

## WOMEN OPPRESSION AND STRUGGLE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

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### ABSTRACT

This research discusses women's oppression and women's struggle for existence and equality. The aim of this research is to find out the forms of oppression experienced by women and how they struggle to gain their freedom. The data source for this research is the novel entitled *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The method used is descriptive qualitative. Researchers use Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory of existentialism which emphasizes the concepts of freedom, interpersonal relationships, and the experience of life as a human. This study uses feminist theory and focuses on the loss of existence as an independent individual in a society dominated by men. Women are oppressed and exploited as visual and reproductive objects. Researchers found that women's struggle to gain their existence was carried out in various ways. Some do it passively, and some do it actively. From the results of the analysis, it can be seen that women also want to exist in society and show that their role in society is equal to that of men.

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### INTRODUCTION

Oppression is a type of injustice in which authority, law, or physical force is used to deny a person's right to freedom and equality. Bullying can also mean demeaning someone socially. One of the problems faced by humans, especially women, is how to struggle against oppression against them and defend their rights as individuals. Oppression of women is an important issue in society. The oppression that women face in everyday life is often ignored by society. The assumption that women are treated unequally because of their gender, role or identity as women stems from the ingrained assumption that women are inferior to men. Therefore, the topic of oppression against women is very interesting to discuss, especially considering that oppression against women has existed for a long time in various places and has been expressed in various forms of work, including novels.

There are many novels that tell stories about oppression and women's struggles in facing the oppression or discrimination they experience. One novel that raises the issue of women's oppression is *The Handmaid's Tale*. The story in this novel is told in first person narrative by a woman named Offred. The name is actually a reminder of his position as Commander named Fred. She is a woman with a fertile body who lives in an environment full of pollution and radiation. As a result, she was forced to bear children for someone referred to as a "Commander", the male ruling class, and was called the "Handmaid" based on the biblical story of

Rachel and her servant Bilhah. Offred, like the other women at the Rachel and Leah Center, trained as a maid. Offred initially faced injustice or discrimination because she came from a low social class and also because she was a woman. In this story, men dominate women by making discriminatory and oppressive rules to control women.

The scope of this article is limited to the oppression of women experienced by the characters in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and the struggle of women for their freedom as told in the novel. Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory will be used to analyze the data. Simone de Beauvoir was a French philosopher and famous modern feminist figure in the 20th century. Her work, *The Second Sex*, brings thoughts about existential feminism. This feminism emphasizes concepts such as freedom, interpersonal relationships, and the experience of living as a human body. In *The Second Sex*, the ideology focuses primarily on oppression through social structures that confine women under the predicate of the Other in men. Beauvoir believed that biological elements were the main source of oppression of women in patriarchal societies. Beauvoir challenged the discourse of gender equality in which women were defined based on their biology and also believed that women faced oppression and exploitation due to sexual perversion in the male mind (Beauvoir, 1949).

## **METHOD**

In this research the researcher used a qualitative descriptive method. Sugiyono (2010) defines qualitative research as descriptive. This shows that the data collected is in the form of words, not numbers. Furthermore, Punanji (2010) defines descriptive research as a research method that aims to accurately describe natural and social phenomena that occur in society. According to the above point of view, descriptive research is research that offers a description of research data based on natural and social events that occur in society. Researchers use data from library research to enrich the analysis. The data analyzed are words, phrases, sentences and dialogue in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

After examining the data and relating it to the theory chosen by the researcher, it can be found that women in Gilead are oppressed by the rules made by male officials in various ways. Women in Gilead, especially the Handmaids, experience oppression because their bodies are thought to be made of matter. In this way, they are considered unable to control their bodies and lose their identity as humans. Apart from that, researchers found several struggles carried out by women to be free from this oppression in various ways. There are those who try to escape and there are also those who break the rules to get the freedom to behave as they please.

The oppression of women in the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood occurs because the United States was destroyed due to an attack. This then gave rise to a new totalitarian government called the Republic of Gilead. This attack caused several negative changes, such as environmental changes, toxic waste, and acid rain which caused infertility. This level of infertility causes low birth rates, causing the government to abolish some women's rights. Women have lost all their rights and are not even allowed to have desires, especially those who hold the title of Handmaids. Women who fall into this group are actually women who are still fertile in terms of reproduction. As a result of the conditions that occur in Gilead, some women experience infertility so that those who are fertile are forced or forced to have sexual relations in order to continue the reproductive process.

The following is an explanation of some of the discriminatory policies and treatment of women in the Republic of Gilead. Discriminatory Government Policies After a coup that killed the president and most of the

senators and congressmen of the United States were overthrown and theocracy was brutally instituted. The country was transformed into the Republic of Gilead. The new regulations in Gilead are strict and cruel, making Gilead society tightly controlled by an authoritarian regime. This situation means that people do not have the freedom to live like ordinary people. They must fully comply with the rules that the new government has made in their lives.

#### EXCERPT 1

The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren't allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. (Atwood, 1985: 5)

In the quote above we can see the rules that restrain the Handmaids. They cannot go out freely and must be accompanied by guards. Servants are only allowed to leave the building where they live if permitted and still have to follow the rules if they leave their residence according to a schedule, such as having to leave twice a day. The place where they walked was also heavily guarded, surrounded by a chain-link fence with barbed wire on top to prevent them from escaping. The Handmaids are also guarded by The Angels who are the vanguard soldiers in Gilead and are very scary guards from other groups. The Angels are the guardians of the Handmaids who were formed to terrorize the Handmaids so that they are afraid and cannot run away, and still obey the rules. So, their movements are very limited.

#### EXCERPT 2

I don't know if the words are right. I can't remember. Such songs are not sung anymore in public, especially the ones that use words like free. They are considered too dangerous. They belong to outlawed sects. (Atwood, 1985: 40)

#### Extermination of Birth Name

According to Hofmann, a name is something that is understood and referred to by someone in the form of words, terms or expressions that can be used to identify someone or something else (Widodo, 82). In Gilead, some women are forced to become Handmaids. Their identities are erased by all means, including the birth names given by their parents. As Handmaids, they cannot use their birth names. They must also accept the new name given by the Commander. They are given titles according to the wishes of their Commander. According to the law in Gilead, the Commander is the person who has the authority to win. This also happens in the real world. If a woman is not married to her husband, they will use her father's last name, after her last name follows her husband's name. This shows that women will always live as Other in society and do not have an existence as an independent entity. The following is a quote that shows that Handmaids do not have the right to use their birth names.

#### EXCERPT 3

My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is

like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. (Atwood, 1985: 60)

The existence of women, represented through names, is taken away by the rules in Gilead. By changing the name and adding the word "Of" in front of the name of the commander assigned to manage them. The name of Offred's commander in this story is Frederick Waterford. Thus, according to the rules above, she was given the name Offred, a combination of "of" and Fred or can be interpreted as "from Fred" or "belongs to Fred". In the quote above, Offred tries to separate herself from the new name given to her. He tried to convince himself that his name was separate from his identity in the eyes of society. According to her, before her name was changed to Offred, she had another name before becoming a Handmaid. Now the original name is no longer used because it is prohibited. Offred thinks that having a name is important. This is because name is an important part of a person's identity. She explained how her name have similar function as a telephone number. It is a means of addressing her. By removing her name, her identity is now buried. That's what happened to the women in Gilead who become Handmaids.

### **Prohibition of Education for Women**

The women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are oppressed in many ways. Not only in their names, their existence as individuals who have the same intelligents as men is taken away by the new rules in Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, women do not have the right to receive an education. They were prohibited from writing and reading. This stems from concerns that with these abilities, they will become dangerous and have the potential to carry out rebellions.

### **EXCERPT 4**

Now we are left to our own devices, our own speculations. The first one, the one they're now raising from her chair, black-gloved hands on her upper arms: Reading? No, that's only a hand cut off, on the third conviction. (Atwood, 1985: 191)

From the quote above, it can be seen that the rules regarding the oppression of freedom for women in Gilead in terms of education are visible. They were prohibited from reading and writing. If they violate, they will receive the first punishment in the form of having their hands cut off. That way, people who have power over them can easily control the consequences of this ignorance. It was feared that women who could read and write could use these abilities to communicate and devise escape strategies and carry out rebellions. Due to lack of access to reading, it makes them illiterate.

### **Becoming a Sexual Object**

The new rules in Gilead reduce the function of women who become Handmaids to mere reproductive organs. The function of reproduction is to keep Gilead's population growth rate stable. Women who are considered fertile and capable of producing children are called Handmaids. They become a place to reproduce children for the Commanders assigned to them. Women are considered as entities capable of maintaining population and the one who have fertility.

### **EXCERPT 5**

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.. We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices. (Atwood, 1985: 95)

Women are considered as a reproductive machine defined by their biological and reproductive capacity. As explained in the quote above, Handmaids play a role in reproducing and maintaining the population in Gilead. Therefore, they define themselves as "two-legged wombs".

### **Discrimination Perpetrated by Other Women**

Women are not only oppressed by men but by women of higher status as well. This oppression of fellow women is carried out by the Aunts against the Handmaids. Aunt is considered the highest status for working women in Gilead. They are "instructors, companions, and enforcers" for the other women in Gilead. They are tasked with indoctrinating the Handmaids with the beliefs of the new society and making them accept their fate.

#### **EXCERPT 6**

I am alive, I live, I breathe, I put my hand out, unfolded, into the sunlight. Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or. (Atwood, 1985: 8)

Aunt Lydia is responsible for the "re-education" of the Handmaids. She uses religiously radicalizing teachings to manipulate the Handmaids into believing and following the doctrines Gilead teaches. Initially, religion was seen as the main pillar of Gilead society that determined all aspects of life. However, in reality, the entire structure in Gilead, including its state religion, is built around one goal, namely reproductive control. In the quote above, Handmaids can be manipulated easily and can be effectively brainwashed using the Bible. That a woman's obligation is to be a mother and give birth to children and that is a noble thing. Because of this, they were told by Aunt Lydia that being a Handmaid was a privilege and the place they were in was not a prison. Even though in reality they were locked up like prisoners and what they experienced was rape and that was not a noble thing.

### **Women's Struggle**

Women's struggle is a process of liberating women from a low social position and the constraints of a social system that limits their possibilities for development. The amount of oppression experienced by women makes some of them weak and remain obedient to the rules, but there are also those who rebel to fight for their rights as human beings. There are some of them who are looking for a way to get the freedom they want because they are very oppressed by the new rules that have been created. According to KBBI (2008: 950), a name is a word to name or call a person (place, animal, etc.) or a title or title, for example fame, goodness, or honor. Having a name is a gift because it can define ourselves and our behavior as individuals in society. Unlike in Gilead, women, especially Handmaids, are not allowed to give their names. Servants are strictly prohibited from saying their birth names out loud so that they lose their identity as human beings. In erasing birth name, the situation experienced by the Handmaids is in accordance with Beauvoir's statement regarding the understanding of women by men, that women are "belong to him". Beauvoir's work emphasizes that "humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as something relative to him. Woman is not considered an autonomous being." This can be compared to the name of the Handmaids. The name is simply a means of indicating whose property they serve.

#### EXCERPT 7

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretchout our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands acrossspace. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June. (Atwood, 1985: 6)

One attempt to indoctrinate women was to separate the Handmaids by their birth names, and then give them new names by new Commanders each time they were assigned. Servants must not have identification and are prohibited from using their real names. In addition, women are not allowed to communicate through writing or reading. Their daily conversations were strictly limited. In the quote above, the Handmaids whisper their names to each other from bed to bed at night to show that they are still connected to their real lives. The servants learned to whisper so that their voices could not be heard, and they learned to read each other's lips and then observe them secretly. They remember each other's real names in such a way that their names are not forgotten and are always remembered by each other. It is also shown that in this way it is the Handmaids' attempt to exist, that they also have names, and that the rulers did not create them.

#### Escape to Have Freedom

The time setting in Gilead is dystopian, and one of the main goals of a dystopian society is freedom. Dystopia is a community or society that is neither desirable nor frightening. Dystopia refers to dangerous situations and imaginary places where people cannot be happy and fear being persecuted. The Gilead depicted is certainly not a free society. There were no families, no women were allowed to receive any education, they were not allowed to eat whatever they wanted, and they were not allowed to smoke. Gilead was formed by a totalitarian government that left people without freedom and forced them to obey the rules that had been created. Several characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* do various things to be free from the cruelty of Gilead.

#### EXCERPT 8

Moira took off her own clothes and put on those of Aunt Elizabeth, which did notfit her exactly but well enough. She was not overly cruel to Aunt Elizabeth, sheallowed her to put on her own red dress. The veil she tore into strips, and tiedAunt Elizabeth up with them, behind the furnace. She sniffed some of the cloth into her mouth and tied it in place with another strip. She tied a strip around Aunt Elizabeth's neck and tied the other end to her feet, behind. (Atwood, 1985: 92)

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Moira is described as a woman who is an extreme feminist and very rebellious against the rules created by Gilead. Moira is the only character who goes directly against Gilead's authority by trying to escape the Red Center. She failed his first escape attempt, so he received cruel punishment. He succeeded in this second attempt by tricking Aunt, as in the quote above. Moira insisted that Aunt Elizabeth take off her clothes and put on Auntie's uniform. Gilead attempts to erase identity at all costs, most notably by eliminating individuals so that all must be uniform and color coded to indicate their status and role. The aunt's clothing symbolizes the power of freedom because the aunt plays an important role in her position even as a woman in Gilead. Even though Aunties are also women, they have limitations but still have freedom that can be utilized, for example is a freedom to be a Housewife.



Every woman has the desire to be what she wants. There are those who want to work, there are also those who want to be housewives and mothers. It is their right to play a role in society. Equality in society is an important social factor, and women have tried to fight for their rights and equality, and they have the right to live as they wish. Traditionally, women's roles as wives and mothers have determined their identity. Like their roles, women are often associated with domestic roles but have dual roles, both domestic and public. Some women have jobs outside their responsibilities, such as doing housework. In the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, several women who are still fertile are forced to become vessels to conceive and give birth to children, then these children will be given to other people who have high power. They are also forced to follow cruel rules, so they have no hope of freedom for their own lives. Some Handmaids want to experience a happy life with their family and become complete women.

#### EXCERPT 9

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the Children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn't too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless. (Atwood, 1985:19)

In the excerpt above, we can see that as a woman, Offred wants to be the mother of her children. She hopes to have children with her husband, Luke, and live a happy and loving life with him. When she was Luke's wife, Offred always served her husband, from making coffee in the morning and preparing clothes for work to knowing everything in every situation they were in. As a wife, spending time with your husband is a pleasure. However, things have now changed. Offred is no longer a wife; Luke belonged to someone else, and she couldn't love him anymore. Offred is not only a wife but also a mother. She struggles with thoughts about her beautiful past and life with her husband and daughter, whom she has lost track of. This shows that women want to exist and enjoy their roles as wives and mothers. Women experience oppression because they are considered "Other" in the eyes of men and cannot live fully independently because the main differences are biological. Women must be treated the same as men in terms of laws, customs and education. When someone experiences oppression, they think about how to be free from all that pressure. Something similar also happened in Gilead. Women feel very oppressed and try various ways to try to escape from those oppression. They yearn for their freedom that was forcibly taken away by the cruel Republic of Gilead. There are those that show freedom, such as running away, and there are also those that show freedom such as reading secretly, smoking, and the freedom to love someone.

#### EXCERPT 10

I stood in front of her, hands folded. So, she said. She had a cigarette, and she put it between her lips and gripped it there while she lit it... The cigarettes must have come from the black market, I thought, and this gave me hope. Even now that there is no real money anymore, there's still a black market. There's always a black market, there's always something that can be exchanged. (Atwood, 1985: 12)

All forms of freedom for women in Gilead are eliminated—even women's freedom to smoke and drink alcohol. Apart from men, women are not allowed to smoke freely. Serena Joy's smoking habit shows that she exploits her privileged social position for her own needs. The presence of cigarettes is very significant because they are only available on the black market. In the excerpt above, Serena Joy, Commander Fred's wife, can smoke quietly without being noticed. Offred believes these cigarettes come from the black market, where

they have to trade them for something to get what they want. Offred associates cigarettes with freedom and "an earlier time." Offred is thinking about what she should trade because she has nothing to trade. In this case, Serena Joy shows a little rebellion by smoking a cigarette. She is not someone who follows the rules and is willing to circumvent them for the sake of her goals. Serena Joy is willing to break the rules and use her position in other ways that do not oppress her community. This shows that women want to exist by taking advantage of the privileges of those in power. They can also smoke like the men in Gilead, although they can smoke openly and not hide like the women. Smoking becomes a representation of women's freedom in this context.

### EXCERPT 11

There isn't much music in this house, except what we hear on the TV. Sometimes Rita will hum, while kneading or peeling: a wordless humming, tuneless, unfathomable. And sometimes from the front sitting room there will be the thin sound of Serena's voice, from a disc made long ago and played now with the volume low, so she won't be caught listening as she sits in there knitting, remembering her own former and now amputated glory: Hallelujah. (Atwood, 1985: 40)

Music can bring hope to listeners. Music can also carry messages and have certain goals. Apart from that, music can also educate and raise a person's enthusiasm. Music is closely tied to a person's soul. However, it's not like in Gilead. Most music is forbidden to listen to. In the quote above, Offred says that she can only occasionally listen to music on TV. She listened to Rita's humming sound several times without hearing any random words or notes. She also hears the voice of Serena Joy, Commander Fred's wife, who listens to the song on a cassette tape at a low volume so as not to be noticed. It was just the sound of Serena humming and listening to old recordings of herself as a famous gospel singer. Women's freedom to listen to music is severely restricted. The reason is because it is feared that this will bring back the spirit of the Handmaids and make them rebel the rules or the authority in Gilead. Singing then becomes a representation of women's struggle as well. This shows that women want to exist by singing.

### CONCLUSION

One of the oppression women experience in Gilead is sexual harassment. They are used as sexual objects by the authorities, so women have no rights over their bodies. Women, especially Handmaids, are also oppressed because of the regime's rules, such as permission to leave, prohibited to listen to music, not being able to speak freely, and not being able to have real names. Their names are a form of ownership of the Commander they serve, so their names are given the prefix "Of" and connected to the Commander's name. Women also do not have the right to education such as reading and writing. The education they get is only knowledge about the content in Bible that meaning has been changed. Women have a lower social status than men. However, there is a group of women called *Aunty* who participates in oppressing women who are part of the Handmaids. Compared to other women, they have greater position and power. The characters in the story struggle to gain rights and equality by learning to read secretly and doing things that are prohibited. By applying Simone de Beauvoir's theory of Existential Feminism, it appears in this story that the female character shows that she wants to exist in society and be equal to men. Not only that, the women in this novel also fight for their rights to their bodies. Thus, Radical Feminism approach can be used as well to analyze women's equality in this novel. Because in this novel women struggle to uphold their right to education and the right to choose, the Liberal Feminism approach can also be used. To study the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in depth and thoroughly, apart from researching using feminist theory, other researchers can also study the symbols that are widely used in this novel in order to gain a holistic understanding.



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