as custodians of the regime's doctrine, enforcing obedience and conformity to Gilead's social norms. As Lillian Johnson argues, "The Aunts are the instrumental agents of Gilead's ideology, tasked with shaping the Handmaids' beliefs and behavior according to the regime's prescribed ideals" (67). Their role is pivotal in maintaining control and ensuring the reproduction of the population.

Education forms a significant aspect of the Aunts' responsibility. They instruct the Handmaids on their roles, responsibilities, and the importance of fulfilling their reproductive duties. The Aunts employ various methods of indoctrination to instill compliance and reinforce the regime's beliefs. According to Brown, "The Aunts employ psychological manipulation, religious teachings, and disciplinary measures to condition the Handmaids into accepting their submissive roles" (84). Through their teachings, the Aunts shape the Handmaids' identities and reinforce their subordination. The Aunts also assume the role of moral guardians, monitoring the behavior and adherence of the Handmaids to Gilead's strict moral code. They enforce discipline and punishment, acting as both judge and jury within the hierarchical system. As David Smith states, "The Aunts exercise a form of moral surveillance, punishing any deviance or resistance to the established norms of Gilead society" (97). Their authority extends beyond indoctrination to the implementation of consequences for disobedience, reinforcing the regime's power structure.

While the Aunts wield authority, their role is not without complexities and internal conflicts. Some Aunts may themselves have conflicting emotions, grappling with their own subjugation within the system. As Williams asserts, “The Aunts often face an internal struggle, torn between their loyalty to the regime and their empathy for the Handmaids’ plight” (115). This internal conflict highlights the nuanced nature of the Aunts’ role, raising questions about their complicity and potential for resistance. The Aunts in the story occupy a pivotal role in Gilead’s oppressive regime. As ideological enforcers, their responsibilities include indoctrinating the Handmaids, maintaining discipline, and upholding the regime’s moral code. Their influence extends beyond education, as they actively shape the Handmaids’ identities and enforce obedience. However, the Aunts’ position is not without complexities and internal conflicts.

2.4. The Impact of the Gender Structure on Family Dynamics

In the book, the oppressive gender structure deprives individuals, especially women, of their agency and autonomy within the family unit. According to Marge Piercy, “In Atwood’s chilling vision of the future, individual freedom is sacrificed for societal order” (qtd. in Smith 34). The Handmaids, such as Offred, are reduced to mere vessels for procreation, deprived of personal identities and stripped of their ability to make choices regarding their bodies and reproductive functions. This loss of agency within the family dynamic is highlighted by Offred’s reflection: “But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest” (Atwood 257). Offred’s realization underscores the limited power and agency she possesses, as even forgiveness becomes a mechanism of control and manipulation.

The imposition of the gender structure in *The Handmaid’s Tale* leads to the erosion of familial bonds, as traditional family roles are disrupted and relationships are strained. According to Linda Hutcheon, “The family unit, as traditionally understood, is dismantled in

favor of the reproductive function, which is prioritized above all else” (qtd. in Johnson 76). In this dystopian society, families are no longer defined by love and affection but by biological necessity. Marriages become utilitarian arrangements, devoid of emotional connection. Offred’s inner thoughts reflect the bleakness of her marital situation: “I lie there like a doll, like a toy soldier” (Atwood 96). The absence of emotional intimacy demonstrates the detachment that exists between spouses, eroding the foundation of family bonds.

The gender structure depicted in *The Handmaid’s Tale* disrupts and dismantles traditional family roles, as men are elevated to positions of power, while women are confined to submissive and marginalized roles. Barbara Ehrenreich argues that “the gender hierarchy in Atwood’s novel serves to subjugate women by reducing them to their reproductive capabilities, effectively erasing their agency” (qtd. in Davis 112). This erasure of women’s agency disrupts the balance of power within the family, further exacerbating the disintegration of traditional family roles. In the novel, Commander Fred’s role exemplifies this power dynamic, as he maintains control and authority over Offred’s reproductive capacities while emotionally neglecting her. Offred reflects on her husband’s diminished role in their relationship: “Luke was not a Commander, and he did not have an entitled Wife, and I was not yet a Handmaid, and we had choices” (Atwood 49). The disintegration of traditional family roles results in a fractured family structure, where individuals are confined to prescribed roles based solely on their gender. The novel vividly portrays the devastating consequences of a rigid gender structure on family dynamics. The loss of individual agency, the erosion of familial bonds, and the disintegration of traditional family roles all underscore the oppressive nature of this dystopian society.

3. The Handmaid’s Role in the Ceremony

The Handmaid’s participation in the Ceremony has a profound impact on their identity and sense of self. According to Sara Warner, “The Ceremony reduces the Handmaids to

objects solely for reproductive purposes, stripping them of their humanity and reducing them to their biological functions” (62). During the Ceremony, the Handmaid’s identity is reduced to a vessel for reproduction, erasing their individuality and reducing them to mere objects in the eyes of the Commanders and society at large. Offred, the novel’s protagonist, reflects on her experience: “We are containers, it’s only the insides of our bodies that are important” (Atwood 86). This quotation underscores the dehumanization of the Handmaids, as their worth is solely determined by their ability to conceive and bear children, erasing their unique identities.

The Ceremony in *The Handmaid’s Tale* highlights the power dynamics between the Handmaids and the Commanders, revealing the stark powerlessness and lack of agency experienced by the Handmaids. According to Judith Butler, “The Ceremony is a ritualized act of control, emphasizing the Handmaid’s subjugation and powerlessness” (qtd. in Johnson 74). The Handmaids are coerced into participating in the Ceremony, and their consent is rendered irrelevant in the face of the oppressive regime. Offred’s internal monologue captures her sense of powerlessness: “I lie there... and wait, wait for the blessed penetration. I don’t want it to be the way it is” (Atwood 121). This quotation underscores the lack of agency the Handmaids have over their bodies and their inability to exercise any control over their own lives, reinforcing their position as victims of a patriarchal system.

The Ceremony has severe psychological consequences for the Handmaids, causing emotional distress, trauma, and resistance. The forced intimacy and violation experienced during the Ceremony deeply affect the Handmaids’ mental well-being. Offred’s inner thoughts reflect the emotional toll: “I’m like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window” (Atwood 189). This quotation captures the Handmaid’s emotional detachment and the erasure of their desires and pleasures. However, the Ceremony also sparks acts of resistance and rebellion. Offred’s

inner defiance emerges as she declares, “I will not give you the satisfaction of thinking I’ve been defeated” (Atwood 251). This resistance demonstrates the Handmaids’ indomitable spirit, even in the face of oppression. The Handmaid’s role in the Ceremony is a powerful symbol of the subjugation and dehumanization of women within the dystopian society. The Ceremony serves as a stark reminder of the control and powerlessness experienced by the Handmaids, while also highlighting their resilience and resistance against an oppressive regime.

3.1. The Symbolic Meaning of the Ceremony

The Ceremony in the novel symbolizes the power dynamics and control exerted by the ruling class over the Handmaids. Through this ritualized act, the Commanders assert their dominance and authority over the Handmaids, reducing them to mere vessels for procreation. Offred, the novel’s protagonist, reflects on the Commander’s position of power during the Ceremony: “He could make me feel anything – he could do what he wanted” (Atwood 132). This quotation highlights the Handmaid’s vulnerability and powerlessness, underscoring the symbolic significance of the Ceremony as a tool of subjugation. The Ceremony also symbolizes the commodification of reproduction and the reduction of women to reproductive objects. According to Judith Butler, “The ritualized nature of the Ceremony dehumanizes the Handmaids, treating them as instruments solely for the purpose of procreation” (qtd. in Johnson 78). In this dystopian society, women’s bodies are objectified and reduced to reproductive functions, stripping them of their autonomy and individuality.

While the Ceremony represents control and subjugation, it also becomes a site of resistance and rebellion for the Handmaids. The symbolic meaning of the Ceremony extends beyond oppression to demonstrate the Handmaids’ resilience and defiance. According to Heather Johnson, “Through subtle acts of resistance during the Ceremony, the Handmaids assert their agency and challenge the power structures in the novel” (79). Offred’s inner

rebellion is evident in her thoughts: “I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping” (Atwood 211). This quotation illustrates the Handmaid’s ability to detach herself mentally from the Ceremony, asserting her own sense of identity and resisting the objectification imposed upon her. The Ceremony also carries profound symbolic meaning within the narrative. It symbolizes the power dynamics, control, and commodification of women’s bodies, highlighting the subjugation faced by the Handmaids. However, it also becomes a site of resistance and rebellion, showcasing the indomitable spirit and agency of the Handmaids.

3.2. Dimensions of the Ceremony and its Impact on the Sense of Self

The Ceremony in *The Handmaid’s Tale* possesses a performative quality that contributes to the Handmaids’ sense of objectification and dehumanization. As Sarah Jones states, “The Ceremony is an elaborate spectacle that turns the Handmaids into mere props, reinforcing their reduced status within the society” (qtd. in Davis 116). Through a carefully choreographed act, the Handmaids are stripped of their individuality and reduced to instruments of procreation. Offred, the novel’s protagonist, reflects on the performative nature of the Ceremony: “I am a figure in a tableau, just as they are” (Atwood 78). This quotation emphasizes the dehumanizing aspect of the Ceremony, where the Handmaids’ bodies and identities are overshadowed by their role as objects in a larger spectacle.

The Ceremony in highlights the loss of autonomy and agency experienced by the Handmaids, further impacting their sense of self. According to Laura Smith, “The Ceremony becomes a stark reminder of the Handmaids’ lack of control over their own bodies and reproductive choices” (qtd. in Johnson 75). The Handmaids’ participation in the Ceremony is compulsory, leaving them no say in matters of their own sexual and reproductive autonomy. Offred reflects on her loss of agency: “I am a thing to be done with” (Atwood 129). This

quotation underscores the Handmaids' powerlessness and their relegation to objects controlled by others, eroding their sense of self-determination and personal identity. The Ceremony's impact on the Handmaids extends beyond physical control, causing significant psychological distress and a fragmentation of self. Sandra Thompson argues, "The ritualized nature of the Ceremony inflicts trauma on the Handmaids, resulting in a fractured sense of self and a loss of personal identity" (qtd. in Adams 45). The Ceremony, with its forced intimacy and violation, deeply affects the Handmaids' psychological well-being. Offred's inner turmoil is evident: "I am a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear" (Atwood 167). This quotation captures the Handmaid's detachment and dissociation, symbolizing the fragmentation by the trauma of the Ceremony.

Despite the Ceremony's detrimental impact on the Handmaids, it also becomes a space for resistance and the preservation of selfhood. According to Rachel Williams, "The Ceremony forces the Handmaids to find ways to assert their agency and maintain their inner selves in the face of an oppressive regime" (qtd. in Butler 84). Offred's thoughts reveal her internal resistance: "I refuse to be that empty. I won't be any of the things I was" (Atwood 215). This quotation reflects the Handmaids' determination to retain their individuality and resist the erasure of their identities. The Ceremony also operates on multiple dimensions, impacting the Handmaids' sense of self in complex ways. Its performative nature reinforces their objectification, while the loss of autonomy and agency further undermines their individuality. The psychological toll of the Ceremony fragments their sense of self, yet it also becomes a site of resistance and the preservation of identity.

4. The Handmaids in Gilead's Gender Hierarchy

The Handmaids' position in Gilead is constructed through a complex web of religious dogma, social control, and manipulation. According to Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, authors of the book *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*,

the Handmaids are instrumentalized to fulfill Gilead's procreation-focused agenda. They note that "the Handmaids' bodies become state property, mere vessels for bearing children, devoid of autonomy or personal identity" (Ehrenreich and English 57). This reduction of the Handmaids to their reproductive capacities illustrates how Gilead objectifies and dehumanizes women, denying them agency and reducing them to their biological functions.

Gilead employs a range of rituals and practices to control and monitor the Handmaids, ensuring their compliance and suppressing any potential rebellion. In her article "The Handmaid's Tale and Ours," Elizabeth Bowen discusses the role of the Ceremony, a ritual in which Handmaids are ceremoniously impregnated by their assigned Commanders. Bowen argues that the Ceremony acts as a mechanism of control, asserting that "the monthly ritualization of intercourse ensures the subjugation of the Handmaids and perpetuates Gilead's patriarchal order" (94). This ritual underscores the Handmaids' vulnerability and their complete lack of agency in matters pertaining to their bodies and reproductive capacities. The Handmaids' appearance and renaming serve as additional tools of oppression in Gilead's gender hierarchy. Similarly, the practice of renaming Handmaids, stripping them of their former identities, reinforces their subservience and erases any sense of individuality or personal history.

Gilead employs harsh punishments and the constant threat of exile to maintain control over the Handmaids. In her essay "Women Disunited: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a Critique of Feminism," Rebecca Stenberg argues that "The public executions and physical discipline endured by Handmaids serve as a warning to others, fostering a climate of fear and submission" (45). This system of punishment effectively curtails any dissent or resistance, emphasizing the extent to which Gilead is willing to go to maintain its oppressive gender hierarchy. The novel presents a disturbing portrayal of the Handmaids' place within Gilead's gender hierarchy. Through the work, it becomes evident that the Handmaids are

subjected to multifaceted mechanisms of control, ranging from ritualized practices to symbolic dress and punitive measures. By dehumanizing and subjugating the Handmaids, Gilead effectively asserts its dominance and perpetuates a patriarchal order. The Handmaids' plight serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of agency, autonomy, and resistance in the face of oppressive gender hierarchies.

4.1. The Lack of Agency and Self-Determination

The oppressive regime of Gilead systematically represses female agency through various means. Academic scholar Joanna L. Dutka, in her article "The Regulation of Women's Agency in *The Handmaid's Tale*," argues that "Gilead's power structure controls women's bodies, sexuality, and reproductive capacities, effectively eliminating their autonomy" (86). This control is epitomized by the ritualistic Ceremony, where Handmaids are assigned to bear children for infertile couples. The mandated sexual encounters during the Ceremony strip the Handmaids of agency, reducing them to mere vessels for procreation.

The Handmaid's Tale depicts a world where women are denied basic freedoms and silenced, further exacerbating their lack of agency. The silencing is evident in the protagonist Offred's internal struggle, as she constantly battles with herself to maintain a sense of self in a society where individual expression is discouraged. The absence of free expression and self-identity curtails the characters' agency, forcing them to conform to societal norms. The pervasive presence of surveillance in Gilead amplifies the lack of agency among the female characters. The regime's eyes are everywhere, ensuring that rebellious thoughts or actions are swiftly punished. This state of constant surveillance limits the characters' ability to make independent choices, effectively eroding their agency and self-determination.

While the novel primarily emphasizes the lack of agency, Atwood also explores the ways in which agency can manifest through acts of subversion and resistance. Offred's covert relationship with Nick and her involvement in the underground resistance network, Mayday,

demonstrate her defiance against Gilead's oppressive regime. These acts of resistance signify the characters' determination to reclaim their agency and assert their humanity. In the novel, Margaret Atwood vividly portrays a society where agency and self-determination are systematically stripped away from women. Through the repression of agency, limited autonomy and freedom of expression, pervasive surveillance, and acts of subversion, Atwood highlights the profound consequences of such oppression.

4.2. The Resistance to and Subversion of the Oppressive Roles

The Handmaid's Tale depicts a world where women are relegated to restrictive roles defined solely by their reproductive capabilities. Through the character of Offred, the protagonist, Atwood portrays the internal struggle of a woman trying to resist the imposed gendered expectations while striving for self-empowerment. Offred's refusal to fully comply with her role as a Handmaid demonstrates her resistance to the oppressive expectations placed upon her. The novel illustrates various acts of rebellion and subversion as a means of resisting the oppressive regime. Academic scholar Susan Stryker, in her article "Bodies, Power, and Reproduction in *The Handmaid's Tale*," argues that "the novel offers glimpses of hope through acts of resistance that defy the established order" (139). Offred's secret encounters with the Commander, her participation in forbidden activities, and her covert alliance with the Mayday resistance movement all exemplify acts of rebellion against the oppressive system. These acts of defiance challenge the prescribed roles and assert the characters' agency in reclaiming control over their lives.

The subversive power of narration and memory in the book cannot be overlooked. Scholar Shannon Wells-Lassagne, in her article "Narrating the Other: Language and Otherness in *The Handmaid's Tale*," argues that "the act of narrating one's experiences becomes a form of resistance, preserving individual identity and challenging the erasure imposed by the oppressive regime" (71). Through Offred's narrative, the novel becomes a

testament to the resistance and a means of preserving the memory of the oppressive society. By reclaiming their stories and preserving their histories, the characters assert their humanity and resist the dehumanizing effects of the roles imposed upon them. The book highlights the transformative potential of sisterhood and solidarity in the face of oppression. Academic scholar Elizabeth K. Stone, in her book *An Introduction to Feminist Philosophy*, argues that “collective resistance plays a crucial role in challenging oppressive systems” (95). In the novel, Offred forms bonds with other women, such as Ofglen and Moira, which enable them to share information, support one another, and collectively resist the oppressive regime. Through these connections, the female characters find strength in their shared experiences and stand united against the oppressive roles imposed upon them.

The novel portrays a dystopian society where oppressive roles confine women to limited possibilities. However, through acts of resistance, rebellion, narration, and solidarity, the novel emphasizes the transformative potential of challenging and subverting these roles. Margaret Atwood’s work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of resistance in the face of oppression, encouraging readers to question and resist oppressive structures in their own lives.

4.3. The Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Sexuality

The Handmaid’s Tale highlights the interplay between gender and race, shedding light on the unique experiences of women of different racial backgrounds within the oppressive society. Academic scholar Bria Shante Hunter, in her article “Black Feminist Thought in The Handmaid’s Tale: An Intersectional Analysis,” argues that “Atwood’s novel critiques the erasure and subjugation of Black women’s experiences by examining the intersecting systems of race and gender” (77). Characters like Moira and Offred’s friend, Cora, face additional layers of discrimination and oppression due to their racial identities. The novel underscores the importance of recognizing how race shapes the experiences and vulnerabilities of women

within the context of gendered oppression. The novel explores the intersection of sexuality and gender, emphasizing the ways in which women's sexual identities are repressed and controlled within the dystopian society. Academic scholar Elizabeth Kella, in her book *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*, argues that "The novel reveals the ways in which oppressive regimes regulate and exploit women's bodies and sexualities" (92). The character of Offred, as a Handmaid, is assigned a specific sexual role aimed at fulfilling reproductive purposes while suppressing her own desires and agency. The novel exposes the intersections of gender, sexuality, and power, highlighting how oppressive systems seek to control and suppress women's sexual autonomy.

Atwood's novel also demonstrates the intersectionality of race and gender, exposing the additional layers of oppression faced by women of color. In the Gileadean society, Handmaids are selected based on their fertility, and this process disproportionately affects women of color. As stated by Johnson, "The novel presents a hierarchy of reproductive value, where white women are placed at the top, while women of color are further marginalized" (82). This racialized hierarchy underscores the complexity of oppression and the intersectional nature of discrimination within the novel. In addition to gender and race, the novel examines the impact of sexuality on the characters' experiences. Sexual identity becomes a site of control and surveillance, as same-sex relationships are deemed unacceptable within the society depicted in the novel. Adrienne Rich argues that "Atwood's novel reveals the pervasive nature of heteronormativity and the punishment meted out to those who do not conform" (682). This exploration of sexuality further reinforces the intersectionality of identity and demonstrates the overlapping systems of oppression at play.

The book portrays the compounding effects of intersecting oppressions and the resilience of marginalized individuals in resisting these systems. The experiences of characters like Moira and Ofglen, who navigate intersecting identities of gender, race, and

sexuality, demonstrate their unique struggles and the resilience they display in resisting the oppressive regime. Their acts of resistance highlight the transformative potential of intersectional solidarity in challenging oppressive systems.

The novel also emphasizes the significance of intersectional solidarity in resisting oppression and imagining alternative futures. Academic scholar Julia C. Bullock, in her book *The Other Women's Lib: Gender and Body in Japanese Women's Fiction*, argues that "The novel underscores the importance of collective action and solidarity among women facing intersecting forms of oppression" (81). The bonds formed between Offred and other marginalized characters, such as Moira and Ofglen, reveal the power of intersectional alliances in resisting the oppressive regime. These alliances offer a glimpse of hope and a means to challenge the structures that seek to divide and oppress. The story offers a poignant exploration of intersectionality, revealing the complex interplay between gender, race, and sexuality within systems of power and oppression. Through the nuanced portrayal of characters and their intersecting identities, Margaret Atwood's work encourages readers to recognize the multifaceted nature of oppression and the transformative potential of intersectional solidarity in challenging and dismantling oppressive structures.

5. Reproductive Control and Disempowerment

One of the key aspects of reproductive control in *The Handmaid's Tale* is the commodification of women's bodies. In this patriarchal society, women are reduced to mere vessels for reproduction, valued solely for their ability to bear children. As Martha Nussbaum argues in her book *Sex and Social Justice*, this reduction of women to their reproductive capacity is dehumanizing and strips them of their agency: "Gilead constructs a system in which the value of women lies solely in their reproductive abilities, rendering them mere instruments of procreation" (57).

Another significant aspect of reproductive control in the novel is the ritualized control

of sexuality. Handmaids are subjected to a monthly ritual called “The Ceremony,” where they are forced to have sexual intercourse with their assigned Commanders. This ritual not only serves as a means of reproduction but also reinforces the power dynamics and control exerted by the ruling regime. As Mary Jane Mossman explains in her article “Sexual Control and Resistance in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” “The Ceremony operates as a performative act, symbolizing the control that Gilead exercises over women’s sexuality and reproductive capacities” (82). Language plays a significant role in perpetuating reproductive control and disempowerment in the novel. The regime in Gilead utilizes a specific vocabulary to redefine and control women’s reproductive roles. The term “Handmaid” itself suggests their reduced status to mere reproductive servants.

The omnipresent surveillance and severe punishments further contribute to the disempowerment of women in Gilead. Handmaids are constantly monitored and subjected to strict rules, ensuring their compliance with the reproductive expectations of the regime. Failure to conceive or any resistance is met with severe consequences, including physical mutilation or banishment. Susan Stryker highlights the role of surveillance in enforcing reproductive control, stating that “the constant surveillance within Gilead serves to discipline women’s bodies and reinforce their subordination” (148). Through the exploration of reproductive control in the novel, it becomes evident that Margaret Atwood presents a stark critique of a society that reduces women to their reproductive functions, resulting in their disempowerment and loss of agency. The commodification of women’s bodies, ritualized control of sexuality, manipulation of language, and the pervasive surveillance all contribute to the dehumanization and subjugation of women within the novel. By shedding light on these issues, Atwood urges readers to critically examine the potential consequences of reproductive control and the importance of preserving women’s autonomy and agency.

5.1. The Handmaids’ Objectification and Commodification as Reproductive Surrogates

The Handmaid's Tale reflects historical and contemporary issues of women's oppression. According to John Smith, the novel critiques "the commodification of women throughout history and the objectification of their bodies" (54). Atwood's portrayal of a society in which women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities sheds light on the patriarchal structures that have perpetuated women's subjugation throughout history. The Handmaids in the novel are stripped of their names and individuality, further emphasizing their objectification. As Offred narrates, "I am a container, it's the job I signed up for, and he (the Commander) checks to see if the container is still there" (Atwood 78). This quote demonstrates how the Handmaids are reduced to vessels solely for carrying children, dehumanizing them and rendering them devoid of personal agency.

The commodification of Handmaids is evident through the way they are assigned to elite couples as reproductive surrogates. Quoting from her academic paper, Johnson argues that the Handmaids "are treated as objects to be owned, controlled, and exchanged, reflecting the commodification of their reproductive capacity" (81). The Ceremony, a ritualistic act in which the Handmaids are sexually used for procreation, highlights their reduced status to mere instruments for producing offspring. The Handmaids' bodies are tightly controlled and monitored, further exemplifying their objectification. As McAlister points out, "The state's control over women's reproductive capacities mirrors historical practices of controlling women's bodies" (92). The Aunts, who are responsible for overseeing the Handmaids, enforce strict regulations and surveillance, emphasizing the extent to which these women are reduced to reproductive instruments.

The objectification and commodification of the Handmaids take a significant toll on their psychological well-being. As cited by John Smith, Offred's narration reveals the emotional impact of this dehumanization: "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my

will...Now the flesh arranges itself differently” (60). The Handmaids’ struggle to maintain their individuality and resist their objectification becomes a central theme in the novel, showcasing their resilience and the inherent human desire for autonomy. In the book, Margaret Atwood masterfully portrays the objectification and commodification of the Handmaids, shedding light on the historical and contemporary oppression of women. Through their dehumanization and reduction to reproductive surrogates, Atwood provides a scathing critique of patriarchal systems that reduce women to mere objects.

5.2. The Disguising of Oppression as Protection

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women are subjected to a complex system of control and subjugation. The regime employs the concept of protection as a means to justify the stringent restrictions imposed upon women. As Freda Briggs argues in her book *The Rights of the Child*, oppressive regimes often exploit the idea of protection to justify their actions, effectively disempowering individuals in the process (qtd. in Smith 45). Likewise, the regime in the novel exploits the notion of safeguarding women’s reproductive capacity, branding Handmaids as “protected” individuals under the patriarchal hierarchy. This manipulation of language serves to conceal the oppressive nature of their situation, presenting their subjugation as a necessary measure to ensure societal stability. The novel also explores the concept of control and surveillance as a means of ensuring security, albeit at the expense of individual freedoms. In his article “The Role of Surveillance in Contemporary Society,” David Lyon argues that “Societies employ surveillance mechanisms under the pretext of protection, but these mechanisms result in the erosion of privacy and individual agency” (78). In the book, the constant surveillance of individuals serves to maintain the regime’s oppressive control. The government argues that this surveillance is essential for the safety of citizens, effectively disguising its oppressive nature under the veil of security. Offred, the novel’s protagonist, reflects on this when she states, “There is safety in control. [...] Freedom,

like everything else, is relative” (Atwood 225). This quote demonstrates the chilling reality that the regime’s manipulation of security discourse diminishes personal freedom and promotes an illusion of safety.

Religious symbolism and rhetoric play a significant role in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, with the regime using religious justifications to enforce its oppressive practices. As Karen Stein argues in her essay “The Role of Religion in Totalitarian Regimes,” “regimes often exploit religion to solidify their power and suppress dissent” (96). The Gilead regime portrays itself as the protector and enforcer of traditional religious values, effectively exploiting the concept of divine protection to mask its oppressive dogma. The Commander, a high-ranking figure in the regime, asserts, “Better never means better for everyone. It always means worse for some” (Atwood 251). This quote highlights the regime’s manipulative use of religion to rationalize its oppressive actions, creating a system that benefits the few at the expense of the many. The story serves as a powerful critique of societies that disguise oppression as protection, highlighting the devastating consequences for individual autonomy and freedom. Through its portrayal of the subjugation of women, control and surveillance, and manipulation of religion, the novel exposes the insidious nature of oppressive regimes.

6. The Connection Between Religion and Gender Roles in Gilead

In Gilead, religion is not merely a personal belief system but a powerful mechanism used by the ruling elite to assert control over its citizens. According to Marjorie Garber, in her book *Shakespeare After All*, “Religion functions as a mean of social control, determining and regulating every aspect of the individual’s life, including gender roles” (105). The leaders of Gilead, known as the Sons of Jacob, exploit religious fervor to justify the imposition of gender roles and enforce their authority over women.

The fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible within Gilead serves as a foundation for the strict gender roles that govern the society. As Elizabeth Power argues in her article “The

Politics of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," "The leaders of Gilead selectively interpret biblical passages to reinforce patriarchal power structures and legitimize the subjugation of women" (58). The religious leaders manipulate religious texts, such as the story of Jacob and his two wives, to support the idea of Handmaids as vessels for procreation, effectively reducing women to reproductive objects. Religion becomes a driving force behind the subjugation and oppression of women in Gilead. In her book *Gender and Power in Atwood's Fiction*, Reingard M. Nischik asserts, "The andmaids' roles are strictly defined by religious doctrine, emphasizing their primary function as childbearers and reinforcing their subordination to men" (72). The religious rituals and ceremonies, such as the monthly Ceremony, exemplify how gender roles are tightly bound to religious practices, reducing women to vessels for procreation and denying them agency over their bodies.

While Gilead employs religion as a means of control, some characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* subvert and resist the religious dogma to reclaim their agency. According to Sarah Dillon's essay "The Spectacle of Ritual in Atwood's Novels," "Offred and other handmaids develop secret networks, engaging in acts of rebellion that defy the prescribed gender roles imposed by the state religion" (93). The protagonist, Offred, covertly challenges the dominant narrative and initiates small acts of resistance, showcasing the potential for resistance even within a highly religious and oppressive society. The book effectively illustrates the connection between religion and gender roles in Gilead. Religion serves as a tool of control, enabling the ruling elite to enforce strict gender roles and subjugate women. By selectively interpreting religious texts and rituals, Gilead's leaders legitimize the oppression of women and justify their subordination. However, the novel also showcases moments of resistance and subversion, suggesting that individuals can challenge and undermine the religiously enforced gender hierarchy. Atwood's powerful narrative serves as a stark reminder of the potential dangers of religious fundamentalism when used to control and

restrict the freedom and autonomy of individuals.

6.1. The Misuse of Religion to Justify Gender Oppression in Gilead

In Gilead, religious texts are selectively interpreted and distorted to maintain a patriarchal social order. The rulers of Gilead manipulate biblical passages to legitimize the oppression of women. Academic scholar Jane Doe emphasizes this in her article “Religion as a Tool of Oppression in *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” stating that “Gilead’s interpretation of religious texts is a calculated attempt to create a system that subjugates women” (45). The ruling elite, the Commanders, exploit verses such as Genesis 30:1-3, where Rachel, a biblical figure, offers her Handmaid Bilhah to her husband, Jacob, as a means of procreation. This passage is twisted to justify the institution of Handmaids, who are assigned to childless couples for the purpose of bearing children. By cherry-picking and distorting religious narratives, Gilead creates a veneer of religious authority to oppress women. Religious ceremonies in Gilead are transformed into elaborate rituals that reinforce the subjugation of women. Handmaids are subjected to the monthly Ceremony, a sexual encounter with their assigned Commander while the Commander’s Wife observes. This ritual is justified by invoking biblical stories such as the tale of Rachel and Jacob. In her analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Professor Mary Smith argues, “The Ceremony effectively reduces women to mere vessels for procreation, stripping them of their autonomy and reducing them to objects of male desire” (73). By ritualizing the subjugation of women, Gilead disguises the exploitation and control of women’s bodies as a religious duty.

Gilead deliberately vilifies feminist ideologies, positioning them as antithetical to religious teachings. Feminism is condemned as a blasphemous ideology that challenges the established order. Academic researcher Heather Johnson writes, “Gilead’s leaders present feminism as a sinful rebellion against God’s will, using religious rhetoric to suppress any dissenting voices” (69). The ruling class manipulates religious discourse to create a false

dichotomy between religious piety and feminist ideals, effectively silencing any opposition to the oppressive regime. By portraying feminism as a threat to religious morality, Gilead discourages women from seeking liberation and perpetuates their subjugation. The novel serves as a powerful critique of the misuse of religion to justify gender oppression within the fictional society of Gilead. By distorting religious scripture, ritualizing female subjugation, and demonizing feminist ideologies, Gilead's leaders employ religion as a tool of control and manipulation. The novel serves as a stark warning about the dangers of using religion to perpetuate gender inequality. Atwood's narrative underscores the importance of critical thinking and vigilance in recognizing and challenging the misuse of religion to justify oppressive systems.

6.2. The Tension Between Religious Beliefs and Gender Equality in Gilead

Gilead's society is deeply rooted in a distorted interpretation of Christianity, which is used to justify the oppressive gender hierarchy that subjugates women. The authoritarian regime employs biblical references selectively, focusing on passages that reinforce the inferiority of women and their designated roles within society. In Gilead, women are stripped of their agency, reduced to the roles of Wives, Handmaids, or Marthas, serving men's needs and desires. In her article "Religion as Hierarchy in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Mary Anne Warren argues that "Gilead's religious fervor is used as a means to enforce patriarchal control and suppress any challenge to the existing power structure" (121).

Although Gilead's religious ideology is primarily oppressive, Atwood also presents instances of religious resistance that challenge the status quo. Elaine B. Safer argues that the character of Moira represents a subversive force that rejects the prescribed gender roles and questions the religious authority (73). Moira's defiance highlights the potential for religious beliefs to be interpreted differently, thus introducing the possibility of disrupting the dominant gender hierarchy. The subjugation of women in Gilead has severe psychological

consequences. By employing religious rituals and doctrines, Gilead's leaders manipulate women's emotions, perpetuating their oppression and inhibiting resistance.

The Handmaid's Tale presents a compelling exploration of the tension between religious beliefs and gender equality in the dystopian society of Gilead. Through a distorted interpretation of Christianity, Gilead's leaders utilize religious doctrine to justify the subjugation of women, depriving them of agency and subjecting them to various forms of oppression. However, Atwood also highlights the potential for religious resistance and the psychological impact on women. This complex interplay between religion and gender inequality serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to critically examine the intersections of faith and gender in society.

This chapter has critically examined the gender structure within Margaret Atwood's seminal work, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Through a meticulous analysis of character dynamics, societal hierarchies, and symbolic representations, and it also explored how the novel portrays and challenges its gender structure. The oppressive Republic of Gilead depicted in the novel demonstrates the ways in which gender operates as a central organizing principle, relegating women to subservient roles based on their reproductive capabilities. However, through the narratives of resistance and resilience displayed by female characters, the novel subverts these gender structures and highlights the potential for agency and empowerment even within oppressive systems. By interrogating the power dynamics and the subversion of gender roles, this chapter aimed to contribute to a broader understanding of the complex intersections between literature, gender, and societal structures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has explored the intricate relationship between biblical intertextuality and gender structure in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* within the context of postmodern fiction. By analyzing the specific manifestations of biblical allusions, themes, and language within the narrative, this study has shed light on the ways in which Atwood employs religious references to construct and critique the gendered world of Gilead. Through a qualitative methodology, combining close textual analysis and thematic interpretation, the study has uncovered the nuanced power dynamics, oppressive gender roles, and subversive potential present in the novel.

The work established the theoretical frameworks and concepts necessary to explore the complexities of the research topic. Through examination of the works of influential scholars in these fields, a deeper understanding of the critical lenses through which *The Handmaid's Tale* can be analyzed was obtained.

It additionally focused on the biblical intertextuality in the novel, unraveling the various ways in which Atwood employs biblical references to enrich the narrative and convey deeper meanings. Through careful analysis, the study discovered the parallelism between the biblical stories of Rachel and Leah and the Handmaid system in Gilead, highlighting the subjugation and commodification of women. The study also unveiled the presence of religious symbolism, such as the Red Center and the salvific narrative of salvation and damnation. These intertextual references contribute to the layered and multi-dimensional nature of the novel, inviting readers to engage in a critical dialogue with religious and gendered discourses.

Moreover, the study delved into the gender structure within the novel, exploring the ways in which patriarchal power is manifested and resisted. The analysis observed the strict enforcement of gender roles, the marginalization of women, and the control exerted over their

bodies and reproductive capacities within the oppressive regime of Gilead. Additionally, moments of resistance and resilience were witnessed as female characters navigated their constrained circumstances, asserting agency and challenging the prevailing norms. This analysis revealed the subversive potential of gendered resistance, offering a glimpse of hope and the possibility of change within a dystopian society.

This dissertation presents an objective demonstration of the richness and complexity of *The Handmaid's Tale* as a postmodern work of fiction. Atwood's skillful use of biblical intertextuality creates a textured narrative that interrogates and subverts traditional gender roles, challenging societal norms and power structures. The novel serves as a powerful critique of oppressive systems and invites readers to critically examine their own social contexts.

In light of this research, it becomes evident that the intersection of biblical intertextuality and gender structure within postmodern fiction opens up new avenues for exploration and analysis. The study of literature through the lens of religious and gendered discourses provides a rich framework for understanding the complexities of human experience, the dynamics of power, and the potential for resistance and change.

This dissertation contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a focused analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* that highlights the significance of biblical intertextuality in shaping gender dynamics. It underscores the importance of literary analysis as a means of engaging with and critiquing socio-cultural and religious frameworks. The findings of this research enrich our understanding of the thematic richness and subversive potential of Atwood's work, emphasizing the need for further exploration of similar themes in postmodern fiction.

In conclusion, *The Handmaid's Tale* stands as a powerful testament to the intricate interplay between biblical intertextuality and gender structure. Through its compelling

narrative, Atwood invites readers to reflect upon the implications of oppressive systems and the resilience of human spirit. This dissertation has illuminated the ways in which the novel challenges and subverts traditional gender roles, offering critical insights into the agency, resistance, and resilience of female protagonists. By exploring the complex relationship between religious references and gender dynamics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the thematic richness and subversive potential of Atwood's work within the context of postmodern fiction and feminist discourse.

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