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Women of Gilead as colonized subjects in Margaret Atwood’s novel: A study of postcolonial and feminist aspects of The Handmaid’s Tale

Zahra Sadeghi1* and Narges Mirzapour2

Abstract: Postcolonialism and feminism are two critical discourses that have some common features as both bodies of thought concern the issues of oppression, inequality, binary oppositions, political/social fundamentalism and explain the possible resistance to the cultural legacy of imperialism and colonialism. In Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale, women, especially handmaids, suffer from the oppression imposed upon them not only by the imperial power but also by the indigenous patriarchal ideology which is similar to the situation of colonized subjects, particularly women, in previously or currently colonized countries. In this respect, Gilead, a place in which this novel took place, is considered as a colonized country in which we will see that although the setting is America, the female characters, who are subjected to both the totalitarian government of Gilead and the patriarchal society, are treated similar to those colonized subjects. Considering Gilead as microcosm of the postcolonial society, this paper explains how the handmaids are treated and forced to experience a life of passivity and submissiveness.

Keywords: post-colonialism; feminism; The Handmaid’s Tale; handmaids; subjugation; loss of identity

1. Introduction

One of the most important issues that put postcolonial and feminist approaches beside together is that both approaches revolve around the study of the marginalized “Others” and possible...
resistance to the oppression under the fundamentalist regime and, in so doing, they have a similar theoretical trajectory. Both feminism and postcolonialism attempt to “uncover power structures, biases, and exclusions in the construction of knowledge” (Chew & Richards, 2010, p. 121). As Teresa de Lauretis indicates, “a feminist theory itself became possible only within a “postcolonial mode”” (Schwarz & Ray, 2005, p. 54). As McEwan (2001) explains, “feminism is associated with cultural imperialism ... (and) emerged from the historical context of modern European colonialism and anti-colonial struggles” (p. 97). Both feminism and post-colonialism intended to reject the binary oppositions and reverse the dominant hierarchies of gender (male vs female), culture (lower-class vs upper-class), and race (white vs black). Bill Ashcroft et al. (2005) believe that feminism is of crucial interest to postcolonial studies based on the fact that:

both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of respects, and both feminist and post-colonial politics oppose such dominance. (p. 83)

What makes feminism inseparable from postcolonialism is “interventions of feminism that have done more to complicate postcolonial notions like resistance, identity, subjectivity and difference” (Chew & Richards, 2010, p. 120). As Mellor explains in Feminism & Ecology (Mellor, 1997), “women suffer disproportionately in social and ecological terms based on patterns of colonialism, racism, work exploitation and militarization” (pp. 5–6). “Feminist and post-colonial discourses”, as Bill Ashcroft et al. argue in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (Ashcroft et al., 2006), “both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions for a male-dominated canon” (p. 233). In The Handmaid’s Tale (Atwood, 1985), Atwood depicts the oppression imposed upon women by the political and religious trends, women’s reaction to such victimization, their loss of identity, and their search for their lost female and national identity. Marginalization of female characters, their experience of “Otherness” and their struggle for survival in Atwood’s novel make them similar to the colonized nation/land. The women of Gilead are oppressed many times over. They are oppressed by the totalitarian society which does not let them much freedom. They are oppressed by their men, who take benefit of the helplessness of women in their country. They are oppressed by other women, the Aunts, who act as the agents of the Gilead regime. Besides, they are oppressed by religion, which is the primary reason for all other oppressions. The Handmaid’s Tale stresses the dark fact that women are suffering in Gilead because of their gender and that they are under the oppression because of their being women. The Gilead, as a place in a developed country, is a society replete with fear, apprehensiveness, hopelessness, and dissatisfaction. According to Staines (2006), who comments on the dystopian setting of this novel, “[s]ociety has returned to a constricted re-creation of Puritan New England ... [and] perhaps only a Canadian, a neighbor as well as an outsider to the United States, could create such an unsettling vision of the American future” (p. 21). Atwood changes the setting so as to exaggerate and expose some of the failings of western society, including the inequitable distribution of power between individuals. By depicting the plight of Gileadean women in general, Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale tries to show that these women are deprived of any right. As Howells asserts in The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood (Howells, 2006), the novel is “centered on human rights abuses and particularly the oppression of women under a fundamentalist regime [and] is entirely social and political in its agenda” (p. 163). Gilead is a future United States, the atmosphere of which is similar to the postcolonial countries, and the status of women in which is similar to the situation of women in once colonized countries. In her novel, Margaret Atwood describes the actual oppression of women and compares them to silent and substitutable objects which reminds us of the third-world or black people/women.
2. Women in Gilead as colonized people

Like Canada or any other colonized lands which are exploited by and confronted with a powerful colonizer while people of which are mentally and physically dominated and deprived of basic rights, women in the Gilead regime experience the same confrontation with power and oppression by social, political, and rigid religious norms. In this way, women’s confrontation with powerful forces in Gilead and their powerless can be compared to Canada’s confrontation with American colonial/imperial power and its submissive status in a colonized-oriented world. As Offred indicates, handmaids are “ladies in reduced circumstances.” The circumstances have been reduced; for those of us who still have circumstances (Atwood, 1985, p. 13). As J. Brooks Bouson (2001) describes, “because they are women with ‘viable ovaries’ in a world of mass sterility, they are forcibly enlisted in the regime’s project of reversing the precipitous decline in the Caucasian birthrate” (p. 44). The Handmaid’s Tale exposes female anxieties about male domination and sexual exploitation that have always plagued women of the third-world countries. The disobedient handmaids who do not surrender to the new regime are severely punished or executed. Women are not permitted to take part in the consequential works or to take independent decisions. The right of making decision is allocated to men who exercise sexual mastery over women and handmaids have been maintained chiefly for the process of breeding and reproduction.

Compared with the underdeveloped countries’ women, the role of women of Gilead is marginalized too. Sheila Rowbotham in Women, Resistance and Revolution (Rowbotham, 1972) indicates that “certain similarities exist between the colonization of the underdeveloped country and female oppression within capitalism and totalitarianism. There is the economic dependence, the cultural take-over, the identification of dignity with resemblance to the oppressor” (p. 201). Women of this novel, especially the handmaids, are treated like animals, sometimes even worse than animals, and they suffer from the oppression imposed upon them by the patriarchal society. The fertile handmaids are kept by their commanders in order to bear children and those infertile women are sent to the colonies to experience a slow death. Marti Kheel (2004) believes that:

women’s fertility is also increasingly being exploited by the male-dominated medical establishment, which now routinely ‘harvests’ women’s eggs. The underlying idea behind both operations is the same—women’s bodies and animals’ bodies belong first and foremost to men. (p. 334)

As the colonizer uses Christianity as an influential factor in changing the values, cultures, beliefs, and the mind of colonized people, Gilead regime utilizes the totalitarian theocracy to subjugate women and use their bodies as political instruments which can produce future generation. Every month, a sexual Ceremony is held in which the handmaid does not have any control over her body and should surrender to the masculine power of the commander who represents the western colonizer as he holds the control over the handmaid’s body and uses it for his own benefit. Offred’s description of the Ceremony confirms the cruelty and the violence exerted on the handmaid and that the handmaid suffers from both physical and psychological injuries:

The Ceremony goes as usual ... Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread ... My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers ... The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge ... My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking. What he is fucking is the lower part of my body. I do not say making love, because this is not what he’s doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. (Atwood, 1985, p. 77)

This Ceremony is an example of the manifestation of the strict religious doctrines which prevent women, particularly the handmaids, from having any control over their bodies and their identities.
2.1. Restrictions imposed upon women in Gilead

Atwood explains the character of Offred as a person is forced to experience a solitary life and is prohibited to have a slight amount of freedom in her life, even in her communication with other characters, exclaiming that in this novel,

you're dealing with a character whose ability to move in the society was limited. By the nature of her situation, she was very circumscribed. She couldn't communicate well with people. It was too dangerous. How do you tell a narrative from the point of view of that person? The more limited and boxed in you are, the more important details become. (Foust Vinson, 2010, p. 84)

Throughout the progress of the revolution, we see that some governmental restrictions are also imposed upon women. In the Republic of Gilead, women are forbidden by law to read books; all the female employees are dismissed from companies and they are not allowed to work anymore; moreover, women are not allowed to access their own bank accounts. Offred couldn’t even pay for her packet of cigarettes because she found that her bank accounts have been frozen. The government has seized the assets of all its female citizens. Women are forbidden to read and write. The handmaids, as Kanaar (1993) states, “have to speak by rote, if they speak at all” and should use “the prescribed expressions they have learnt at the Rachel and Leah Training Centre” (p. 7).

Living in the gymnasium where assumed to be for entertainment and amusement, the handmaids were bound to strict rules of the place, living in isolation and mostly having robotic life. Women are treated inferior to men and are subordinate to them. Moreover, the wives of higher officials and commanders also dominate the handmaids which are similar to the behavior of white women toward black women in postcolonial societies. Submission of women to the various classes in the Republic of Gilead established by New Right fundamentalists is one of the dogmatic rules of their society. Based on their function, women are entitled as the Wives, the Handmaids, the Marthas, the Econowives, and the Aunts. “The Gilead regime” as Bouson (2001) indicates, “effectively robs women of their individual identities through this imposition of a strict system of hierarchical classification and transforms them into replaceable objects in the phallocentric economy” (p. 43).

The other situation that is created for Gilead women is about their clothing; aforementioned, men manage all the decision-making positions and they construct oppressive culture to control women in public and private spheres. As an example, women even don’t have the opportunity to choose what they wear. Similar to the handmaids, all other women are also classified and divided into different groups based on the social class they belong and their clothes are in different colors signifying their role and social class. As handmaids wear red, Marthas—those housekeepers and cooks who “are not permitted to have sexual intercourse, further evidence of their lowly status” (Kanaar, 1993, p. 16)—wear green, and Wives—who are known as the upper-class women and have the most freedom among women—wear blue and turquoise. Other lees influential groups of women are Econowives who are also regarded as the lower-class women and wear “multicolored stripes” (Atwood, 1985, p. 165) which signify their multiple roles. As the title of these women—Econowives—indicates, they seem to be profitable for the Gilead regime as they do different roles and produce children; however, “they seem to be diminishing” (Atwood, 1985, p. 26) and one day there will be no Econowives in the society. Another class of women consists of Aunts who indoctrinate and control the handmaids and wear brown dresses, “a colour favoured by the Nazi Party of Germany” (Kanaar, 1993, p. 19). Although the Aunts seem to be powerful, at least when compared with other women of the society, the tools they are permitted to use are “electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts” (Atwood, 1985, p. 11) and they are not allowed to use gun. Apart from the restrictions imposed upon handmaids which forbid their right to read and write, or to have any control over their identity...
and name, the fact that these handmaids wear wimple intensifies their state of confinement which prevent them to have a clear and complete view of their circumstances. These restrictions imposed upon women in Gilead—being prevented to read and write, or to access their bank account, and their inability to choose what they want to wear—make the Gilead women the same as third-world or black women who, oppressed by the colonialism and patriarchy, lack the power of making any decision.

2.2. Women being silenced

Gayatri Spivak in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) discusses the relationship between woman and silence explaining that women are represented and constructed as absent or silent who are not listened to in a variety of discourses. Spivak indicates that “if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Morris, 2010, p. 257). The limitation of speaking the subaltern women should face can be exactly compared with those voiceless handmaids of Gilead, especially the novel’s major character, Offred. None of the handmaids has voice, and if they have, like the subaltern who “as female cannot be heard or read” (Morton, 2003, p. 65), no one hears them. Similar to the handmaids, “the voices, lives and struggles of ‘Third World’ women [have been] silenced and contained within the technical vocabulary of western critical theory” (Morton, 2003, p. 7). As it is explained by Parsons (2004), the fact that “women have been rendered silent, their natures devalued and their experiences underrated” is because of “a deep seam of prejudice that is called sexism, and that is embedded in all kinds of institutions, known as patriarchal for their persistent division of humanity into two parts of unequal status and power” (p. 117). Such patriarchal societies expect women to be silent, obedient and submissive. As it is indicated in Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (Bloom, 2001), “like physical abuse, literary violence against women works to privilege the cultural father’s voice and story over those of women, the cultural daughters, and indeed to silence women’s voices” (p. 52). In Gilead, and according to the revised Gileadean Bible, “Blessed are the silent” (Atwood, 1985, p. 74). The Gilead regime attempts to silence women and treats the handmaids as abused cultural daughters; this situation in which “men have ‘the word’ and women are rendered speechless” (Bloom, 2001, p. 52) is very similar to Spivak’s claims that “subaltern groups” (Morton, 2003, p. 57), being silenced during their life, “cannot speak” (p. 59). These fertile handmaids, their names as well as their identities are manipulated and controlled by external forces making them become passive, submissive, silent, and brainwashed sexual objects. This state of being regarded as an object, while being treated well apparently, is obvious in Offred’s statement when she refers to the tattoo: “I cannot avoid seeing, now, the small tattoo on my ankle. Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape” (Atwood, 1985, p. 56); this tattoo—in the shape of an eye which, as Offred states, “means ownership” (p. 195)—shows that Offred and all other handmaids with the same tattoo are always under surveillance by the authorities and cannot violate the rules. The society expects women to be submissive, silent, and passive since they are constantly observed and it signifies that the Gilead regime is like a panopticon prison for women.

2.3. Loss of identity in The Handmaid’s Tale

Identity crisis, loss of identity, and identity confusion are among those issues that are discussed in both postcolonial and feminist approaches. As the colonized people are oppressed and prevented from realizing their identity by the west colonizer, women are oppressed in the same way by the patriarchy. The identity of the colonized people is defined by the West colonizers’ use of categorization—“Self” versus “Other”, “West” versus “East”, “civilized” versus “primitive”—and the identity of women is defined by the patriarchal authorities’ use of gender stereotyping and dichotomies—“male/female, mind/body, and dominant/submissive” (Bomarito & Hunter, 2005, p. 238). As a Canadian woman writer well aware of the bilingual and bicultural situation of Canada, Margaret Atwood was living and writing at a time that Canada suffered from lack of national identity because of American imperialism and this lost identity of a colonized nation/land can be
seen in and compared with the women’s inquiry for their lost identity as depicted in her novel. Handmaids’ loss of identity is manifest in their multiple names as their names change when they are in the possession of a new commander. They do not have a fixed name, hence, a fixed identity. Another significant manifestation of the severe limitation and domination imposed upon the handmaids is that their previous, original name is ignored and, instead, they are labeled according to the names of their masters. For example, Offred’s name, “is derived from that of her male guardian, the Commander Fred” (Cooke, 2004, p. 125). Nathalie Cooke in Margaret Atwood: A Critical Companion (Cooke, 2004), quotes Constance Rooke’s argument about Offred’s name in which Rooke states that “the narrator’s name is June although, like Atwood’s Surfacer, she never reveals her name to the reader. We know her only by the name she has been given, ‘Offred’ because she belongs to the Commander ‘Fred’” (p. 114). Offred rejects the name imposed upon her and says that “[m]y name isn’t O freel, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it’s forbidden” (Atwood, 1985, p. 69). Therefore, handmaids are forced to kill their identities and, consequently, their desire. Howells (2006) describes the root of Offred’s victimization in this way:

As a handmaid deprived of her own name and identity, she has no rights as an individual but instead is conscripted into sexual service to the State, reduced by its doctrine of biological essentialism to her female role as a child breeder, a “two-legged womb” and to the ghost of a person, “a wraith of red smoke.” (p. 165)

Like the colonized people who prefer to imitate white people in order to be more civilized, the handmaids are involved in “a mimicry process close to perfection” (Academique, 2007, p. 258) “in order to adjust to social demands” (p. 53). This mimicry is the manifestation of the artificial aspects of life in Gilead in which people are pretending to be something they are not and to do something which is against their will. Offred describes this process of mimicry in this way: “I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born” (Atwood, 1985, p. 57). Therefore, what Offred presents of herself to the society is not her innate personality but the something artificial which may be even “a betrayal of womanhood” (Academique, 2007, p. 258) but can save her. Like the colonized people whose acceptance of western civilization and destruction of their previous values hasten the process of colonization, Atwood’s novel shows that women of Gilead, by accepting new indoctrinated values and beliefs and degrading their traditional values, begin to foster antagonistic attitudes toward each other and lose the sense of community which could have helped them in their resistance to the imperialism of the Republic of Gilead.

2.4. Women disunited in The Handmaid’s Tale

The division of women into different categories with different roles, unequal possession of power and different colors of their clothes which determines the differences between their status makes resentment among women. By dividing women into different categories, the Gilead regime generates animosity among them using women like Aunts to control and oppress other women. Depicting such resentment among women, Atwood opposes the gynocentric culture which assumes women to be “inherently kinder and gentler than men” (Callaway, 2008, p. 17) emphasizing the bond and friendship among women and their hatred towards men. Aunts try to convince the handmaids that if they are oppressed and victimized, it is their fault not the cruelty and violence of the patriarchy. The way Aunts try to brainwash the handmaids is manifest when Aunt Helena begins to talk about Janine:

It’s Janine, telling about how she was gang-raped at fourteen and had an abortion. She told the same story last week ... But whose fault was it? Aunt Helena says, holding up one plump finger. Her fault, her fault, her fault, we chant in unison. Who led them on? Aunt Helena beams, pleased with us. She did. She did. She did. (Atwood, 1985, p. 61)
In another part, Offred describes how Aunts used pornographic movies to make the handmaids submissive and content with the cruelty they should face:

Once we had to watch a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped of with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out. Consider the alternatives, said Aunt Lydia. You see what things used to be like? That was what they thought of women, then. Her voice trembled with indignation. (Atwood, 1985, p. 95)

Forcing the handmaids to watch such humiliating pornographic movies, the Aunts try to convince the handmaids that women had a worse situation in the past and they have been abused and tortured sexually.

Similar to the colonized submissive nation who are used to fortify the process of colonization, women in Gilead society are regarded as “sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices” (Atwood, 1985, p. 109) who are used for the benefits of the government. The Gilead regime, like a colonizer, begins to brainwash some selected women, the Aunts, and uses them as its agents who are selected to control other women and prevent them from any revolutionary act. As the colonizer chooses some of the indigenous people to accomplish its objectives and gives them some sort of power to exert on other indigenous people, the Gilead regime grants the Aunts special privileges such as the right to read and write and the power to avoid being sent to the Colonies.

These Aunts are mostly chosen from “childless or infertile or old women who were not married” who can “escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous Colonies” (Atwood, 1985, p. 233). Therefore, like the colonized people who are not only oppressed by the colonizer, but by internal agents who facilitate the process of colonization and imperialism, women in Gilead society are oppressed not only by the patriarchy/men but also by matriarchy/women who help the process of female humiliation and subordination. As stated by Nathalie Cooke (2004), “the inequitable distribution of power between individuals”, as depicted in Atwood’s dystopian novel, is one of the main “failings of our society” (p. 113). This inequitable “ascription of power” is emphasized by Atwood in her definition of politics and means “who gets to do what to whom” [or] “who inflicts violence on whom” both in the political and sexual domains” (Howells, 2006, p. 44). By using women against women oppressing each other, the Gilead regime prevents feminist activities and resistance to the oppression.

### 3. Resistance to the oppression

The intersection of feminism and postcolonialism lies in the fact that both theories seek to challenge the dominant power and incorporate the voices of silenced, oppressed, and marginalized people. As Ashcroft et al. (2005) argue, “the texts of feminist theory and those of postcolonialism concur on many aspects of the theory of identity, of difference and of the interpellation of the subject by a dominant discourse, as well as offering to each other various strategies of resistance to such controls” (p. 83). Like a colonized nation, women in Gilead are mentally exploited and their response to such victimization is influential in their failure or survival. Like Canada that resisted the American imperialism, women in Gilead society, especially the handmaids, should resist the political and religious fundamentalism in order to survive. Therefore, Atwood’s novel can be regarded as a contribution to the “understanding of Canadian identity and character and the placing of Canada on the literary-world map” (Abd-ur-Rahman, 2018, p. 116). An in-depth analysis of Offred, a passive protagonist and the narrator of the novel, will illuminate the similarities between her character and the black or third-world women. The thirty-three-year-old narrator of the tale, Offred, is an isolated protagonist whose character seems to be passive compared with the active and heroic women around her. Offred’s friend, Moira, and Ofglen are both punished for their frank and straightforward resistance to the Gileadean regime, a fate that Offred seems to escape.
She is not black, but like black women, she is a person who is forbidden to have her destiny in her own hands.

Offred’s name “suggests the words ‘afraid’, ‘offered’, and ‘off-read’ (misread)” (Bouson, 2001, p. 43). Cooke (2004) remarks that

she, herself, is ‘afraid’ (to play on a word that sounds like ‘Offred’) — afraid to rally against the Revolution, to reveal herself to Ofglen, to spy on behalf of the Mayday group, to attempt escape, to commit suicide. Indeed, she seems afraid to act independently at all. The only risks she takes are either prompted by a male partner (the attempted escape from Gilead with Luke, her evening at Jezebel’s with the Commander, and her eventual escape facilitated by Nick) or in order to be with a male partner (as in her nightly journeys to the Commander’s office and later to Nick’s bedroom). (p. 125)

Offred, compared with other active female characters, seems to be a weak and passive character, or as Moira calls her “a wimp” (Atwood, 1985, p. 223), what the Gilead regime expects from all women to be. She is different from her mother who was determined enough to involve in political and feminist movements. She is also different from Ofglen who joins the resistance against the Gilead regime and encourages Offred to join them and provide information about the Commander, what she never dares to do. When Ofglen commits suicide in order not to be arrested by the Eyes, Offred feels relief and states that “So she's dead, and I am safe, after all. She did it before they came. I feel great relief. I feel thankful to her. She has died that I may live. I will mourn later” (Atwood, 1985, p. 218). That’s because she is now safe and nothing about her can be revealed.

The other character is Moira who, in contrast to Offred, tries to find and define her identity and rejects Gilead’s policy toward women. She is a strong female character whose presence, as Offred states, “makes [Offred] feel safer” (Atwood, 1985, p. 60). Offred describes her friends as “quirky, jaunty, ... irreverent, resourceful” (Atwood, 1985, p. 46). Like Offred’s mother, Moira is a feminist activist and a rebellion who resists the homophobia. She is the only person among handmaids who dares to plan to escape from the Red Centre by using Aunt Elizabeth’s clothes. Ironically, she is the only black woman character who plays a role in the TV series of The Handmaid’s tale (acted by Samira Wiley) and also the strongest character in the novel. She’s determined and seemingly as capable as any man. When she arrives at the Center, she challenges the aunts by interaction with Offred in the restroom since the handmaid were not allowed to speak with each other. Finally, she escapes the center using a piece of a toilet device to abduct an aunt and then stealing the aunt’s clothes to disguise herself and run away. Her character is different from the character of Offred and even Offred accepts and praises such difference when she says that “I don’t want her [Moira] to be like me. Give in, go along, save her skin. That is what it comes down to. I want gallantry from her, swashbuckling, heroism, single-handed combat. Something I lack” (Atwood, 1985, p. 192). However, despite her bravery, she doesn’t have pleasant ending and has miserable fate like all other women of Gilead society. When Offred meets her at the club which has been used only by officials, she comes to know that Moira has become a prostitute who sleeps with different men in order to be free to do what she desires. That’s because of the system of a society that a proud, self-assured feminist rebel like Moira has become the antithesis of all she once stood for. Caught, tortured, and then forced into prostitution, Moira ultimately loses her willingness and becomes indifferent.

What happens to the strong women in the novel—Offred’s mother being is sent to colonies; Ofglen’s political activities result in her suicide; Moira’s escape ends up with her being sent to the colonies—makes Offred become a passive, silent and submissive person who prefers to surrender in order to survive. She is responsible for her victimization; her silence and acceptance of what has been imposed upon her is a contribution to the policies of the Republic of Gilead. Instead of joining other active and revolutionary women in resistance to the injustices, she decides to be a silent
woman subjugated to the needs and wills of her commander and her decision to love Nick is also her attempt to give birth to a child which can prevent her from being sent to the Colonies.

While being silent and submissive throughout the novel, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that she decides to narrate her life story. Reading, writing, or any other activity which can give them knowledge and awareness and, subsequently, grant them the access to the power of language were banned. Literature, story-telling and memoir are known as creative practices that can help those marginalized and oppressed subjects to regain and reconstruct their lost identities and challenge the master narratives. These creative practices can act as “cultural resistance” because “they cannot be dismissed or silenced” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001, p. 108). Offred’s decision to narrate the tale of her life and stop being silent is a transgressive act that reveals the cruelty imposed upon women and shows her resistance to the absolutism and oppression of Gilead regime. This is the moment when “what is silent becomes heard” (Plain & Sellers, 2007, p. 113). By narrating her life-story, Offred, like Scheherazade in Arabian Nights, uses storytelling as a powerful tool and tries to empower herself in order to survive the subjugations that the patriarchal society imposed upon her reclaiming her identity as a female subject, not an object or property of male commanders. Offred, Scheherazade and Atwood find language a redemptive tool which enables them to find their voice in different ways, recording her voice, telling stories, and writing, respectively.

Although it has become forbidden and illegal for those women throughout the novel to engage in any sexual behavior outside of the socially approved Ceremony, Margaret Atwood’s feminist concerns in this novel are mainly the issue of a woman’s sexual role in society. The protagonist, Offred, is representative of the classic “Madonna-Whore”, the imagery that describes the handmaids “as both pure and defiled” (Gulick, 1991, p. 46). However, their changing roles are as a result of what their society, Gilead, labeled them. According to Angela Michelle Gulick (1991), “terms such as nuns, sacred vessels, seeds, the blessed fruit, the carriers of life are common labels” (p. 47).

4. Image, memory and identity-formation
One of the common metaphors used for self-discovery, especially in feminist discourses, is the journey; however, since Offred is limited by the social rules and is not allowed to have physical journey through Gilead society, her trip and quest for self-discovery is psychological one, “moving backward in time in an attempt to find some understanding of what has happened to her and what she has become in this new society” (Gulick, 1991, p. 69). Actually, Offred can have these psychological journey at night, as she said “The night is mine, my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet .... The night is my time out. Where should I go?” (Atwood, 1985, p. 35). These kinds of mental quest help her in growing her awareness about both her role in Gilead society and her changing positions as a woman through the time. Offred, like the female character of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, The Scarlet Letter (1850), who lives in a Puritan Boston and suffers from public humiliation and strict religious beliefs, lives in the “dystopian world of Gilead’s totalitarian theocratic republic” (Obidič, 2017, p. 18) and experiences victimization. Offred and other handmaids suffer from patriarchal system and harsh religious doctrines as Hester, in Hawthorne’s novel, suffers from male leaders’ sexism. Like Hester, who has been stigmatized by the strict religious forces and tries to survive by remembering her past life and her parents, Offred usually tries to remember her past life when she lived happily with her husband and little daughter in order to regain her identity and the power to continue. The fact that Atwood uses the verb “remember” 110 times signifies the importance of this act and its redemptive effect on Offred’s personality as she remembers “what [she] wore, each blouse, each scarf” (Atwood, 1985, p. 44). She also tries to remember her daughter as she says, “I remember the pictures of us I had once, me holding her, standard poses, mother and baby, locked in a frame, for safety” (Atwood, 1985, p. 55) and her husband Luke and her happily married life with him when she states, “[a]ur
happiness is part memory. What I remember is Luke, with me in the hospital, standing beside my head, holding my hand, in the green gown and white mask they gave him” (p. 101).

The Mirror, which can be used in literature as a symbol for different concepts such as vision, consciousness, self-doubt and self-awareness, is used, in Atwood’s novel, as a symbol of Offred’s self-knowledge, which aids her in her psychological development and self-identity. As it is depicted in the novel, in Gilead society, there is no mirror around the handmaids, except in some public places which they have limited access. Once when she was walking in the street, Offred sees her “silhouette in the plate glass window” (Atwood, 1985, p. 29) but she could not stand there for a long time due to the permanent presence of the Eyes. Moreover, none of the handmaids is allowed to stay in a room with a mirror for a long time to get a clear image of themselves. When there is a mirror, Offred moves quickly which makes it difficult to have a clear image of herself. Even the mirrors seem to provide an unclear and distorting image as Offred explains: “I go up the stairs, my face, distant and white and distorted, framed in the hall mirror, which bulges outward like an eye under pressure” (Atwood, 1985, p. 43).

However, compared with the first half of the novel in which the mirror forbids the handmaid’s self-discovery, the second part of the novel gives a picture of the mirror which can increase her self-awareness. When Offred decides to show her resistance to the oppression imposed upon her, she has access to the mirrors, “to her image, and ultimately, to herself” (Gulick, 1991, p. 78). Her first disobedient behavior starts when she decides to leave the room at night to steal a flower from “Serena’s parlour” (Atwood, 1985, p. 82); there, she states that “[n]ow I can see outlines, gleams: from the mirror, the bases of the lamps, the vases, the sofa looming like a cloud at dusk” (p. 81). In her second illegal act, when she kisses Nick, she says, “He too is illegal, here, with me, he can’t give me away. Nor I him; for the moment we’re mirrors. He puts his hand on my arm, pulls me against him” (Atwood, 1985, p. 81). Finally, use of the image of mirror increases when Offred starts her illegal relationship with the Commander. During their meetings, she can see fashion magazines of the past which lead her to a consideration of how magazines “dealt in transformations; they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another” (Atwood, 1985, p. 122). Offred’s next rebellious behavior, which is related to the mirror, happens when the Commander wants her to be “decorated” (Atwood, 1985, p. 168) with clothes and makeup of the “time before” (p. 168) and she strongly reacts by saying “I feel stupid; I want to see myself in a mirror” (p. 178). This time the mirror is brought for her immediately, “a large silver-backed hand mirror” (Atwood, 1985, p. 179). Here, the Commander helps Offred in her rebellious actions since “not only does the Commander give Offred the mirror, he holds it while she applies make-up” (Gulick, 1991, pp. 79–80). When her illegal acts increase, Offred sees the image of herself in the mirror more than before. When she is with Serena, who seems to limit her freedom, she can see, as she states, “the two of us, a blue shape, a red shape, in the brief glass eye of the mirror as we descend. Myself, my obverse” (Atwood, 1985, p. 198). As Angela Michelle Gulick (1991) states, “these mirrors follow Offred’s pattern of becoming more and more rebellious, breaking more and more rules” (p. 81).

5. Conclusion
As number 37 on the Hundred Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990–2000, The Handmaid’s Tale (Atwood, 1985) is a dystopian novel in which women are raped, oppressed, and abused in the service of a patriarchal theocracy. The novel depicts a dystopian society in America right after the second civil war, when the fertile women are imprisoned and dominated to have just one function, bearing children. As a dystopia, “the world of Gilead is a place of whispers, silences and lies” (Academique, 2007, p. 254). Emphasizing the oppression and humiliation depicted in her novel which makes it a dystopian novel, Margaret Atwood called it “a cognate of A Clockwork Orange, Brave New World, and Nineteen Eighty-Four” (Bloom, 2004, p. 7). This novel, as Obedic (2017) states, “deals with a futuristic post-apocalyptic and nightmarish world which mirrors our ... society of today ... [and] criticizes the
evils already present in our contemporary world” (p. 17). Focusing on the possible consequences of neo-conservative religious and political trends in the United States (namely Gilead), the author shows that what happens in this novel is not a new and extraordinary event but something which is always repeated everywhere throughout history. She depicts the repeated cruelty of human beings in her novel and, as Targets Moving (2004) explains, “in The Handmaid’s Tale, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or which it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We’ve done it, or we’re doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow” (pp. 102–103). What happens to the handmaids, or the women in Gilead generally—being forbidden from writing or reading a book, having no opportunity for gathering or communicating with each other, being deprived of the freedom to choose their clothes, and the custom of naming people after their owners—is very similar to what happens to the Black people during colonialism. Despite the fact that Margaret Atwood just referred to the fate of black people in Gilead in just one paragraph in the whole novel, the structures of oppression that all white handmaids face throughout the novel are largely similar to the experiences of black women—once colonized subjects—in America. Handmaids’ experience of stigmatization, imposed silence, marginality, identity crisis, sexual harassment, and invisibility makes them similar to the black and Third World women in America as these women are known as “a priori category of oppressed” (McEwan 99). Similar to the “Third World Women,” handmaids experience the oppression of “otherness, tokenism, stereotyping, ... silence, the veil, and negativity” (Schwarz 54–5). The relation between feminism and postcolonialism lies in their attempts to “recover the lost historical and contemporary voices of the marginalized, the oppressed and the dominated” (McEwan 95). Disrupting the hierarchies and dichotomies of male/female, upper-class/lower-class, white/black, and subject/object, both feminist and postcolonial theories attempt to reject the stereotypical categorization. These handmaids’ struggle for survival and freedom makes them comparable with black women as the novel depicts the “relations among women of different castes, classes, and religious communities” (Schwarz 61). Revolving around the issues of power, domination, oppression, inequality, dependency, identity crisis, class, race, and sexuality, this novel depicts the subjugation of handmaids, their marginalization as well as their struggle to survive and resist the imperial/patriarchal discourses. In this novel, the victimized, “Othered,” and silenced handmaids—Offred, Ofglen, and Moira—move from victimization to consciousness and begin to show their resistance to the oppression and imperialism of the Republic of Gilead.

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Author details
Zahra Sadeghi1
E-mail: zahrosadeghi68@yahoo.com
Narges Mirzapour2
E-mail: n.mirzapour67@yahoo.com
1 Department of Foreign Languages, College of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran.
2 Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Human Sciences, Seminar University, Semnan, Iran.

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