



RESEARCH PAPER

Investigating Female Resistance and Governance in Challenging Patriarchy for Sustainability in Margret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore female resistance against patriarchy in Margret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), specifically focusing on themes of governance and sustainability. Incorporating methodology of Anarcha-Feminism and the concept of paradigm shift, it puts focus on the ways these women adopt to fight against the patriarchal system and the measures they took to work for gaining justice. Theorists from past and present indicate continuous, mass struggle, even in 21st century. The female characters of Atwood's novels fight authoritarian regime through developing sisterhood, by creating space for liberation, by influencing the system and by developing counter-knowledges that weakens and challenges state narratives and state-authorized histories. Through the exploration of several resistive forms, this research breaks new ground on feminist studies and women's writing, incorporating discussions societal change. It is recommended that policy makers prioritize initiatives promoting feminist political theory, providing strategies to dismantle authoritarianism and promote gender equality, democracy, and human rights globally.

KEYWORDS

Counter-Narrative, Feminist Political Theory, Governance, Patriarchy, Sustainability

Introduction

This research is crucial, especially in the current socio-political context where women's representation is complex, protest movements are dynamic, and state and patriarchal manipulations have become omnipresent. There must be urgent, practical and sustainable resistance strategies. This study represents a paradigm shift as it explores feminism within the framework of female resistance in order to question patriarchal control and authoritarian governance. It seeks to challenge the dominant narratives put forward by governments on women's representation with alternative perspectives that criticize or reject government treatment of women. Moreover, this allows for an enabling environment for feminist knowledge production.

This paper explores Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, from a feminist anarchist viewpoint. The focus is on the theme of defiance and obstacles encountered by women in male dominated societies. Margaret Atwood, an author known for her fiction works and advocacy for women's rights wrote *The Testaments* in 2019 as a continuation of her earlier novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, first published in 1985. Garnering acclaim, *The Testaments* sealed the Booker Prize jointly with Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019).

The story within *The Testaments* is narrated through the perspectives of three characters; Aunt Lydia, a figure from the previous book; Agnes and Daisy (later revealed as Nicole) two new personas. Agnes hails from the class in Gilead's society while Daisy is a Gilead missionary residing in London who actively resists against the oppressive regime.

Through their viewpoints Atwood delves into experiences of women navigating life under Gilead's dictatorship. This exploration delves into the way Atwood portrays resistance within *The Testaments* and its impact on challenging patriarchal structures and norms.

By exploring the behaviors and intentions of individuals such, as Daisy who actively resist the rule of Gilead, I aim to enhance the comprehension of advocacy, in dystopian settings. The novel takes place in Gilead, a Puritan theocracy that took over the United States in the 21st century. Atwood continues her exploration of Gilead's authoritarian regime through the intertwined stories of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Nicole. Aunt Lydia's narrative comes first. She is a powerful figure in Gilead and one of the founders of Ardua Hall. A former judge who experienced humiliation before being co-opted by Gilead's authorities, Lydia navigates a treacherous political landscape, outmaneuvering her rival Aunt Vidala and secretly gathering incriminating information about Gilead's authorities. She enlists Agnes and Nicole in her efforts to undermine the regime from within.

After the death of Tabitha, Agnes, the adopted child of Commander Judd, has to suffer the misfortune of Judd getting married again. Having had the choice of becoming a bride and getting married, Agnes is offered a chance to become an Aunt, by Aunt Lydia, just like her friend Becka. They include Daisy, now known as Nicole, currently based in London. Later, after her adoptive parents have been killed by Gilead agents, Ada saves her and tells the girl that her name is actually Baby Nicole, who was secretly smuggled out of Gilead. Nicole has been prepared to become a part of the protesters, referred to as Mayday, and work as a Pearl Girl in Gilead. Nicole is able to get valuable information with the help of Agnes and makes significant progress towards creating a resistance against Gilead, as well as working against such oppressive systems for women put in place by men.

In the epilogue, historian Pieixoto speaks at a conference in 2197, explaining how the damning evidence collected by Aunt Lydia and Nicole exposed Gilead to global criticism, ultimately causing its collapse. Pieixoto also discloses that Agnes and Nicole are Offred's daughters, the main character of *Handmaid's Tale*.

Literature Review

It's not just a fiction in genre but its story is inspired by the real life suppression of women by the male patriarchal systems and society. It is a real life inspiration as Sophie Gilbert writes in a journal named *The Atlantic* that the "novel is fiction but inspired from real life crimes" (Gilbert, 2019). Most people in their book reviews are connecting this novel to be the revealing factor of all the crimes and injustice of Donald Trump, which is as disturbing the fact as the description of torture endured by the women in the novel. Female abuse is as common these days as in history. So, it was just right to write about such a topic in today's novel, indicating that the time has come to speak up and take a stand against cruelty and injustice. The novel resembles the reality so much that Maureen Corrigan calls this actual world 'Gilead Lite' in her article for a website named *NPR*.

Connecting to the idea of reality, it presents the totalitarian view of Gilead in real life. Elizabeth Sulis Kim writes for an association named LARB, "Gilead is still totalitarian state. There are still public executions. Women are still raped" (Kim, 2019). So, it was necessary to write about it in a socially accepted way that spread awareness and a need for resistance. Atwood's recent novel seems to achieve that purpose successfully.

The novel also raises a voice for women against patriarchal abuses. Giving the voice to women, which is unlikely in most narratives, Atwood actually protested against these abuses. Holly Williams writes for a journal named *The Independent*,

In case where #MeToo has revealed the extent of abuse against women's bodies, where women's accounts are systematically disbelieved and undermined, where women's rights to control their bodies are freshly eroded, and where talk of walls and borders and the demolished other is all one the rise – well, the rhyme of reality with fiction is loud and devastatingly clear (Williams, 2019).

Feminist storytelling is another important theme and Elizabeth Sulis Kim writes about it for a website named LARB, "The importance of storytelling is a major theme in the novel. Storytelling has the capacity to forge chains and to break them, to shape identities and make people cooperate" (Kim, 2019). Stories have been used as narratives and set as ideologies, as she says, "The regime also recognizes that stories underpin and buttress belief – the right stories if edited to fit the political agenda, can be used for propaganda" (Kim, 2019).

Material and Methods

This applies qualitative textual analysis in presenting the various forms of resistance manifested by women in the narrative. The methodology is analytical, and the paradigm of text interpretation is the feminist perspective. Historical and contemporary feminist thoughts were fused in a manner that resistance against patriarchy is ongoing. To that end, this paper shall rely on the work of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1989) to explain how men have traditionally used women to delegate duties to them without observing the complement of the same right to balance those moral duties. This paper further explores ways in which women in the novel try to correct the imbalance through acts of resistance. A closely related issue of women's empowerment and resistance against oppressive forces through "Sisterhood is still Powerful" by Bell Hooks from her book, *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000), is used to analyze the elements of sisterhood in the novel and its effect as a means of empowerment and resistant base.

This paper illustrates that the women in the text ultimately bond with each other in order to institute a collective strength against patriarchy. The paper also draws on Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa* from (1976) for discussion of the themes of education, writing, and knowledge as instruments of resistance. This paper focuses on the theme of women solidarity in a narrative: how it induces collective strength against male oppression. I have based my arguments and prospects on Hélène Cixous's literary work to dig out education, writing, and knowledge as key elements of resistance. The paper illustrates just how and why these elements prove fundamental for the women portrayed in the book to resist certain aspects of men's supremacy- narrated to have begun with men creating tactics that excluded women from education. This is uncovered in the progression of the review; this is the act through which men ensured they remained at the top later in societies where such practices as described by the writer were participated. Further, this paper uses the theoretical perspective of anarcha-feminism, which is an amalgamation between anarchist and radical feminist viewpoints.

The term anarcha-feminism first appeared in an August 1970 issue of the Berkeley-based movement newspaper *It Ain't Me Babe*. The theoretical perspective of anarcha-feminism is basically formed on Marxist state theory from the 17th century that believes in the rejection of hierarchical leadership and centralized power. Anarchism follows by opposition of all coercive forms of authority. Together with radical feminism, whose aim

is to abolish patriarchy and men's domination, anarcha-feminism makes for a political philosophy and movement that has as its goal the abolition both of the capitalist state and patriarchal structures. Writing about anarcha-feminism, Sanya Sethi has to say in her book *Feminism in India*: "It focuses on placing women's emancipation at the center of the struggle towards achieving the goals laid out by anarchist theory" (Sethi, 2020, 01). This view binds experiences to the broader political struggle, thus emphasizing the integration of personal liberation within the context of anarchism.

The essay operates on the notion of a "paradigm shift" described by Thomas Kuhn and it creates an intersection between political science and literary studies. This changes a large part of our cognitive framework which makes us see things differently – sometimes acting or understanding things in new ways introduced by political science in relation with literature. The socio-political realities are questioned upon any intersection between politics and literature because such intersections help to understand how they came into being, apart from appreciating them based on pre-existing norms or values. Political ideologies can be challenged through governance structures with their inherent power relations that stifle dissent while promoting certain norms that society is expected to follow. On the other hand, Aunt Lydia as a character brings out the theme of identity within the power dynamics existing between resistance and those who coerce conformity; portraying differing aspects surrounding this issue. The meeting point promotes a blend of empirical studies and creativity – reshaping how we view things, making us have more ideas about what is before us. This broadens the scope of politics beyond its usual boundaries, with such discussions inspiring thoughts on different levels. This vantage point is thus used as an investigative instrument in this work.

Results and Discussion

Attached to Margaret Atwood's latest novel, *The Testaments*, mining and resistance of women against patriarchy and authoritarianism are thrown into sharp relief. In this case, this study examines education and knowledge as means of powers to be used to challenge oppressive and dominant male hegemonic systems. This paper shows how language proficiency and education are related in the most essential ways. First, and as the key English speakers well know, knowledge is indeed power, and as for the rest, language serves not only as a tool of oppression and privilege but also a tool of defiance (Shroff & Minai, 2019, 03). Writing, therefore, emerges as one of the major tools through which women are able to fight social unjust against them. Since education cannot be afforded to women, literacy serves as the ultimate arm in the fight against oppression.

To achieve this goal and to support the argument presented in the paper, the novel explores different representations of women and how institutions deploy power to facilitate the dynamics of resistance. In Gilead, the Aunts are a high-ranking caste of women selected by the regime for training and service at Ardua Hall. They rule and manage the destinies of the other women through retention of burial functions throughout the welfare states. The entire Aunts system and the rules that apply on the women of Gilead are set and implemented by the Aunts and at the same time providing for them. Unlike all other women in Gilead, Aunts are the only women who can be educated but cannot engage into marriage and reproduction. Although these powers are restricted by specific rules, their capability must not be underestimated, for even a Commander dare not question it; they obtain and manipulate information around the globe through entities called Pearl Girls. This intelligence is then employed to further their own agendas by gaining freedom, promoting resistance, etc.

The initial group of Aunts, known as the Founders, consists of four pivotal figures: The four aunts include Aunt Lydia who is portrayed as the most powerful; Aunt Vidala who comes second in rank; Aunt Helena who is considered as being frail and; Aunt Elizabeth who is portrayed as being afraid. Women can only be created by the Founders, and thus, build the systems and rules for them with the power being enforced by Aunt Lydia. This echoes the position of women in the real society whereby such administrators devise and run the nation's policies that govern the structures in societies.

As seen in *Aunts*, Pearl Girls are in the first echelon of The Testaments and perform the missionary role. They go to the northern side of America as well as other countries to educate young women on the faith of Gilead. Each such conversion is called a Pearl and this is how this software was named. When such women bring their converted counterparts back to Gilead, they become full-fledged Aunts despite being Pearl Girls. Due to their flexibility, Pearl Girls are also informants going to their areas of jurisdiction and passing info to the Aunts. The path to full power for women in Gilead involves three stages: first, they are turned into Supplicants and trained at Ardua Hall; second, they are used as Pearl Girls for missionary/espionage assignments; and third, if and when they succeed in these tasks, they are promoted to the rank of Aunts and given full power and scope. This place they are able to attain gives them the authority and chance to call for main changes in secret, as best depicted by Aunt Lydia in the book.

Sons of Jacob are the main founding father characters who also destroyed the United States Congress and usurped the old order, in a way similar to political/military authorities in real life. They are speaking the language of Gilead and are the creators of this world, with Commander Judd being named in the novel. This group of men who are commanders form the upper class of human society hence controlling the polity power as politicians and military generals. Angels work as the military like the security force with members being armed and uniformed in black clothing resembling police or security guard.

Eyes is the Secret Service of Gilead, an organization that is ruthless and operates covertly in Gilead and abroad, for the purpose of espionage and, mainly, executing acts of murder and abduction. They act with complete freedom and as far as they are concerned, they do not have to answer to anyone but their master, Commander Judd who is also a member of the Sons of Jacob. Women in the novel are categorized into various roles and oppressed same as the men by the male-dominated authoritarian regime making them powerless. It originates from within and is driven by the system's enforcer, such as the Handmaid and forced followers like Aunt Lydia. These external resistance groups included Mayday peace activists also have a significant part. The event was orchestrated and Gilead was brought down freeing women from its tyrannical rule.

Having a rather important position assigned by the rulers, Aunt Lydia actively participated in many clandestine actions and this woman effectively 'buried a lot of bones' but now, apparently, she is ready to 'dig them up again' (Atwood, 2019, 04). Fully prepared and without hesitation, she was ready to take a firm stand to overthrow the man and his despotic rule. The strategy was advanced slowly and surely, it adopted the idea mentioned by Emma Gray in her book *A Girl's Guide to Joining the Resistance* by Deja Foxx, the sixteen-year-old activist who cheerfully noted that "small acts of resistance when done by many people are the seeds of solidarity" (Gray, 2018). Fearing the danger of such writing in such an oppressive environment, Aunt Lydia hid her writings where "surveillance cameras [patriarchs]" could not see, that is, Aunt Lydia hid her writings in a secure "hiding place" (Atwood, 2019,05). In Ardua Hall, many betrayals lurked waiting for the right time to grab

those papers, this forces her to work under tight security measures to ensure she is shielded from anyone who would want to pry into her papers.

Since the whole story is shown through the eyes of three female characters including the character of Aunt Lydia, her consciousness of time running out pushes her to be not only careful but also fast. However she knows that the required work is to be done effectively, if not, some base should be set from where this work could be continued. For this reason, Aunt Lydia's desire to do more for the cause is based on her understanding of the need to build for the movement that seeks to bring change in the society.

I am well aware of how you must be judging me, my reader; if, that is, my reputation has preceded me and you have deciphered who I am or was.

In my own present day, I am a legend, alive but more than alive, dead but more than dead. I'm a framed head that hangs at the backs of classrooms, of the girls exalted enough to have classrooms: grimly smiling, silently admonishing. I'm a bugaboo used by the Marthas to frighten small children –if you don't behave yourself, Aunt Lydia will come and get you! I'm also a model of moral perfection to be emulated –what would Aunt Lydia want you to do? –and a judge and arbiter in the misty inquisition of the imagination – what would Aunt Lydia have to say about that?

I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it – formless, shape-shifting. I am everywhere and nowhere: even in the minds of the Commanders I cast an unsettling shadow. (Atwood, 2019, 32)

Aunt Lydia dedicated her life to attaining her high-status position, earning the respect and influence among the people of Gilead, including the Commanders. She amassed power with the strategic intent to subvert it against the very authorities who conferred it upon her. Even their prayers were laced with subversive intent. For instance, the Prayer of Grace includes the line, "Bless our Pearl Girls in their mission work beyond our borders" (Atwood, 2019, 36). This mission work carried a covert objective: to rescue Baby Nicole, and as such, not only strengthen the position of Aunt Lydia and the rebellion movement but also develop the trust of the superiors, whom she had no intention of obeying but rather delegitimize and dismantle from within.

In addition to writing, Aunt Lydia was able to minimize the oppression within Gilead and the pain inflicted onto women as much as she could. She proves the cliché wrongs about women through her strategically tactful behavior and wise allocation of resources. Education made the first group of women taken because they were considered a strong threat that ought to be quenched through resistance and betrayal. The suffering she underwent turned to will for plotting strategies of defiance through different frameworks of institution.

During the storm in the stadium, women did not lose the hope to become better and found their strength in the unity. They would sing songs such as "We Shall Overcome" to stay on the positive side of morale (Atwood, 2019, 136). One example of a dramatic act of disobedience was demonstrated by a woman who, during the test of her loyalty, taking a walk and shot another captured woman instead, took the gun and shot a man in a black uniform, meaning that she was refusing to submit to the authority of her captors. Hook's says, "The feminist activists who made these changes possible cared for the well-being of all females. We understood that political solidarity between females expressed in sisterhood goes beyond positive recognition of the experiences of women and even shared sympathy for common suffering" (Hooks, 2000, 12). Aunt Lydia seized the opportunity to

implement her covert strategy, agreeing outwardly with the regime while secretly plotting its downfall.

The "dollhouse" is a metaphor that describes the sociopolitical climate of Gilead (Atwood, 2019, 20). It stands for the hardwired social and political structures with their respective idols: the wife, the aunt, the commander, and so on. In this symbol, for instance, the young Agnes developed animosity towards the Aunt and Wife dolls. She upbraided them for the oppression women received. When she started staying with her step-father and his second wife, she would place the Aunt doll hanging in a room. That, of course, was what she felt about the doll.

It introduced another female voice of narration that refused the concept of forced marriage introduced by another female voice of narration; Agnes. The young lady opted to run to her mother and told her that she does not want to get married. This answer relies on basic principles of psychology: It means that whereas the experts in a given concept will not get tired of it, or even develop a negative attitude towards it, the common people can get bored with the concept and refuse to consider it any more. This was the case regarding the formation of Agnes Jemima, who later on grew to become Aunt Veronica. Her understanding of the world as a little girl created the biases, disparities, and top-down patriarchal paradigm that in turn shaped her psychological immunology against injustices.

Aunt Vidala said a rebellious woman was even worse than a rebellious man because rebellious men became traitors, but rebellious women became adulteresses. (Atwood, 2019, 24). Even though male-dominated forces tried to overpower these women, they stood up again and again, finally escaping from chains of domination. They embodied Toni Morrison's insight from *Beloved*: "Freeing oneself is one thing, but taking possession, owning that freedom is quite a different thing" (Morrison, 1987, 95).

The Pearl Girls, acting under the orders of Aunt Lydia, actively searched for the baby and attempted to bring her back to the safety of the bicycles. She employed this strategy with the intention of strengthening the position of Aunt Lydia and to ensure that Commander Judd depended on her to achieve his goal, which was furthering her agenda. Finally, the sisters have combined their forces for driving the point home at the end of the novel with the help of all those women Barbara, Aunt Lydia, Daisy, and Agnes. Some of them depicted a commander's daughter as symbolism of freedom to the oppressed regime. Ada also helped Daisy (Nicole) in the process of setting the directions and reaching the critical alterations moment.

The name and characteristics of Mayday, the anti-Gilead underground organization, weren't clearly defined into the film adaptation. Aunt Lydia tried to thread the middle perfectly, obeying orders of Commander Judd to the letter where it was needed so that her dealings with Mayday were not exposed to him. This allowed her to continue her mission of exposing the regime's darkest secrets. Ruby Flick writes for *The Anarchist Library*, "Anarchist feminist sees the state as an institution of patriarchy and seek to find a way out of the alienation of the contemporary world and the impersonal nature of the state and its rituals of economic, physical and psychological violence" (Flick, 2011, 02). Aunt Lydia's diplomatic approach ensured her survival and effectiveness, positioning her as an anarchist feminist.

Conclusion

The paper discusses pathways on which women can challenge 'patriarchal power,' and seek justice. The female outcry and fight against male dominance in the novel is

reflected through a character of Aunt Lydia who works under the Gilead system but seeks to make changes. From the perspective of the governance and sustainability, the narrative also makes an important point of women's coalition as the strategy towards addressing the patriarchal systems. This resistance is complex, where women may engage in knowledge production, wield power, and build and/or seek solidarity to deconstruct state repressionisms and construct counter-stories that challenge official knowledge and history. In this sense, the paper aims to contribute to the development of the existence of the concepts of the postfeminist resistant strategies and the notion of women's agency and activism in the construction of gendered and political territories.

Education acts as the key element of the struggle by providing the people with knowledge, which enables them to identify oppression and act accordingly. In the novel, the main characters' life narratives are portrayed as the unexpected sources of knowledge, which reveals the hard aspects of living in Gilead. Lydia, having been restricted by the social fabric, embraces concealment and reservation as the ruthless world subtly wields power to oppress people like her. They use their skills and money to address the unfair rule by those who are supposed to be the keepers of the state. From covert meetings and conferences to recording activities and archiving operations, these women use a wide range of strategies to actively resist and subvert patriarchy and state control. These books and campaigns promote a coherent and nurturing sort of activism for a sustainable non-violent, but assertive form of protest and in some way, enhance the on-going feminist dialogue, and add value to both the Field of Feminist Studies and Domain of Political Science and women's writing.

Recommendations

By making use of the themes of *The Testaments*, policy makers can prioritize the promotion of gender equality, democracy and human rights round the sector.

- 1. Empowerment via education and literacy:** It is very essential to propose for rules that prioritize female education. This goes past simply primary literacy; it includes growing essential thinking abilities that allow women to question and undertaking oppressive systems.
- 2. The Role of Language and Speech:** Researchers can discover how language shapes power dynamics in societies and the way marginalized agencies can reclaim language to undertaking the dominant narrative, as depicted in novel. This evaluation can articulate regulations on speech rights and representation in governance systems.
- 3. Feminist Political Theory and Practice:** The novel highlights strong ladies who are guided to destroy authoritarian systems from within. This provides insights into feminist political theory, analyzing how gender and political strength intersect and how feminist strategies can subvert traditional hierarchies. Political scientists can make a contribution to this discourse via a feminist perspective by incorporating it into systematic critiques and governance approaches, making literature as a catalyst for critical inquiry and policy reform.

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